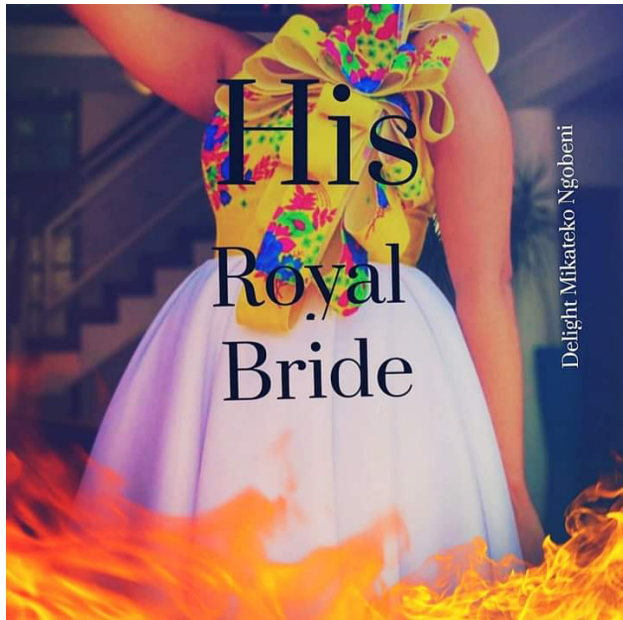


PROLOGUE



Mkhuhlu village, 1991, on one nerve-freezing evening...

The queen stands frozen in the middle of the cold bedroom floor, watching as her amniotic fluid flows down her one leg. She knew what it meant. She knew that it was time and she wasn't anywhere near ready for what was to follow – at least not emotionally. The seer had secretly told her that she was carrying two of them. That wasn't allowed. Everybody knew that twins were pure taboo and impermissible. Tears streaked down her cheeks when she remembered the time they heartlessly took her little girl because she looked different from all of them. The baby

was in her sweat-drenched arms for only two minutes and that was the last time she ever saw her. It was her husband, the king's idea to smother the defenceless infant to death, so the queen already knew that even in this case, history would repeat itself and he would be just as detrimental to her children's health.

She gets herself to walk towards the door and sees two of her sister wife's children happily playing outside. They look in the direction of her hut when the door squeaks open.

'Pss, Mixo, please go call your mother for me. Tell her to bring warm water and clean towels' she whispers and they scurry off at her word. A few minutes later, Masingita bolts into the house with all the requirements.

'Where is he?' Xongi, the queen, desperately asks as the contractions intensify.

'He's not sleeping here tonight' her sister wife responds as she gets her to lie down on the cowskin carpet. Xongi sighs with relief as she wipes the sweat off her forehead.

'Open your legs. We have to be quick' Masingita prompts.

About an hour later, each woman has a wrapped new-born

baby boy in her arms.

Masingita looks to Xongi with a broken heart.

‘What are their names?’

‘This one I will name Kurhula. That one will be Fikani, after my father’

‘Which one are you keeping?’

‘Please. Just take him away. They’re essentially the same’ Xongi replies before the tears fall down as she cradles the baby in her hands protectively. Masingita nods and stands up with urgency before dashing out into the dark.

‘Singi!!’ Xongi calls. Masingita was already gone and they were too much of a distance apart for her to hear, considering the fact that she was also running – rushing to get the baby to Sarah, who had been struggling to conceive for ages now.

‘His name is Fikani. When the sun gets out, you will leave this place and never look back’ Masingita sternly commands and her instructions are received with absolute comprehension and zero resistance.

--

30 years later...

'Kurhula, your father has not even defrosted in his coffin but you're already implementing changes here?' Uncle Solomon protests. Kurhula slightly rolls his eyes as he pours himself a drink on the rocks.

'Listen, you're not going to force me to take over and THEN want to control how I'm taking over. I want this dump of a house demolished. I want to build a double-storey here and there's no space'

'You can build whatever it is you want to build on that field over there'

Kurhula gulps down his drink and frowns for a second when its strength hits the back of his throat.

'I said I want to build a double storey, not a tuck-shop'

'Kurhula!' his mother warns.

'No. Edward has ruined this boy. You're too spoilt' Solomon says.

'The very same Edward you speak of wanted this vision I have fulfilled. Now if you'll excuse me, they need my

attention at the mine' he picks up his phone, suit jacket and car keys.

'Before you leave, there's something we need to discuss with you before the official family meeting tonight' Solomon states. Kurhula stops by the door.

'Yes?' he says with a raised brow.

'We have spoken to the Baloyi's. The negotiations are set to take place on Saturday'

'Excuse you?'

'Your royal bride is ready for you, Kurhula. You have wasted enough time'

'Sol, if you like this girl so much, why don't you just marry her yourself?' Kurhula jabs. His mother gasps from disbelief.

'You're very insolent, boy!' Solomon angrily spits.

'You think this is me being insolent? Careful not to die at my worst. Sol, my father never even liked you. Now you have your claws all over his business. He never asked you to continue where he left off'

'Your father wanted us to have a relationship with the Baloyi's. They're a well-respected family with enough resources. Kulani has also been confirmed to be a virgin,

which is something to applaud'

'Ey I wouldn't care even if she had a renewable hymen. I will marry the woman of my choice when I am ready' he immediately walks out after these words, leaving his family fuming and breathing flames.

'This boy is not fit to be king' Solomon comments.

'Please give him a chance' Xongi begs as Solomon shakes his head in disapproval.

...

'Baby, I'm home' Fikani says as he walks in through the front door while loosening his tie. Boitumelo appears in a see-through lingerie gown – completely naked underneath. Fikani gives her naughty smirk as he receives her in his arms.

'Hey you' he greets lovingly – his coarse voice brushing over the hairs on her neck, sending chills all over her smooth, buttered skin.

'How was work?' she asks as she undoes his shirt.

'It was okay. Managed to secure two properties today'

'It wouldn't be you if you had failed. Congratulations baby' she says before softly sucking on his lips. '... but now, we need to get to work in the bedroom. I am ovulating' she says excitedly while pulling him as she walks in reverse. He instantly gets bored and drops his head.

'Here we go again'

'I could think of better things we can do than arguing, you know' she seductively tries to convince him as she kisses his neck while her hand brushes his chocolate facial skin. He pulls both her hands from him and walks past her.

'Baby please tuu'

'Tumi, all our sex life has been about lately is babies, pregnancy tests, ovulation what nots. There's no excitement anymore. You will fall pregnant when you do. One thing for sure is that you won't when you're busy stressing about it'

'Please I'm the gynae here, not you. We have been married for two years now!'

'Exactly! We're supposed to be at how happiest, not stressing about family planning'

'All my peers have kids now. At least one if not two. My friends are always asking me when I'm having my own whenever we link, and guess what? There's always three

prams around the table but there's four of us!

'You know what?'

'What?' she lifts and drops her hands.

'I need a shower' he says and continues walking up, leaving her frustrated, naked self on the kitchen floor. She throws his tie to the floor before stressfully attempting to pull her hair out.

...

[KULANE]

'Ouch!' I scream when Rhandzu pulls too hard. She keeps forgetting that she's not tying a pile of wood here.

'Sorry' she flatly says. She doesn't mean it. I need to check if you can't sell little sisters on Takealot, plus she's tiny. She will fit in a box.

'You're selfish, you know Kuli?'

Where is this coming from?

'I am selfish? Ouch!' I yell once again when she fights with

the roots of my hair. If I had known that she had waken up on the wrong side of the bed, I wouldn't have agreed to these twisted braids.

'Sit still otherwise I'll let you go there with a half-done head'

Whatever is on her chest is clearly frying her lungs because even her breath is hot. She stops braiding and starts pacing back and forth in front of me.

'You are so damn selfish because this is the third marriage offer you're unsure about. I swear if you come back from there I am going to strangle you because you are better off dead'

Okay, this is not as trivial as I thought.

'What is this about?'

'It is about you standing in my damn way. You know very well that I cannot get married before you do. Had you agreed to the Chauke's proposal, I would be the one getting married to Kurhula right now'

I cannot help but laugh. The crush she has on this man is the same age as first grader.

'Rirhandzu, you're still 21 my love. Your turn is going to come. I don't even know why you find this whole thing

glamorous. Old people who are quarter to death are deciding on the man I get to spend the rest of my life with. Do you understand that?’

She rolls her eyes and pulls my head. If my scalp doesn’t peel off today, I will admit that I’m indeed a strong woman; inside and out. I allow her to take her frustrations out on me because in as much as I hate to admit it, I get it. She has always been a daydreamer this one. She once cut my mother’s inner curtain and made a veil out of it and because she’s always been a spoilt brat, I was always forced to be her bridesmaid – with chores and schoolwork yearning for attention for me.

Mom opens the door and lets herself in as always. If there’s one thing that’s motivating me to move away from here, it is the lack of manners in this household.

‘Can you excuse us for a bit?’ she asks and Rhandzu immediately leaves. She knows that it isn’t a request. She sits on the bed and looks at me.

‘I hope, for your sake, that you won’t get to the Ngobenis and embarrass us’

‘Mom, I have cried, kicked and screamed until I accepted the fate that you and dad are forcing down my throat. You can stop now’

'Why do you say it like we hate you?'

'You probably do. I would never know'

'Kulani, we have given you the chance to complete your studies as you asked. You said you wanted to do journalism. We allowed that. When you were supposed to get married, you said you wanted to your honours. We kept quiet. You enrolled for your masters and even graduated. Even with all these qualifications, you're still failing to find a simple job. What else do you want?'

'I will find a job...'

'You won't, trust me I know better'

...

Xongi looks around to see if there are any prying eyes when she pulls her sister-wife close to her.

'What is this?' Masingita asks.

'I don't want Solomon to hear us. You know he wants his son on that chair. Tell me you're still in contact with the lady that took my son'

'After 30 whole years sesi?'



'Please'

'Why?'

'Kurhula is going to drive this chieftaincy into the ground. He is going to implement his modern ways here and you know he listens to no one'

'So you are looking for a child you don't even know? What if he's worse?'

'I will take my chances'

'With all due respect, this is madness. Give the boy a chance. How are you going to explain how they were separated? How are you going to explain this without dragging me into it?'

'I won't mention your name' Xongi continues to beg.

'If you could carry on like he doesn't exist for three decades, you can surely take this to the grave. Ndzi tshiki meh' (Leave me alone)

'Ratatata!' they both hear Aunt Lydia's disembodied voice, accompanied by the sound of her pulling her luggage bag. Xongi instantly feels her ears burning.

'What are you doing here?' she asks.

'Don't annoy me. This is my home. Your passport here is a



cow' she shoots back, dangling her car keys in the same hand that has her iPhones.

'Ifikin rich aunt madoda' (the rich aunt is here) Kurhula laughs as he takes patient steps down the stairs, with a golf cardigan loosely tied to his neck by the sleeves. Lydia smiles at her favourite nephew.

'Ndawini Ngobe-Zitha' she greets him and he bends for a hug.

'I hope you've booked yourself into a guesthouse somewhere because you didn't announce that you're coming, same way you left without saying goodbye' Xongi says. The smile completely vanishes from Lydia's face.

'I swear, I smell venom each time you open your mouth to speak'

Ntiyiso's child comes in running and Lydia quickly moves out of the way. Another boy of the same age follows after him, running happily.

'Now whose child is that one?' she asks.

'Which one?' Kurhula asks.

'That one. The one with the snorty nose. I don't know him'

The child comes running back again in her direction and she moves again. The boy offers her his hand and she

gets awkward.

'Good lord. Hi little guy. He's cute, now get it away from me'

Xongi lovingly picks the child up and frowns at her husband's sister.

'You're mean'

'Thank you. Use some wet wipes on that nose'

Kurhula's little brother walks in, typing on his phone with headsets over his head.

'Hey aunty!'

'Tell me why I haven't been able to reach you, you little charlatan?'

'Ah I lost my phone' Junior accounts. 'Let's not dwell on that too much. Can you please borrow me your car? Uncle Sol sent me to go get some Black for the old men'

Lydia scoffs.

'Pardon me, you want to use an entire Porshe Cayenne to go run that paedophile's errands?'

The mood in the room instantly goes green and sour.

'Can you not?' Masingita admonishes. Lydia turns in her direction.

'Why do you still dress like you're going out?'

The question comes unexpectedly. Masingi looks at her dress and smiles.

'Arg out where in this old thing?'

'Exactly. You look like you're going out to go collect water from the well and cow dung. Junior, sonny, if you dare scratch my car, I will scratch your eye. Don't forget to get me a six pack of something nice as well'

Junior celebrates when she hands over the keys.

'Savannah?'

She scowls as if she has just been insulted. 'I said something nice. Do I look like I'd voluntarily drink piss?'

[08/24, 12:44 pm] #o: CHAPTER 1

Xongi knocks on Kurhula's bedroom and he allows entry. She finds him buttoning up his white mandarin shirt. The scent in the room provides proof that he has been taking a shower.

'Good morning son' she greets.

'Morning mhane'

'Mitlele njhani ka Ngobeni?'

'I slept well, thank you. How did you sleep?'

She sighs and sits on the couch at the corner of the room.

'I am worried about you Kurhula'

Confusion shrinks his face. 'Worried about me?'

'N'wananga, I am begging you. Please try to be obedient. Do it for your mother'

'Is this about the Kulani issue?'

She nods. The breath he releases expresses great irritation.

'You know I love you, right?'

She nods once more.

'I would do anything for you but marry a woman I have never met a day in my life just because she's royalty. I don't even know what she looks like and you expect me to accept this? Njhani marha?'

'Don't you trust us to pick the best for you?'

'I actually don't. Your idea of a perfect marriage is twisted and warped. Do you remember how you got that scar in the middle of your leg? I was seven but I remember it very lucidly'

Shame covers her whole.

'He used to beat you up till you turned blue but all you were concerned about was feeding and keeping him happy, protecting his dignity and reputation. He almost killed you that day. I watched you bleed but you weren't even feeling the physical pain. Why? You continued wanting to run after him! That was always your main focus'

She clears her throat and fidgets in her seat.

'I am still your mother'

'I never disputed that. Everybody knows that you are. I am just saying that I could never trust your judgement on what you deem to be a perfect wife. You're going to bring me a yes woman I can't even consult with because she'll believe that everything I say is right. I am capable of finding a wife for myself'

'She is on her way here as we speak'

'She is your wife. Not mine'

'Kurhula?!'

'No mother. Please excuse me. I have a meeting to prepare for'

'Are you aware that you cannot assume the mantle without getting married first? To a royal wife that is?'

'Who is going to stop me? Let there be no king then. It's

not like I'd be devastated'

She laughs. 'You think this is Oxford university? You're back home. Wake up!'

She leaves him in there and he drops the hand that has his leather belt. He starts processing this whole thing.

...

[KULANI]

This is the night marking the event of my life being thrown to wild cats. I no longer have the strength in me to fight. My worst mistake was being the fastest sperm. I am fully raimented in xibelani na miceka. If it was any other day, I would feel my most prettiest but I see none of that as I stand in front of this mirror. I catch Rhandzu watching me by the door.

'You look breathtaking sesi'

I feign a smile. I don't even have the energy to expose my teeth.

'I'm sorry about my tantrum. It was uncalled for' she

apologizes as she walks in.

'It's okay. You know I can't stay mad at you'

She giggles.

'It's your big day today. I can see that you're nervous. Don't worry, I'll be holding your hand' she assures, with her hands on my shoulders. I am three years older than this little human but how she anchors me at my weakest makes me forget that I am the older one sometimes.

'What if they don't like me?'

She snorts like I've just asked a dumb question.

'You know they won't. You have to accept this about yourself. You're a child of living waters. You attract only genuine people and there's not a lot of those'

My heart almost collides into my ribs after she says this. I could never get used to these goosebumps.

'Do you have your njeti with you?'

I nod. She knows I can't go anywhere without my ancestral cloth. I would come back barefoot and running. She looks at my reflection in the mirror and it stares back. She gives me that adorable closed-lip smile of hers.

'Ndauwe...'

I laugh full-heartedly. I am a bundle of jittery nerves. The dream I had last night is not helping, at all. My ancestors need to keep some things to themselves sometimes.

‘Can I ask you a question?’ Rhandzu requests. I nod inquisitively.

‘Deep down, do you feel like he’s the one?’

I stand and think, trying to ravage through my intuitive thoughts.

‘I would be lying if I said I knew’

Mom barges in and Rhandzu laughs before she can say a word. She knows how much this annoys me. She leaves me with her and I turn away from the mirror.

‘I am warning you for the last time. If they send you back, find another place to stay. You are no longer welcome here’

‘If he’s not the chosen one, there’s nothing I can do’

‘Rubbish! You keep irritating us with this virginity nonsense. You have to lose it at some point’

‘What you don’t understand is that I am not keeping myself pure because I want to impress these men you keep sending my way. I will not lose my connection with my forefathers because of intimacy with the wrong man’

'If these forefathers of yours really exist, why are they not telling you which man you should marry? Don't annoy me little girl. I am going to finish doing my make-up. I should find you in the car when I'm done. Nywenywadas my left paralyzed foot' she marches out. I am surprised that my mother and I haven't physically fought in all the years I have known her. I come really close to grilling her with burning slap sometimes.

...

I am walking blindly with a blanket covering me whole. I am boiling under all this heavy cotton. Rhandzu is holding my hand as my mother and aunt walk in the same slow pace behind me. I hear loud ululations and people reciting clan names but I cannot see them.

'The light of the yard has entered!' somebody shouts with jubilation. My father said the same thing when I asked why I have to arrive at night; that I am considered a light because I am to be the king's first wife. I am made to sit down and wait for Kurhula to come release me from the shackles of this hell fire in the form of a blanket. I hear inaudible whispers. I am burning in here people. The



blanket is still on. Is this man even here? I lift it a bit without making it obvious. I need to breathe. I can see little feet next to me. Two pairs. I laugh internally because this is not surprising. I am a magnet for kids. I just didn't think the attraction was this strong. They haven't seen my face but they already feel the need to come stand next to me.

I squeeze Rhandzu's hand so she comes closer. She is my eyes and ears since I have been manually turned blind.

'What's going on?' I ask. She clears her throat.

'It looks like your fiancée is running late' she whispers back.

Goody! I am definitely coming out of here fully cooked with my flesh falling off my bones. The whispers continue until somebody starts a song and they resume the dance. I am glad I have only lipstick, mascara, and eyeliner on because if I had a full face, I would be revealed as a four-year old's rushed painting board. Where on earth is he?

'You still don't see him?'

'Nope. Relax. He should be here soon. Maybe this is how they do this'

'We both know that's not true. We have been sitting here for almost thirty minutes' I estimate.

'I Mlambya! I Masiya a govile a govela vurhena. Yena masiya byi virile.

Manyela patwini a tshembe nkanu.

Khwembe ra ndlela xi upfa hi moya.'

I hear by these recitations that he's here.

'I nsizwa ayidavuki ku davuka ilicwe. Thamb' le nyoka lihlava lim'zondhayo.

Ikhamba liya hleka lihleka nama ntombazana lithi khakha

Wena kaya hihina vaka rifu ra nhlekani. Ahidlayiwi hi munhu hina hiti fela hi hexe'

When is he uncovering me vanhu va hosi???

'Mkhatshwa!'

'Who is this???' I hear an elderly lady's voice asking, trying

to be discreet.

'Kurahula has just arrived, with a boy child' Rhandzu alerts before I can ask. I frown. He has a kid?

'How old?'

'Looks... five-ish. I don't know. I'm not good with age'

The steam cloth comes off when I'm one breath away from a coma. The first thing I do is to wipe my face of the sweat. He holds the blanket in his hands and looks at me. He must be admiring his brilliant work of slow-cooking me'

They are still ululating. I soften my facial features, trying not to show these people that I can get big mad. I see this stylish woman studying me carefully with a bottle of Ice Tropez in her hand.

'Where did you get your hair done?' she asks. There's this tone of judgment that's carried in her voice. Rhandzu frowns – ready to fight.

'Uhm... my sister did it' I respond.

'Is this her?' the woman continues to interrogate.

'Yes. This is she' Rhandzu responds on my behalf and she flinches. My mother just pinched her. I am sure of it.

'She has a good hand. I need me this hairstyle before I jet off to Paris next week'. She says with pride and I smile. She gives me social butterfly vibes. I turn away and see the face of the woman who appeared in my dream last night. So this is the witch that is planning to kill me? I can't help but lock eyes with her. She breaks the stare and rivets her eyes away from me.

...

It's been three hours and I have already been introduced to these women in the room. I have met Kurhula's mothers and most of his aunts. I guess the time has arrived for them to 'teach' me how to keep a man pleased at all times. Aunt Lydia walks in and mhan' Xongi immediately asks her to leave.

'Can you quickly explain why? I don't have time' Aunty protests.

'Lydia, you have been divorced three times. You cannot be here and you know it'

'I am glad you're aware of my vast experience. It should tell you that I am the perfect person for the job. Now scoot. Your skin needs some moisture serum' she bypasses her

and finds a seat amongst the women, who are evidently unhappy to have her there. Mhan' Xongi gives up and brings her face back to me.

'Kulani n'wananga. Welcome home once more. I can see that you're exhausted so we will try to move through this quickly. You know that every household has its own rules, correct?'

I nod.

'Hi Valambya hina. We are known to be hardworkers and to serve our people diligently. You are about to be queen and we fully expect you to carry yourself with fitting elegance, grace and composure'

I nod once again.

'You are now a married woman. That is your number one priority. Your husband and the kids you are going to bear for him'

'One second' Lydia raises her manicured finger. 'Is Kurhula receiving this advice in another room? If yes, please speed this up so I can go attend that one as well'

Xongi suddenly experiences laboured breathing. She fans some air towards her face with her hand. Her countenance isn't doing much to hide the fact that she is severely irked by all of this.

'No?' Lydia continues when nobody answers her. 'Then there's no point. Let's go get drunk wena makoti' she comes to me and helps me up.

'Lydia!' They all try to reprimand. The laughter leaves me with zero intention. I quickly contain it as I am being dragged out.

'Aunt Lydia please' I stop by the door. I have already seen who is disapproving of me. I don't want to make my stay here unbearable.

'I was trying to help. Stay, with your ungrateful ***' she gives up on me and leaves. I go back and sit down.

'Sorry about that my child. You will get used to her'

The meeting carries on and I listen to how I am not supposed to get mad from the waist down, how I shouldn't investigate his whereabouts and similar hogwash. I am accompanied to my room once everything is done. My bags are already here. I need to get out of these clothes and get some water on this traumatized skin. I see his watch on the bedside table and paracetamol tablets. This motivates me to lock the door in case he waltz in here unannounced. Well, he has every right since it's his room but I am locking it anyway. Men have a limited amount of brain cells. I luckily find clean towels in the bathroom

closet. I take my shower and get into my pyjamas. I then put my satin gown on and tie it over the PJs. I am sleeping with this on tonight. Someone knocks as I'm moisturizing my hands. I go unlock. Thought as much.

'Already locking my door, Mrs N?' he asks, trying hard not to smile. I chuckle and walk back to the bed so I zip up my bag. He gets in and takes his charger from the table. I put my bag away and hand him a pillow. We are definitely not sleeping in the same bed. I pull the gown and cover my chest protectively when he stands there and looks at me. This PJ top covers me very modestly but I can't help. There's no telling what's on a man's mind.

'I just came to get this' he states, dangling the charger in the air. I nod.

'You can take that off and sleep comfortably. I won't be sleeping in here tonight. I'm not as perverted as you think I am' he announces and I am instantly flustered. His light laughter tells me he's not offended but his words say otherwise. He leaves before I can apologize. I start thinking about this and how it must look. Is there anybody you don't find ways to offend, Kuli?

...

[08/24, 12:44 pm] #o: CHAPTER 2

[KULANI]

Whoever said sleep is for resting was clearly not talking about me. I am tired from all the fighting I was doing last night. I almost punch myself when I realize that I am not in my father's house, otherwise I would've simply kept the door locked and continued to sleep. I check the time and see that it is half past six. I shot myself in the foot by forgetting my bath salts at home. They would come in handy right now. After getting cleaned up, I decide on a brown pleated skirt and a long-sleeved bodysuit. I will be walking around in these morning shoes because it's not like I'm going anywhere. I miss Rhandzu. As annoying and pesty as she is, I miss my little best friend. On my way to get some lemon water, I bump into one of the helps. She gives me the widest smile before she greets. I greet her back.

'I love your headwrap. You're done it so well' she compliments. It means I'm a natural because all I did was to throw it on and winged it from there. 'Thank you mhane' I say with the same warm energy. I stop her before she

passes me by.

'I'm sorry but do you perhaps have a charger for this phone?
I forgot mine at home'

These are the results of the lack of enthusiasm to come here. I even forgot my deodorant.

'Let me see' she wipes her hands before receiving the phone.

'You youngsters and your fancy phones. If you were using a simple one like myself, I would be borrowing you my charger'

I laugh. 'Ah it's okay. I guess I'll have to call them back home so they can bring it'

'Or you could ask your husband. I think he uses a similar phone. I'm not sure but I think it looks like this, just in a different colour'

'Where can I find him?'

'At this time, he's usually in his study. Down the passage, first door on your left'

I say my thanks and walk there, plus I need to apologize for all that awkwardness last night.

I knock and there's no answer. I'm a bit hesitant but I try

the door anyway and look inside. The chair is empty. I step in to have an expanded view. He's not here. This is a pretty sophisticated space. I have a peculiar thing for quality wood and furniture design. On some days I tend to think I was meant to be a carpenter. I catch myself running my fingers along the bookshelf on one side of the room. The person who was picking out the furniture in this house knew what they were doing. I will excuse the kitchen and say they were probably tired when they got to the part of the house. That's why it looks like a Boerre housewife's baking haven. I might as well find a book to read here because I will have nothing to do all day. I pick it out and I find that it's written in a foreign language. I put it back. I pull out another one and it speaks about constitutional rights. All these books don't look like something one would read for leisure. I turn around when I hear him clearing his throat. He's in a vest and sweatpants, with a water bottle in hand and an air pod in his ear.

'Uhm... I'm sorry. I got carried away'

He walks in and closes the door.

'Carry on. I don't mind' he says and sits on his chair. He pulls his laptop open and moves on like I'm not there. I am no longer comfortable standing here. I was having fun invading his space in his absence. The apology.

I walk over to the other side of the desk.

'Do you mind if I take a seat?' I ask. He takes out his earpiece.

'Sure' he sits back and gesticulates with his hand that the chair is mine.

'Thank you. Last night... I did not mean to make you feel like a pervert. I am sorry'

He looks at me and doesn't say a word. I stare back. Is he trying to intimidate me? I am not the one. If there's one thing I do perfectly without fear or favour, it's eye contact. I will look into your eyes until I see your memories from creche and a cross-section of your kidneys. He laughs when I don't break the stare.

'Kulani...' he pronounces and stands up. He comes to balance his weight against the desk next to me. 'So you like to read?'

'Only when I have nothing else to do. I actually prefer Pinterest over any book' I say and he chuckles.

'Wow. The way you were so interested in those items on the shelf I thought you were going to be on some pan-African, bantu knowledge, forgotten soil and what not rant'

I laugh. He is not the first person to mistaken me for

someone who is passionate about those types of things and I come nowhere close. I don't like stress and giving myself the unnecessary task of dissecting stuff and things. There's already a lot going on in my head and the moment it all goes silent, I cherish every second.

'Interesting. Tell me, how did you find yourself in here? Were you looking for me?'

'Yes, actually. I need a charger please'

He goes to the socket and unplugs it.

'Anything else?' he asks after handing it to me.

'Y-yeah. Can you please organize a driver for me? I need to go get some deodorant'

He smiles. Maybe Rhandzu wasn't wrong. He is not bad for the eyes. Not bad at all.

'So as you sit there, you don't have any deodorant on? I was wondering where this odd smell was coming from' he asks and I smell my armpits without giving it a thought. He must be insane. I use Mitchum. It lasts a lifetime. He laughs.

'I am just joking. Give me an hour to reply to these emails and we'll leave. I also need a couple of things there'

'Okay, thank you'

...

Fikani walks into the bedroom and Boitumelo immediately throws what's in her hand under the pillow, looking like she was caught with murder evidence. He raises his brows as he slowly closes the door.

'What are you doing?' he asks. The manner in which she's shaking her head gives it away that she's in fact hiding something. He walks over to the bed and removes the pillow. He finds a yellow baby romper with pink flowers. His heart bounces as he looks at the small item that would fit a tiny human being. He sighs and puts it back. He squats in front of her and takes both her hands. She looks away, eyes glossed with tears. He kisses her fingers.

'Look at me' he says. She stubbornly continues to look away. 'Hey?' he softly calls and she finally turns in his direction.

'Stop punishing yourself like this. You don't deserve any of this pain. It's unnecessary'

'It's easy for you to say because you don't want this baby as much as I do'

'Tell me something. Do you want to fall pregnant because you want to redeem yourself somehow or you genuinely want a child?'

'I want to be a mother with all my heart baby. I just don't understand what's happening because we did all the tests and even got second opinions. You're not the problem. I'm also fine. So what is it? Have I lost my praying power?'

'Can you see what this is doing to you? Let's try other options. There's in-vitro. There's surrogacy. If all else fails then even adoption exists'

'I have everything I need. I just want to be a mother and I want to carry my own kids. I want to experience morning sickness and cravings'

The tears drop unceasingly. He gets her up and hugs her tight.

'Sshh. We will have kids but right now? I think you need a break. Push this at the back of your mind and one day you'll just see. I promise you'

He hugs and brushes her relaxed hair, pushing it back and indirectly massaging her scalp. He has noticed that this always calms her down. Once she's in a serene state of mind, he kisses her hot forehead and urges her to lie on the bed.

'I'll bring you glass of water and some fruit, okay?'

She nods and hugs his pillow. Her phone rings.

'Cynthia?'

'Boity my doll, are you home? Listen, I have a conference I need to attend and my nanny did not pitch today. Please help?'

'Sure. You don't need to ask'

'You're a godsent. Let me bath her and I'll be there in ten'

Boitumelo gets out of bed and quickly wears her slippers. Fikani comes back with a glass of water and a saucer carrying a peeled nartjie and a sliced apple.

'Ku humelela yini manjhe?' (What is going on?)

She sniffs and wipes her swollen eyes.

'I need to quickly wash my face and lay my wig. Can't let her see me in this state'

'Let who? What are you talking about?'

'Cynthia. She's on her way here'

Fikani is instantly bored.

'Baby tell me something. Why are you still friends with these people because y'all clearly don't like one another?'

'I thought they were decent people when I joined the squad, until they started gossiping about me' she answers from the bathroom.

'And you still agree to babysit for them?'

'Kea is just a baby. She did nothing wrong' she states as she walks back into the room.

'Okay' he retreats from the conversation. 'I am off to see my mother. I thought you'd come with but you're clearly preoccupied'

'I wouldn't have. She's also judgmental'

'In what way?'

'She's always making these backhanded remarks about why we don't have a baby yet, and please don't say a word. She doesn't do these things in your presence'

'I'll speak to her'

'No, don't. Our relationship is already unstable. Let her be'

He shakes his head and walks out. When he arrives by the township, he finds her sitting outside and picking sugar beans.

'If it isn't his mother's favourite boy' she stands up to welcome him. He laughs as they hug. He takes the

groceries inside and takes out a chair, joining her on the veranda. He knows that she will update him on everything that's been happening and she won't stop until she runs out of news bulletins. He keeps laughing and nodding as she reports.

'Anyway, how are you my son?'

'I'm okay, just tired. I barely slept last night'

She gives him a naughty smile. 'Manufacturing a little Fikani?'

He laughs. 'No. Just work stuff'

She obviously disappointed.

'My boy, do you not see that I am getting old? I should've been a grandmother to four kids by now'

'About that, I have a favour to ask'

'Yes?'

'Please don't say these things to her. She doesn't need the stress'

'Are you sure that this woman of yours is not taking any prevention pills?'

'Let's not discuss that. I wasn't meaning to stay long. Just thought I should pop by and let you know the progress of

the house. The roofing is almost done and you should be able to move there in about two weeks' he informs. She gets up and ululates, bringing herself to tears. He smiles at this sight.

'Oh my boy. Thank you so much. You really don't have to do all these things for me'

'I actually do. You sacrificed a lot for me. We didn't have much but every time I needed something, you made sure to make it possible. So no, thank you. Ndzi khensa rirhandzu ra nwina makhe' (I am thankful for your love, mother)

'God indeed restores' she wipes her tears and sits back down.

'You don't look happy. Did I say something wrong?'

'Please sit down. We need to talk'

He sits, wearing a worried face. She gathers some strength.

'You once asked me about your father...'

He nods.

'We fought that day and you disappeared from home for a week. You were only fourteen, I remember'

Fikani is quiet.

'I couldn't eat because that was the first time you threw a tantrum and raised your voice at me. I had always known you to be unproblematic child. The issue is, this is much more complicated than you think'

'In what sense? Is he a married man?'

'Yes...'

He keeps his thoughts to himself.

'He is married to your mother'

It takes him a second to process.

'You've lost me'

'Yesterday, your aunt called me. I was hoping otherwise but I knew that this day would come. They're looking for you back home'

'Who is they? I thought you said we weren't welcome there?'

'I... I lied, to an extent'

'Please summarize this in a way that will be quick to understand because you've completely lost me'

'Fikani, I am not... I'm not the one who gave birth to you'

'Am I adopted?'

'No. Your mother couldn't keep you so I had to raise you'

'Please start from the beginning'

'Your mother fell pregnant fell twins at a time where people did not understand why they exist. It was considered a curse and those children were never allowed to live, including those with albinism and congenital deformities'

'Okay?'

'Her first child was a girl born with albinism. Apparently, her husband killed the baby himself'

'What? That's absurd'

'Yes but it still happened anyway. If you wanted to keep your child, you had to move away from there. Everybody knew'

'So, instead of her moving with me, she gave me away?'

'Please understand that she had no choice. She couldn't leave because she had responsibilities back home'

'What responsibility is greater than your own child?'

'Your mother is a queen. She's royalty. She could've never just upped and left'

'I hear you makhe trust me. I just don't understand a word you're saying'

...

[KULANI]

'Akani!' Kurhula calls his son after starting the car. He comes from behind the house, running to heed his father's call.

'Papa?'

'Khandziya hi famba boy' (Get in the car so we can go)

'How old is he?' I ask.

'He's four. AK, meet mhan'Kuli. Kulani, this is my son' he nonchalantly introduces us as he reverses the car. I look back and wave at the boy. He gets shy and hides behind his hands. I laugh when he eventually waves back.

'And his mom, where is she?'

He suddenly becomes uncomfortable. Akani asks him for his phone and Kurhula hands it to him.



'She's a deadbeat' he answers. I'm left short of words. I don't even know if it's safe to keep talking. Why did I even ask that question? I tend to get personal a lot and regret it soon after.

'We used to be fine until my family rejected her. Things went downhill from there'

'Why did they reject her?' I gingerly ask.

He snorts. 'There's only one reason why they would reject a woman. Their justification is that she has no royal blood'

'Are you still together?'

'No. She's not the same person anymore'

'When did you break up?'

We arrive at the shopping complex. It's not packed and that makes me happy. He steps out of the car and opens the door for Akani. The boy walks ahead of us and trips on an ill-fitted pavement brick. I immediately shut my eyes when I imagine how hard the fall is going to be. Kurhula laughs. AK gets up and dusts himself after hitting the ground.

'That's the trick. Don't ever do that again because once he starts crying, he becomes inconsolable. Even if he's injured, make it seem like it's nothing' he says with a smile

before going to pick him up.

'His knee is bruised. It needs some cleaning up' I observe as his legs dangle.

Akani keeps inspecting the area with blood patches and Kurhula is unbothered. Are we sure that men are meant to be fathers? We go into the store and I get my deodorant. I take advantage of the trip and pick up a couple of things I might need, including the cotton, plasters, and a small bottle of Dettol. We go back to the car and I make Akani sit on the passenger seat with his legs facing outside.

'It's gonna hurt just a little bit okay?'

He nods. I dab the surface wound and remove the blood.

'I feel like an experienced nurse' I joke and Kurhula laughs.

'Maybe you are' he says and continues standing behind me. Crossing the plasters covers more space, so I do exactly that.

'Say high-five mhan'Kuli'

Akani giggles and we smash palms. He's so adorable.

'What would you like to eat? Kurhula asks.

'KFC' Akani innocently responds.

'I knew it. And wena, matron?'

I shoot out laughter. I have moved on from that.

‘Whatever our patient is having. I’m really not hungry’

We walk to shop and place Akani’s twister order. The mere thought of it gets me full so I settle for a strawberry sunrise instead. I need a cold drink. It is not even midday but we’re already getting cooked. From the deepest parts of my heart, I truly hate this type of weather.

Akani chooses to sit on the same side as me and Kurhula finds this surprising.

‘What do you bath with? He usually doesn’t gel well with strangers’ he says as he opens the wrap for him.

I laugh while sipping on my drink.

‘Do you like kids?’ he asks.

‘It’s the other way round’ I answer.

‘Makes sense, Miss Pinterest’

‘Are you gonna use everything I say against me’

‘Most probably. It’s every lawyer’s bad trait so careful not to say anything incriminating’ he states and I shake my head.

‘Where did you study?’

‘CN Mahlangu. What about you?’

'Why are you lying? That doesn't even make sense'

My mother couldn't stop raving about him. He chuckles.

'If you know the answers to your questions then why are you asking them? I don't want to talk about any of that.

What's your favourite colour? This is what I am interested in the most'

I laugh at the sarcastic tone.

'Blue' I answer, nonetheless. 'What's yours?'

'Maroon, thank you for asking'

I laugh. I misjudged him. Initially, he had this uptight energy about him. This is quite a playful human being.

'Why did you agree to this Kulani?'

I finish off my drink and slurp on the ice cubes. He's irritated but he's trying not to say anything. He laughs when I continue, with my eyes on him.

'This behaviour doesn't suit you' he says.

'What suits me?'

'You strike me as a lady of class'

'I'm full of surprises. Why did I agree, you ask?'

He nods.

'I should be the one asking you this question'

'I did not. Now answer me'

'Your family needs healing. That's why' I say as I wipe the sauce off Akani's chin and nose.

'You stare a lot' I note. He laughs.

'Another bad trait. You done boy? Let's go. You will finish your drink in the car' Kurhula says as he picks up his phone and car keys.

'You said you needed to buy things here but I never saw you paying for anything' I ask with suspicion. He smiles and keeps walking.

'Ask no questions, hear no lies my lady'

[08/24, 12:44 pm] #o: CHAPTER 3

[KULANI]

'You are moving on to the next stage of your initiation' The old woman who always appears in my dreams says to me. When I describe her to my father, he suspects that she is his great grandmother. The one who is said to have lived till 112 years of age. I have never been to this place before.

She has been giving me a tour, feeding, and sprinkling me with things. The first time I discovered that I had a spiritual gift was when I blacked out and collapsed in a mall two months ago. It wasn't the first time I had a blackout. When I opened my eyes, there was a woman looking over me. I concluded her to be a traditional healer from her beads and outfit. She was the one who took the most interest in me amongst that large crowd. She left me with a simple sentence. She told me to get a blue Njete cloth that I will tie around my waist when I experience lower back pain or over my shoulders whenever they feel heavy.

I was taken back home and when I arrived, I told my dad everything. He said he wasn't surprised. When I asked why, he said I was born with my amniotic sac still intact around me and that this was expected. When I asked to go see a traditional healer regarding this, he blatantly said no. His reasons were that if I am meant to consult, I will be shown in my dreams who I need to consult with because not all traditional healers will have my best interest at heart. I simply went and got the cloth. Two nights later, I was shown a concoction that resulted in lucid dreams, bright as day.

I wake up on top of a cold flat rock, in a white vest, black tights and my cloth around my waist. I am pale and dripping wet. I hear the sound of the water and I open my eyes. I have no idea if the sun is setting or rising. The headache and time disorientation is making my head spin. Where is this place? My heart starts racing. I begin trying to breathe and I remember where I was. They brought me here. They would never allow anything to happen to me. The last image I remember is getting swallowed by a monstrosity of a python. The trees surrounding this place are forest green, shrubby and healthy. There's someone here. I cannot see them yet but I can feel that there's someone here. I begin hearing footsteps and I wait. That lady, the lady from the mall. She appears with a smile, wearing a white dress with a cape and a matching doek. The spiritual belt made of wool around her waist has her body snatched. She looks like she's in her good forties.

She extends her hand towards me and tells me to stand up. I do, with her help. I'm cold and I am trembling due to this fact.

'You must be hungry. Let's go get you something to eat'

My instincts assure that she's harmless. I am an excellent reader of vibes. They never lie. I tell her where home is and

she says I mustn't worry. We get to her house and she gives me bread and milk. Not what I would voluntarily go for but I was taught never to be picky in other people's houses. We go sit outside on reed mats. I start eating my breakfast.

'How was home?' she asks with a warm smile. Wait, she knows? I drink my milk.

'You've been there?'

'Not in the physical sense like you. I had to go to Swaziland to find my Gobela' she explains.

'Does that mean I'll have to go too?'

She laughs. 'No. We're all different with different spiritual specs. You're one of those people who don't have to go to any initiation school. Your ancestors prefer to be hands on. That's why they are thwasaring you themselves. Your initiation started the first time I saw you, through dreams. Your journey can never be the same as anybody else's, hence we have prophets operating in churches, sangomas and the likes. We are all different parts of the huge body of God'

'In other words, I am doing all of this by myself?'

She smiles. 'No. You will have guidance along the way. They will send you people who are more experienced than

you, or simply tell you these things themselves’

I am slowly losing my appetite. I was okay with the dreams and seeing things that nobody else can, but this thing of waking up in random, dangerous places? They need another modus operandi because this is not it. I burp and shock myself. I usually do but it’s mostly subtle. I am certain I heard the roar of a lion towards the end of the sound that just came out of me. She develops the widest of smile and bows her head and claps her palms thrice.

‘Ndauwe. Thokoza gogo’

I have to ask.

‘Why are most terms in Zulu in ancestral language?’

‘It’s not necessarily Zulu. Our great ancestors were predominantly Nguni so that’s where it comes from. A good example is your marital destiny. You are a Ngobeni bride. Those are Zulu people from Louisville that got assimilated into the Tsonga culture. oNdwandwe, oMkhatshwa, oNxumalo, unlike vaka Ngoveni who speak a slightly different but almost same type of Xitsonga. The Ngobe-Zithas are Shangaan if you trace them from way back. We are all connected, one way or the other’ she throws some maize to the chickens in front of us.

I laugh at my ignorance.

'I have always thought there was a fault at Home Affairs or something, hence they're written differently'

She sips on her water.

'No. There's different groups. Vatsonga va hambana'
(Tsonga people are different)

I nod.

'I am sensing a lot of anxiety and worry from you. Don't overthink this. This journey takes time'

Time? Have I not the reached the end? Was I not graduating this morning?'

'There's still more?'

She chuckles.

'Way more. What are you were doing by far is getting acclimatized to uMndau, the marine ancestor. Your journey continues. What lies ahead of you is a bit tedious because you have what we call abalozi, which communicate by whistles or bird sounds. There's usually an irritating ringing sound you get in your ear that sounds like a whistle. Once it's there, it demands your focus and concentration, right?'

I nod. She seems passionate about all of this.

‘These are not your direct ancestors, same as uMndau. Hence you see this type of ancestor through mermaids and white people. They are spirits that died by the mountains and rivers, without a place they can call their own. This whistling sound you hear is what they used to communicate back then – imitating the sounds of birds to encrypt their messages from enemies. They are the type to tell you a direct message you will hear in your ear as if someone is verbally saying something, sitting next to you. You don’t have to use your imagination with them’

‘But, that’s mostly how I see things, with my imagination?’

‘You need to understand that you don’t receive messages from one type of ancestor or spirit. We walk with a crowd, which is sometimes a disadvantage because they can clash. When elephants fight, it’s the grass that suffers’

To say I am amazed would be a great understatement.

‘How do I learn their bird or whistle language then?’

‘Forget about it. They will come to you and teach you everything themselves. They are not like uMndau. Their training can take a very long time. There’s a white bird that likes to visit you. That’s not just a bird’ she informs and stands up. ‘In due time, you will understand what it’s actually saying to you. Let me go wake this child up so he

can drive you home' she beams as she speaks. I am still taken aback. I was never mindful of that particular bird.

...

'How does a person walk past you and you don't see her? What did I say about sleeping on duty? You are all fired!' Kurhula boils after watching the camera footage, showing Kuli slowly walking out of the yard with closed eyes. He concluded that she was sleepwalking.

'Hi kombela rivalelo, Mlambya' (Please forgive us) they both speak at the same time while ruefully squashing their security berets. Kurhula opens his mouth to speak and immediately decides against it.

'Get your black behinds off my f**king property' he leaves them at the gate and walks back his mother, who was standing at the corner of the house with Akani on her back. He calls for back-up and asks that the gents go all over the community to look for her.

'What are we going to tell her family?' she anxiously asks while hushing the quiet and calm baby unprovoked. Kurhula puts his hands over his head. The trafficking rate that's been peaking in that area wasn't helping either.

'Please give me a second to think' he walks away and marches straight to his study. He puts both the phones down and takes a seat – his and Kulani's. He shortly stands up and begins pacing back and forth. He didn't want to call her family. That was the last option but he felt the situation was backing him into a corner. He hears by the feeble knock that Akani is behind the door. He goes to open for him and lets him in.

'Hey boy' he picks him up and puts him on top of the table. 'Why are you looking sad? Swilo yini?' (What's wrong?)

'Vakwihi va mhan'Kuli?' (Where is mam'Kuli?) he innocently asks and Kurhula's heart goes cold. It wasn't the first time he heard AK ask this type of question in such a heartbroken tone, except all along, he's been asking about his biological mother.

'She's gonna come back, okay?'

Akani slightly bends his lip and nods. He's a smart child. He could sense the haywire around her going missing. The fact that she wasn't in bed when he woke up was the first sign that she had gone somewhere. Kurhula let Akani be when he wanted to sleep in her room the previous night, considering that she didn't mind.

'Go tell your grandmother to make you some oats with

blueberries neh?' he puts him down and he runs out.

'She couldn't have gotten far barefoot' he says to himself as he dials the security guys.

'Sho. We're still looking' his old high-school friend, Bennet, answers before Kurhula can say a word.

'Please try your best to find her. Ask everyone if you can'

'Don't worry my guy. I'll try my best to find your wife'

He cuts the call and carelessly drops his weight on the chair. He hears his mother celebrating outside. He dashes there and sees Kuli getting off the back of a van driven by two boys. He quickens his steps towards her and holds her by the upper arms, trying to inspect if she was injured.

'Are you okay? Where were you?' he questions from a place of shock. By now, she was completely dry.

'I... I don't know. I just woke up in the middle of nowhere' she lies. She couldn't tell anybody else what she saw under there.

'We are just glad you are okay. How were we going to explain this to your father?'

Kuli laughs.

'You must be traumatized. Sleepwalking is not a joke. I

need to get you to our family healer. Who knows what was being done to you?' Kurhula says, thinking of witchcraft.

Kuli immediately shakes her head in disapproval.

'No please. I do not mix with traditional healers. Don't take me there. I am fine'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. If there was anything wrong with me then I would know, trust me' she bends to pick AK up, avoiding having to speak about this any further. They all walk into the house. Junior steps out of his room, stretching his arms and yawning. He is surprised to see Kuli dressed in this manner.

'Uhm... good morning family. What is happening?'

'This house will burn down one day while you sleep like a dead person' Kurhula says and moves him out the way. Kuli laughs and puts AK down.

'I am going to bath. I'll see you at breakfast' she says to him and he understands.

Mhan'Xongi follows Kurhula outside. He finds him standing next to the water fountain in the garden.

'Do you see what I am seeing here?' she asks. He turns and sees her.

'Anitwi?' (Come again)

'That cloth she's wearing. I don't think that was just sleepwalking. It has everything to do with her ancestors. I am old enough to see and understand these things'

'That's why she has to leave. She will bring us demons here'

They both hear Aunt Fanisa's voice from behind them. She was eavesdropping. Kurhula looks in her direction. He despises her the same way he hates Uncle Solomon.

'This is a private conversation' he says and waits for her to excuse herself.

Fanisa walks away with her hands in the pockets of her dress. Xongi sees her sister wife coming out of her house in the next yard.

'We will resume this conversation later. I need to speak to your mother quickly' she dashes off and they enter the house. Kurhula looks at her biological mother as she pushes the door closed. He begins wondering what they have been conniving about in the past two days.

'Did you manage to find them?' Xongi asks. Masingita's chest goes up and comes down a second later – exhausted with her.



'It is still morning. Can I have breakfast first?'

'Please Singi...'

'I found her sister. She promised to speak to Sarah. I was told to come back today'

'Let's go now'

'Haa hee nweh!' Singi exclaims – appalled. She pushes her outside and tells her that they will leave later.

...

[KULANI]

After my bath, I walked straight to bed and fell on top of it. Large bodies of water are extremely exhausting. I wake up about an hour later and sit up. One thing they won't tell you about spiritual gifts is the unnecessarily high libido that comes with them. I have a strong desire to touch myself right now but I am going to ignore it. I need some fresh air before undoing these braids. They're still fresh but I feel like they're eating at my scalp and digging into my brain. The headaches are unbearable. Kurhula knocks and asks

if it's safe to come in. I laugh. What does he mean safe? Would I leave the door unlocked if I was naked? A t-shirt and leggings are decent enough. I tell him to enter.

He comes to sit on the bed as I untwist the hair. Luckily, they're thick so I should be done soon.

'Why don't you use a scissor once?' he asks as I start from the very end of the strand.

I snort. I don't play those games. I have a bad experience with having my real hair cut.

'Do you know how long my hair is?'

He shrugs and offers to help. He wants his mothers and aunts to say I am emasculating him? And why is he being so nice?

'I was worried about you' he states.

'You were?'

He nods.

'There's a lot that can happen to an unguarded woman out there'

Unguarded? Bra, I walk with an army of beasts and things. I laugh internally.

'I'm okay, really. Nothing happened'

'Are you one hundred percent sure that you don't remember where you were?'

I nod as I unplait my hair. He nods as well but I see that he's unconvinced. I start remembering. I was dreaming of him just minutes ago. I remember. He breathes out loud.

'What is it? You sound burdened?' I ask. He puckers his lips and gets me to stand up. I must be looking like a peacock on the one side of my head.

'Can I hold your hands?' he asks. I—

He holds them anyway.

'F***. Where do I start?' he says. He looks nervous.

My palms start to get sweaty. There's this humble spirit about him today.

'Your name sounds right, Kulani.'

My name sounds what? In what sense? I keep quiet.

'I was promised a light and at first, I wasn't for the idea of having a wife arranged for me. Your aura brightens up the room. This will sound dumb but it took a terrible thing like your disappearance to make me realize how I truly feel about you'

My heart rate is rising. My palms are bleeding sweat. I do a

young breathe in. Men are manipulative. Did he have to do this after getting a fresh haircut?

'I don't mean to overwhelm you but, my pride will not allow me to go back to the elders to tell them that they were right, but I have to ignore it when it comes to you because you are making me feel some pretty foreign things and it's beginning to drive me nuts. I haven't slept properly ever since your arrival here. The moment I lifted that blanket off you, I just knew'

'I was boiling under there' I mention. He has to know. I am still upset.

He laughs. 'I'm sorry for my late coming. I will be honest. I have no excuse. Please forgive me?'

'In due time maybe'

He laughs again.

'I have a huge favour to ask'

'If it's money then I cannot help' I joke. I cannot imagine a circumstance where Kurhula would ask me for money.

'Well, I would like to get to know you better. Since time is usually equated to currency, can you please reconsider?'

[08/24, 12:44 pm] #o: CHAPTER 4

[KULANI]

FLIP! How could Kurhula allow me to sleep until this time? I rush out of bed and bolt into the bathroom to wash my face and my teeth. The pyjamas come off and I find a long-sleeved navy-blue dress with a matching floral headwrap. They all turn their faces to look at me when I appear. Aunt Fanisa laughs sardonically and sips on her tea. Mhan' Xongi says nothing. She doesn't even look at me. Kurhula is trying not to laugh. This is a devil's agent operating on a permanent contract.

'Good morning' I greet and continue to stand. I am mortified because the judgement is thick in the air. Junior's head is not even here. He's on his phone as always. They greet back and Aunt Lydia pulls out a chair for me. I sit in between her and Kurhula. She's already drinking alcohol. He pulls out a plate and puts in front of me. I grab one slice of toast. This is all I'll be having. My stomach is full from sheer embarrassment. They continue their conversations and the awkwardness begins to dissipate.

'When will your sister get here to do my hair? I am leaving

next week’

I don’t even know if Rhandzu will agree. She might say no because first impressions last with her.

‘I will call her this afternoon and ask’ I bite from my toast and side eye Kurhula. He continues being silent, with that smile on his face. He knows what he did wrong.

‘Kulani, the traditional part of things is basically done. Are you aware that you’re a makoti here?’ Aunt Fanisa finally speaks. She’s been eyeing me for some time. I keep quiet, out of respect for everyone around this table. She and I both know that my waking up late is not what this is about.

‘Aunty, yiman’nyana. She overslept because she slept late last night. It’s normal human behaviour’ Kurhula says and I apologize for the sake of it. Aunt Fanisa looks away – still looking dissatisfied. I thought mhan’Xongi was disappointed in me but the longer I sit here, I realize that her sadness has nothing to do with me. I don’t even want to entertain this because she’s going to infect me with her morosity. I plan on having a good day.

‘I am just saying that you should respect this home, and this habit of yours of speaking English with your elders—’

‘Oh please. Give it a rest already. We have more important things to discuss’ Aunt Lydia interjects.

'Like what?' Fanisa asks, already irritated with what might come out of Lydia's mouth.

'Uhm... how about the fact that you don't have a matric certificate? That you failed this very English you speak of with a 13%? That's a good place to start. Are you aware that irregardless is not a word? Do you even have the slightest idea what the word regard means?'

'Lydia!' Mhan' Xongi reprimands as always. Aunt Lydia raises her flute and sips her champagne – unbothered. Kurhula is obviously exhausted. He's not even trying to intervene.

'I was just sharing food for thought, but shame I understand why it was difficult for you to grasp certain things. Even flammable and inflammable essentially mean the same thing so... very tricky for a flat brain' she takes another slow sip.

I don't know where to look. I should've just stayed in that room and left people to continue eating in peace. Fanisa is cooking a comeback. I can just see it under that twitching sneer.

'Well, at least I can keep a man unlike somebody who has entered the divorce court more than once'

There's subtle exclamations around the table. This is

escalating at a dangerous rate. Junior keeps moving his eyes from one woman to the other as they throw rotten eggs across the table. Lydia laughs out loud.

'It's called maintaining standards, mon amour. Nothing you know anything about because even the husband you claim to have kept is quite... challenging on the visual side of things, may his hideous soul rest in pieces. Excuse me but...did you marry because there was a man willing and available or do you just generally have a concern-worthy and questionable taste in men?'

'Damn!' Junior says and we all shoot looks at him. 'I'm sorry. I... I'm sorry' he retreats'

All this mess because I was late for breakfast?

'Lydia, I am older than you' Fanisa admonishes and stabs the table surface with a fork.

'There's no need to point that out. Those eyebags and grey hairs are very much screaming ancient fossil'

'Just because some of us don't go to western doctors because we refuse to get OLD, it does not mean—'

'Dr Parmessel to you. Say it. He's bloody expensive for you to be referring to him as a random western doctor ngaku ulowa nsinyeni' (like you're falling off a tree)

If I wasn't told otherwise, I'd easily swear that these two do not come from the same womb.

'The money you receive from this skill you have of scamming men is driving you crazy'

Lydia laughs. 'Thank for acknowledging that it is quite in fact a skill. It's called getting married in COP if anybody was wondering. I can teach you a thing or two so you can also go consult with a reputable surgeon and stop carrying around the face of a genetically constructed dog gone wrong'

Fanisa gasps! Mhan' Xongi has long given up on them. She keeps stirring the bowl of porridge in front of her, so much that it's assuming the liquid consistency of a thin smoothy. Kurhula stands up and offers me his hand. I get up and we leave them still tearing one another apart.

'We are we going?' I ask when we step out of the yard.

'Taking a walk, or were you enjoying that wrestle mania going on in there?'

I laugh at how bored he sounds.

'Are they always like this?' I ask.

He sighs. 'Unfortunately, yes'

'What kind of a person is Aunt Lydia? You seem to like her'

'Ah' – he chuckles – 'Aunt Lydia is... just Aunt Lydia. She's one of those people whose brains are disconnected from their mouths. Each is working independently nje' he says and I shoot out laughter. How dare he?

'That's not a nice thing to say'

'What? It's true. She's just... she shoots straights to the point and doesn't care who gets burnt with the fire she spits'

'Is she the same with you and Edward Jr?' I ask. I have noticed the soft spot she has for the two.

'No one is spared'

'And Aunt Fanisa?'

The smile completely disappears from his face.

'I brought you out here for some fresh air. Please don't pollute the atmosphere'

There's something here. Something big. I am not quite sure what it is but from the little I know about this woman, the discovery won't be palatable the day things come out in the open.

'Come with me to Port Elizabeth'

That was rather random. I'm not sure.

'Come on, or do you want me to leave you behind with these old women? I don't want you calling me crying saying you want to return back home'

I laugh. I know who he is referring to, but I can defend myself. Aunt Fanisa is the type of person you just allow to shout until they get tired and go to sleep. You don't say a single word, you just nod and apologize. I was raised by someone similar so this is nothing bizarre.

'What are you going to do in PE?'

'My client has been arrested'

'For what?'

'Murder'

I have always wanted to ask this.

'Do you defend such people even when you know they're guilty?'

'There's a reason why I'm the advocate and not the judge. My job is to keep people out of jail, not enforcing morality'

I swear, the devil has a special furnace for lawyers in hell.

...

Boitumelo opens the door for Lorraine and immediately hugs her best friend.

'I've missed you terribly!'

Lorraine laughs. 'Oh please. We both know you found new friends'

'That's not true'

They walk to the couch area.

'I see your Insta stories. I can still buy data even though I no longer have a job, you know' she laughs. Boitumelo doesn't.

'Don't be like that. I tried reaching out to you but you never pick up my calls. What can I get you to drink?'

'I'd like a full meal please. I ate noodles the whole week'

Tumi laughs. She'd forgotten how her friend is everything but shy.

'You know what? There's the fridge. I won't allow you to stress me'

They go into the kitchen and Lorraine prepares her mountain of a sandwich.

'So, how have you been? I see some fat on the neck. Are we expecting a baby?' she asks with little sparks of joy

flying from her eyes.

'Pshh! I wish. I guess it's the fertility hormones I've been pumping myself with'

Lorraine frowns.

'It's still not happening?'

Tumi shakes her head.

'Oh my friend...' Lolo walks over to her and holds both her hands.

'Let's pray'

Tumi gets off the chair and they stand, holding hands.

'Modimo waka a' lokileng. We come before you great God to firstly give praise and thanks for allowing us to see yet another day. You are worthy of praise because You do not keep a record of the number of times we stray but only the number of times we come back to You. We were never holding You up, so there's absolutely nothing we can do to let You down'

Tumi tightens her hands around Lorraine's.

'You are worthy of all worship because you are a consistent God. Your promises are always yes and amen. Give us the wisdom to accept the things we cannot

change and the strength to change those that we cannot accept, according to Your will'

Lorraine starts praying in tongues and all Boitumelo can do is cry.

'Modimo waka I cast out all the forces in Boitumelo's womb that are shutting the door for her baby. I bind the spirit of barrenness and infertility! All she's asking for is a child. Only a child. Give us an answer, my Lord. Give us a way forward. All this I ask in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen'

Lorraine wipes her sweat after she closes the prayer and hugs her friend.

'You need a white candle'

'To do what with it?'

'You pray. Every day at 3am for seven days. Don't ask me many questions. You will thank me later'

She goes back to her sandwich and starts digging in. Boitumelo rubs her hands thoughtfully.

'If it doesn't work out, I am going to leave Fikani'

Lorraine almost rolls her eyes.

'Ye of little faith. You haven't even started praying but

you're already entertaining the chance of failure. God doesn't operate like that. The slightest doubt sends your prayer flying out the window. Why do you wanna leave him?'

'I don't want to trap him. He never signed up for a childless marriage. He might pretend like he's fine but I know he's worried that we might not have kids. If I don't get pregnant, someone else will and I will not stand for all that shame. Our marriage is slowly developing cracks. We fight every two minutes. Yesterday, I asked him about the double amount he sent to his mother this month and—'

'And why would you do that?'

'I don't know. I printed his statement trying to find something suspicious because he works late these days and I find nothing in his phone'

Lorraine laughs. 'How.... Hhh... how was a bank statement supposed to help you mratuwa?'

'He's a giver, especially of money and gifts. That's his love language. If there is someone, I will see from his transactions. And lately he's buying me an abundance of flowers, lunch at work and spa vouchers that I don't need, like he's guilty of something'

'Do you know what your biggest problem is, Tumi? Pride!

Fikani loves you, you love him just as much. These are things you should be discussing with him, not me. You should be comfortable enough to discuss your insecurities with your husband. As for the spa what not, excuse him for wanting to take care of you. He's a Tsonga man. They're all like that. They're taught to nurture and protect, always. I warned you because I know you. This hyper-independence of yours will work against you. Submit already'

Boitumelo laughs and drinks Lorraine's juice. Lolo finishes her lunch and grabs her handbag.

'I love you and thank you for the food. I need to pass by the store and get some formula before it gets late'

Boitumelo gives her a warm smile and walks her out. She takes her phone and sends Lorraine R3000. She takes what Lolo said into consideration. She starts cooking dinner and takes a bath after she's done. She welcomes Fikani at the door and takes his laptop bag. He offers her a kiss before sitting down.

'How was your day my love?' he asks as she dishes up.

'It was okay, I guess. Lorraine was here' she approaches with a covered plate and a small water basin with warm water and a cloth. He frowns as she kneels in front of him.

'What's happening?' he asks as he relieves her of the tray,

with a shadow of confusion covering his face.

She giggles. 'I am serving you your food'

'Baby, did I forget something? Is it our anniversary today? Usually you just put it in the microwave or bring the plate as it is. Ay get up'

'Hawu. I thought... isn't this what you want?'

'Says who? Since when?'

She slowly shrugs. 'Lorraine'

He laughs. 'I must say. You have a pretty impressive knack for choosing terrible friends. Get up please. You've covered the plate. That's enough respect, thank you' he pecks her lips and cups her chin.

'I don't expect you to be kneeling in front of me like a slave, unless if it has everything to do with fellatios and gag reflexes, ayt?' he says – looking straight into her eyes and she smiles.

'Get up' he smiles back and starts enjoying the food she prepared.

...

[KULANI]

I am married but I still feel guilty for travelling with a man. I keep expecting my mother to call and yell at me for being out of the house at this time in that strict voice of hers.

He pulls my bag and opens the door when we get to the Raddison Blu. Long trips exhaust me but I love travelling. Kahle kahle ni rhandza swilo meh. I like experiencing new things. His phone rings and he puts it on speaker while trying to plug in his laptop.

'Jaguar' the person on the other line calls.

'Jaa Khalanga'

'Have you arrived?'

'Yeahhh but plans have changed man. I won't be able to join you guys anymore'

'Why though?' his friend complains. I hear the others whining as well. Kurhula laughs. Judging from the noise, wherever they are is a boozy spot.

'I'll see you guys. I promise'

'You're not answering the question, bloody fool'

He laughs even harder.

'I brought my wife along with me. I can't leave her here by herself'

'Bring her with'

'Amo penga marha?' (Are you guys not mad?)

I grab my things and go into the bathroom to take a shower. I come out fully dressed and find food waiting for me. He's already had his. I don't like eating after seven. Apart from generally not liking it, I'm not allowed to. Besides, I had wings on our way here.

'Are you not going to eat?' he asks.

'I'm not really hungry'

I haven't found my feet in this. I don't even know what to call whatever it is that's happening between us but each minute I spend with him kinda makes me feel like I want this. That dream I had is not helping either. It's like I woke up with fresh feelings for this person. Maybe I have finally found the one. If he is, I'm not complaining.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' he asks. He laughs when I finally realize that I have been stalling. I burp and alarm him. The look on his face tells me that he wasn't expecting that.

'Nothing. There's something I need to tell you' I say and he

puts the laptop down. He stands up and comes to stand in front of me.

'I'm all ears'

'I have a spiritual gift, Kurhula. I am a self-initiate' I say it like it is. There's no vocab to decorate this. He doesn't look shocked.

'What kind of a gift is it?'

'I haven't harnessed it fully yet but—' – I burp again— 'Oh God'

He laughs softly.

'Take your time'

I swallow the bubble of air constricting my breathing pipe and I feel better.

'I can see things. People's problems and their solutions'

That's the simplest way to put it.

'Interesting'

'You're not freaked out?'

He huffs. 'I am an African man, Kulani. What's there to be freaked out about?'

He holds my hands. He likes holding hands, I've noticed.

'We don't have souls' he states and I frown. We don't have souls?

'We are souls inhabiting bodies so we can navigate this physical realm. Your body and your soul are separate entities, hence they find it difficult to communicate most times. The things that please the flesh are usually a hindrance to the spirit that lives in it'

Okay this took a smooth curve, but where is he going with it?

'What kind of things are those?' I want him to stretch this.

'I don't know. Sex? Alcohol? Money in a way?'

'Money? How so?'

'It carries a lot of energy. This is why you should never hand a person hard cash in hand if it makes you feel uneasy. You're making me digress now. The point of this is, if I am going to be with you, I can't change you. I won't even try because spirituality is a beautiful thing'

Interesting... as he likes to say.

'Do you drink?' I ask. He nods.

I laugh. 'But you're aware that it's a hindrance?'

'I do drink but I never get drunk'

'Why? I heard it's fun'

'It leads to vulnerability. There's nothing I hate more'

The conversation is no longer light. The mood has suddenly changed. He sits down on the bed and picks up the pen he was using moments ago. I sit next to him.

'What happened between you and your father?' I ask this question without giving it a thought. It's not coming from me.

Kurhula silently plays with the pen until it breaks.

'We didn't have a good relationship' he finally speaks.

'Edward was a pretty violent man and I have always wanted to defend my mom from him. I didn't mind him hitting me but her? Something in me broke each time he did it. That's why she shipped me off to boarding schools and made sure I studied abroad, far from home. She convinced the family that I was rebellious and unruly, whole time I was just trying to be a barrier between her and premature death'

What?

He looks at me and smiles unexpectedly.

'Don't look so sad...' he says and continues gazing at me. I need these lashes for myself. He bites his lower lip and

releases it. I watch him approach for a kiss and the next thing I know, I am sucking on his soft lips. He gets on top of me and I wrap my hands around him. Okay, my body is going to betray me, but I can't get myself to stop. He's a bloody good kisser. I manage to break away from him and finally breathe. Phew, that was close.

'I'm sorry. I got lost in the moment' he says and I sit up, fixing my top. I laugh. He looks at me and laughs at well. Coming here was a bad idea. He gets overwhelmingly irresistible the longer I study his design and listen to his thoughts. Let me just stop lying to myself.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 5

[KULANI]

I can hear the door opening. He's back from the hearing.

'Ah, ah, ah. You're still sleeping?' he opens the curtains and I laugh. I don't even have the one bar that's required for me to talk. My body is not being cooperative today. I have been sleeping and waking up at frequent intervals but I just cannot get myself to get up from here. He squats next to the bed and looks at me with a smile.

'Nana, pfuka. I left you here in the morning na sweswi waha tlele? One day even God will be convinced that you're dead. Mitafa Kulani pfuka. Wake up we have things to do'

Breathy laughter leaves me as I lay on my stomach, hugging my pillow. Can this man leave me alone abeg?

He pulls his tie and it comes undone, waiting for me to get up. I look at him with through a single eye and close it. He puts his hand over my forehead.

'Are you sick? Have you eaten?'

'No. I'm just tired. I blame you for keeping me up for all night with your endless stories'

He gives me a devious smile and keeps his eyes on me. 'Then it means you'll wake up in ICU if I stop talking and start doing mus'

It takes me a second to get what he actually means and I can't help the bored smile that takes over my lower face. I get up as he keeps urging and go get myself cleaned up. I thought I brought the tropical shorts with, instead I left them in the bedroom. I switch off the hairdryer so he can hear me when I call.

'Kurhula??'

'It's hubby to you. How can I help you?'

I laugh.

'You're such a handful. Please bring me my shorts. They should be on top of the bag' I left my luggage open so it shouldn't be difficult to find them.

'Shorts? You mean these ones that look like pyjamas?'

I lick my upper teeth in defeat and keep quiet. I am not doing this with him.

'Yes, those ones'

He comes in walking in reverse and hands them to me without turning to face me.

'What are you doing?'

'Trying not to be a pervert'

'Oh come on! Are you ever gonna let me live that down? I'm sorry. And I have a towel on for Christ's sake'

He turns and looks at me.

'A towel?'

I don't like that smile on his face.

'Get out' I chuckle.

'I usually charge but let me tell you something for free. When a man is attracted to you, not even a Super B sack

can hide what he wants to see. Enjoy the hairdryer' he leaves. I have been smiling for way too long. I refuse to continue because my cheeks hurt. I am starting to miss Mr Uptight the Latecomer because this roommate is a menace. I look myself in the mirror as I comb and pass heat through my relaxed hair. Why can't I get the thought of him out of my damn head? If he was a mind reader, boy would think I'm the pervert. Maybe I am. Am I a pervert? I laugh silently as I internally reprimand myself. I walk out of the bathroom clad in the shorts and a matching bodysuit. My mom ruined me by buying me these tops that come with their own underwear from a young age now I can't seem to let them go. They're convenient though. Conventional tees need to be tucked in consistently and I am not about that life. I find my sandals and he comes back into the room. I was wondering where he'd went although I did hear the door when he left.

'You look cute' he compliments. He's changed into cargo shorts and a white golfer matching his sneakers.

'And you're a copycat' I tease. He laughs and hugs me from behind as I pack my stuff back into my bag. Butterflies...

'Just cause I changed into shorts? Kulani, is your grandfather the inventor of these half garments? I need to

know before I apologize'

I laugh and he kisses the exposed part of my shoulder.

'Yes he is. Why do you ask?'

'In that case, let's go buy a four-legged Wi-Fi signal so I can ask him if he was expecting me to go ziplining in a suit and a tie'

I shoot out laughter when I imagine this.

'Wi-Fi?'

'Yeah, a goat'

'I don't know what to do with you anymore' I try to zip the bag up. He picks me up and puts me on top of it to suppress it.

'Well, I know what to do with you. What's wrong with you women?' he asks as he closes it with ease.

'Leave me alone'

'No seriously. We need to address this because it's a global problem. A pandemic. Nkata mina, I specifically mentioned that we will be here for only two nights and you pack like we're moving to Egypt'

'But this bag is not that big. It's my smallest luggage bag'

'Yes, go ahead and lie'

'I swear'

He looks me straight in the eye and I laugh before clearing my throat.

'Okay fine. You got me. It might not be the smallest but it's one of the small ones'

'Why do you need so many outfits?' he ties the strings to my pants.

'The weather can change and I like to have options'

'Vavasati...' (Women)

I take the dust bag that has my sneakers and throw it into the tote bag I plan to take with me. I also throw in the small transparent bag that has my hairbrush, lip stuff, hand cream, a pack of tissues and a scrunchy. I need my sunglasses as well.

'You see? Why do you need two pairs of shoes? Do you need this huge bag?'

'These ones match my outfit but I can't do activities in them'

'Why don't you wear those ones then? Once and for all?' he looks genuinely confused. This is what happens when you mind the business that doesn't pay you.

'It's hot outside and as I've already mentioned, the sandals match my outfit' I throw my straw-hat on and he laughs. He gently pulls me by the waist and looks at me.

'You know how I know that this right here is where I'd rather be?'

I shake my head. I really do not know.

'These little things you do that do not make any sense to me fascinate me so damn much. The crazy thing is that on a random day, I wouldn't even care why women do these things but just because it's you, I am deeply interested. I think I love watching you exist'

Okay, I don't want to melt.

'We better get going Mr Ngobeni' I offer him a smile.

'Your eyes haunt me, Kulani'

I can literally feel him transferring his body heat onto me as his hands sit stationery on my waist.

'As they should, Kurhula'

He chuckles. 'You're proud that you're the sole cause of my insanity? Is this what they teach you during self-initiation?'

'They should've just named you Dennis the menace

because you have no peace'

'This is usually what happens when you give a child a name hoping they live up to it. They will grow to be the exact opposite. This is why we should name our baby Corruption'

'That's it! Let's go'

We laugh on our way out. He hands me his power bank and bottled water to put in my bag.

'Oh now you see the need for all this space?'

'I am utilizing already available space because it's unoccupied. I'm making it useful'

I thin my eyes at him.

'Hold your things in your hands, Jaguar'

He laughs. 'Don't call me that. I said I am hubby to you'

'Where does the name even come from?'

'Wild cat. Ximanga'

I feel a bit dumb. That's his totem. I start thinking about how crazy this is. I am dating my husband. We are literally doing things backwards. I laugh and shake my head. He holds the bag for me and puts his things inside it.

...

I couldn't do it. Heights are not things to kid around with. He's the only one that did it. He begged me a couple of times to do it too but I said no. He had to come back and fetch me after landing on the ground. I have just added to the list of things he doesn't dare to forget.

He keeps looking at me with that emotionally abusive smile of his.

'Stop it. I just couldn't do it, okay?' I say as I drink my juice. He's done with his lunch. I'm a slow eater and I have accepted this fact about myself.

'If it was bungee jumping I'd probably be more sympathetic, but lining??' he mocks

'Knowing my luck, that rope would've snapped and resulted in my unplanned suicide' I defend and he bursts in laughter.

'I have met cowards before but you deserve a medal. I gwala ra special' (You're a special kind of a coward)

I do that straw thing with my orange juice to irritate him. I laugh when a bored expression grows on his face, still hugging the straw with my lips.

'I won't say shit'

'I'm glad I could shut you up'

He shakes his head. 'Would you like anything else or are we leaving after you finish that?'

I am full. I don't even think I'll make it to the river cruise. My eyes are heavy from sleep. We head back to the hotel and the first thing I do is to throw myself on the bed. He joins me and we nap together.

...

This was supposed to be an hour nap. By the time he wakes me up, it's eleven at night. The view is magical outside. I notice this from the bed.

'Did you study sleep management? You're an expert at this'

I snort. I am not in the mood. I am feeling a little down for some unknown reason. I'm not surprised. I suffer from sporadic mood swings like it's a chronic disorder. He continues moisturizing his hands with a towel wrapped around his waist. I can see it. I can see it under there and I don't want to.

He sits down next to me.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asks. I sigh and continue watching the lights outside through the open curtains.

‘Nothing, really. I’m just feeling down. It will blow over’

‘Are you sure it is not because of anything in particular?’

The thing about feeling like this is, you end up regurgitating all the things that you know make you sad. We are never told about the bad luck that comes with having a gift. You’d think you are being bewitched only to find out that it’s your ancestors that are intentionally blocking your things. I feel like I wasted my time with these qualifications. I should’ve just sat at home. Maybe I would be an influencer by now if I hadn’t paid attention to school. They said it’s the key to success but my guides switched the locks.

‘It will blow over. I just need a cold shower’ I say. Water always helps. It never fails me. He opens his arms and offers me a hug. I smile and crawl towards him. He cradles me and kisses my forehead. We sit in silence for a couple of minutes. I decide to go take that shower. The weather has even changed but I can’t handle the thought of hot water right now. It will just make things worse. I catch myself singing and I immediately know that I am

coming back to myself. I entertain happy thoughts and let all the gray ones flow down the drain along with the soapy water. I hear him laughing on the phone and I envision the straight white smile contrasting his flawless brown skin. My heart start beating out of control, surrounded by that cold feeling I get when I'm nervous. I want him. I want him and I want him now. I dry myself and finish up with my night care routine. I take off my shower cap and let my hair down. I stop walking. Am I really doing this? It feels right. I've been waiting for this day for a long time. If there are any consequences, I will see to them in the morning. It's not like I have anything huge to lose. I was never meant to be celibate forever. I glance at my white-painted toes and step out into the bedroom, barefoot. I am completely naked under this towel. He looks at me and stops mid-sentence. I'm no longer feeling so confident but I'm gonna keep the stare. If only I could stop breathing so fast. Relax Kulani!

This is it. I drop the towel to the floor and he widens his eyes. He clears his throat and stands up from the bed.

'Khalanga, let me get back to you, yeah? Something urgent just came up'

He cuts the call and puts the phone down on the table. He approaches me.

'Uhm... are you... Gaddamit Kulani' he briefly shuts his eyes like they're stinging. If he's losing coherency in his speech then it means I'm doing something right. He pulls me by the waist and attacks me with a kiss. I love the feeling of his touch on me. He puts me against the wall and runs his hands along my arms, raising them up. My kitten is getting impatient. My clxt is pulsating. He kisses my neck a couple of times before coming back to my lips. I open my eyes when he stops and I find him starring at me.

'Are you sure about this?' he whispers.

'Don't give me the chance to change my mind' I kiss him and he breaks it.

He softly laughs.

'That's not a yes'

I nod. 'I'm sure'

He picks me up and goes to place me down on the bed. He takes off his sweatpants and I start rethinking what I've just done. Bloody Norah! He smiles, seeing the look on my face. He comes back to my lips and I laugh in his mouth.

'You're stiffening up. Please relax'

I start to breathe.

'I am not a boy, Kulani. I know what I'm doing. Please relax.'

Okay, baby?’

I inhale. Get it together Kuli you’re a big girl. He reaches for his wallet and drops his head in disappointment.

‘Fvck. I don’t have a rubber on me’

I feel my heart rate stabilizing again. What exactly do I want? Somehow, this is affirming for me. If he didn’t come prepared, then it means he never had any sexual intentions. He just wanted me here, with him.

‘Should I go out and buy them?’

I giggle at his silliness. It is late. I shake my head and he sucks my lips once more. He fondles my boobs and looks at me.

‘Can I?’

He wants to insert his finger down there. He can go for it. He has clean hands. He separates my legs and I feel his index gently trying to burrow a way inside. I flinch when he pushes too hard. This is why I wanted to do this while I was still a teenager. I am too much of an adult for this.

‘I’m sorry’ he seals his apology with a kiss. He pulls a pillow and lies on his stomach. He places it under my lower back and puts my legs on his shoulders. This man is starring directly at my wide open cxxchie. I laugh when he

smiles.

'What did I say?' he asks.

I laugh again. 'That I must relax'

'And?'

'That you know what you're doing'

'Wantwisisa nyan?'

I blush at how he says this. That smile is going to be the death of me. I feel his lips grabbing my bean and I close my eyes. He sucks on it and licks me from my opening going up. He keeps at this, moaning while he does it. His tongue goes inside my canal and he projects it back and forth while his finger circles my pulsating clitoris at an unrushed pace. I throw my head back and allow him to continue harvesting my soul. That's clearly his intention. Lord, he's busy licking and sucking like he's eating an expensive delicacy. If this is wrong, then I don't wanna be right.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 6

[KULANI]

I am woken up by gentle wet kisses trailing up my back. He lifts my hair and kisses my neck. I should've known that cuddling naked wasn't the best idea. I am not complaining. I feel like I am making a series of reckless decisions and I'm ashamed to say I am enjoying it. Being here with him has awakened something in me. I don't want to say I've been dead on the inside but I suddenly feel alive and I look forward to experiencing new things and living life, with him. I giggle when his touch gets ticklish. He gets on top of me and kisses my lips.

'I can't take it anymore' he confesses, huskily. The feeling is mutual. The only difference is, I managed to sleep. I'm not sure I can say the same for him.

'What time is it?' I ask, with my hand behind his head as he explores my neck, while rubbing me down there. I am dripping.

'It's 3am'

I separate my legs when he pins my hands to either side of my head. If I lost them, it would get really awkward between us because holding them is his favourite thing, I've observed. He lets them go and lifts my legs. He briefly inserts his finger and takes it out before taking hold of his hard and standing dxck. This is going to hurt, not questions asked.

'Are you comfortable?' he asks. I shift a little bit and I nod. He inserts it and keeps his eyes on me. I close mine. All I'm feeling is increasing pressure as he moves – trying to gain entry.

'It's gonna hurt but I'll try my best to be gentle neh?'

I nod. I want the painful part to be over and done with. He keeps pushing, steady and gently.

'I haven't gotten used to your body yet so I'm relying on you to alert me if you can't take it anymore okay baby?'

I nod again. One particular push gets me screaming in his mouth. He stops but doesn't pull out.

'I'm sorry' he whispers in between kisses. I tell him to continue and he gets back at it. Another push sends tears running towards my ears. He stops again, waiting for a go-ahead from me. I get myself to relax for a bit and tell him to carry on. We've been at this for some time now. I open my eyes and find him looking at me.

'You're gorgeous, even in pain' he says and I laugh. Can he be serious for one moment? We're working here.

'This hurts' I state. It really does. I just had to go do this with a Tsonga guy, didn't I? Not so smart hey. He puts his arms on the sides of my head and fingers into my hair.

'We can always stop'

'I don't wanna...'

'What do you want?' he pecks my lips.

He can be so gentle and soft-spoken when he wants and right now, it's necessary and making me fall for him even harder. The more he speaks, the violent the butterflies in my stomach get. His whispers send thin shivers down my spine. He's so charming and I hope he doesn't know this.

'I want you to continue' I softly answer.

'Continue doing what?' he asks as he moves. This conversation is moving my focus away from the pain.

'Tearing me apart' I'm honest. He laughs.

'That's not what I want though. I only wanna make love to you, to cement and solidify everything I've already confessed in truth'

'Ahhh!' I scream when he pushes himself in and I feel like I'm torn. I shut my eyes and he kisses me passionately.

'It's over. I promise...' he brushes my hair back as I cry. Oh my days. That.Was. Fvcking. Painful. He always mutes my screams with a kiss. He doesn't move.

'Uta n'khomela neh baby? This is the first and the last time

I'm causing you pain, because I have to'

Yoh... the people who said this ain't that bad were lying.
What the hell?

'Should I pull out?'

I shake my head. My eyes are still closed. He begins moving and it still hurts. I hold his tummy and he stops. He puts his forehead against me and waits for me to speak. He's so patient with me. He starts moving again when I remove my hands and I decide to endure. We can't be doing this the whole day. He rubs against my clxt as he moves and that sensation is the sole reason why I'm enjoying this pain. He's getting lost in this. I love it when he kisses my neck like that.

'Mhm!' the moan slips out of my mouth.

'Nak'rhandza ani?' he whispers as he serves his strokes. I can't get myself to reply. I am feeling multiple things at once here. My kitten is feeling flames. My clxtoris is sensitive. I'm listening to sweet nothings. He's touching and caressing me like he knows my body. I just—

'Fvvvvvck...' he moans in my ear and continues to move in and out of me.

'Don't cvm inside' I can see by his facial expression that something is about to spill and I am not ready to push a

head out of this hole, not after what I've just experienced. He clenches his teeth and immediately pulls out, stroking himself and splashing his warm seeds on my stomach. He goes and finds a towel to clean me up. He does it patiently with a smile.

I laugh. He wants me to say something.

'Please finish up'

'Why? I'm still enjoying the view'

'What view?'

'The doorway to the place that will house my babies one day. It's cute, with these little soft hairs and gorgeous folds' he says – spreading me open with his fingers. I laugh and close my legs. He gets up and drops a kiss on my cheek.

'I never thought I'd say this so soon but I love you woman. You make me happy, Kulani. When you're around, nothing else matters'

I smile. I think I love him too. I do.

...

I woke up late again and he just let me be. This time I had a solid reason to blame him for my exhaustion. He went out to get me a bouquet of flowers and contraceptive pills like I had asked him to before I slept. We went for the river cruise before going to the elephant park. He takes pictures of me every time he remembers to. They were right. She who finds a husband finds a photographer. I get stressed every time I think about planning the wedding. I never thought about it much at first but now, I can't help but daydream about him in a wedding suit. My life is taking a lane of its own and I'm enjoying the ride so far. After having a late lunch, he met up with his friends for a short while and I insisted on staying behind. I avoid strangers as much as I can because things might get weird when their secrets randomly start burning and confusing me. I've discovered the second thing I hate about him on our way home. When there's traffic, his road rage comes out. He's one of the people who hoot for no reason. Where are all these people supposed to go? We eventually get home and I am pretty certain that everyone is asleep by now. He takes out our bags and I carry my bouquet of flowers. I have been in relationships before but this is the first time I'm receiving them. I wrap my arms around his neck and he spins me around before I can kiss him. I laugh when he puts me down.

'Would you like something to eat before bed?' he asks.

'Do you enjoy seeing me chew? All I've been doing on the road is eat'

'I love feeding you. Shoot me then'

I chuckle and fix his t-shirt. 'No I'm okay baby. I told you, I shouldn't even be eating at this time'

'Okay then...' he sucks my lips and I break the kiss. I see where it's headed and I'm tired.

'Just one round' he begs and I shake my head. He's already hard?

'No. You and I are going to bed, and I don't wanna be screaming here. Your mother's room is right down the passage'

'These people knew what they were doing when they sent cows to your house. Nothing will come as a surprise to them'

I chuckle. 'You're silly'

'So you're just gonna watch me suffer?' he points at his engorged front and I nod.

'I'm afraid so. Calm yourself down' I say as I put on my pyjamas.

'Is it because I don't have a father?'

I shoot out laughter and immediately close my mouth with my hands. I continue laughing behind them and it gets hard to hold back the tears. This usually happens when I'm forced to suppress laughter. Tears come out.

'See? You're already making a noise. We might as well go all the way'

'Kurhula man' I reprimand, still laughing. He holds me by the waist.

'Please. I'll make sure they don't hear you'

I want to, but I'm really tired. He finally gives up and gets in bed with me.

...

When I wake up, I find that he's not here. It's fifteen minutes to five. He probably went jogging. I am thirsty and I didn't get a glass of water last night. Mhan'Xongi wakes up at five on the dot so I can get away with going to the kitchen in my sleepwear. Also, my feet feel hot so I need to be in contact with the cold floor for relief. I get there and find him making coffee, facing the wall. I wrap my hands

around him and I immediately feel that the energy is off. He turns around and looks at me, alarmed. This hair? He looks different. Am I awake or am I having one of those realistic dreams again? I am pretty certain I am wide awake.

'Good morning' he greets and smiles. This is not my man.

'Kurhula?'

'I am not who you think I am'

I step back. This is definitely not my man.

'Don't be afraid. I am not a demon or a ghost. My name is Fikani'

'He never told me he had a twin'

'Err.. I don't think he knows'

'What? So you haven't met?'

He shakes his head as he sips from his cup and leaves me there. I have never been in such a state of discombobulation before. He's pulling my leg. He's definitely pulling my leg. Maybe he wasn't around when I first arrived here, that's why I never met him? I walk back to the room and sit on the bed. Ah, I even forgot what I had went in the kitchen to get. I take a bath and get dressed. It's back to headwraps and skirts again. Kurhula walks in

an hour later and I look at him. His manner of dressing confirms my suspicions. He was out jogging. I can't help the frown on my face.

'I'm sorry I left without saying a word. I don't like waking you up for no reason'

He thinks I'm mad? I'm confused.

'Why didn't you tell me you have a twin?'

He laughs. 'A what? Did you dream I had a twin?'

'No. I found him in the kitchen this morning. I even hugged him by mistake'

He frowns.

'Baby, what are you on about? Who did you hug this morning because it definitely wasn't me?'

Somebody knocks on the door and Kurhula opens it. It's Mhan' Xongi.

'Can you two please join us at the table?'

A meeting at this time? He takes a quick shower and changes his sweaty clothes. We find everyone already seated. Auntie Fanisa is not here. Thank the heavens!

'What the fvck?' Kurhula is beyond stunned to see a mirror of himself seated at the table.

'Please sit down?' Mhan'Xongi pleads. I sit and Kurhula continues standing.

'Who is this?'

They're freakishly identical but they don't know each other? The only aid I have is the hair. Their hairstyles are almost similar but different. Fikani has a side trim and a slightly longer beard.

'We are just as surprised as you are. Sit down Kurhula' Uncle Solomon sternly instructs. Kurhula sits, still looking at Fikani.

Mhan'Xongi swallows and fidgets with her fingers nervously.

'Are you going to speak or should we give you seven working days to tell us what's going on here?' Lydia gets annoyed. Mhan'Xongi sniffs and keeps her eyes away from Kurhula. He is starring at her with his hand squeezing down his nose, covering his mouth.

'Erhh... on the 31st December 1991, I went into labour' she starts and raises her eyes. I notice how Mhan'Masingi is looking at her. There's a lot of threat in those eyes. There's another woman and a man I do not know here.

'I was by myself. Edward was not here'

Kurhula's sister frowns. Mixo looks like she's recalling or calculating something. I can't help but study all these faces around the table.

'Some of you here know what happened to my first child. I struggled to conceive for such a long time and when I finally did, he killed my baby because she was different. He never gave it a second thought. I remember his exact words. He said he won't be a laughingstock because of my rotten womb'

Lydia offers her a tissue. This is a first. Mhan'Xongi releases a laboured sigh.

'I prayed. I prayed for a miracle, and I received one, thankfully' she sniffs once more.

'When I gave birth, I realised that there was two of you, my sons. I just knew that he was going to either kill one of you or both. Twins were considered a curse back then. As a loving mother... I had to give one of you away. I had no choice. I'm sorry Fikani. That's why Sarah had to raise you. I was assured that you would be in good hands'

'Assured by who?' Mixo asks and Mhan' Masingi shoots her a look.

Fikani's eyes are glued to the table. The unfamiliar woman rubs his shoulder.

'Who is older?' Solomon asks.

Xongi wipes her running nose. She looks at Kurhula and follows with Fikani. She glances at Kurhula again.

'Fikani. He's thirty minutes older'

'Well then this means we have a new king' Solomon says with a smile.

'What?' everyone is confused.

'With all due respect, I did not come here to be king. I came to look for answers and to fix my personal life. This surname issue is apparently causing problems in my marriage'

'Son, you will take over from here. There will be no ritual or surname change unless you take your rightful seat'

'You're losing it' Uncle Albert says, shaking his head.

'We were also hasty in getting Kurhula married but we can fix that so you can take your royal bride as well'

I lift a brow. Is he referring to me? I now see why Kurhula hates him. He seems to be enjoying this. I look at Kurhula and he holds my hand under the table. He is seething.

'You must have lost your mind. Kurhula is not dead. You can't just pass his wife to his brother like she's a platter of

kebabs at a buffet table!' Aunt Lydia is furious.

'You shut up'

'Shut up?' she echoes with a trembling lip. 'Shut up Solomon??? I should shut up the same way I did when you and your wizard of a father threatened me?'

Uncle Solomon clears his throat. He's getting uncomfortable.

'When you shoved your shrimp and shrunken two-centimetre worm into me?' – she gulps down her glass of champagne – 'I am talking to you. Answer me dammit!'

She's crying and shivering now. This is an unfamiliar sight.

'Don't pretend like you never wanted me to—'

He doesn't get to finish the sentence. Kurhula jumps him and he falls along with his chair.

'Kurhula!!' We're all screaming for him to stop. He beats him senseless and I see blood. Shock has me frozen.

Uncle Solomon goes unresponsive and Fikani manages to pull Kurhula off him. His t-shirt is covered in his uncle's blood. He's hyperventilating.

'Mixo, hand me those car keys. We need to take him to the hospital' Uncle Albert is in a frenzy.

'Is he dead?' Mixo asks. Aunty Lydia scowls in disgust.

'I hope he is' she deliberately drops the stemmed glass to the floor, steps on its broken pieces and walks past.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 7

[KULANI]

The air in this house is filled with confusion blended together with severe awkwardness. Nobody knows what to say to the other. Kurhula left before I could stop him. I'm anxious because I'm worried about him. I'm praying that his guides protect him because driving in that state has buried many people. I have been sitting in this room for some time, even the sun is beginning to give up on this day. I need some fresh air. I am going to use the backdoor because I don't feel like facing the elders on the other side of the house. I step out and find Aunt Lydia on the porch, with a glass of something in hand. She's gorgeous. That's one of the first things I've noticed about her. She's a masterpiece of a human being with those sculptured cheeks and that pointy nose. Aunty Fanisa says it's all surgery. Her doctor must be excellent at what he does if this is true.

'Did your mother not teach you that staring is rude?' she says and takes a sip, sitting with one leg on top of the other.

'Sorry. I was just— I needed some fresh air. I thought I wouldn't find anybody here'

She continues having her beverage and watching the sunset. Her eyes snitch on her. She's been crying.

'Is my boy okay?' she asks when I'm about to walk past her.

'I have no idea. His phone is off'

She nods, chewing her teeth. She laughs unexpectedly.

'You must think you married into a circus'

'Every family has its own skeletons' I say. If she knew where I come from, she wouldn't say this. She'd even judge my background. She pats the chair next to her, offering me a seat.

'He was fed up' she states, looking me in the eye. I don't understand. It's always best to keep quiet when you have nothing to say. She's different. By now, she would've said some pretty hurtful things.

'Kurahula has never had the support every boy child needs from both his parents. Maybe that's why I felt the need to step up as a mother to him but... I don't think it will ever be

enough. Today was the last straw. That damn Xongi is sucking up to the son she abandoned at his expense'

I'm still quiet.

'In fact, she abandoned them both, for a stupid man! My brother was a piece of shxt that deserved to be cremated and have his ashes drained down a sewage pipe'

'What do you mean she abandoned them both?'

'All Kurhula wanted from her was for her to leave his father. He wasn't afraid to say it. The first time he grabbed that man with his shirt was when Xongi decided that Kurhula was going to be the end of her marriage. I remember her calling me, asking for boarding school recommendations. That's when I gave up all hope but I was glad Kurhula wouldn't be there when Eddy finally strangled her to death. He wasn't going to survive that'

This is weighing my heart down.

'Why are you telling me all this, aunty?'

She finishes up her drink from her tumbler.

'I am telling you so you don't think he's an animal. He wasn't for the idea of you coming here because you were a complete stranger, but you arrived. You know what he said when I asked him how he felt about this whole thing that

night?' she swallows her smile. I shake my head curiously.

'Did you see how she looked at me, aunty? She was livid that I was late. That's what he said'

I laugh.

'I still don't understand what fascinates him with your anger or what it means but I'm just happy he's happy. What you saw this morning... He's never going to lay a hand on you, I want to promise you that'

...

When Kurhula's car comes in, it blocks Fikani's as he attempts to drive out. Kurhula is stationery for a second before going back out in reverse. Fikani drives out and parks outside the gate and they both leave their cars.

'Ey man...' Fikani greets. Kurhula laughs and offers him his hand. They greet each other through a shoulder bump.

'Now this is weird' Fikani says and Kurhula laughs once again before he sighs.

'It's like looking yourself through a mirror?' he asks and sits against his bonnet. Fikani nods and joins him.

Silence...

'Leaving already?'

'Y-yeah. I just came to say goodbye. I was with my mother's family the whole day so... thought it would be rude to just leave without saying a word, and I was kinda hoping to speak to you'

'What personal problems were you referring to?' Kurhula asks.

'Pardon?'

'You said the surname issue is—'

'Oh that' – he sighs – 'My wife is desperate for a baby, and nothing is happening. I don't know how many times we've tried'

'Try rooftop doggy' Kurhula jokes and Fikani bursts in laughter.

'Yup. You're just given me the confirmation I needed. Appearance only wasn't enough'

Kurhula chuckles. 'What confirmation?'

'Your head is full of dust. I've been accused of that a couple of times'

They both laugh.

'Have you tried going for some tests?'

'We've tried everything, until I decided to go see a traditional healer when my mother suggested it'

'That's where you got this surname thing?'

Fikani nods. 'And you? Any kids?'

'Yeah, one boy. Four years old'

Fikani smiles proudly. 'Oh? Where is he then?'

'At his maternal grandmother's house'

'With the same woman?' Fikani asks, pointing into the yard.

Kurhula snorts. 'I wish. We recently got married'

'How long have you been together?'

Kurhula looks at him, holding back laughter. 'A couple of days...'

'Man what? So it's true? She was arranged for you?'

'Hawu. You thought that nutcase was joking?' the smile disappears from the mere thought of Uncle Sol.

'He could've died, you know?'

'I know. That was reckless of me. He just rubs me up the wrong way'

'What are you gonna do if he presses charges?'

'He won't. This family is too proud. He's probably going to tell everyone else that he got hit by a car than admit that I beat him up. He's that type of a person who'd rather die than apologize, that's how proud he is'

'We need a day to sit down and talk. I'm gonna come back soon. Now I have to go because I'm already being accused of cheating'

Light laughter leaves Kurhula.

'You should've brought her along'

'I just felt like it was best to come by myself. I will next time'

He extends his fist and Kurhula sees the shiny scar just above his wrist.

'What happened here?' he asks.

'Ah. Some fool was trying to hijack my car about... five years ago'

'When exactly was that?'

'I don't remember. Why the interest? It was in winter because I remember how he tore my favourite jacket'

Kurhula laughs.

'I think that's when my hand stopped working for no particular reason. I was sure that these witches had got me'

'You lie?!'

'I'm telling you. It didn't stop completely but it just wasn't doing what it was supposed to do, how I wanted it to do it. Welcome home, twin bro' he says and they exchange a firm handshake. Fikani pulls Kurhula for a hug.

'I hope you know that I'm not here to take your place?'

'Ay, I don't care whether you're appointed as king or not. I just need you to stay the fvck away from my woman'

Fikani chuckles. 'You don't need to worry about me in that department. I am happily married my guy'

'She tells me she hugged you this morning?'

They laugh. 'She was sure that I was something that walked out of a paranormal movie'

'This is hella weird. Imagine discovering you have a twin at this big age?'

'After Covid, nothing shocks me anymore'

...

Mhan'Xongi immediately stands up when Kurhula walks through the door.

'Not now, please' he tries to walk past and she blocks him.

'Please understand where I'm coming from'

He raises a brow. 'Where you're coming from?'

'I had no choice but to separate you two. I'm just glad to see that you can talk and laugh together like the brothers that you are'

'I see everything else. What fvcks me up the most is the fact it all makes sense now. What you and Mhan'Singi where up to. Your doubt in my leadership skills is not a secret. You brought him back here because you and Sol have the same goal in mind'

'It is not like that please'

'I won't stand in your way. I never wanted this anyway. I'm gonna leave you to your tactics and go back to PTA'

'But... you've already sold your house? Please don't do this'

'I can always buy another one'

He attempts to walk past her again and she blocks him once more.

'What about Akani? Are you going to leave him behind?' she desperately asks, trying to convince him to stay.

'One thing you're never going to do is use my son against me, but if you must know, I am taking him with me'

'The Nkunas will never agree to that'

'We'll see about that. I'll take this to court if I have to. All Nikiwe knows is being a baddie and she couldn't care less about AK. She's just using him to spite me and I'm gonna put an end to that. You might even find that she's somewhere in Dubai having bottomless mimosas right now. I haven't seen her in months. Please excuse me'

He continues walking and leaves his mother crying behind him. Masingita walks in.

'Swilo yini sesi?' (What's wrong?)

Xongi carries her hands over her head.

'He's leaving. He says he's leaving'

'Who is leaving?'

'Kurhula'

'He's back? Let me try and talk to him'

'This is getting out of hand' Xongi cries out loud.

'You will have to choose if you want to be a mother or if

you want to cling on to that chair. You obviously cannot have both'

'What if Fikani doesn't agree to be king?'

'Then Solomon's stupid boy will put his behind there. What else? I am tired of being in this web. Also, why did you lie?'

'Lie about what?'

'You said Fikani was born first. If I remember correctly, he was last!' Singi says through gritted teeth – careful not to be heard by anybody else.

'You're confused. He was the first to come out'

'Do you realise that if you're lying, Magezi will reveal everything during the coronation?'

'First of all, I did not lie. Secondly, there's no such. It doesn't even matter who was born first'

'Let's hope you will be able to lie on this bed you're making right now. I am completely out of it. I don't want to find myself banished from here when the entire council finds out what you've done. Fikani was fine where he was. It's not like he was poor or his life was in shambles. His ancestors were guarding him just fine!'

'You heard him. He wants children and he can't have them'

'That's a small price to pay compared to how this is going to rip the family apart'

...

[KULANI]

I uncover my head when I hear his footsteps. I'm waiting for him to come in here. He opens the door and immediately smiles when our eyes meet. I get out of bed and hug him. He squeezes my bxtt and brings his hands to my upper back. He holds me tight and I kiss him.

'Are you okay?' I lowly ask. He's not. I can just see it.

'I'm fine. How have you been? I'm sorry I left the way I did. I was ashamed to look you in the eye'

'Why?'

'Well, I didn't want you to see me in that state and I practically beat up a man old enough to be my father'

I hold his cheeks. He's cold. Where has he been?

'I don't blame you. What he said was awful'

He pecks my cheeks a couple of times and picks me up. He goes to sit on the bed, with me straddling him.

'I'm moving back to Pretoria and I want you to come with me'

I pinch my brows.

'For good? What about your duties here?'

'I have none. Please come with me nkata mina?'

'The wedding? We're no longer having it here?'

'Once we leave, we're never coming back here unless you want to visit your parents'

'I feel like you're being hasty. I dreamt of you wearing leopard skin. You know what that means, right?'

'Kulani, I wouldn't care if you saw me change into a leopard itself. I no longer want anything to do with these people'

He's furious. I'm not even sure if I should tell him more of the things that were revealed to me this afternoon.

'What's on your mind?' he asks. I sniff my upper lip and look away. 'Talk to me' he kisses my hands.

'There's a lot of things that went wrong here and if we leave, nothing is going to work out for us'

'Things like what?'

'Well, your father killed your sister, your aunt stole Mixo's luck for her own kids and she knows what happened to Mixo's sister'

I have been seeing these things before I even set foot here but they weren't making sense. The nap I was having now took me on a scary and violent rollercoaster ride.

'What?' he frowns. I cautiously nod. I have no choice but to tell him. He has to know how this decision of his might affect me, us. We might even separate if he moves me away from here.

'There's more'

He instantly runs out of strength and says nothing.

'Your mother is the one that put an end to your father's life'

'Edward was sick'

'He was getting better the day he died. It wasn't his time to depart. She used a pillow and suffocated him to death. I'm sorry...' I speak speedily so I can get it over and done with. It's leaving a terrible taste in my mouth.

'That would make sense. Her behaviour was suspicious that morning. I just concluded it to be fresh grief'

I shrug. I am just telling him what I saw. I have no idea what I'm required to do with this information, yet.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 8

I am standing in the middle of this room, watching myself sleep in Kurhula's arms. I've heard of out of body experiences before but all I've ever thought of them was absurdity and histrionics. I have never seen this tall man standing behind me. He has a hat on, decorated by a red feather on the side. Another thing he wears is a heavy presence – one that demands reverence. He introduced himself as Mavengana, Kurhula's great grandfather. I can tell that he was a king at some point without him saying it out loud, without the assistance of logic. A single look from him demands a bow of the head.

'Let's take a walk' he commands and I continue standing barefoot and shaken. I feel different. I feel lighter than usual. The only source of light in this room is the full moon outside. He walks ahead of me and leaves the door the open. I follow him out as he walks slowly with a wooden rod with a gold handle. I'm wondering what he needs it for because his posture is as upright as they come. The slow motion in his step is unusual. I am failing to catch up to him. We step outside and walk around the house. We go

into the garden and he instructs me to take the small garden tool that looks like a spade.

'Kulani Mandilakhe Ngobeni' he says and I keep quiet.
'When you hear this name, know that I'm around' he states.

'Mandilakhe?'

He inserts a pipe in his mouth and sets it alight. I know that smell. I perceived it in my sleep on my first night here. Even in the morning, it was still lingering in the air.

'Did your husband tell you that I had seven wives?'

I shake my head.

'Mandilakhe was the last one. A bloody mess of a woman'

He's naming me after a chaotic human being?

'She destroyed everything I worked hard to build and maintain; she's the one that introduced witchcraft into this family – wiping out family members like a pesticide does to flies. It existed in my father's other houses but not in ours because my mother was a church-going woman; a staunch Christian' he pulls the smoke and releases it into the air. We are standing by the corner of the house and the guards are not at the gate, which is strange.

'You must've been told that wansati ifela vukatini, ayiswona?' (A woman's grave is always erected at her

marital home, is that not so?)

I nod. This is an old saying that elderly woman never miss the chance to remind us of.

'Her punishment was the skipping of bridal generations before she could fix her wrongdoings. Now she's getting remarried in a sense, through you' he points me with the pipe.

'She died a week after me but till this day, she's still uncleansed, trapped in darkness. That's why I am here to give you the mandate on her behalf'

I am silent.

'Follow me' he walks on and fixes the leopard skin on his shoulder. We reach Mhan'Singi's gate just next door. He crouches down and points at a spot. After I'm done digging, I pull out a dirtied brown bottle. It looks like it had a black-brownish liquid inside it but it's now empty. He raises my arm with the walking stick and tells me to look at it carefully.

'This is one of the things I do not want in these yards'

'What is this?'

'You will find out soon enough'

We find a box of matches in the house and burn that bottle

in the street. He leaves mid-conversation, while I'm still asking him about who is other wives were. Rude much?

...

My spine is on fire, my feet feel like they've been exchanged with an elephant's and my lower back is feeling severely compressed. I feel like the only relief is screaming and I'm going to do exactly that. Memories from the early hours of this morning hit me and I begin crying out loud.

'Baby, what's wrong? Please talk to me' Kurhula is mad worried and he doesn't know what to do. Mhan'Xongi is knocking at the door and I hear Junior's voice as well. They want to know what's going on. The door opens and they come in.

'What are you doing to this poor child?' she scolds, directing this to Kurhula.

'Nothing. She just woke up crying and I have no idea how to help her' he defends.

'Let's put her on the floor' Junior suggests. All these voices in this room are clashing with those in my head and

it's driving me insane. They come closer and I start feeling like they're suffocating me. Mhan'Xongi reaches for my leg and I pull it back. I don't want to be touched for heaven's sake! She persists and I can feel myself getting angrier.

'Leave her alone. You're making things worse'

'Should we call Magezi?' Junior asks. I can't see them anymore. I can only hear their jumbled up voices. I can't hear them. I feel whatever has my vertebral column wrapped up coming loose. I start feeling extremely cold. I was on fire just seconds ago. It's like I've been teleported from Zim to the North pole. I hear drums. I'm developing a striking headache in between my eyes. Something is moving violently in my stomach, making a noise while at it. Why are they doing me like this? I did not ask for this gift. Why are they causing me pain? Why can't they just deliver their messages and go? Something is happening around here and it's not good. I start rubbing my hands together. The friction and heat is helping me connect better. People are having conversations in my head and I can't hear them properly. No, I can hear them. I just don't understand this language. Mixo! I run out of bed and out of the house. I am crashing into the ground as I run. I bolt into Mhan Singi's house and find her kneading dough.

'Kulani. What's going on?'

'Mixo. Where is Mixo's room?' I ask and the others come into the house after me. I am coming back to myself. I follow Mhan' Singi and we barge into her daughter's room. I am on time. She was readying herself to put the rope under her chin.

'What the hell are you doing?' Singi is furious at this sight. I catch a glimpse of myself in her mirror. My hair is a tousled mess.

'Sesi, please let go of that rope' Kurhula begs, taking slow steps towards the bed. Her eyes are swollen. She's has been crying, probably throughout the night.

'Why? What are you all doing here? I am tired. Nothing is working out. I don't have a child, all my relationships end after one argument, I have a weird smell down there that just won't go away, none of my applications are getting replies. Men don't even look in my direction anymore. I am tired of just living with no direction, no purpose!'

'But suicide is not the solution' Kurhula continues trying to convince her to let go of the rope. Singi is in tears now. I put my hands on my waist when I feel that heaviness of my shoulders. She's here, with me. That violent burp escapes me.

'Mixo, do you have any idea what the consequences of

your actions are going to be?' I ask.

She just looks at me and sniffs.

'You are going to die, yes and then what? You are going to turn into a wandering spirit, giving us nightmares at night and sleep paralysis. Please stop this nonsense!' I scold and burp again. These words are just rolling off my tongue. I ask everyone to excuse us and they do, with a little hesitation. What was happening last night is starting to make sense.

'Things are going to be fine, I promise you. Now that spell has been removed, they're coming after you with a suicide curse and you're allowing them. You are being influenced to die right now and you are allowing it. Once you hang from there, you'll be captured and be used as a slave of the underworld – ruining people's lives!'

She looks at the knot she has tied and slowly lets go of it, unsure. I sit on the bed with her as she cries. I am not going to hug or comfort her. I don't have it in me because I know exactly how she feels – except, our obstacles are not from the same source. I can't have the life I want because I'm meant for something else. She's suffering the brunt of evil ways.

'What do you mean the curse has been removed?'

'You were stepping on it every single day when you came into the yard and going out, renewing it with every trip you took. Someone doesn't want to see you happy but that's all about to come to an end'

'Who is that?'

Mine is not to break, but to build. If she has to know that her aunt is the cause of all these things, she will have find out elsewhere.

'I cannot tell you that'

'Are you a healer, Kuli?'

'Not yet. I don't think I can call myself that'

'Where to from here then?'

'I'll take you to someone who will cleanse you of this despicable aura you carry around. What happened this morning?'

She sighs. 'I don't know. I just got this overwhelming feeling of wanting to die. It's been there for a while, but I just... I didn't have the required courage to do it'

'Can I trust you to be by yourself in here?'

She laughs. 'I don't want to be wandering nor a trapped spirit'

I smile and brush her back. Life is a terrible thing to find yourself in to be honest. There's no getting out of it once you're conceived. You just don't call the shots.

...

[At the council meeting]

'We had to postpone the meeting because Solomon was still hospitalized. Speaking of which, what actually happened to you?' Wiseman asks. Sol's eyes move in Kurhula's direction, with his head held up by a neck brace.

'I fell' Solomon lies to all the men seated around the table. Albert clears his throat and drinks his water. Wiseman gives a curious smile, full of amusement.

'You fell?' he echoes, quizzically.

'Yes, I fell'

'That must've been a very strong floor' Wiseman says. Gezani calls them to order. The other elderly men are quiet.

'Albert, you said we have an important issue to discuss?' Wiseman probes.

'Oh, yes. There has been some developments in who is actually supposed to be king' Solomon answers enthusiastically.

'I hope you did not call us here to waste our time. We told you that your boy cannot take that seat. You don't even need to be told. You know!' Wiseman says.

'There is another Kurhula roaming the wild, who is actually older than this one' Solomon continues. Everyone is confused, except those that know the root of this.

'Get to the point?'

'He has an identical twin. They were separated at birth'

People are stunned around the table.

'How could Xongi do something like this? Where is the boy? Kurhula, how do you feel about this? Your mother needs to account for this mess. Where is your brother?' Gezani asks.

Kurhula sighs. 'He had a family emergency he needed to attend to. He couldn't stay' he informs.

'When last did you speak to him?' George asks.

'This morning. Are we done?'

'You haven't answered my question. How do you feel about this?'

'About what exactly? Him coming back into the picture?'

'About him taking over'

'He's taking a burden off my shoulders. What I do not approve of is this man here wanting to hand my wife over to him'

Conversational noises arise and rumble round the table.

'He wants to do what? That's taboo. You know very well that what you want to do only applies in the case of one brother's death'

'I thought you said you didn't want this Kulani girl. I don't understand what your problem is' Solomon is stubborn, still under limited neck movement.

'That was before I met her. I would love to stay but I have other obligations' he picks up his car keys and leaves the table. Cliques arise after he walks out and the men divide into two.

'Kuruhula needs to go. You know very well that if he is in charge, funds won't move as easily as they did when his womanizer of a father was still in charge. We need someone we can influence and because this other boy is new, I personally think he'll listen more. This one is as stubborn as a mule' one group agrees, nods and all.

'We cannot allow a stranger to come and do as they please here. Kurhula is perfect. He has a working head over his shoulders and he's highly educated that boy. What does this other one know about our ways, culture and practices?' the other group insists. Kurhula calls Kulani on his way to Mlambya and Associates.

'Hey baby' she greets.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula. Are you okay? You sound busy?'

'I'm alright. How are you? Not really, I'm packing your laundry. Are you coming back home? Let's go get some ice cream'

He smiles. 'Not yet. I'm on my way to town. I need to get some work done.

'I'm sad' she sulks. He laughs.

'Don't be like that. Phela I have to work so I can afford you. Have you checked the prices of the brands you like or did you just pick and buy?'

She chuckles. 'Don't start with me. That was my father's money'

'And I took you out of your father's house. One thing I'm not gonna do is make you suffer'

'Seeing that you're in a good mood, can I have a Chanel

bag?' she jokingly takes her chances. He laughs.

'What the hell was I thinking marrying a daddy's girl? Send me a picture. I'll make a plan'

They both laugh.

'I might just do that'

'I'm actually serious. If it's a bag you want, then it's a bag you'll get. Speaking of you being a daddy's girl, it's actually quite funny how ancestors don't care if you're boujee or not, they will go straight for the family snob. Have you seen how you get when you're in a trance?' he teases – laughing out loud.

'You're such a bully! And I'm no snob!'

'I'm sorry baby. You really scared me this morning, truth be told'

'You better get used to it'

'I'm not getting used to shxt. You should stop eating greasy stuff and start fasting. The reason why you experience such pain is because you think you can just do whatever you want. It doesn't work like that'

'Listen to you. Like you're not the one who gets me all these things'

'When you cry of cravings there's nothing I can do. My job is to make sure you're well fed. You'll deal with the consequences'

'I told you you're a devil's agent'

He laughs. 'The devil has no agents'

'What do you call the people who do stuff he finds impressive?'

'His company. That lowlife was thrown out of heaven and y'all automatically assumed that he was put in charge of hell. I don't read the bible but I know that he's lures people there because he doesn't want to be the only roast. He's just a bad influence, nothing else' he states with certainty as he drives. Kulani laughs out loud.

'I'm not gonna argue with you'

'You would be doing yourself a huge favour because you'll never win'

'Whatever dude'

'Dude? Kulani, I am six years older than you'

She chuckles. 'Once you sleep with someone, age no longer matters. I'm joking'

'Ja. Wa phalaza straight. I want you to say these things

when I get home'

'I said I'm joking' she continues to laugh.

'And I said I want you to repeat this standing in front of me. Isn't it we're agemates now that you've seen my genitals?'

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 9

[KULANI]

'My goodness!' he exclaims when he walks into the bedroom. I did a full face of make-up today. I felt I needed to cheer myself up and I haven't done this in a while.

'You like? I tried a cut crease and it turned out perfect'

'I'm not even gonna ask what that is. Stand there' he says and takes out his phone. Pictures. He changes positions on the floor, capturing me as I stand against the curtain. I am tired of changing poses like a Levis model. I feel like exactly that because I am in a t-shirt and jeans, barefoot. I needed to feel like myself again even though I'd never step out of this room dressed in this manner. I need to go get my toes done.

'I have come across a plethora of words to describe

beauty but I don't think wordsmiths have seen something like this before' he says before approaching my face for a kiss. I laugh and kiss him back. I can see by his facial expression that he's irritated with the texture of matte lipstick.

'What's wrong?' I laugh.

'Mm-mh. Nex. Are we still going out for ice cream or do you have other plans in mind?'

'We are. We're actually going to get my nails done'

'And how long is that going to take?'

'A minimum of three hours'

This is inclusive of the thirty minutes it will take us to drive there. Michael is slow but he's the only one that lays gel exactly how I love it.

'What? Can't I drop you and fetch you later?'

'No I want you to keep me company. I haven't seen you all day'

I am being honest. I have missed seeing his face and feeling his presence. I am slowly getting addicted to this man. He's not happy with this but he has no choice.

'Marha baby. What will I be doing there with such ample

time?’

‘Keeping me company ah...’

‘Watching you filing and applying Qtex to your nails for three hours? That’s an exam’

I laugh.

‘You’re really old. When last did I hear this that word?’

‘What? Qtex?’ he chuckles.

‘And you’re wrong. I’m going to do gel’

‘Ey whether it’s gel, concrete or tar, I can’t just sit and do nothing baby. That’s one problem I have’

My convincing skills need a bit of polishing here.

‘You’ll go window shopping at Lowveld Mall when you get tired? It’s nearby’

‘Please take me serious. I only go into the store when there’s something I need and after I get it, I leave’

‘Come on. Take it like... quality time. We’ll be bonding’

‘If you were saying let’s go chill by the grass and set up a picnic situation for ten hours, trust me, I wouldn’t mind. I am not sitting and watching you do your nails my love, I’m sorry’ he kisses my forehead and checks his phone. I’m gonna go drop you off and I’ll come fetch you when you’re

done, okay?’

I keep quiet, trying to emotionally blackmail him. He shakes his head when I stare at him.

‘The answer is still no’

I give up and change into tight-fit dress, a kimono, and sandals. I offer to drive and he laughs.

‘I don’t wanna die young. What if you lose it while behind the wheel?’

Every chance he gets, he teases me about this. He throws himself in the car and I stand outside, holding my waist. He continues laughing and opens the passenger door to the double cab bakkie from the inside.

‘I’m sorry. I swear, this is the last time I’m mentioning it’

I thin my eyes at him.

‘Why are we taking this car?’ I ask as he drives out.

‘You don’t sound happy’

‘It doesn’t have a sunroof. I want to take pictures and there’s no proper lighting in here. This face can’t go to waste’

‘You have too many demands today. Are you on your period?’ he asks. He continues driving out.

'I'm not. I just want proper lighting'

'I'll take you proper photos when we get there but I am not changing cars for pictures' he kisses my hand after saying this. I am defeated.

'I hope my kids don't take after you' I jest. He laughs and kisses my hand again.

'You need to get your eyes checked'

'I don't mean looks. I mean stubbornness'

'So, looks are fine?'

'Mm... you're not half bad. We can work with that'

He scoffs. 'The nerve of this woman'

'But there's nothing special though. You're a typical Tsonga guy; tall, flawless darkskin, beautiful teeth, big eyes. See, not half bad' I continue to tease.

'I am beginning to wonder. How many "tsonga guys" have you mingled with Kulani? Four? Seven?'

'Objection. Speculation, Your worship'

He laughs out loud and I enjoy this sight. 'You're something else'

...

When Fanisa gets to Magezi's hut, she looks around dubiously before leaving her shoes at the door. She finds him grinding granules in a small pestle and mortar – seated with his knees raised.

'What can I do you for today? You look like someone is chasing you' he asks, still powdering the ingredients. Fanisa anxiously swallows before she speaks.

'That little girl I told you about? She is stirring things up. She has to kick the bucket as in yesterday'

Magezi laughs, seemingly unbothered. 'The wife?'

Fanisa nods. 'We have to get rid of her'

'We?'

'Yes, otherwise secrets are going to spill and we'll be in trouble'

'I am getting into no trouble. You came here like everybody else, made a request and I made it come true. Do not annoy me' he speaks in calm spirit.

'Do you understand what will happen to me if the family finds out?'

'I am responsible for none of that. You speak as though I'm solely responsible for the disasters you create whereas you have enough knowledge to pull this off by yourself. If you want her gone, kill her. It is that simple'

'It's actually not. She's not that simple to deal with. She's heavy'

'Start slow. You don't even need to kill her right away. You can just blind her from seeing what you think she sees'

'Magezi, this is not your simple 'I dreamt of you doing unholy things at odd hours' kind of case. She's digging up things, literally!'

He pulls the old newspaper next to him and empties the mortar onto it, then wraps it up.

'I don't know what you want me to say, truly'

'Okay. You will have something to say the day your name comes up'

'I would kill her within a second. Tell her I said so'

'If she finds out about Cheyeza, it is over!'

'Your problem is that you're quick to panic. Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I'll see what I can do'

Fanisa grinds her teeth due to frustration and gets up. She

bumps into Xongi by the door. They both frown upon this concurrency.

'Fanisa, what are you doing here?'

'Am I not allowed to get sick these days? What are YOU doing here?'

'Same reason why you are here'

Fanisa picks up her shoes and they both look back at one another, suspicious of each other's intentions. Xongi walks in and greets. Magezi laughs.

'Hhawu, did I say something funny?'

'No. Sit down. I am laughing at my own issues. How can I help you?'

She clears her throat and pulls out a stack of cash from the inner pocket of her handbag.

'What did I say about bringing dodgy money in here?'

'Sorry' – she puts it back into the bag – 'I'll drop it at the house on my way out'

'Ndzik' pfuna hi yini namuntlha?' (What can I do for you today?) he repeats.

'Do you remember the time you told me that I was carrying two boys?'

'I'm incapable of memory loss'

'Well, the other one is back and I need you to make sure that he sits on that throne'

'And Kurhula?'

'I have thought about it long and hard. He will just have to get over it. He's too much of a hot head to rule'

'What if I told you that neither of them is meant to be king?' he asks, with a smirk on his face.

A sharp frown pulls Xongi's features.

'What?'

'Or both of them are meant to be king?'

'You have lost me'

'The decision you took thirty years ago is now dividing the family, the council and the ancestors' he states with a tinge of judgment.

'You are the one who encouraged—'

'No. I did no such thing. I gave you the information I felt you needed to know. What you did from there is none of my concern'

'What was I supposed to do??'

'Do like all the other mothers who gave birth to the forbidden and left this place'

Xongi chooses silence.

'How is it possible that both or neither is meant to be king? Or whatever it is you've just said?' frustration engulfs her whole.

'Who was born first? What's the other twin's name?' Magezi asks, rhetorically.

Xongi scratches her neck.

'Fikani. To be quite honest? I have no idea. In between me wanting to hold them and the anxiety of having to separate them, I—' she runs out of words, remembering Masingita's judgmental question. 'Why did you lie?'

'He was the first one out'

'But Singi is convinced otherwise?'

'Take her word for it then' he gives up on the conversation.

'You still haven't told me what you meant?'

'Fikani was born first. Edward doesn't approve of him. He's adamant that he only has one son who is the rightful heir'

Xongi sneers in disgust.

'He is still ruining things even from the grave?'

'You owe him an apology. I have told you this before'

'Is that the only thing it will take for him to acknowledge Fikani?'

'No. He's not the only one that needs to be appeased. You have angered your father as well by naming the child after him and then getting rid of him like used toilet paper. He felt disrespected by that'

'What? Why is it so difficult for them to understand that I had no choice?'

'They are known to be unreasonable. I guess that's why'
Xongi breathes out fire.

'What am I supposed to do?'

'Get the appropriate goat. It needs to be accompanied by beer made by your own hand'

'You want me to announce to everyone that I killed my husband? I will do no such thing'

'It will get messy then. Even a corpse might come out of this'

'Why is Edward doing this to me?'

'You need to understand that death doesn't change people'

She sits back, with her hands flat on the ground behind her.

...

When Fikani walks into Grill n' Dine, he finds Boitumelo and her two friends seated by the corner, having shots, champagne and hubby. He walks over to them and sits next to her since she was seated by the far end.

'Ladies...' he greets. Cynthia and Namhla greet back with wide smiles. Tumi releases the hubby smoke onto her husband's face and he just looks at her.

'I thought I had told you that we needed to talk after work. What is this?'

She chuckles and wraps her hand around him. He shakes his head because he knows that laughter. It mean one thing and one thing only; she's wasted.

'If it isn't the man that travels long distances for pxssy'

He stops himself from replying and bites his lip.

'Let's go home. I don't want to drag you out of here' he tries to be discrete in his conversation with her. She stands up with her stemmed glass. He tries to pull her down and stops when she yells, bringing all the attention on them.

'Excuse me. Attention everyone!'

'Boity!' Cynthia chides. Namhla laughs into her glass, looking away.

'This man' – she points at him as he seats – 'This man thinks I'm not woman enough because I can't give him a baby. Would you imagine that? A whole me?'

He grabs one shot from the table, downs it and stands up.

'I hope that bxtch you've been fvcking—'

He puts her over his shoulder and places his hand on the back of her thighs to avoid any live explicit scenes, knowing the beef between her and underwear. The people continue looking at them like they just fell from the sky.

'Obe sharp meiskat!' Cynthia yells as Tumi is being carried out.

'Did you have to? We have enough eyes on us already' Namhla admonishes and fakes a smile to the rest of the people. 'Please forgive that little incident. Do enjoy your food and drinks' she says and waits for the unwanted attention to evaporate. Fikani gets to the car and puts his wife at the back. She continues laughing and he shuts the door. He races angrily to their house – adamant on keeping quiet as Boity asks him senseless questions.

'Oh you no longer love me?' she asks when she gets no answer to any of them. He continues keeping silent. He carries her out of the car when they arrive, the same way, like a bag of potatoes. He ignores when she continuously kisses his back. He puts her on the bed and helps her out of her shoes.

'You look mad. Are you mad at me?'

'Sleep. We will talk in the morning'

She pulls him back by the wrist when he attempts to walk away.

'Let's talk. You said you wanted to talk...'

'Talk? What the hell was that Boitumelo?'

She gets off the bed.

'I don't like it when you call me by my name. My government name is baby in this house' she gets on her knees and seductively touches his crotch. He removes her hands and he tries to get her to stand up. She pulls the zip down and he just looks at her. His flaccid dick goes into her mouth and she licks on it – starring at him with the eyes he can barely say no to.

'Punish me. I can see that you're mad. Punish me...'

'I will talk to you tomorrow morning. You need to get some

sleep'

'Take me. You said there's no excitement anymore. Fvck me, Fikani. Fvck me harder than you did her. I am your wife. I deserve to have this when I want it'

'You're drunk' he says, watching himself getting erect. She laughs.

'And hxrny' she pouts and sulks, still playing with him. He throws his head back and releases a long sigh.

'Tell me I'm a good wife'

'You have your moments. Please leave my dxck alone' he ignores his desire to have her right there and then.

'But I need you...'

'What you need is some sleep so you can quickly wake up with the hangover you deserve'

'You're denying me my marital rights?'

'I will see you in the morning when you're sober. You won't be able to handle it now'

She continues staring at him with her trusted puppy eyes. He pulls her up and meets her with a kiss that leaves her breathing heavily. He pulls her skirt and separates her legs with his hand. He rubs on her sensitive spot – gently and

slowly stimulating her heightened nerves. She moans in his mouth and he breaks the kiss.

'Is this what you want mama?' he asks. She nods desperately.

'You know what I want? I want you to sleep with a throbbing clitoris' he lifts his finger and it hovers over her love bean. His middle finger goes inside and it comes out moist with her juices. He smells it and inserts it into her mouth. She knew how much he enjoyed sniffing on her and her underwear on the days she decided to wear it.

'Are you serious? Baby please...' she pleads after tasting herself.

'I'm dead serious. When I say be home by seven, I don't mean half-past or two hours later. This is the first of two times we are ever going to have this conversation'

'Two times?' she tries to squeeze her legs together and keeps them separated. He knew that alcohol went straight to her lady parts. He sucks on her lips and breaks the kiss when she deepens it.

'You and I gonna have a proper conversation tomorrow. Go to sleep. I have work to do'

His phone rings and the screen informs that it's Kurhula.

'Heh mfo?' he answers and leaves her there, still thirsty for his touch.

...

Hello, hi. Excuse the haphazard posting (time wise). Load shedding is effing things up. Happy reading!❤️

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 10

'We have wasted enough time. Fikani will be home on Friday so we need to get the ball rolling' Fanisa says to Solomon as they stand outside, with him finishing off the biscuits and scones he was gourmandizing in her house.

'How when you failed to support me the time I raised the royal wife issue?'

Fanisa's eyeroll is complemented by a sneer, deeply expressive of despal.

'That Kulani girl? You know very well that it won't be possible'

'It will if we want it to be. I want that boy to get off his high horse'

'Ah forget about it and besides, that Kulani girl is no longer pure. You will just further complicate things'

'How do you know?'

'Are you blind? Can you not see what is happening between those two?'

'I do but I never thought... so soon? She's loose' he remarks and Fanisa laughs.

'That's her husband...?'

'Still...'

'Aii we can't be sitting here and discussing children's bedroom things. The Baloyis have another daughter. She was there on the night of the welcoming'

'This is not going to be easy. That Fikani boy said he's married or did I hear incorrectly?'

'Married where using the wrong surname? That marriage is null and void to us. I will personally make sure that everything goes according to plan this weekend. I am in fact on my way to see Rhandzu's mother. Fikani will have no choice but to fall in love with her, just watch'

She winks and he looks at her inquisitively.

'I have noticed that you've become good friends. I am not

even going to ask'

She laughs as she goes back into the house to find her car keys.

'Musa?' she calls her daughter. She appears head-only from her room, wanting to hear why she's being summoned.

'Let's go. I need you to drive me to the Baloyis'

'Now?' she protests.

'Don't annoy me. Put some clothes on hi famba!'

She gets herself in a dress and they get in the car.

'I need you to do me a favour'

'You have started. I don't like the sound of that'

Fanisa laughs.

'It's a small one, don't worry'

She shakes her head begrudgingly as she drives, with Fanisa filling her in. They arrive to Kulani's mother drinking tea by herself, sitting outside the house.

'Vaka Baloyi...' Fanisa laces her greetings with fake laughter. Musa greets the queen respectfully and they're told to take a seat. During the pleasantries, Musa asks for the loo after being told that Rhandzu is not home. She

pretended to crave for a peer's presence.

'You have started with wanting to use the toilet in other people's homes' Fanisa chides. Mhan' Risimu laughs.

'Oh let the child be. You can go inside, just by the door you will see it. When you come back, go into the kitchen and tell Maria to give you two cups for tea' she orders. Musa nods and walks inside the house. She looks around to see if anybody sees her as she walks past the toilet and up the stairs, planning to tell anybody she bumps into that she was sent by the queen and she got lost. She keeps looking back as she walks carefully.

'If anybody catches you, we're dead!' her mother's words echo in her head. She tries the first room and finds a laptop open on top of the bed, with a speaker next to it. She sneaks in and goes straight to the chest of drawers after concluding this to be Rhandzu's room. In her quick search, she finds the underwear her mother told her to get and shoves it into her pocket. She then goes to find the kitchen and almost bumps into Maria by the door.

'Child, why do you look so panicked? Who is chasing you?' she asks with great suspicion.

'No no one, nothing. I was told to come in here to get teacups' she half-lies. After getting the cups, she hears

Rhandzu laughing with her mother outside.

'It must be lonely now' Fanisa says. Rhandzu shrugs with a smile.

'She's so lost. She's even taken over her sister's room. Apparently it makes her feel close to her' Mhan' Risimu joins in on the banter.

...

[KULANI]

For someone who doesn't have a job, I get overexcited for Fridays. They have this energy about them that's laidback and screams leisure.

Kurhula comes out of the bathroom and I watch him getting dressed in jeans and a blue Man-U soccer jersey. He comes to sit on the bed next to me and steals a kiss before putting on his sneakers. I smile lazily and continue scrolling on my phone.

'Wish me luck' he says.

He's going to fetch AK. Apparently his grandmother is a

fierce one.

'What if she says no?'

'I won't give her the opportunity to'

'Okay. Don't forget his pyjamas like last time'

He laughs. 'He's a boy. He doesn't need them'

He walks out laughing when I thin my eyes at him. I hear noise coming from the living room fifteen minutes after he has left, like someone they haven't seen in a long time just walked. It must be Fikani. Junior knocks on the door. I know it's him because he's the only one that knocks like he's composing a beat in this house. I get up and go open the door for him.

'Mom says you should come greet your brother-in-law'

I find my shoes and we walk out together.

'Can you do me a favour sis?' he asks. I wonder. I just give him a curious look.

'Can you put my crush in your list of bridesmaids? I want her to see how serious I am about her'

I shoot out laughter. This boy honestly wants me to play matchmaker at my own wedding?

'Are you being for real right now?'

He nods. Madness runs in the blood here.

'Hell no!' I continue to laugh.

'How much do you want?'

This world would be a better place if all men took us seriously like how he's prioritizing this girl. We greet everyone and he continues whispering in my ear.

'Junior leave me alone'

'Hi, I'm Kulani' I introduce myself to the new lady in the room.

'Boitumelo' she greets back with a smile. She must be the wife.

'Can I talk to you for a moment?' Mhan' Xongi asks, directing this to Fikani. I notice he's also wearing a Liverpool soccer jersey. Twins are fascinating because you never know whether certain things are a plain coincidence or telepathy is really a thing. I internally laugh at how Kurhula is going to be irritated by this. I teased him two nights ago, telling him how they should start wearing the same outfits because they missed out on that cute stage of their lives. He wasn't having it.

'Come, let's go get some fruit outside' I offer to Boitumelo. She had no idea where to look when Mhan' Xongi

requested some privacy with her son. I laugh at how relieved Boitumelo looks as we walk out.

'Why didn't we see your pretty face around here the first time?' I ask. I notice the hickeys near her breast when she bends to fix her sandal. That explains the silk scarf. I clear my throat and decide to ignore all of this. Must've been an interesting night.

'He says he found it better to come by himself. I wish he would've told me because I went ahead and embarrassed myself' she says with irritation.

'What did you do?'

She looks at me and laughs. 'I had a few drinks and ended up saying stuff I shouldn't have. I was sure he was here cheating'

'Surely you can apologize' I simply reply while looking for a good-looking mango.

'Apologizing is not the issue. The thing is, I embarrassed him in front of everyone at Grill n' Dine, including my friends'

Sounds messy. I find one mango that looks like it has had a recent visit to the dermatologist. I'm gonna put it in the fridge. I used to miss these when I was still living in Gauteng. Those from the store don't taste the same. I

hope this tree took tips from the one at home. She picks two and we walk to sit at the back of one of the houses. The sun is going down and it's much cooler.

'Anyway, you must be the twin's wife?'

I nod.

'How does it feel to gain a new brother in-law?' she asks as she washes the fruit on the tap connected to the water tank. I shrug.

'It was awkward at first but I'm slowly getting used to the idea'

I can't tell her that I hugged her husband. It is embarrassing to even mention. We continue talking about everything that surrounds nothing until we have to back into the house. They're shown their room and she tells me she needs a bath. She's talkative but still a pleasant human being. AK comes running and I pick him up. It's only been a few days but he's already gained weight.

'What is granny feeding you?'

He laughs as I tickle him. Kurhula comes in after him, holding his bag.

'Yey? Yey? What is granny feeding this boy?'

I give him a break from laughing because my mom used to

hate it when Rhandzu and I tickled one another for too long; saying it's dangerous for some reason. Kurhula closes the door and gives me a kiss.

'He's not sleeping in here tonight' he states before I can say anything. I laugh.

'What is your problem?'

'No I'm just saying that this one is not sleeping in here tonight. I don't wanna fight with nobody'

We'll see about that.

...

When we come out for dinner, I see Aunty Fanisa coming out of the kitchen with casseroles of food. Something about that smile is not sitting well with me because I don't see it often, and since when is she hands on in the kitchen? I ignore this thought because I haven't been here for that long to know the whats and whose of this house. Everyone is here today. It's such a full house that some needed to find extra chairs and squeezed themselves in the rotation.

'Fikani, son, we are happy to have you home. Same applies to you makoti Buyitomelo. This is Albert speaking, your

late father's brother from another mother' he proceeds to introduce everyone else. I can see that Tumi is holding back laughter and I know why. I move my eyes from her because I'm gonna end up laughing as well.

'And that is Lydia, your problematic aunt' he jokes and everyone laughs except the aforesaid, Aunty Fanisa and Solomon. Fikani nods with respect after the introductions are done. Kurhula's scent is distracting me. I feel my middle button going loose as laughter shakes the dinner table. What the hell is this man doing? He glances at me as speeches proceed about who grew up with who, what happened in '89, stories about cows getting stolen and how they got them back. People are busy laughing at Uncle Wiseman's jokes as we eat. Kurhula takes a spoon of rice into his mouth while his other hand is busy pulling my underwear to the side – very slowly in unsuspecting manner. I clear my throat and continue playing with my food. There's no way I am eating in these circumstances. It's an application for suffocation. He inserts his finger inside me and continues having a conversation with Fikani like nothing is happening underneath this table. Kurhula is playing with my wet folds at a table surrounded by respected elders. I can feel the orgasm coming. I can't even push him off because I'll just give everything away. My heart is racing. My legs jerk and I try my best to keep

still. No one is paying attention to me. They're all minding their plates and reminiscing happily – trying to make Fikani feel at home.

'U tshamsekile?' (Are you comfortable?) he whispers, with a smirk on his face. I laugh breathlessly as I drink my orange juice.

'Please stop what you're doing'

My legs are vibrating and I am trying with all my might to keep my upper body composed.

'Tell me you love me first'

'Nak'rhandza Kurhula. Now please leave me alone'

'Is it mine? This gold mine between these soft thighs, is it mine?'

I sharply pull in some air when his finger goes deeper. I subtly nod multiple times.

'Are you okay? You haven't touched your food one bit' Auntie Lydia asks, sipping on champagne as usual. I swear, there would be something wrong with the picture if I ever saw her with no alcoholic beverage in hand. That smile on her face? She has read the situation and now I am mortified! Kurhula's hand leaves my skirt without him looking at me. He's carrying on with his supper and life like

he didn't just wreck the stability of my nervous system, amidst his entire family.

'I'm okay Aunty'

'She's a slow eater. Right baby?' he supports, looking mw straight in the eye. A daredevil!

I clear my throat and drop my eyes to my plate.

'Right' I corroborate. Aunty Lydia laughs.

'Ahhh. The joys of being young...' she says with a wide smile and I don't raise my eyes.

'What are you talking about?' Wiseman asks.

'You should be minding this Mount...' – she gestures at his plate judgingly – 'Carbohydrate on your plate and take your fat nose out of things that don't concern you. Your cholesterol levels must be alarming. Why do you always eat like you're getting rid of looting evidence?' she spits, unashamedly inspecting his round belly.

'I tend to forget that you're not one to be spoken to' he takes offence and shoves another spoon into his mouth with a force of vengeance.

'Did you see that the cemetery is running out of space? Wiseman, give us a chance to die first since your funeral will require a casket the size of four and ultimately space

fit for an RDP'

Wiseman raises his arm and checks himself with a frown on his face.

'Lydia, we have guests' Mhan' Xongi says.

'I don't think we would if your motherly instincts were fully functional my lovings' she snubs while scratching the tail of her brow. Yup, the jubilant mood just went straight down the drain. The resident killjoy has just sprayed hydrogen sulphide into the atmosphere and single-handedly spoilt the air.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 11

[KULANI]

After Kurhula and Fikani agreed that we needed to go out, a decision was taken to visit Phongolia resort for the weekend. They told the elders that they needed some time to bond while their actual words were, 'We need to get away from these meddling ones'. These two are more alike than they are different. Fikani is just good at hiding his madness around people. He's the shy one. Boitumelo and I are the back of the car. The gents stopped by a Tops

to get some alcohol and we went to get breakfast supplies.

‘So you don’t drink? As in at all?’ she asks as she picks up the tray of eggs. I nod and push the trolley forward.

‘Girl! Life is too much of an extreme sport for you to be facing it head on and sober’

I laugh. I am tired of having this conversation to be honest. Alcohol consumers should leave teetotallers alone. I once tasted the whiskey that my father had left in a glass and I began wondering why people associate booze with fun. It tasted like an abortifacient. After that little illegal experiment, I needed to go brush my teeth to cleanse my tastebuds.

‘Ah but I kinda get you. I also want to stop drinking since we’re trying for a child’ she says. I have come to notice that Boitumelo overshares a lot. She’s the type of person to find you in a bus and next thing you’re hearing about how her aunt slept with a Ben 10 and put him in her will. Conversations like these make me uncomfortable because I know how dangerous they can get. My granny always said you don’t announce early pregnancies, job interviews and pending negotiations before they come to fruition. This is just as good as an early pregnancy.

‘If there’s an African concoction that you know of, please

let me know' she keeps talking. I chuckle. What makes her think I'm concoction savvy?

'At this point, I am even considering surrogacy'

The more she speaks, I get to realize that Fikani never told her the root of their fertility problems.

'Speaking of which, would you carry a child for somebody else?' she asks. I truly hope this is hypothetical question.

'Uhm... I don't know. Don't you have to have a child first for you to qualify as a surrogate?'

'You don't have... that little boy?'

'AK?' – I laugh – 'He's not mine, not biologically'

She looks embarrassed.

'I'm sorry. The way you're so good with him I just concluded that—'

'Don't worry about it'

'So he's Kurhula's?'

I nod.

'Where's the mother? How are you handling the baby mama drama?'

Tumi doesn't keep quiet and I'm in that mood where I want

to retreat into a corner and just shut up for a couple of hours.

'Uhm...' I lose my train of thought. I close my eyes and softly rub my forehead.

'Are you okay?'

I nod.

'I'm fine. I haven't met her yet' I answer and see the two duplicates approaching. They took their stuff to the car and probably thought we were taking too long. Fikani kisses his wife and Kurhula looks at me with a worried face.

'Are you okay?' he asks as the two chat away about how pleasant they're finding the rurals. He has his one hand on my waist.

'I'm fine' I offer him a subtle shut-lip smile. He gives me that 'Why are you lying?' look

I laugh.

'We'll pay so long' Fikani says and pushes the trolley forward.

'What's going on? I saw you from that aisle that something was up'



'I'm just... I'm feeling overwhelmed. I'll be good, it's no big deal' I assure and brush his upper arms.

'You sure?'

I guarantee with a nod.

'Okay let's get out of here then' he takes me by hand and we go find the other couple.

...

After taking a long shower post-supper, I was ready to socialize again. We agreed to meet by the fireplace even though it wouldn't be lit. Night cold is slowly creeping in so we might reconsider in that regard. When I leave the room, I hear their noise from the pool area and walk in that direction. I hope the mosquitos here have some decorum. When the lights meet the water, it creates a cosy and cute illumination I find pleasing to watch.

'Welcome back. I was getting tired of this one third-wheeling us' Fikani says and we all laugh.

'Oh it be like that?' Kurhula asks with a playfully raised brow, receiving me in his arms. He pushes my hair out of the way and kisses my shoulder.

'How was your bath?' he asks as he wraps his hands around me.

'What you're not gonna do is flirt in front of us' Fikani jokes.

'Heh mfo, I never said shxt when you were all over your wife so allow me to have my moment'

'Can I pour you a drink?' Tumi asks, holding the juice bottle up.

'No thank you' I politely say. She shrugs and fills up her glass. I can smell the alcohol Kurhula has been drinking in his breath. I thought I was fine but I lied to myself. This is why I don't like being around people. They will take it personal if I leave right now so I'm forced to stay.

'You still haven't told me how you guys met' Kurhula says. I am sitting on his lap. Tumi looks at Fikani with a growing smile on her face.

'We met via Twitter, indirectly'

Kurhula pulls his brows and head back, amused by this.

'Carry on' he encourages. Fikani laughs.

'His friend posted something problematic and I wasn't going to let him get away with it. That found its way to the DMs and he mentioned something about me being his friend's type, only to find that he was right and that he was

my type too'

I'm confused.

'Wait. The friend, Fikani's friend is the one that saw that you two would look good together?' I ask. They both nod.

'Interesting...' Kurhula says. 'From there?'

'The rest was history'

'Weren't you afraid that he might be part of a trafficking syndicate? Phela this face is one of a seasoned criminal' Kurhula jests and we laugh.

'You do realize that you have the same face, right?' Tumi asks.

'I look nothing like this motherfvcker' Fikani argues and empties his glass in one gulp.

'I was about to say the same thing' Kurhula supports.

They're being childish and it's hilarious.

'It's insane how just a few weeks ago, I was thinking about how I wished I had a little brother then the unimaginable happens' Fikani says.

'I'm the little brother?' Kurhula says, ready for a fight.

'I am talking about Junior. Sit your a** down'

'I was about to iron you my boy'

'The same way you ironed that old man?'

They shoot out laughter. This shouldn't even be a laughing matter.

Tumi can't stop laughing at their meaningless argument.

'What old man? Can you two grow up?' she urges, still laughing.

'That one with grey hair?' Fikani draws the picture to his confused wife. 'The one with the neck brace baby man'

'You're responsible for that?' she's shocked.

'Long story. I'm not proud'

'That nonchalant look tells me otherwise'

They continued arguing and I notice how Fikani's eyes are riveted on me. I avoid them a couple of times and he drops his eyes into his glass. I thought I was seeing things this morning but that odd look is back. I guess he's one of those people who aren't afraid to stare, like me. The difference is, I don't initiate. I only stare back but this time, I am feeling uneasy holding it. That was rather uncomfortable. Kurhula's phone rings and he releases a loud sigh. I see a Kgosi on the screen.

'Can I take this, baby? Just two minutes. It's important'

I get up from him and he moves away from us. Tumi finishes off her drink and shakes her head while getting up.

'I am no night owl. By this time, I should be in bed. Are you coming?' she asks her husband.

'In a minute' he says with a smile. She kisses his cheek and squeezes my arm goodnight. Her body is to die for in those linen pants. You can never not notice it. She has an almost flat behind with wide curves.

'You remind me of someone...' he points me with the rocks glass, distracting me from watching Tumi as she disappears. 'I just can't put my finger on who' he takes a slow sip.

'I'm told I look like a lot of people everywhere I go so, I'm not surprised' I lie for the sake of conversation. I raise my eyes to Kurhula. He's still on the phone, pacing up and down. What he's discussing there must be serious judging by the hand gestures. Fikani is quiet and swirling his drink.

'Those people you're said to have a resemblance with must be quite beautiful then' he finally responds after an equivalent of seven months.

'Fvck, I didn't mean to say that out loud. I'm sorry' he mumbles to himself. What on earth is going on between

this chair and the one he's seated on? The distance is small but it seems to be accommodating an overwhelming amount of a lot. I am not going to read too much into this.

'I will take that as a compliment. Please tell him that he'll find me inside. I'm also starting to feel my eyes getting heavy' I leave him with the message and walk away. His eyes are piercing my back.

...

'They decided to go to bed' Fikani reports before Kurhula could ask.

'That call took too long. I wasn't expecting that'

'Trouble at work?'

Kurhula refills his glass.

'Nxn, sort of. I started a poultry business with a friend. He's moving to another country but he doesn't wanna sell me his portion. Instead, he wants his slayqueen of a wife to take over'

'He's leaving her behind? This is why you shouldn't mix business with pleasure'

'He has three. He's apparently going to join the second one in the US'

Fikani laughs.

'Three? Damn, that's a lot. Do you see yourself remarrying one day?'

Kurhula shakes his head as he swallows.

'I don't think so. I don't know. I've never thought that far. You will have to, by the way' he states.

'I will?'

'Yeah. If you're taking this position then this is a heads up and I'm gonna be as blunt as possible. Boitumelo will mean absolutely nothing to those ones back at home'

'Ah. Relax. I am not taking any position. I have already told you this'

'Between you and her, who wants kids? Be honest'

'We both do. I just don't want to pressurize her because she's already going through the absolute most, unnecessarily so. When are you manufacturing another one?'

Kurhula laughs.

'Soon!'

'Have you two spoken about it?'

'Nah, not yet. I feel like it will take some convincing but I do have a wish of filling that tummy up. I always felt like I should've started making kids when I was in my mid-twenties' he chuckles. Fikani nods.

'Why?'

'I want a big family bro'

Fikani laughs. 'How big is big?'

'Seven/eight kids?'

'What?!' he continues laughing.

'Yeah! It's always been one wish of mine and it's one of the crazy things that push me to work hard. Push gifts are expensive and my wife was a bad financial decision'

They laugh.

'I've noticed. You seem happy though'

Kurhula smiles. 'I'm even afraid to admit that I truly am. She's amazing. She's intelligent even though she doesn't wanna admit it, funny and... she's an amazing human being'

'Did you know her before the whole arrangement thing?'

'Nope, but when I laid my eyes on that angry face, I was

like 'Yep. We've found her. She's the one. The egg you mustn't dare allow to fall''

'Angry?'

'Ey bra. I had to fetch my son that evening and a huge argument erupted between me and his uncle. To be honest, I didn't care that I was getting married. I arrived late and she wasn't having it. A reaction I have always longed to see from my mother. She just took blow after blow and continued being a "good wife". Shxt used to make me mad. I swore to myself that I'd never marry such a woman, let alone date one'

'Wait, what do you mean... blow after blow?'

Kurhula looks up briefly and rolls his upper lip.

'Your father was a bustard, Fikani. Through and through. I remember this other time he locked her outside in the rain and told her to marinate in her wrongdoings. Rain that came with the loudest thunder. It was just us at home, including Mhan'Singi. I don't even know what she had done but I remember being told to sit down when I tried to go by the back door to fetch her. He had a whip in hand. You know what she said when he finally opened the door?'

Fikani shakes his head anxiously with widened eyes.

'Thank you. She said thank you with that humility and

respect he never deserved'

'How old were you?'

'Eight. I still remember every incidence till the time I was taken away to an all-boys school. Shxt happened there too but it wasn't as bad as the situation back home. I thought about her. Every. Single. Day. In class, in the showers, the soccer field, everywhere'

'This is hectic'

'Be glad you weren't there to witness all that bullshxt. That man was too damn hard to please. I don't know if it was the money or the status that kept her in that house, but I wish she'd killed him sooner'

'She did what?!'

Kurhula starts drinking from the bottle. 'Not a word to anybody about this'

'Were you there?'

'No. I just know she did. Don't ask me how'

'I'm assuming you never got along?'

'Mostly. He'd tell me how proud he is of me whenever he'd slip and fall into a good mood. It used to piss me off. Everything they did including the grad parties pissed me

the fvck off because none of them was ever there. The other was focused on destroying the marriage that the other one was desperately trying to fix. I'd listen to people speak about how nice it is to be from a royal, moneyed family while boiling on the inside because I craved nothing more than living a normal life. I used to wonder what it would be like if she took me and ran. I wouldn't have had a problem being raised by a single mother' he raises the bottle and Fikani takes it away from him.

'There's nothing praiseworthy there. There's nothing cute about being raised by a single mother drowning in poverty. All you want to do is make money to ease the burden for her, that time you're only a kid nobody would even consider hiring'

'Trust me, you were better off with her'

'I'm not listening to this because you have no idea what you're talking about. You grew up cushioned and comfortable, having three meals a day and you want to tell me that my version was easier? Sleeping in a house that could easily lose its roof whenever it rained cats and dogs? Having to give up your own meals, claiming that you ate at school so your mother can eat? Is that your idea of better? That's some bullshxt!' Fikani angrily spits and stands up.

'I have no idea what I'm talking about? I have no idea what

I'm talking about??? I have seen your mother's torn breast!' he yells and Fikani stops walking. 'I know almost all her scars and how they came about, including the one on her back and her thigh. He did these things while I watched and he never gave a fvck how loud I cried! Ungani nyeli wena'

Boitumelo comes out running, followed by Kuli. Both prompted by the noise.

'And then???' the ladies both question with raised hands and curious countenances.

'ASK YOUR BLOODY HUSBAND!' the brothers shoot out and walk in different directions.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 12

'What are you up to?' Lydia asks when Fanisa asks when Rhandzu is arriving to do her hair for the second time.

'Nothing. I just... you know how fond I am of her mother so we need to make sure our guest is comfortable. They're family'

Lydia gives her a suspicious look and continues paging through the catalogue in her hand. Xongi appears. Fanisa pulls her by the arm and they disappear into the kitchen.

She finds her way out of Fanisa's strong hold.

'You don't have to drag me like that. What do you want?'

'Rhandzu is on her way here'

Xongi wears a befuddled face.

'I took things into my own hands. Don't pretend like you want Kurhula on that chair'

'Fanisa, what are you talking about?'

'Rirhandzu is to be Fikani's royal bride. Kurhula has to leave this house with that girl'

'Do you realize that this is my son you're talking about?'

'There's no time for that Xongi. You stand to benefit from this as well because we both know what you've done to Edward. Let's not pretend to forget'

Xongi clears her throat and looks around to see if anybody is approaching.

'What exactly are you talking about when you say you took things into your own hands? What have you done?'

'Don't worry about that'

Xongi is the one that does the mandhandling this time. She drags her sister-in-law outside and they go stand by the vegetable garden.

'Okay fine. When he sees her, he'll immediately fall in love. They said they will be back this morning so he should find her here' Fanisa finally speaks.

'You still haven't answered my question. What have you done?'

Fanisa is reluctant in giving an answer.

'I went to the Baloyis and got the girl's underwear'

'Are you insane??? Your husband almost killed you because of this nonsense and you're repeating it? I don't mind you boiling your own underwear and almost dying because of this but please leave these kids alone. If Fikani needs a wife, it shall be arranged as normal'

'I made things easier. The choice will be his and he won't be overwhelmed by this whole thing'

'I said about this bloody mission you witch'

'Ah. Too late. He's already had the meal and you are going to help me keep the portion alive. It will be suspicious if I spend too much time in the kitchen'

'Wait. You've already fed it to him? Don't tell me...' – she pinches her nose bridge in frustration – 'Do not tell me that you did this at that last family dinner' she speaks through tightly gritted teeth. Fanisa simply shrugs with

nonchalance and looks away.

‘Everybody ate that food. Now they’re going to be lusting over a little girl!’

‘Ask and you shall be told. This portion only has his name on it. It will only work on him and nobody else’ she takes out the little bottle containing murky water and shoves it into Xongi’s pocket.

‘I am trusting you to execute this properly. My job here is done’

They both hear cars pulling up in the yard and conclude that the couples are back.

‘What time is it?’

‘Around nine’

‘Rhandzu should be here by midday. I am going out to fix a small problem concerning this one’ she points at Singi’s yard by the head. Xongi shakes her head disapprovingly.

‘Keep that Kuli girl close if you want this secret of yours to remain a secret. I will tell you what to do with her. Keep being the friendly mother-in-law’

Fanisa leaves her with a scheming smile and Xongi supports her suddenly heavy weight by holding on to the tap. Fikani appears, almost giving her a heart-attack. She

welcomes him with a smile as her heart drums violently behind her chest.

'My boy. How are you? How was your little outing?' she asks. He hugs her back when she raises her arms.

'It was okay I guess' he lies, not wanting to speak about the fight that erupted between him and his twin brother.

'Good. I am glad you had a good time'

'Yeah. Can I ask a question?'

She nods.

'Do you still remember where you buried our placenta? The traditional healer who I was consulting said that spot will be necessary'

Xongi lifts both brows.

'He said that?'

Fikani nods.

'We will discuss it further. Don't worry' she dismisses and swiftly changes the topic.

...

[KULANI]

'Are we ever going to talk about what happened last night?' I ask when Kurhula takes off his shoes. The drive back home was awful because only Tumi and I were trying to keep an upbeat energy in the car. They weren't budging nor interested in joining in on the conversation. He sits up and sighs.

'I also don't know what happened. We were having a simple conversation, ended up talking about the past and then things exploded when I least expected it'

'What did you say to offend him or what did he say that didn't sit well with you?' I sit next to him on the bed.

'I told him about the abuse and said things would've been way better if I had been raised by a single mother. I don't know why he took offense in that because I never said it's a blissful experience. I just said it would be better than the horror I experienced'

'Do you have any idea of the kind of childhood he had?'

'He says he grew up poor and said I was cushioned and comfortable. The audacity...' he scoffs.

'Maybe that's why he took offense'

He gives me a deadly look.

'No listen. I am not taking any sides here. I am just saying that you two grew up in completely different worlds so it is expected that it won't be easy for you to understand one another'

'Nah. There's no sane person who'd think watching your mother experience all that is better than poverty. I am sickened by what money does to logic to sometimes'

I sigh and take his hand.

'That's the thing, baby. You cannot apply logic to painful lived experiences. Fikani has had his fair share of the brutality that life has to offer. This equally applies to you. You were coming along fine. You cannot allow this to break you apart'

'We were never joined at any point'

'Says the other half of the zygote' I mumble and he shoots a death stare at me.

'Please go and apologize to your brother?'

'Why me? Because I was cushioned and comfortable one?'

Lord have mercy.

'I am not the enemy here'

He cups my chin, gives me a feeble smile, and offers me a kiss. I kiss him back.

'I know. I'm sorry'

'Are you gonna apologize?'

'Fvck no'

I feel like I am trying to mediate a case between stubborn four-year-olds. I check the text on my phone. Rhandzu is here and she wants me to fetch her from the gate. Kurhula laughs at this.

'Tell her to come in. We don't bite. I still want to talk to you about something'

'What?'

'When would you like to have your first child? I'm curious'

Where is this coming from?

'I don't know. Probably around 29/30'

'What about next year?'

That's a second away. I laugh and get up. He catches me from behind and pulls me towards him.

'I am serious here' he insists. I get comfortable sitting on top of him.

'Two years from now. That's the lowest I can go'

'How many kids do you want?'

'Two will do'

'Hmm' he simply says and I turn to kiss him. I need to go attend to my sister. I find her in conversation with Aunt Lydia, sitting outside and sorting out fibre.

'Hi sesi' I greet her and she smiles at me.

'Hey. Did you get my message? Or you plainly decided to ignore me?'

'My phone is somewhere in my bag' I lie. This is all Kurhula's fault. He comes out to kiss me on the cheek and tells me that he's heading out.

'You should be a clothing model. You change outfits a million times in a day' Rhandzu says and Kurhula thins his eyes at her before laughing. He doesn't explain and I am not in the mood for it too. I hope Rhandzu holds her tongue today. I'm used to her crassness but other people won't receive her the same way.

Rhandzu pulls the chair and instructs Lydia to sit down in between her legs.

'Why don't I take the chair and you—'

'I stand up?' Rhandzu asks, with a 'Think again' undertone. I'd had forgotten how she fears no one. Lydia rolls her eyes and asks me to go get her a reed mat inside the house. I get it and she lays her legs there – wearing nothing but an Ankara cloth.

'Don't make them too thin. I want them to look exactly like the ones Kuli had'

'It will be R1200' Rhandzu states as she parts Lydia's hair. My jaw drops at this daylight robbery. I say nothing.

'I'll only cough it out because you're probably a broke student but don't ever think I was born yesterday' she says and I laugh. For a moment there, I thought Rhandzu had fully gotten away with ripping her off.

'You were drinking the other day when I was here. Even today, you're still drinking' Rhandzu notes. Oh God. All my hope was in absolute vain.

'If you lived a day in my shoes, I promise you, an hour would be enough to turn you into a dipsomaniac'

Rhandzu laughs as she braids.

'What kind of life is that?'

'You haven't heard? Sweet thang, I am an experienced divorcee. While we're at it, take this advice from me, an

expert. Never allow a man to explain anything because they know exactly what they're doing when they cheat and do unbiblical things behind your back'

'Never allow a man to explain anything. Got it' Rhandzu reiterates. I laugh at this conversation.

'I have lived, my doll. I have seen things that could keep you up at night. My love for rich men has traumatized me but I can't say I'd go back to undo anything' her mind is obviously travelling back in time as she speaks. I can tell by the deceleration in her speech. Xongi appears with Fikani.

'Oh you're here? There's someone I'd like you to meet' she says to Rhandzu with a wide smile. I lift a brow. Rhandzu does the same.

'This is Kurhula's twin brother'

Is she trying to play cupid or am I imagining things?

'Kurhula has a twin?' Rhandzu asks. There's something odd about her behaviour. We're all surprised, including Fikani. He extends his hand and they greet one another. Here comes trouble. Rhandzu will just see this as stars aligning.

'Uhm... my wife must be done getting dressed by now. Please excuse me' he says, looking at me.

'Please, have some shame' Lydia says to Mhan' Xongi after Fikani leaves. She frowns at this statement.

'What?'

'Are you seriously going to parade the abandoned twin like he's some rare ornament that got spat out by the sea?'

'What did I ever do to you, Lydia?'

'It's not your fault. Your parents are to blame. The fact that you exist makes my inner thighs itch'

Rhandzu shoots out laughter and Xongi raises a threatening pair of eyes to her. I barely take the jabs that Aunt Lydia spits but this sounded rather personal. When Xongi disappears, Rhandzu fails to continue keeping it in.

'What are you laughing at, you little swindler?' Lydia sharply asks and Rhandzu immediately zips it. I should've left with Kurhula. Plus, I am yearning for something cold and sweet.

'Please excuse me'

I get up and go find my phone. He better answer.

'Husband to the only wife that matters in South Africa. How can I help you?'

I laugh. 'Only in SA? So I do have competition, just not in

this country?’

‘Xikwembu... I can never win. That’s not what I meant’

‘What did you mean then?’

‘Women...’

I hear him sigh. ‘Okay you’re the only wife that matters in this whole world’

‘There are scientific suspicions that there’s life on other planets. Just saying’

He chuckles. ‘Kulani, you’re the only wife that matters in this entire galaxy’

‘Is heaven a part of that? Because there’s women in heaven too, you know?’

‘I can argue that heaven is only a state of mind, not an actual place’

‘Whose mind? Are there women living in your mind Kurhula?’

He laughs out loud.

‘This is proof that I have met my match straight. You’re so bloody argumentative’

‘Answer the question’ I persist while suffering from burning cheeks.

'Okay let's do this. I don't care what happens in other planets and galaxies. You're the only woman that matters in my world'

I chuckle. 'I miss you. Come back home'

'I miss you too but couldn't you call me earlier and saved me the trip?'

'No I didn't miss you then. Please come fetch me. Where are you even going?'

He laughs

'You don't know where I'm going but you wanna come with. I'm headed to the office. I swear, whoever said getting married was a good idea was out of their damn mind' he complains and I laugh.

'Are you coming back?'

'Do I have a choice? I am still filling up the tank, and no eating pie in my car, please baby'

We fought the last time I did that. Where am I supposed to have it though?

'Yay. Please don't drive too fast. I still need to freshen up'

'Yes ma'am'

I feel the defeat in his breath. He should be glad that we

found AK already bathed and looking like glazed doughnut. His grandmother doesn't play when it comes to petroleum jelly. She makes sure.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 13

[KULANI]

While helping AK put on his sneakers, I hear noise coming from the doorway. Someone is trying to force their way inside and Uncle Jonathan is not having it. I call him uncle out of respect but he's in no way related to the family but the love he pours into it could convince anybody otherwise. I take Akani by hand and we walk there to find out.

'I thought I had specifically told you all to leave my child alone' I hear the lady's voice again. AK immediately runs towards her and she crouches down with a smile to pick him up.

'You are not going anywhere with that child Nikiwe' Mhan Xongi states with certainty.

'You're the last person to tell me that. I am not good enough of a wife for your son but I'm suddenly good enough to bear kids for you people? It's the hypocrisy for

me'

Boitumelo is just standing there, obviously wondering what is going on. Aunt Lydia appears with Rhandzu following behind her.

'Who is that?' Rhandzu asks. I shrug. I am in no mood to be explaining things I know nothing about.

'Where is his bag?' Nikiwe asks.

'You would know if you were serious about being a mother!' Lydia shoots out.

'I am not going to repeat myself. You are going nowhere with that child'

Kurhula walks in as she fixes AK on her hip.

'Nikiwe?' he calls.

'Kurhula please. I am not here to discuss anything with you. I just want my child'

'Are you sure you wanna do this with me?'

'Excuse me... are you threatening me right now?'

Kurhula sighs. 'I don't make threats. Let's go talk about this outside'

'I am not talking. I am leaving, with my child'

Akani starts crying when he's being pulled back and forth between his mom and grandmother.

Kurhula takes him. 'You'll my boy into two. Where have you been?' he asks the mother of his child.

'Places. I don't report to you anymore'

'When have you ever reported to me? I will bring AK later. He's still spending time with his family'

Mhan' Xongi insists on taking him and Kurhula doesn't fight her.

'You better bring him tonight'

'Goodbye Nikiwe'

I have questions...

...

'Wasn't Fikani supposed to be leaving today?' I ask when it's finally just the two of us in then room. He laughs. This whole day has been boring and exhausting.

'Are you tired of them already?'

I continue moisturizing my hands.

'Not really. I am just confused'

'Are you okay?'

I get on the bed and go lie on his chest. We're naked under this sheet. I don't think I've ever been this comfortable with anybody before.

'I am fine. I am just disappointed that we couldn't go out today and now AK is gone. Is this how life is going to be for him?'

I hear him sigh.

'I don't know really. I have had the thought of fighting for sole custody but Akani loves his mother, as absent and a deadbeat as she is. I am caught between a rock and a hard place'

I nod. I understand.

'I wanna build you a house baby' he mentions. 'And before you say no, it will be right here in the yard. This one is getting small for my liking. One can't even breathe properly here'

'You're serious about moving out of here?'

'I have better things to do with my time than fight for a throne. We have spoken about this'



'I hear you. I have an idea. I don't know what you will think of it' I change the topic.

He waits for me to speak.

'I wanna open a creche'

'Is this sudden or is it something you've been pondering over for some time?'

I chuckle. 'I don't know. At first, it was a random meaningless thought but the more I think about it, I tend to feel like my purpose lies somewhere there'

'I can't argue. I mean... you're good with kids so...'

'I'm still playing around with the idea though. Another part of me wants to go back to school so I can enrol for Bed Foundation phase'

'There's a lot of sadness in your voice. What's wrong?'

I am listening to his heartbeat as I lie here.

'I just...'

'At some point you have to let go of the idea of journalism because that's clearly not your path baby. You can still do whatever you wanna do. You're way too young'

'Young at 24?'

He laughs. 'I'm gonna strangle this person who managed

to convince you that you're old. You're just a baby. If you're old then what am I?

'I'm tired of studying'

'But you wanna do something?'

I nod innocently and he laughs.

'Okay. Come work for me then'

'Work for you?'

'Yeah. You'll be my assistant' he says, playing with my hair.

'Bad idea'

'You'll be a stay-at-home mom then. I'll give you the creche you want. My soldiers are still strong'

I shoot out laughter.

'I have never imagined myself as a stay-at-home mom or a housewife. I would go crazy I swear'

'You wanna be an independent mom?'

I nod. He kisses my forehead.

'I am for whatever will make you happy. I just want you to know that I don't mind taking care of you, waswitwa mama?'

I nod once more.

'So, I can call that house plans guy tomorrow?'

'I think tomorrow is too soon. Why don't we focus on the wedding first and deal with everything else afterwards?'

'And here I was convinced that women are multitaskers. Somebody lied somewhere'

I raise my eyes at him and he looks at me with suspicion.

'I already know what you want' he states and I laugh.

'I just serviced you about an hour ago. This appetite of yours for dxck is gonna kill me one day' he's complaining but he's already kissing up on me. He cannot blame me. Every time I'm with him my mind just wanders off to places where kids aren't allowed. I pull him up when he wants to go down. There's an itch that he needs to scratch right now. He laughs when he gets the message. I close my eyes he enters me slowly.

'Kurhula?' I call.

'Ja baby?'

'I love you'

He smiles and kisses me. 'I love you too. Can I get you pregnant now?'

I laugh. He just had to ruin it.

...

'Am I hallucinating?' Boitumelo asks before sitting besides Fikani on the bed.

'What do you mean?'

'No. My gut is never wrong. We were supposed to leave. The next moment you tell me you wanna spend one more day here. We have lives back home'

'It's just a day. I am trying to fix both our lives here. Nobody is paying attention to this ritual that I need. That we both need' he nonchalantly argues.

'I have seen how you look at her' she drops the bomb. He chooses silence.

'Fikani?'

'My love?'

'I have seen how you look at Kuli. You don't look at me like that' she decides to be absolutely vulnerable like her friend advised.

'How do I look at her?'

She ties her silk headwrap around her hair.

'I don't know. Like she's the second-best thing after sliced bread'

'You sound jealous'

'So you do have feelings for this girl?'

'That's not what I said'

'So why would you go straight for the jealous card if there's truly nothing there?'

'I really don't understand where this is coming from'

'You are fvcking lying!' she yells and he chides for her to keep it down.

'Tumi, this is not our house. Please remember that'

They hear a knock on the door two minutes later. Mhan Xongi asks if they're okay and Tumi apologises for the noise.

'Please keep it down' Fikani urges after he closes the door. Tumi angrily throws herself into the sheets.

'Now you're no longer talking to me?'

She keeps quiet. He cuddles her from behind and she shifts away. He gives up and pulls his phone from under the pillow.

'See? You're falling out of love with me' she states a

couple of minutes later.

'And where is that coming from?'

'My husband would want to fix this before we went to bed. You're just sitting there'

'I tried to speak to you and you moved away from me. Am I supposed to force you into having a proper grown-up conversation with me?'

She drops her head back on the pillow and he brings his eyes back to his phone screen. He looks back to see if Tumi sees anything. He finds her still facing the other side of the room. He continues watching Kurhula's WhatsApp status where he posted the recent pictures he took of Kulani. He goes into the bathroom to wash his face with cold water. He faces the mirror and looks at it square in the eyes.

'What the hell is happening with you Fikani?'

He takes a seat on the closed toilet seat and begins calculating his life choices.

'You can't have her. You can't have her. You can't have her. She's not yours to have' he reiterates to himself to whispers.

Kuli's smile keeps circulating in his mind whenever he tries

to close his eyes. The thought of Tumi is just... suddenly lukewarm.

'Was I late? Should I have come back home sooner?' he asks, still talking to himself. 'Would she have been mine then?'

As hours pass, the attraction seems to grow far more intense. The thought of being away from her felt like dipping his tongue in absolute misery. He just wanted her where he could see her. He goes back into the bedroom and finds Boitumelo fast asleep.

...

[KULANI]

I almost turn back when I walk into the kitchen and find Fikani there. We seem to clash a lot at this time. I need ice cold water. I am a special type of thirsty this morning.

'Why do you look so afraid?'

'Uhm... I'm not. I just woke up. Maybe that's why my face looks weird'



'I wish you knew'

'Excuse me?' I ask as I grab the water bottle from the fridge.

'Nothing. I'm just complimenting this face you claim looks weird. I don't see it'

I pour myself a glass of water and put the bottle back. He pulls me by the wrist and puts his coffee cup down. I immediately take my hand back.

'What are you doing?' I have to ask, genuinely. The thing about me is that I'm always laughing 24/7 and some people tend to mistake this for being dumb and worthy of disrespect.

'I am sorry. I'm really sorry. I just wanted to get something off my chest. Maybe if I do that, it will leave me alone'

'What is that?' I fasten the belt to my gown.

'There's no easy way to say this but... the more I see your face around here, the deeper I develop feelings for you'
I scoff.

'Well, maybe it's a sign that you need to leave'

'What?' I hear Mhan' Xongi's voice. 'Kulani, what did you just say to Fikani?'

'It was a joke' Fikani answers on my behalf.

'No. It wasn't. Itlharihele tlhelo weh. You need to stop this nonsense' I say and pick my cold water up.

'Tlhelo rihi? My ears must be deceiving me. Little girl? In my house? You have the audacity to tell my son that he must leave whereas you haven't been here for barely two minutes?'

She shouts. I breathe and remember why I am always urged to hold my tongue with pliers. Sometimes it gets difficult when I feel like people are getting too familiar. My chest is cold. I get this feeling when I have a lot to say but I am forced to keep it in.

'No you have no manners'

Now I am feeling bad. She continues scolding me like a little girl caught with her hand deep in a sugar jar.

'Stop it!' Fikani chides and she finally keeps quiet. If I was home, I was simply going to leave her talking by herself. She doesn't even want to hear my side of the story. Kurhula walks in, followed by his little brother.

'What's going on? Why this noise at this time of the morning?'

'You need to teach this wife of yours mavulavulelo. What I

walked into this morning is pure disgrace. She's even wearing pyjamas in my kitchen!

Kurhula frowns. I am still thirsty so I am going to drink my water. She's usually not up at this time so today was my unlucky day I guess.

'What has she done?' Junior asks.

'This is no big deal to be honest' Fikani says and Mhan' Xongi looks at him with great incredulity, like she couldn't believe what he's just said.

'Can somebody explain to me what is going on here?' Kurhula asks.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 14

[KULANI]

'Baby girl! You look like a walking million dollars, walking in heels!' Aunt Lydia compliments and I laugh. Mhan Xongi continues dusting the cushions on the couch and says nothing. The conversation this morning evaporated into the air. Fikani stood in his word that his mother was exaggerating. I was told to dress up and nothing more. I hate vague dress codes. Anyway, I decided on a satin tube

dress and Saint Laurent ankle strap sandals. The nude made sense. I am gonna take this coat off in the car. I only wore it because I didn't want to give Xongi more reason to despise me. Not that I regret this outfit. I just don't want her seeing it in its full sexy. I have the bag he left on the bed for me. He meant it when he said he was gonna get it for me. I'm so happy I think I'm gonna sleep cuddling it tonight. He'd surely wake up in the morning and return it. He doesn't want his own son sleeping in between us. What more is a bag? I internally laugh at my own thoughts. Aunt Lydia is still looking at me like I just walked out of a magazine cover. I love her man. I genuinely do. Under all that offensive and brusquerie cover, there's a genuine motherly heart. I wonder if her not having kids was a choice. I am not going to ask though. You do not ask people such questions. She indicates with her hand that I should come closer. I laugh. I wonder what she wants to whisper to me.

'Seal the night with some depththroat'

I shoot out laughter. I did not expect that. This woman?!

She licks her flute and leaves me there. One of the drivers walks in and alerts me that it's time to leave. I follow him out. I analyse the space where Kurhula wants to build. It's more than enough. After the houses that already exist, the

kraal and garden area, there's still more than enough space to build our house. This yard is huge. The space is enough for a shopping complex. I almost bump into Fikani and he holds me from falling. I quickly gain my balance and he removes his hands.

'You look stunning'

I know. This response stays in my head. I quickly reprimand myself. I always do when one of my spicy personalities come up. It sounds wrong. Even in my head.

'Thank you. Please excuse me'

He insists on holding the door for me and I let him be. We drive out of the garage. It's gonna be dark soon. I wonder where we're going. I hope I'm not overdressed, or underdressed. I wouldn't mind the former that much. The latter is usually embarrassing. Pinterest keeps me company because this guy doesn't talk that much.

'Mlambya and associates?'

Kurhula made me dress up so I can meet him at his office?
Does he know the effort I put into this face?

Tony opens the door for me. I grab my bag and step out with his help. He leaves only after I've pushed the doors open and let myself in. The reception area is empty. The elevator tings open and he appears with that smile on his

face. He has a rose in his hand.

'I wonder what you're up to'

He laughs after I say this. He approaches and hands the rose to me. I smell it and appreciate the freshness in its natural scent. He takes my hand and turns me around.

'My, my, my...' he says and steps away. I guess to get a proper view of me. 'I wish you could see yourself the way that I do right now'

I chuckle. 'What makes you think I don't?'

'You're calm. If you knew what you really looked like, I swear you wouldn't know how to act'

I laugh. He's started.

'Damn woman...' – he bites his lower lip – 'Now I wish I could have you right now and right here but let me get my mind out of the gutter. I have a surprise for you' he receives my bag and takes my hand. There's red petals everywhere on the floor. The person who's gonna clean here tomorrow morning will be cussin' and swearing throughout. We get to his office and the only source of light in here are the candles on his desk and on the floor. There's a picnic setup in the middle.

'Awwwn... this is so sweet baby, thank you'

'Do you genuinely like it?'

I nod as I check the food. There's prawns, creamy pasta, white wine, and chocolate dessert. I love the elegance and simplicity attached to all of this.

'I hope there's juice'

'There's none. I want you to try something new' he says as he pours. I laugh.

'You're such a bad influence'

'I know, and you better not drink in my absence'

'What if I like it?'

'Try not to get addicted' he hands the glass to me after I get seated. He helps me out of my heels and also sits with one knee raised. He dishes up for me and I ask where the food is from after the first bite. I know for a fact that he didn't make any of this. He doesn't strike me as someone who knows how to cook.

'I made it' he lies and looks at me in the eye, waiting for a reaction. I know he is lying.

'No ways' I disagree and continue enjoying this well-made Italian cuisine. The juicy taste of the prawns keeps bursting in my mouth.

'The person who made this knows exactly what they were doing. I can almost tell which ingredients were put in here'

'You sound like you're well versed in food my lady'

'Not really but I once took up a short culinary course out of boredom. It was recess'

One thing about me? I am my father's nightmare when it comes to his bank account. I am realizing now how I used to buy stuff and pay for things just cause I could, not that I needed them. However, that course was necessary.

Growing up with helpers did not work in my favour when I had to live by myself at dorm.

'You sound like a curious human being' he notes.

'You can say that. Now tell me where this food is from'

'Okay fine. My friend is a chef so I asked him to whip up something quickly'

I believe the quickly part. It's like the idea just hit him and he went with it, judging by the time he informed me of our date.

'But why don't you believe that I can cook?'

'No prince can. You guys are hopeless to be honest'

He laughs. 'This prince grew far from home. You seem to

forget this fact'

'So you can?'

'You sound very doubtful of me. The only reason you haven't had any food made by me is because I'm a busy man and we live with your mother-in-law under the same roof. I don't want her in my ear'

I believe him because she'd definitely throw a gasket at the sight of him holding a pot.

'I will conclude that you can cook the day I eat your food. For now, I choose not to speak'

He laughs.

'Zero faith in me'

I giggle and continue eating. This wine doesn't taste bad. It smells citrusy.

'I need to go back to PE baby. The trial is starting on Tuesday'

'You're seriously defending this person?' I say, deliberately.

'I told you that I'm just doing my job. If I operated on conscience I wouldn't have went to law school'

'What are your limits when it comes to such?'

'Well...' he takes a sip. He's done eating. 'I've turned down

cases where I felt a man is being rightfully accused of killing a woman or cases of GBV. I don't know. They're just not doable'

'Hit close to home?' I softly ask. He nods.

'I... I don't know man. I always ask myself if I would've defended Edward if it happened that... ja. That's enough for me to tell the potential client to leave my office'

'I understand. What's happening with this particular client?'

'He's being accused of killing his friend'

'Did he do it?' I ask and he laughs.

'I can't discuss that with you baby man'

'Hawu. Where would I be taking this information? And even if it might be useful to me, it will be your word against me'

'Hearsay neh? Listen to you' he smiles. 'It's not that I don't trust you. I just don't like discussing my clients but if you have to know, yeah he did it but he pleaded free of guilt'

'Do you see yourself getting him off?'

'I'll manage a light sentence at most. The evidence is solid so I have to play dirty'

'Dirty?'

'Claim mental imbalance at the time of the incident'

'So you guys do this on purpose?'

He laughs as he finishes off his wine and nods.

'We have to. The friend wasn't innocent either so...'

'What do you mean?'

'He slept with his wife. That's no mistake. Loko munhu aku tolovela thyaka they should expect that things will get out of hand' (When a person is getting too familiar with you)

'How did he even kill him?'

'He broke into his house and shot him after catching them in flagrante delicto in the afternoon. After that, he did the most dumbest thing any defence lawyer despises'

'What? And what does that mean? That fragrance word?'

'He left the murder weapon at the crime scene' he states in severely bored tone. 'And the word means red-handed'

'Couldn't you just use simple English?'

He laughs. He did it on purpose.

'My fees costed an arm, a leg and a couple of hairs my lady'

I thin my eyes at him. He laughs even harder.

'Have you decided what you want? Are we going back to

school or are we building a day-care?

I sigh. 'I think I wanna go back to school but it will have to be long-distance'

'Okay I will be waiting for your documents then'

'Why?'

'So that I can send the applications on your behalf'

I immediately smile. Arg, what did I do to deserve this man?

'I thought you said you were a busy man'

'Never too busy for you. I'm not saying you should do it but if you were to wakk into a court in session and told me that you miss me, I would simply tell the judge to postpone everything' he says, massaging my foot.

I shoot out laughter while imagining this scene. As crazy as it sounds, I would trust that he's capable of such insanity. He pulls me close when I least expect it and I almost spill my wine. I'm on my third glass.

'Ooh...' I exclaim and he takes the glass from me, putting it down.

'Do you know why I called you here?' he lifts my legs so I sit on him astride. I shake my head. His lips are a hairsbreadth away from mine. His scent and stare are

intoxicating me.

'I need memories of you in this office. Motivation to remind me what awaits at home. Not that I need a reminder but you know? There are some flashbacks that will have a man racing the road, in a hurry to get in between a special set off thighs' he kisses me.

'You're always welcome in between these ones, you know that right?' I respond with the same tone and he smiles. I'm getting wet and I have no underwear on. Flip, I forgot my coat in the car. Hopefully Tony keeps it safe and it doesn't land in the wrong hands. I choose to forget about it now. He manoeuvres a way to get up with me still straddling him. Once managed, he goes and puts me on his chair. He turns it around and pushes my dress up and sees that there's no cloth barrier between him and my nakedness.

'We came prepared nana?' he asks with a smirk before wheeling the chair closer so he can kiss me. I nod as we suck each other's lips. I am addicted to this human being! He squats and raises my legs up. I was looking forward to the chocolate thingy though.

'Kurhula what about the dessert?'

I feel his warm tongue before I can speak.

'This one? What about it?' he asks while eating me out. Arg, it can melt. I no longer care about it. He separates my folds with fingers, angles his head and sucks on my throbbing bean. He's gotten to notice that this tips me over the edge.

'Mmh!' he moans while at it. The manner in which Kurhula eats me out makes me want to taste myself. His warm breath fans me and I close my eyes once again.

'I'm about to explode'

He tongue back to the pink canal, holding my waist with both hands.

'Cvm into my mouth'

The ocean gates burst open and drinks it all up. He's refusing to let me go. My eyes roll back as my toes curl. He's massaging my vibrating leg.

'Kurhula...' I am running out of strength. He smiles and gets up.

He unbuckles his belt, still looking at me. He swipes the files off his table and picks me up. I help him out of his white shirt as his pants find their way to his ankles. My dress also comes off.

'Do you masturbate baby?' he asks while rubbing my clxt

with his firm dxck and I laugh. Why am I feeling shy?

'I used to. There's no need for that anymore'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. I have a breathing seggs toy now'

He laughs. 'First, you tell me that we're agemates since you've seen my genitals. Second, I'm a toy? Kulani, how many times am I supposed to warn you baby girl?'

He's slowly entering me and I am getting all of it today. I feel my insides expand as he burrows through my muscles.

'Was I lying?'

From that threatening smile and lifted brow, I can clearly see that I'm pushing limits here.

'You even have the attitude to match. We need to fix that' he gives me a fast long stroke and I flinch. 'Don't you think?' he asks.

'I'm sorry' I laugh.

'Why you folding so quickly?'

Another long stroke. Motherf...

He lifts my legs and supports them on his shoulders. I am feeling every inch as he disappears into me.

'Hey mamma? Why are we folding so quickly? I haven't done nothing yet but you're already tapping out?'

He's consistently poking at a sensitive spot and I want him to keep at it. He's fully aware of what he's doing, judging by his persistent angular movement.

'Hhh...hhh' I breathe out loud. He increases the pace like he'd just read my mind. I feel my muscles tensing up that Olivia is about to rush through me like an anxiety attack. I cum and grease him his dxck up even further. He slows down the pace and pulls out. He goes back to massaging my clxt with his head. He slides it in again when I least expect it and I gasp. Another orgasm hit me and he doesn't change the pace even after I'm done losing my mind. He continues rearranging my intestines while massaging my boobs. The third one is intense. I squirt all over him.

'There we go' he says like he's just achieved something he was intending to. I have no strength left in me. He pulls me by the small of my back and kisses my neck, then my lips.

'You can have your dessert now. Be quick because I need mine back as in yesterday'

I laugh breathlessly while holding on to his neck. He's breathing into mine. My kitten is on fire.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 15

[KULANI]

Kurhula and his aunt decided to leave together for the airport. I went back to sleep after he kissed me goodbye. I am not up for tagging along this time because I'll just get there and fall sick again. I hate that feeling. Plus, I need to do some cleansing through purging. Lately, I have been giving into food desires and eating at any time I wished. I feel internally dirty and spiritually congested. Even my body feels heavy. I have a backlog of dreams and visions I cannot access because of my lack of self-discipline. Wait, I saw something during my nap. It's vague but the memory is there. I remember it but I also don't at the same time. I wrap my ancestral cloth on my head and kneel down. This is how I pray and meditate. Meditation helps me recollect things and receive answers to certain questions I have. It also helps me recall dreams. I feel like prayer is me communicating my feelings to the higher world and meditation is me allowing them the chance to respond by being silent. It used to scare me at first. There's a point where the darkness that surrounds you is no longer just that of being behind closed eyes. That was the reason I'd

quickly open them when I started feeling like I'm no longer by myself in the room. After a good thirty minutes of trying to piece together that dream, I remember a portion of it. I quickly get up and go to the mirror. I lift my t-shirt and study my stomach. Why would they do this to me? I am on contraceptives! And the thing about my dreams is that they are never cryptic. I am not the one to dream of a wedding dress that represents a funeral. If I see a wedding dress, then it means someone is going to get married. They handed me a baby and I'm only realizing now that my period is late by a week. My period is strict to time. If it's late, it's only by a day. Did they not hear me when I said I want to go back to school? I got on contraceptives for a reason. I am in tears as I try to call Kurhula. His flight leaves in thirty minutes so I should be able to reach him. I know this because he was complaining about being left alone once Aunt Lydia caught hers, whereas he could've been getting more sleep.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula'

I breathe in and out.

'Are you crying? What's wrong?'

'I don't want a baby right now'

'I know. We've established that. We'll have one once you're

ready'

'No you don't understand' I sniff and wipe my tears.

'Make me understand then. Why are you crying?'

'I am crying because I am already pregnant'

'I... I thought you said wa preventa?'

I thought so too. I am suing my doctor because she clearly gave me paracetamol tablets.

'Baby, please stop crying so I can understand what you're saying. Did you take a test? What happened?'

'I missed my period'

'That's no reason to worry. It's quite normal, I've heard'

'Kurhula shut up. You didn't do biology!'

Is he laughing? I'm gonna kill him.

'Whoa, calm down...I'm afraid you might really be pregnant' he concludes. 'Don't panic and don't allow this to stress you. I'm gonna come back home as soon as I'm done here, okay?'

'I don't want to talk...' I throw my face into my pillow.

'What do you want?' he's sincere in his question.

'An empty uterus'

He laughs again. Why is he enjoying my pain?

'I can't help you there my love. You're the one who enjoys it when I cum inside so...'

'You're rubbing salt on an open wound'

'Because I'm trying to get you to feel less stressed. This is not a big deal. Well it is, but not in a negative sense'

'What about school?'

'You can still go. You said you wanted to do long distance, right?'

'Yeah but women don't react the same way. What if I'm always tired and I develop a pregnancy brain?'

'Then I will step in and do all your assignments for you. By the time you're supposed to write your exam, you would've given birth already'

I laugh at this suggestion, through tears.

'Your problem is that you have an answer for everything'

'And you worry too much. You will be fine, I promise. We speak to our kids in this family. He... or she won't bother you when you have obligations to attend to'

'Listen to your lies and tell me if they make sense'

He chuckles. 'Ask your mother-in-law if you don't believe

me'

The smile disappears from my face. There's something about Mhan Xongi that rubs my spirit up the wrong way these days. I don't know if it's new or I have been blind to it but there is something off balance there. I am glad I won't have to see her face when I wake up. In as much as this sounds bad, the funeral she had to attend is a sprinkle of luck on my side.

'I have to go now. You should go back to sleep'

Now I am crying because I already miss him.

'Stop crying baby please. I'm too far to hold you. Nak' rhandza nkata mina and I will call you as soon as I get to PE, okay?'

'I love you too'

I drift off to sleep after our call. I needed to hear his voice.

...

'It's 5am. Where are you going?' Boitumelo asks when she wakes up to Fikani getting dressed.

'We've leaving. Did you not say that you no longer wanted

to be here?’

‘So you’ve finally decided to come with? I was planning to leave around 9 though’

He doesn’t respond. She sees it fit not to argue and appreciates the fact that he is no longer adamant on staying behind.

‘And where were you last night?’ she asks while putting on her slippers. He glances sideways.

‘I was out to get some fresh air’

She nods and goes into the bathroom. He immediately leaves the room when he starts hearing the water running, after spraying the cloth he planned to use with an inhalant. He gently tries Kuli’s door and lets himself in. She shoots her eyes open and he pushes the cloth against her nose and mouth, waiting for her to pass out as she fights unsuccessfully. The muffled screams come to a stop when her face drops back on the pillow.

‘I’m sorry love...’ he softly apologizes before going outside to check the coast. He goes into the garage and opens the boot when he finds that it’s clear. When he steps back into the house, he finds Jonathan trying to see who is opening doors and making noises.

‘Oh it’s you sir’

Fikani nods with a smile.

'Good morning. Yeah, preparing for the road'

'Already leaving?'

'Yeah. It's time'

'We'll catch a break from being confused' Jonathan jokes.
Fikani slightly frowns with confusion.

'On who is who between you and your brother'

He laughs when he gets it. He wafts it off nonchalantly and Jonathan goes back outside to have his tea and bread. That's always the first thing he does when he gets on duty. Fikani is careful in his steps as he goes back to fetch Kuli. He wasn't worried about Junior. He always woke up late if left undisturbed. He carries her out of the room and gets her to the car. He's careful when he puts in the boot. He reaches for the duct tape that he got the previous night to shut her mouth, ties her wrists and legs. He quickly closes the boot when he hears Jonathan's voice.

'Listen, I heard you speak about property and what not. My sister is looking to buy a—'

'Uhm... I don't mean to be rude but please give me a call. Right now I have to go'

'Okay no problem' he says and receives the business card

that Fikani has just retrieved from his car. He goes back into his room to fetch his bag.

'Can we pass by Pamela's on our way home? I haven't see her in a while' Tumi asks, still in the shower.

'Sure' he simply responds and leaves the room. He gets into the car and leaves the premises. He hoots once at the security guards and they raise their hands courteously. From there, he gets the car in full speed.

...

Xongi arrives back home in the afternoon and sighs of great exhaustion as she sits on the couch and takes off her shoes. She stretches her toes in her black stockings and Boitumelo appears, in a frenzy. She notices the morosity on the faces of her family only after they don't greet her back.

'Junior, what's wrong? Tumi, why are you crying?'

Fanisa indicates that she should stand up and follow her. Xongi frowns and picks up her shoes from the floor. After they're sure that it's safe to speak, Fanisa pinches Xongi's upper arm.

'Ouch! What is wrong with you?' she flinches when her sister-in-law's claws dig into her skin.

'Where is the bottle that I gave you?'

'Was I supposed to keep it?'

'What exactly did you do because you clearly did not follow the instructions? He never looked at Rhandzu twice when she was here!'

'Was it supposed to work immediately?'

Fanisa rolls her eyes.

'And I threw the bottle away'

'Threw it away? Why?'

'Why would I keep an empty bottle with me? As evidence? I threw it away immediately after him and had our afternoon tea'

Fanisa laughs in cuts and breaks – her voice carrying disbelief.

'Don't tell me that... empty? You gave it all to him at once?!' she carries her arms over her head.

'Was I not supposed to?'

'Mayeehh! You've killed him you stupid woman! You were supposed to administer it in drops! Now we suspect that

he might've abducted that stupid girl!

'Who? Kulani? But why would he take her when he's supposed to be in love with somebody else? Unless... unless if the fault is entirely yours. Fanisa, what did—' she immediately stops speaking when Fanisa's phone rings.

'Kurhula?' she answers it, looking directly into Xongi's eyes with a sharp sneer on her face.

'Hi. Where's everyone? I am trying to reach my wife. She's not answering the phone. Junior as well. Are you home already?' Kurhula asks. Fanisa hands the phone to Xongi, who shakes her head multiple times – indicating not wanting to speak to him. Fanisa's hand remains extended, waiting for her to take the phone and speak to her son. Xongi breathes out loudly and takes it.

'Boy...'

'Mhakhe, I take it you're already home?'

'Uhm... yes. Yes I am'

'Can you please give my wife the phone?'

She starts sweating needles.

'Uhm... Kurhula? Something terrible happened and...' she's cautious in her speech. He's awfully quiet while she tries to put together a comprehensible sentence. She clears her

throat and swallows a rock.

'I... I don't know. I just walked in and I am being told that Fikani might've taken your wife with him'

'What do you mean by...taken?'

'No. Please phrase that properly. That bxtch bewitched my husband because she's a witch. I have seen her wearing that evil cloth around her waist!' Boitumelo shoots out and the two elderly women turn in her direction. Fanisa smiles internally when this narrative makes sense.

'What cloth are you referring to?' she asks. Tumi sniffs.

'That one of sangomas le mathwasane. The blue one. Kulani knows what she did to my husband' she continues to cry.

'Hello? Kurhula?' Xongi moves away from the noise.

'How does he "take" her in a house with people in it?'

'Kurhula you're asking the wrong person. I was not here when all of this happened'

'What was that altercation about? That morning when you were scolding her?'

She goes silent and wipes her tears.

'I am not going to repeat myself and you know it'

'I don't know what it was about. I just found her hurling insults at him'

'If you're in this with him, deliver this message for me and do not paraphrase. Tell that fvcking son of a bxtch that his entire future will go blank when I get my hands on him!'

'Son of a what?'

He kills the call.

'Kurhula?!'

He leaves his mother boiling with her jaw touching the floor – in utter disbelief.

[08/24, 12:45 pm] #o: CHAPTER 16

When Kurhula arrives back home, he finds the whole family sitting in the living room after dinner. They all look surprised to see him.

'Hhawu. I thought you were only coming back tomorrow?' Wiseman asks. Kurhula walks past all of them and goes straight to the study. Xongi stands up and Albert gets her to sit down.

'Give him a chance to calm down. You know how he can get'

He pushes the shelf and it rotates, allowing him entry into the space behind it. He goes straight to the safe and retrieves a gun. After checking if it's still loaded, his feet take him back to where the family is gathered.

'Kurhula?' Xongi calls when she sees the weapon in his hand. 'You promised me you'd get rid of that'

'I'm sorry, I forgot. Between wanting to keep you alive and being caught in between the messy shenanigans of this family, it completely slipped my mind'

'Why do you even have a gun?' Xongi asks.

'Do you want me to spell it out loud that I bought it to kill Edward?'

Everybody gasps.

Fanisa stands up and Solomon follows her. He shoots the vase next to the door and all the water goes splashing down together with the green glass pieces. Fanisa gasps and stands still with her eyes closed. Mavengana's photo falls down from up the wall and breaks. Wiseman's glass of juice found its way out of his hand when the gunshot went off.

'Sit down' Kurhula commands before lifting himself onto the dinner table. He sits there facing everyone seated by the couches, with his legs on his mother's expensive

chairs. Junior walks in whistling, coming from night study. He frowns when he sees his big brother holding everyone hostage.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Decide if you’re coming in or going out but whatever it is, make it quick’

‘Eh...’ Junior fails to hold back the confusion. He slowly walks in and closes the door before joining everyone. One guard knocks from outside and asks if everyone is okay.

‘I will call you if I need you’ Kurhula states. The guard walks away.

‘Somebody better start talking because I’m trigger-happy. Where is Kulani?’

‘I have already explained—’

‘You never explained shxt’ he cuts Xongi off. ‘What I know is that all off you here have been plotting to get Fikani and Kulani married, even though I explicitly mentioned that it will only happen over my dead body. I just did not think y’all were dumb enough to go about it the old-fashioned way. Abduction? Really?’

‘Son... please calm down’ his uncle, Albert tries to reason with him.

'Tumi, what happened?' Kurhula asks. Tumi swallows and folds her arms, unwilling to speak.

'Tell him what you told me. Tell him that you saw Kulani mixing things into Fikani's food'

'What?!' everybody goes. Kurhula frowns and pulls his head back.

'I never said that. Why are you putting words in my mouth?'

Fanisa looks to Xongi so she can corroborate. Xongi keeps her eyes on the television.

'Boitumelo!' Kurhula shouts and Tumi almost jumps from her seat.

'What I said was, I saw her wearing that cloth. It made me feel uneasy'

'That's not the only thing you said' Xongi argues, still looking at the screen.

Singi claps once.

'Well... another thing I said was that she bewitched my husband because this is out of character for Fikani. There's only one explanation for this'

Kurhula laughs and puts the gun down on the table. He clasps his hands together and looks at her.

'You are saying that Kuli has bewitched Fikani, for him to turn and do something like this to her? And this makes sense? Tumi I thought you were a doctor?'

'E tsena kae eo nou?' (What has that got to do with anything?)

'E kena kae? You're supposed to be smart, you dimwit'

Kurhula pulls out his phone and calls one guard from the gate. He arrives after four minutes later and his walking pace slows down when he sees the deadly black steel next to Kurhula.

'Nhlamulo?' he calls.

'Mlambya?'

'What happened this morning?'

'Uhm... with regard to your wife going missing?'

'What else?'

'We never saw her leave but we did see Fikani driving out. There was no one in the car with him'

'You sound sure?'

Nhlamulo clears his throat. 'I am not'

'It will help you to avoid making definitive statements that might turn you into an accomplice, yeah?'

'You are lashing out on the wrong people' Solomon mumbles. Kurhula slowly wraps his fingers around his gun.

'I usually prefer it when people speak up when there's something on their chest'

Sol glances away. Kurhula moves his eyes back to Nhla.

'Did you watch the camera footage?'

Nhlamulo nods. 'Yes. Nothing dodgy. If something suspicious happened, it happened inside the house'

'Thanks. You may leave' he says and asks him to call Jonathan on this way out, who walks in shortly. Kurhula asks him when last he saw Fikani.

'Uhm... this morning when he left'

'Anything suspicious?'

'I wouldn't say that but he was in quite a hurry'

Kurhula lifts a brow. 'A hurry?'

'Yes, I wanted to ask him about something and he gave me his card, telling me that he can't talk and that I should call him'

'Can I have that card?'

Jonathan searches his pockets and finds it. Kurhula receives and studies it. He gives him the chance to leave.

'Where could he have possibly went?' he continues to interrogate, directing this to Tumi.

'I honestly don't know. I have been trying to reach him all day'

Kurhula taps his phone against the gun a couple of times as he thinks. He throws his head back as he waits for Khalanga to answer. It keeps ringing and ringing.

'Jaguar!' he finally answers.

'The car is parked at home' Tumi loudly announces, watching her phone screen.

'I'll call you back' he says to his friend and gets off the table. 'Fetch your bags. We're going straight there'

Tumi quickly gets up.

'Why don't we just call the police? I don't understand why we haven't?' Mhan Singi asks.

'You want people to think this house is dysfunctional?' Fanisa bites.

'By the police, you mean the South African Police Services? Please take me seriously'

...

[KULANI]

The first thing I notice when I wake up is how blocked my nose is. My sinusitis has also flared up. The last time I had symptoms was when I was still a teenager. I also have a splitting headache. I remember trying to fight Fikani off. I'm trying to remember what happened next but I'm blank. There's nothing in this room apart from a bed, without any sheets. He was considerate enough to leave me with a fleece blanket and a litre of water. The windows also don't have any curtains. When I try to check what's outside, I find nothing but darkness. I can see that this is not the first floor, nor the second. My stomach is growling of hunger. Imagine being stuck in a foreign building in your pyjamas? I need a shower and I also need to brush my teeth. I don't even have any sense of time. It could be 11pm or 3am. I burp as I stand against the window and this annoys me even further. Why didn't they warn me about this? Is it the legendary case of dlozi kids having a tendency of going through the most? If this person is dangerous, there is literally nothing I can use in here to defend myself. Does Kurhula even know that I'm not at home? I think he does. I am exhausted, famished, and

anxious. I turn and watch my hands as they shake. This happens only in two cases: when I feel helpless and when I'm under immense pressure. I allow the tears to fall as they please. What is Fikani's intention? How do you kidnap somebody and expect to get away with it? I touch my belly when it growls. I am carrying a human being in here and I haven't eaten all day. I hear some noises coming from somewhere in this building and I get up from the bed. I go stand behind the door and wait.

Footsteps...

A key is inserted into the door and it turns. I immediately raises my hand to attack and a paper bag drops to the floor. I poke him in the eye and he screams.

'Fvck! What the hell Kuli???' he exclaims and I run out while he tries to nurse his eye. He immediately starts chasing me. I am running in socks and this floor is slippery.

'Can you please wait?!' he yells coming from behind me. My heart is racing as I run. I can feel it. I can feel a blackout coming as I run down the stairway. This is not the time for my iron deficiency to this to me...

...

I am alone again. A quick glance down to my pyjama top alerts me that I am bleeding from somewhere. I raise it and see no wound. I go into the bathroom and luckily find a mirror. The side of my forehead is severed. It's probably not that bad. The sight of blood tends to exaggerate things. I try the tap and water runs out. This building looks like it has been recently built but the stairs say otherwise. Probably still under renovation. I hear the door opening. He's back.

'Kuli?' he calls. I step out with a frown on my face.

'I had to do a quick run at home to fetch this' he raises the small bag up. Judging by the white cross on that green surface, it's a medikit. The eye I poked is red and I am proud of my work.

'Come take a seat'

'I'm gonna scream' I threaten.

'There's nobody here' he simply responds.

I go take the bag from him and go back into the bathroom. I can wash my own wounds. I was taught this in high school. He doesn't fight me. I take out the antiseptic and the cotton wool. After I'm done, I paste the transparent plaster onto the open area. I did say that it wasn't that bad. Blood is just dramatic in nature. I go back into the room

and find him seated on the bed. There's a red stain by the heads where I was sleeping a few moments ago.

'You have to eat'

I want to but I also don't want him thinking I'm obedient or something. He's full of nonsense.

'Where is this place?'

'You don't need to know that' he answers while taking out the box out of the paper bag. There must be a genetic link with KFC in this family because even Akani's ears get blocked whenever he remembers that it exists. Do they not see all these other stores?

'What is your plan?' I ask.

'To show you how much I can love you better. Nothing else'

Hello?

'I am somebody's wife? You're gonna get arrested Fikani'

I see his face changing. Was he not aware that this is a crime? Did he even think this through?'

'Come and eat. You've had nothing all day'

Maybe a softer approach might get me out of this.

'Please take me back home' I gently plead, puppy eyes and

all. He raises his face and sighs. He gets up and steps towards me. His hands hold my cheeks and my blood goes cold.

'Why won't you allow me to love you? We could start a whole new life together and forget about everybody else'

'What about your wife?'

'You need to forget about Kurhula the same way I have forgotten about her. I cannot stop thinking about you, Kuli. Every minute of each day. I tried to ignore this at first but you're just too much of an enigma to ignore. Your charisma and your aura are just—'

I cannot listen to this.

'Cut this nonsense and take me home! I am never going to be yours and I can never leave Kurhula for you. He communicated his feelings to me like a normal person. He's ten times of a man than you could ever—'

I feel a burning slap thrashing me to the floor. It leaves me lying there, balancing on my elbow, with my jaw hanging. My palm slowly reaches for the sensitized area. Never in my life. Ever. I have never had anybody lay their hand on me, including my own father. I swear, this did not just happen. The shocking thing is that he looks just as dazed as me. He crouches down and I shift away when his hand

approaches.

'I don't know what just happened here. I am terribly sorry love'

The tears are burning my ducts but I'm adamant on never releasing them. They prove to be more powerful than my pride and eventually drop. I am still speechless.

'Kulani...'

I shake my head and slither away on my behind. We need some distance between us.

'I am sorry! That wasn't supposed to happen. It was a stupid mistake. I would never hurt you like that on purpose. Please trust me?'

My head is still pounding from that fall down the stairs and all of this is not helping. I can feel my appetite leaving me. My body has this weird thing it does when I am terrified. It makes me concentrate on my blood flow. I can literally feel my blood rushing down my veins. It's a cold and uncomfortable feeling I am not quite fond of. I can't hear him anymore. He is speaking. I can see that he's speaking but I cannot hear him anymore.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 17

[KULANI]

He left. After that maddening slap, I looked at him until shame engulfed him whole. How dare he put his filthy hands on me? I am looking myself in the mirror. With these plasters and a red eye, I look like I just exited a boxing ring, straight from a match I just lost. I am trying to calm myself down but I keep breathing out fire. I scoff. Honestly... how dare he? There's a vibe about him that I do not quite get. When I first met this person, he had a lovable and friendly presence. Right now, he carries this inexplicable dark energy about him that I can't quite place my finger on. My stomach grumbles and I remember that I haven't eaten. I have completely lost my appetite but I need to eat. The chicken is probably cold by now. I leave the bathroom and go lie on the floor, next to the bed. I need the coldness of the tiles against my skin. My heart is sore and connecting with the ground is the only thing that makes sense right now. What I'm not going to do is cry. There's this feeling of loneliness and isolation that insists on keeping me company. My pregnancy revelation comes back to me. I am upset because I can't quite remember everything else that happened in that dream. I have this thing of knowing that I dreamt of something but still be able unable to know what it was exactly. I remember

seeing AK's face though.

He's here. I can tell by the sudden coldness breezing against my skin and the smell of tobacco. I can't see him but I can tell he's on my right. Focus, Mandilakhe, focus. I urge myself to relax because all I'm receiving is that persistent ringing sound in my ear. I am too angry to even hear what he's saying. This is what I have learnt: I will not hear a word when there's chaos in my spirit. I am trying to muster some serene energy as I continue to lie on the floor. It is comforting to know that I am not by myself in here. I can't help the defeated smile on my face. Now the tears come pouring out. The urge to cry is so intense and I have no idea where it is coming from. Lord, I am so upset yoh! My feet are heavy and hot. I feel like putting them against the wall. It always feels like I'm draining blood from my soles when I place them upside down and that always provides some sort of relief. The thing is, I cannot get myself to get up from here right now.

I don't know how I ended up asleep but it was a short nap. I laugh when I realize that Kokwan' Mavengana hypnotized me into deep sleep when I failed to calm myself down. It must be that thing he's always smoking from that pipe.

The information he left me with replaces my anger with absolute shock. I knew that there was something off balance with Mhan Xongi but I decided not to take it seriously. How do you feed your own son a love potion? Wait, how does my little sister feature in all of this? I should've cleansed my system the moment I had the chance. I am finding it difficult to retain dreams and make sense of spiritual data. It is beginning to mess me up. Anyway, this doesn't change the fact that I still hate Fikani. I feel it is unfair that when people hurt us, we are expected to turn a blind eye to that because we know better. We are also expected to be empathetic towards them while all they do is inflict pain unto us. Guides don't care and they have no time to nurse one's feelings. I am realizing now that I am emotionally exhausted. This journey is slowly sucking all the joy out of me. As I sit here, I can literally feel myself spiralling backwards. My depressive episodes are making a comeback and I am going to do absolutely nothing about them. I pull the paper bag towards me and start eating. The food is cold, as reasonably expected.

The door unlocks and Fikani walks in with caution. Was he expecting to find me behind the door, ready to pounce? He did well by not leaving any weapon for me to use in here. Wait, this thought triggers an idea. I could get a weapon if I

am serious about it. That mirror on the bathroom cupboard? I will think about this carefully when he leaves. He doesn't know me. The thing about spending all years as a depressed introvert is that you live in your head a lot, making up scenarios. There's a lot of crazy thoughts involved. I have always wondered if it would be easier to die by directly stabbing into my heart with a sharp knife or if I should go throw myself in a dam. Funnily enough, in as much as I would sometimes wish to mistakenly catch a bullet by being at the wrong place at the wrong time, I would equally wonder how I'd defend myself if I happened to be in danger in the hands of a man. This for me is quite normal, considering the country I live in. South Africa is synonymous to hell's kitchen.

He comes to sit in front of me and takes out a chip from my food. I don't raise my face. I continue chewing on my cold chicken thigh. Rhandzu abhors this fried skin but I feel like the meat would be nothing without it. It's literally the only source of flavour here.

'Would you believe me I told you that I've never laid my hand on a woman before?' he finally speaks. So I'm the easy target that I had to be his first victim? Human beings exhaust me. Most of my interactions with people involve

being used and abused in some way or the other. This one has went too far. I remember a point where I felt like there was no distinction between him and Kurhula. I can clearly see the differences now. I don't know if the influence comes from this crisp hatred I have developed for Fikani.

'You will learn to trust me because what happened here is never happening again'

I am still silent.

'We leave tomorrow via the SA-Zim border'

I raise my face without giving it a thought. Leave to where?

'I would simply organize airplane tickets but I don't trust you to behave at the airport. I'll go get you some clothes and toiletries in the morning'

God will have to forgive me twice for what I'm about to do to this man. If I don't act, I will find myself trapped with this psycho, probably for life.

...

I hear him leaving in the morning. I pretended to be asleep so I wouldn't wake up late. When I heard his breathing

change as evidence of his drift to unconsciousness, I sat up and hugged my knees. Anxiety was gripping me by the throat. Some evil is for a good cause, I continuously tried to convince myself. When the sun came out, I went back to pretending that I was sleeping. He doesn't bother waking me up. After some time, when I'm almost sure that he is gone, I get up from the bed. I stride into the bathroom and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. If I give myself the chance to overthink this, it will end up a failed mission. I pull off my pyjama top and wrap it around my fist. I hope the pain that might come with this won't be unbearable. I am standing here with my boobs exposed. I am only noticing now how full they look. They resemble my period boobs. The only difference is, I am not menstruating right now. Three, two, one...

I attempt to smash into the mirror with my teeth tightly locked. It doesn't break. I have to repeat this?

Three, two, one...

I exert twice the effort and it comes crashing down. My knuckles are complaining, with good reason. After making sure that there's no glass pieces on my sleeping t-shirt, I put it back on. I pick up the longest and thinnest piece from the shattered mirror, careful not to cut myself. How am I even going to execute this? This place is about to be

a crime scene.

I sit on the bed and wait, with my improvised weapon on my right side. The door is on the left. I wait, and wait, and wait until I get fed up. Where is he? I am getting cold feet. If this doesn't go according to plan, I am dead woman. This person is multiple times stronger than me. No questions asked there. I need to be smart and agile in my movements. After one full leap year, I begin hearing footsteps. I am not an actress but this performance I'm about to pull needs to be Oscar worthy for it to be convincing. I start fake crying when I hear the key turning. If he loves me as much as he says he does, I will spark the reaction that I am looking for. He walks in and finds me an emotional mess. Both my hands are closely beside my thighs. I am likely going to cut myself when I pull this mirror knife out but casualties arise in every war so I accept my fate.

'Kuli, did something happen here while I was gone?' he takes quick steps towards where I am seated. He squats in front of me – waiting for me to explain why I'm crying.

'Is it... you know? What happened between us?' he continues to question. 'Please talk to me'

Don't overthink this. Don't overthink this. Do not overthink yourself out of this. His worst mistake was briefly looking down as he sighed. I stab him on the side of his neck and instant regret flushes over me. I did say I was gonna cut myself.

'Kuli...' he lowly groans – clearly in agonizingly painful circumstances. The look on his face is off utter disbelief. It is in this moment where I remember that in the blurry haze of my dreams, I once saw a jail cell. I immediately run out. I keep looking back even though I know he has no chance of running after me. This is no horror movie. He is too hurt to function, I hope so. Well I don't but I do. I tear the one leg of my pants when it keeps rubbing against my open wound, causing me more pain. My thigh is dripping blood and I am leaving it everywhere along these corridors. My pants are torn but for as long as I cannot see white flesh, I am fine. I was right. There are some renovations going on here. The smell of cement on this floor is unavoidable.

I am out in the sun, finally. I need to find a phone. Fikani needs an ambulance. The aim was not for him to die. I just needed to get away from him. I see a security guard by the gate and instant relief covers me whole. I stop in my tracks. What if they're working together? At this point, I

have to gamble with my chances. It doesn't look like there's anybody else here. He approaches me when he sees me limping towards him.

'Hawu, my sister? Where are you coming from?'

I swallow and empty my mouth. I am exhausted.

'Please call an ambulance. Somebody is dying in there' I point.

'Fikani? I thought he said he was here to check on the progress?'

'Ambulance!' I lose it and balance my weight on my knees. He almost jumps out of his skin and takes out his phone. I did not mean to shout like that. I would give away all my designer bags for this headache to leave me alone.

After waiting for about ten minutes, the emergency people arrive. If this happened at home, they were going to get here at 3pm when the forensic pathologists would've long come, taken the body and left. They ask where to head and I show them the building while I sit in the small security house. When they ask which floor, I simply tell them to follow the trail of my blood. I had no opportunity to be counting floors and I am not going back in there. They later come back with him on a stretcher. I have been



praying all this time I've been sitting here. I want nobody's blood on my hands. The security guard's name is Mduduzi and he's kind enough to borrow me his phone. I don't know Kurhula's numbers by heart so I call my father instead. Mdu asks which hospital they're taking him to while I wait for my dad to answer.

'Baloyi here?'

'Daddy...'

'My angel?' I can tell by the sound of his voice that he's in a meeting. I know my dad backwards. I am back to crying once again.

'Kulani, what's wrong?'

I can just imagine that frown on his face. This is why I barely tell him when I'm going through things. He's now ready to set everything ablaze.

'Where are you?' I ask and wipe my tears.

'I am in Limpopo. I told you I would be meeting up with Moima soon. You haven't told me what the problem is'

I explain everything from start to finish and the first thing he asks is what had swallowed Kurhula when all of this was happening. It's really not his fault. I left out the part about potions and all. That would've been a pretty long

story.

'Give me one second to call this boy' he cuts the call before I can reply. This is not going to end well.

'I couldn't help but eavesdrop. I'm sorry' Mdu says and I just shrug with a weak smile. 'This is hectic. So you're caught between two brothers? Twin brothers?'

'Not really. This other one is just... psycho' I say, in lack of a better word.

'But he's always seemed to be cool gent to me. A generous and kind grootman'

I hand him his phone. I have no energy to speak. It rings the moment he takes it. He hands it back to me, claiming that he's sure that the number is not looking for him. I tell him to answer it. I am emotionally withdrawing, and fast. I wish I can find a quiet corner and hide myself there for a while until I recover. My heart is drumming out of control.

...

It doesn't take him long before I see his car speeding towards us. He parks abruptly and comes out rushing towards me.

'Heyy!' he coarsely greets in a low and gentle tone before pulling me into a tight hug. I wanted to lay on his chest a little longer but he pushes me back and holds me by the shoulders.

'Tell me I'm hallucinating...' he says with a lifted brow. He lifts my chin and scrutinizes my face.

'Don't pay any mind to—'

He laughs. I don't like the sound of this. He stands back and looks up. His face comes down with a heavy breath. I wrapped my thigh wound with the leg I tore off. Mdu gave me a blanket to wrap myself with. Probably the one he uses while on nightshift. That's if it's even his.

'Pay no mind? Have you seen your fvcking face???'

Kurhula cusses, a lot. If there's one thing I could change about him, it's this fact.

'Ntayidlaya mbuti leyi. He's not coming out of that hospital alive' (I am killing this goat) he swears. 'Let's go'

I limp to the car and he stops walking. He is trying to regulate his breathing.

'Kulani, what exactly did this motherfvcker do to you?'

I can tell what he is thinking. 'It didn't get that far. I cut myself here, that's why I'm limping'

He puckers his lips and nods. It is not of understanding, approval, or anything positive. I don't need anymore drama.

The police. I freeze when I see them parking outside the gate. They are here with Boitumelo. Kurhula's hand reaches for me and he attempts to hide me behind him. I am going to jail.

'I thought you said you were on your way to the hospital?' Kurhula says to her. The look she's directing to me could easily obliterate a bird in flight.

'Is this her?' the officer asks.

'Yes cuzzy' Boitumelo agrees.

'Kulani Ngobeni, you are now arrested for the attempted murder of Fikani Masiya. You have the right to remain—'

Kurhula blocks his way to me.

'On what grounds are you arresting my wife?'

'Sir, please I am just doing my job' he continues trying to reach for me.

'By your job you mean an unlawful arrest? Do you even have a warrant?' Kurhula continues to question.

'Every question you have, will be discussed at the station or in front of the magistrate if you may'

Kurhula laughs. 'Bra, do you have any idea who you're talking to? I will sue you until this stupid cousin of yours morphs into a complete stranger. You are going nowhere with Kulani'

Boitumelo looks at the police officer the drags him to some distance away from us. I wonder what they are discussing.

'Let me just go with them'

'You are going nowhere, and you're not guilty. Do you understand me?'

'What do you mean I'm not—'

'I'm gonna get you out of this and I'm gonna make sure that Fikani reunites with his ancestors, whoever the fvck they are'

That is exactly what he's not going to do. The other officer steps forward and tells Kurhula to stop wasting their time.

I hold both his cheeks and force a smile.

'I'm gonna be fine. Trust me...'

He sighs. He knows better but he's acting out of anger right now. Blocking them away from me will not help my case in any way.

'Let me make a couple of phone calls. You will be out of there later today, I promise you'

He pulls me by the head and kisses my forehead. His lips stay pressed against my skull for some time while I wrap my hands around him.

'And leave Fikani alone' I warn.

'I'm gonna come get you, okay?' he completely ignores me. He blatantly refuses for me to be cuffed and the officers luckily listen. I can't imagine the discomfort. I get into the back of the van and laugh internally. If I don't laugh, I am definitely going to cry. Me? At the back of police van? What a nasty tada.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 18

[KULANI]

After seeing more blood-chilling things during my nap in jail, I decided I was going to tell Kurhula everything when he came to fetch me. The matter didn't even make it to court like I was promised it would. After walking out of the station, I get in the car and wait for him. He's still outside, talking on the phone. He steps in and reaches for a plastic

from the back.

'You must be starving' he says as he hands it to me. He's right. I receive it and find rice, beef stew and cabbage. These look mouth-mouthing.

'Thank you'

His mood is down. There is something on his mind and I won't ask right now what it is. I have this toxic thing of wanting to avoid being burdened with other people's emotions. They tend to get emotionally harmful for me but I am gonna ask him, just not now. I suspect that it is the fact that I refused to open a case against Fikani. After fifteen minutes on the road, he parks in front of a doctor's office.

'Take your time. We'll go in once you're done' he states and unbuckles his seat belt. He should've warned me. I need a shower and I don't like how musky I feel. I have been sweating and I'm carrying around dead skin and grease. I eventually finish my food and wash it down with the can of Sprite. It's luckily still cold. I catch him with a subtle smile on his face.

'What?' I shrug.

'Nothing. Can we go?'

He hands me his trackpants and hoodie, along with his

size nine slides. I'm a size four! Everything looks big on me and I look sketchy. I raise my arms and laugh. He smiles and asks what I'm laughing at. He knows damn well what I'm laughing at.

'You look adorable, Dora'

'You should've at least given me the opportunity to shower' I complain and he laughs.

'There's no time for that. You're fine'

He holds my hand as we walk in. We greet the receptionist and Kurhula is the one to fill in the forms. There's another lady in front of us so we're clearly gonna wait. Kurhula rubs my palm and tells me to relax.

'I am relaxed'

'You're tapping your foot nonstop' he notes. I stop. He's right. I am feeling quite apprehensive. 'Nothing is ever going to happen to you ever again, not while I'm still alive'

'Where is he?' I ask.

'Still at the hospital'

'Please tell me you haven't done anything stupid?'

He sighs.

'Kurhula! This was not his fault. It hurts me to say this

because I can't blame him now but it really wasn't'

He frowns. The receptionist is busy stealing glances at us behind her spectacles. Kurhula notices this when I stare at her and she looks away. I get up and ask him to follow me. We go outside and stand next to the large pot plant situated at a corner. I could never understand the need for doctors to make their surgeries look like homes. This looks like somebody's house but I disregard this thought. He is waiting for me to speak. I try and gather my thoughts in a comprehensible sequence. My head is spinning all over the place right now.

'How are you defending that son of a bxtch?'

By this b word, he's referring to his own mother?

'I am not defending him. You know that I see things, right?'

He doesn't respond. He's still looking forward to me explaining myself.

'You are not going to like this but... Mhan Xongi and Aunt Fanisa are behind all of this. I'm not sure how Uncle Sol features but yeah... his face showed up'

'I did say that they were working with him'

'No, no. You don't understand. They concocted a potion and gave it to him, that's why he's behaving the way he is'

'Are you sure you're interpreting this the right way? You have a bruise on your forehead. You probably have a concussion'

I laugh. I hate him.

'Baby vona, I hear you neh? But there is always a wild story about a man being bewitched when he abuses a woman and even kills her. Black people never want to take accountability in this regard and this blame shifting is sickening. I quite frankly do not care what had influenced him to bludgeon you in this manner. He is going to pay. I just want him to recover first because I don't kick a man when he's down. It becomes way too easy and right now, it will be a sloppy move'

'You are not going to touch him. That's your twin brother' I argue.

'More reason why I should award him with a violent massage. I'm gonna mash him until all his joints get disconnected. His bones will turn to mash. WATCH'

I pull him back when he wants to walk away'

'Uhm... sorry to interrupt but you may come in' the receptionist informs before I can say another word. We walk in and straight to the doctors office. The first thing he does is check my eyes. My eye is still red and painful.

'What happened here?' he asks, pointing at the wound on my forehead.

'I fell down the stairs' I say in truth and he gives Kurhula a suspicious look. The doctor sighs and asks Kurhula to excuse us.

'I'm going nowhere' he's adamant to stay.

'Baby please...' I plead with him. I want to leave this office and go sleep on a comfortable bed. The sooner this is done, the better. He leaves and Dr Stein looks me in the eye. He pulls his stethoscope off his neck and sits on the bed with me.

'Kuli, I want you to know that this is a safe space' he assures. I nod.

'What happened to your eye and forehead?'

'What you're thinking is incorrect, partially'

'Tell me what happened then'

'I fell and—'

'Tell me the truth' he insists.

'I will if you would just let me finish'

'I'm sorry. I just get so upset when women defend their husbands over these things'

'I fell. This is what happened here' I point at the wound.
'And here, his brother hit me. It wasn't my husband who did this'

'Why would his brother do something like that?'

'He had abducted me, but I managed to escape. Now that that's out of the way, can we finish up here and check if my baby is okay?'

He's very sceptical but he does what I tell him to.

...

'He thought you're the one who did all of this to me' I inform as I pull my safety belt.

'Thought as much. See why this whole thing is pissing me off? From a very young age, I vowed to myself that I would never do something this beastly. I have every intention of treating you right and that includes setting the record straight when a random stranger walks into your life thinking they can do whatever' he doesn't stop to breathe as he speaks.

'As I said...'

'No such thing as this not being his fault, potion or no potion. If you have it in you to be an abuser, it will come out with the right trigger'

I want to stay angry at Fikani. My human nature wants him to take all the blame for this but I'm not allowed to feel like that. Mavengana sees them both as his boys and is putting zero blame on the person who did this to me.

The doctor put some dressing on my thigh wound and gave me some ointment to apply on it to treat the infection.

'The baby is fine' I inform and hand him the ultrasound image, trying to dilute the mood in this car. He raises his face and looks at me. 'You won't really see anything at this stage but here'

He receives it with a child-like smile.

'Can they tell what gender it is at this stage?'

I laugh.

'No'

'Don't blame me for asking. I wasn't afforded the chance to be there during the pregnancy with AK so...' he says, still admiring the picture. I have no idea what he's looking at there because there's literally nothing to see. He takes my hand and kisses it.

'How are you feeling?' he asks. I stop and think.

'I don't know. I'm just... sad I guess'

'I'm sorry' he whispers.

'How are you feeling?' I return.

'Like I've failed you'

'You haven't. I was expecting that you'd take the whole day to come get here but you arrived in a short space of time. That shows the effort you were putting into finding me so, thank you for that'

'I have his phone with me' he randomly mentions.

'Fikani's phone?'

He nods. 'Found it at his house. His wife doesn't know that I took it though'

'Did you go through it?'

He starts the car and doesn't reply.

'What did you find?'

'A shxtload of your pictures. One from my status update, the rest from your socials'

This is why people keep their accounts private.

'This is crazy. All of this is such a top level of insane. One

moment you're living your life as normal, the next, you're told you have a twin. A twin who turns your life upside down before you can even blink'

His tone of voice is dark.

'If you touch him, I am gonna leave you' I threaten. He glances at me, sniffs, and looks away. What has already happened is enough. I am one incident away from running mad. I swear to God...

...

I wish I could stay in that hotel room a little longer but we had to go back home. Three days of being pampered wasn't going to make my responsibilities go away. Junior informed us that Xongi went to see Fikani at the hospital. My dad told Kurhula to bring me straight to his house but I told him not to. My job here is not done. When he agreed to marry me off, he should've taken it to mind he was handing me to complete strangers. Well, to him they're not but I knew nothing of them. I need to hear HER's voice while I take my long bath.

'Sho. I need you to do something for me very quick. We'll discuss your fee later'

I hear him speak on the phone and I listen attentively, with my hand in the salt jar.

'Organize a mob for me and head straight to Fanisa's house, do you understand me? I need that witch roasted before the end of this night'

'Yes she's a witch. Go turn her house upside down if you don't believe me'

I stand up straight. What the hell is Kurhula doing? I walk out of the bathroom.

'Yes, Fanisa my aunt,. Which other Fanisa do you know?'

I take the phone from him and cut the call.

'Baby what are you doing?'

'Kulani, you can let this go if you want but you'll have to forgive me because I can't'

He takes the phone from me.

'Please call whoever this is and put an end to this. I am begging you'

'You won't last long on this planet if you carry on with this Samaritan attitude. When people serve you shxt, you send it back to them. Ni Mlambya ku nyela meh, a ndzi nyeriwe'

I grab the car keys and he catches me when I attempt to

walk out.

'Where are you going?'

'To the police. They have to end this before it starts'

'You are not getting involved this'

'Watch me!'

'Kulani I am not saying this again!' he snaps. How dare he speak to me like that? I simply look at him, trying my best to push back the tears. He drops his chest and lets out a loud sigh. He gently pulls me towards him and hugs my head.

'Don't cry. I'm sorry. I did not mean to yell at you'

I'm still quiet.

'You're still not going anywhere. You're pregnant and mobs are a risky business. I don't want you anywhere near the violence when it erupts'

'This is not the way to solve this. You're gonna cause more problems for us'

'These people have been getting away with too much for far too long. The things you tell me about them are not surprising, at all. Especially this Fanisa character. I've had my suspicions before I always talked myself out of them

because there was no proof nor confirmation. I wish they get there and burn that snake she keeps in her house along with its owner'

A snake?

'Do it for me then...'

'Don't do that. Don't use emotional blackmail on me because it's not gonna work. Not in this case. Fanisa dies and she dies today'

...

'AHUMI NOYI LOYI! AHUMI!!!' (This witch must come out)

'AHUMI!!!'

The loud voices and violent chants sound outside of Fanisa's yard. Musa moves the curtain slightly and almost has a heart attack when she sees that the people holding wooden fire torches and a tire are indeed in front of their gate.

'We have said it time and time again that we will no longer be tolerating witchcraft in this village!' the leader yells from the top of his lungs. The people continue singing,

baying for blood and ready to have Fanisa's head on a stick.

'It is time we put an end to the rumours and stop this nonsense. Why are you all afraid of this woman? Because she's royalty? No she has to go!'

'Mom, you have to hide' Musa pulls her mother and Fanisa is stubborn.

'I will do no such thing. I have already called the police' she states and continues to anxiously stand in the middle of the kitchen.

Mixo and her mother finally arrive – hyperventilating from all the running they have been doing. The news had spread and people were pouring in. They stand at a distance like some of the people who like experiencing things but are hindered by their nature of being cowards. They stand at a steep hill, watching this mess. Fanisa's gate falls down and they scatter throughout the yard. Some pour into the house and others into her hut at the back.

'Solomon, make your way here. The community is about to hurt Fanisa' Singi informs through the phone, blocking her other ear so she could hear him properly.

'Eh. So you think I can fight an entire community by myself? You want them to burn me too? Woman please, you are

disturbing me. I am having supper' he cuts the call and Masingita is left appalled.

'Do you think they will do it?' Mixo asks Mhan Singi.

'You've never seen a mob at work, have you? This won't be the first nor the second time a witch is burnt in this village'

'It serves her right though' Mixo mentions and Singi nudges her painfully.

'No. This woman is the reason why my life wasn't making sense. After seeing that prophet Kulani took me to, I got two interview invitations the following morning and I no longer stink. Can you see that the pimples on my face are also fading?'

'It's in the past. Let it go'

'I'm not going to do that. What kind of a parent are you? Not once did you mention that I should go see someone. You just sit back and allow things to fall apart. You're very weak as a mother and I wish—'

A burning slap sends her straight to the sky and she collides with a couple of stars. The people standing next to them start asking each other questions. Singi clucks and marches off, leaving her daughter there. Mixo wipes her tears and continues waiting for the braai show to start. Three men come out of the house holding Fanisa. Another

one puts a tire over her neck and they continue dragging her as she walks reluctantly.

Mixo follows the mass of people following the men down the street. Fanisa is thrown to the ground, has her limbs tied and people watch as a 5-litre bottle of petrol is emptied on top of her.

'I am begging you people. Whatever you've heard, it is not true!'

The men who were in her hut come out with old clothes that clearly belong to different people, including underwear. The others come out holding voodoo dolls and bottles containing unidentified liquids. They throw these things on top of her.

'What are these then if you're not a witch???'

'Why are we still talking vanhu va Hosi? SET HER ALIGHT?'

'I am not a witch' Fanisa cries even louder.

'Witnesses?'

'She's my neighbour. I know her very well. I have seen her sprinkling things on my gate one time. I was just too strong for her so she couldn't succeed' one woman states.

'What witnesses nah? Everybody knows that Fanisa is a witch!'

'I saw Mixo here. Where is she???' a bold and angry voice asks. She's dragged to the front and goes to stand next to the man with a torch in his hand.

'Is this your aunt?' he asks. She nods.

'Do you think she should be burned?' She looks behind her to see the man speaking in a calm tone. She hesitates to answer. She glances at Fanisa and finds her looking at her, with that face she's always been afraid of. She swallows.

'Yes, burn her'

'Ijaaa!!' people agree in unison.

'Why?'

'I am one of the people whose lives she has ruined. She deserves to burn'

'There you have it'

'SHE MUST BURN!'

Fanisa screams heartbreakingly when they set her alight. Mixo cries at the sight of this bundle of flames and runs away. Police sirens sound from a distance and the people immediately scatter, some leaving their wood torches behind.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 19

[KULANI]

Kurhula's voice becomes clearer the more he shakes me out of sleep. At some point, I thought I was dreaming whereas he was actually calling my name. We weren't on good terms when we went to bed last night because what he did was plainly horrible. The update we got is that Aunty Fanisa has been hospitalized and she apparently doesn't look too good. I had planned to go see her in the morning.

'Musa is a mess and she's demanding to see you. I tried sending her away but she just cannot stop crying' Kurhula informs. He doesn't seem pleased with this.

'What time is it?' I ask before I yawn. I am exhausted and I was actually enjoying my sleep. For once, I wasn't dreaming of anything. Just plain darkness. My mind was off and this is my favourite kind of sleep. Why would Musa want to see me of all people?

'It's 4am'

I get out of bed and wear his slippers. I tie the gown as I walk out, following him.

'Musa, what's wrong?' I ask. She's sitting in front of the couch and crying her throat dry.

'I need your help ses'Kuli' she states and stares at me anxiously. I don't know if it's just my trust issues but I already have a bad feeling about this. The voice in my head tells me I'm obligated to listen to what she says. It reiterates and tells me that I cannot be picky with who I help. Junior is just sitting there in his pyjamas, watching her break down. He is noticeably annoyed. In the next life, we should be able to pick family. A part of me feels like Musa is nothing like her mother. I don't know.

'Let's go to the kitchen. You need some water' I offer and turn away.

'Will you be okay?' Kurhula asks. I am in the house. I am fine. I noticed that he was holding me a bit tighter than usual before I slept last night. He is paranoid but I don't blame him. I am too. Musa follows me and I get her a glass of sugar water. She drinks it up and I offer her a seat. I will stand.

'What's wrong?'

'I can't sleep in that house and Uncle Sol is not answering my calls I am prepared to tell you everything' she speaks without pause.

'I hope this doesn't come across as rude but why did you come to me, Musa?'

She shrugs innocently.

'I don't know. I just felt like you're the only person I needed to speak to. Plus, my mom is afraid of you. She might not say it but I know she is'

I laugh.

'Fanisa? Afraid of me?'

'Exactly. She is not afraid of anybody but she is always speaking about how powerful you think you are and this deprives her of sleep'

I have never claimed to be powerful in my life. In fact, I am the weakest person I know.

'I don't want these things ses'Kuli. They're burdensome. I don't want any of these things' she continues to cry.

'What things?' I soften my voice. This is serious.

'She sends me to do her dirty work for her. I remember her cutting my wrist and rubbing some herbs onto the wound. I have never been the same since that day. Everything she says, I do. I can't stand up to her. She's always saying some of these things are for my own benefit. Can I tell you that I don't study but I am always getting high marks? She

has taught me how to use my classmates' intelligence to get ahead. I don't like that but I just cannot stop'

I get chills down my spine. My shoulders get heavy. I burp and rub my chest. I feel like a bubble is stuck there and is failing to pop.

'You're meant to be a prophet. That's why all of this is messing you up' I tell her what I see. She frowns.

'I am meant to be what?'

'A prophet. However, your mother saw this while you were still young and captured this gift for herself. That's why she can see people's futures and stand ahead of them'

Musa is messing me up right now. Some of the images are hazy. I can't see properly and it's causing me pain. Kurhula comes in running when I yell and crash on my knees.

'What's wrong?' Musa asks.

'Eish, I think it's time for you to leave' I hear him saying this to her.

'Leave to where? I can't go back to that house'

I rub my palms and plead with them to go easy on me. I can't help her in this state. I am transitioning unsuccessfully and it's unbearable. Somebody wants to

take over and I have no idea who they are. The only thing I am certain of is that it's an old woman. I eventually manage to calm down and when I open my eyes, I find them still staring at me.

'You're not telling me everything Musa' I say and get up. I am completely fine now. Kurhula frowns at this swift change of attitude and behaviour. He'll get used to it. I ask him to leave because Musa and I aren't done. She swallows and looks at me with widened eyes. I stare back. She better start talking.

'What chased you out of your mother's house?'

'I couldn't do it. I don't know how she does it'

'What?'

'Khevetlane. This weekend, somebody was supposed to die. It wants blood and I have no idea where to get it'

This must be the snake. I am surprisingly not freaked out by this.

'Tell me more. It doesn't stop there. I am getting the name Maxwell. Who is he?'

She sips on her water.

'So... if night he comes back from work and every morning he goes to catch the 3am bus. He lives at home, in my

mother's hut'

Chills again.

'According to his family, he died four years ago. What they don't know is that his salary goes to my mother every month'

I frown. 'How is he getting a salary when he's dead?'

'He works in Gauteng. He is still a registered employee in his company. Maxwell is a zombie ses'Kuli'

My heart falls to the cold pit of my stomach.

'Tell me something. If you don't feed this creature, what happens?'

'It will eat me like it ate Ntsako'

'Who is that?'

'Mixo's sister. Mhan Masingita's second child. I really tried to save her, but mom was adamant on feeding her to it. I can still hear her screams. She haunts me in my sleep'

Lord, can it actually get worse than this?

...

Xongi carefully closes the door when she's sure that nobody is coming towards Fikani's hospital room. She takes careful steps as reaches into the pocket of her dress, taking out the 'antidote'. She twists the small bottle open and gets Fikani to open his mouth in his unconscious state. She manages to get some of it in and begs him to swallow, getting anxious when some of liquid spills out.

'This should get you back to normal. Magezi promised that it would' she assures while wiping his lower face. Some of it gets absorbed into his beard. She releases a deep sigh while watching him lay there – hooked to machines.

'Please don't die on me. I made a terrible mistake. If I could turn back the hands of time, I would'

Her phone rings mid-apology and she frowns when she sees that Solomon is trying to reach her for the third time.

'What does this monkey want?' she complains under her breath before getting the call.

'Solomon?'

'Why are you not picking up the phone? We have been trying to reach you!'

'Please get to the point?'

'You're adopting Kurhula's disrespectful habits I see. Your

sister-in-law has been hospitalized' he informs.

'Lydia?'

'I wish. Fanisa. She was burnt by the community last night. Luckily, the police got there in time'

Her heart forgets to beat for a second.

'Did they mention what they were burning her for?'

Solomon cuts the call. Tumi walks into the room with a basket of fruit and a bouquet of flowers.

'Oh hey ma!' she happily greets. Xongi fakes a smile.

'Hi' she greets back. Tumi is in a hurry to put her bag down along with all the goods she brought – prompted by her burning bladder.

'Please give me a minute and I'll be back'

Xongi nods and she runs out in her heels.

'I tend to wonder what you saw here to be quite honest. It's like all my sons have been cursed with a faulty eye when it comes to women. If it's not you marrying this garrulous character, it's Kurhula bringing us absolute destruction on legs. Well, it's our fault because we didn't know the kind of person she is but he had no business falling in love with that witch' she states, trying to convince herself that Kuli is

not the one for her beloved son.

Fikani wakes up hours later when the two have left. He wakes to his doctor checking his vitals.

'Look who's up?' she continues scribbling down on her board. Fikani coughs.

'Hh...hey' his voice is rough.

'Okay let's try not to speak, okay?' the young doctor urges and fixes his pillow. She hands him some water and makes sure he drinks up.

'Can I see your eyes on bit?' she quickly directs the light both his lenses. 'Okay'

'Kuli...' he mentions.

'Pardon?'

He tries to clear his throat with difficulty.

'Kuli. Where is she?'

'Uhm... I am not certain if... your wife?'

He shakes his head.

'I have no idea who you're referring to, I'm sorry' she politely says. 'You got very lucky hey. The person who stabbed you missed your important arteries by almost nothing. I usually expect such luck from us oStufuza

because our fat protects us from a helluva lot' she jokes.
He lightly laughs.

'I guess...' he hoarsely agrees.

'Just joking. Are you ready to speak to the police?'

'I won't be speaking to any'

'You're not interested in opening a case?'

He goes quiet and she shrugs. 'Okay then. I will not be asking what happened right now because I need you to get some rest. Please swallow for me and tell me how you feel'

He does as told, with difficulty.

'Painful'

'Understandable. Try to rotate your neck gently. Please, do it as gently as possible'

He does exactly that. She's satisfied with the rotation, weak as it is.

'I have a lot of hope in you. You're recovering well' she remarks before leaving and he smiles, still wondering about Kulani's whereabouts. At the same time, he oddly remembers his friend's words after the thick doctor has left the room.

...

Baloyi is welcomed into the Ngobeni household along with his bodyguards. Kurhula gives up his seat for him and opts for the next one. They greet one another and sit around the table – joined by Uncle Wiseman and Albert.

‘Gentleman. I am not here to take up much of your time. I had to cancel important obligations to come fetch my daughter’

Kurhula lifts a brow but quickly collects his countenance. He keeps quiet like Wiseman had advised him to.

‘I don’t think I understand’ Albert mentions.

‘I thought I was leaving her in capable hands. She cannot be calling me from that far, from a stranger’s phone, stranded in the middle of nowhere!’

‘What happened here was very unfortunate, agreed. But you cannot put the blame on anybody’ Wiseman calmly responds.

‘Please call her for me’ Baloyi commands. Kurhula gets up and fetches her from the bedroom.

'What is he saying?' Kuli asks while wrapping her head.
Kurahula sighs.

'He wants to take you back home'

Kulani frowns disapprovingly.

'I'll fix this, I promise' Kurahula assures before raises her face and kissing her lips. He holds her hand and they leave the room. Baloyi gets up when Kuli approaches and opens his arms wide so she can fall in them.

'Hi my angel'

'Hey daddy'

She grabs the reed mat and takes a seat. Her father continues to study her face.

'You say I cannot put the blame on anybody but look at her face? Kurahula, do you understand that this is an egg?'

Kurahula accumulates some calm.

'I completely understand. Just for the record, I did not do any of this. I would never'

'I asked you a question, boy. Do you understand that this is an egg? I carefully placed it in your hands. You disappointed me by letting it fall. Your father must be equally saddened as well'

Kuli sees Kurhula's fists tightening as he stares at the empty chair across him. She knew the effect that name had on him. She felt like telling her own father that the Edward he's speaking highly of was not the man he thinks he was. She keeps her eyes on him until he turns and meets them – still listening to Baloyi scolding him harshly. She tries her best to communicate with him through eye contact, telling him to calm down. She relaxes when he rubs his hands and wipes the underpart of his nose. She was sure that he was now calm.

'I am taking her home with me and when you're ready to properly apologize, you will come get her. Your apology needs to have a hump, a Bonsmara. For now, the princess needs to come back home'

Kurhula bites into his lower lip and nods. Kuli is appalled.

'No dad...' she argues.

'Kulani...' her father tries to quieten her. 'You were abducted from a royal house, with security at the gate. That could have never happened at home'

'All of this began when my underwear was stolen from the very home you speak of. I mean no disrespect but the first time the negotiations were announced to me, it was clearly stated that I had no choice. Now that I have finally

accepted my fate, you want to uproot me again? How is this fair?’

‘Maybe I made a mistake, and for that I am sorry’

‘It is too late now. Your mistake actually linked me to the love of my life. Kurhula is the only man for me and I am going nowhere if it’s not with him’ the tears fall as her voice trembles.

‘This man is still your father. Please don’t forget that’ Wiseman urges.

‘She will find me in the car’ Baloyi states and leaves the house. Kurhula gets up and goes to squat in front of her.

‘Baby listen...’ he wipes her tears. Kulani shakes her head. He looks back to his uncles and urges her to get up. He takes her by the hand and they walk out through the kitchen door. ‘Look at me Kulani’

She continues looking away, with tears still cascading down her cheeks.

‘Mbilu ya Kurhula...?’

She forces herself to breathe and he cups her chin.

‘I owe your father an apology. You can go with him. He won’t know this but you will be guarded 24/7 until he gives me a date, okay? I meant it when I said I’d never allow

anything to happen to you'

She keeps shaking her head.

'Do you trust me?' he asks. She sharply sighs before giving him a nod.

'I'll come get you, my kryptonite. There's absolutely no way I wouldn't, okay?' he rubs his nose against hers and she laughs.

'Whose gonna run my cravings errands now?' she sulks.

'Your baby daddy. I'm a simple call away'

'And the other cravings?' she flirts, moaning in his ear. He looks up and laughs.

'Please don't do this to me...'

'Tell my father to leave then' she inserts her hands under his t-shirt.

'I can't. You know I can't. In fact, he must be getting irritated by now. Let's go'

'You no longer love me. I have figured it out'

He laughs before stealing a kiss from her pouting lips.

'I would like to see the supporting evidence to that statement before we proceed. Where are the exhibits ma'am?'

She shoots out laughter. 'You're so annoying'

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 20

[KULANI]

I'm officially a snuff girl. I am laughing because wow. This afternoon on our way back home, I had this strong urge to have it in my system. Out of the blue, out of nowhere. This urge was accompanied by the deep-seated feeling that it's all it is going to take to cure my headaches. It's so weird craving for something you have never experienced before. Surprisingly, I felt like I knew what amount of satisfaction it would bring. The first pull shot up my nostrils and I felt like the earth was spinning for a bit.

My mother wasn't happy about my return back home, as expected. I have no idea what they were discussing in their bedroom but I am certain it erupted in a fight judging by how they're behaving around one another. On the other hand, Rhandzu has been sleeping since my arrival here. I need to go check on her because it's approaching supper time and she hasn't left her room. I knock twice before she tells me to come in. Just as I have suspected, she is not okay.

'Hey sis...' I greet and she just looks at me. I go sit next to her as she lies on her stomach.

'What have they done to you?' I ask. Her laughter is weak.

'You should be asking what I have done'

There's a confession coming and it carries great regret. I know that tone. I am silent, waiting for her to speak.

'You remember Nyiko, right?'

Nyiko? I try my best to recall but I know too many people with this name and the ones that are coming up right now, have no alliance with her, as far as I know.

'He used to be my stats mentor in first year. You met him this one time when you were bringing my winter clothes are res'

'Oh yeah. What about him?'

'Arg... we lost contact and I happened to forget about him. He texted me a few days ago telling me that he's around and that we should meet up'

I nod encouragingly.

'It was supposed to be innocent. He was here on work and I was his plus one. We had a few drinks and ended up at his hotel'

Oh dear...

'Your mother is going to strangle me beyond death' she drops her face into her pillow. I rub her shoulder.

'Let's take her out of the equation for one minute. Do you regret the experience?'

She raises her face. This person shamelessly stole my forehead, eyes, and lips.

'I don't know how I feel about it. It wasn't supposed to happen'

'Do you like him like that?'

'I think so. I don't know. I did have feelings for him at some point but he was strictly professional. He hasn't called since that night and this making it difficult for me to understand his headspace right now'

'Don't worry about it. If he hasn't called by now, I don't think he deserves any more of your time. It happened. Move on from it'

'It's easy for you to say. You're married now. You don't have to go for virginity testing and shxt alike. You know how they're all gonna judge me and I'm not sure if I'm ready for all of that'

I sigh. I literally have no advice right now. This is not as big

as she's making it out to be.

'Rhandzu, do you regret that experience?'

She stops and thinks.

'I don't know. He was a gentleman. I've always wished for something like that. I'm just disappointed that we haven't spoken about it till now'

'I don't know. Maybe be the first to call and get this over and done with? Maybe he's just as anxious as you are right now'

She suffocates herself with her cushion and groans into it.

'You need a cup of mocha. I'm gonna make it just how you like it'

She smiles back and I leave the room. My phone rings on my way to the kitchen.

'Hey you. I answer. I was literally about to call you'

'Why do you lie unprovoked?' he asks and I laugh.

'Come on? I mean it'

I was genuinely about to call him.

'How are my people doing? You still okay?'

'I am not. I want you to come take me'

He laughs. 'I will baby'

'Now' I say, petulantly. I step outside to avoid prying eyes and ears.

'If you wanna elope then sure' he simply responds.

I chuckle.

'Mciim. At least come see me tonight?'

'Will you be able to come out?'

'Leave that to me'

He sounds busy. I can tell by his laughter that he did not even register what I've just said.

'What are you doing there?' I ask.

'What makes you ask?'

'I know you. You're focused on something there instead of me'

'I was reading some contract. I'm sorry my love. What were you saying?'

'The day I shoot you in the nxts' I threaten. He shoots out laughter. I chuckle when he fails to stop.

'Where is that coming from?'

'I'll tell you when you come'

'You threaten me and you think I'm still coming? Some terribly wrong'

'Okay I'm serious now. Are you coming?'

'I'm not sure bout that but you're most def cummin'

I laugh. His idiocy has no cure.

'Okay. Don't come here empty-handed'

'Why do I get the feeling that I am being used for food in this relationship?'

'You should've given it a long thought before pumping live seeds into me'

'Well if you must know, I have zero regrets and I would do it again'

'You better say all these things when you have to change nappies at unpleasant hours in the morning'

'I still regret nothing. I have a zoom call in two minutes, can I call you later?' he humbly requests.

'No you may not'

'I should not call you?' he's confused.

'The zoom call can wait' I joke.

He chuckles. 'You know I'm gonna cancel it at your word

right? And I don't wanna hear nothing about purses and shoes because you would be the reason your man is broke'

I burst out in laughter.

'Ay go, Advocate Ngobeni'

'Thank you, boss of me'

He cuts the call before I can respond. His two minutes is up.

...

'The doctor said you should stay in bed' Xongi and Sarah speak at the same time when they see Fikani climbing down the stairs. He ignores both of them and goes straight to the fridge to get himself a bottle of water.

'Let me open that for you' Xongi offers – already on her feet. He moves the bottle away.

'I just have an injured neck; I'm not an invalid' he says, careful not to make any abrupt movements. He unexpectedly vomits all over the kitchen floor after his first sip, reviving the pain that was now laying low. He groans

with his palm over the patch covering his wound. Tumi walks in and almost turns away at the sight of vomit. Cleaning it up in the morning was enough.

'Where are you going?' Xongi asks when she pretends not to see anything, taking fast steps in the direction of bathroom. 'Can't you see this mess?' Sarah supports.

'Can you please leave her alone? I'll clean all of this up' Fikani chides while opening the container of painkillers.

'Clean how when you're in pain?' Sarah questions with a frown on her face.

'I'll do it' Tumi says, her voice carrying defeat. Fikani pops one pill into his mouth and takes his bottle back to the bedroom. Mhan Sarah knocks half an hour later, telling him that he has a visitor. He sighs of exhaustion.

'I don't want to see anybody'

'Why are you so angry? You don't even know who is here. You need some cheering up so I am gonna send him up' she insists. He almost throws the pillow against the door when she closes it behind her. His best friend Reginald shortly walks in.

'Fiks The Fixer' Reggie greets in high spirits and Fikani smiles.

'Ey man. When did you get here?'

They exchange a cautious shoulder bump.

'I took the first flight out when your mother called. The gents have been trying to reach you but...'

'I have no idea where I left my phone' he replies in truth. Reggie pulls a chair and sits next to him on the bed.

'This is your third stab. You sure you don't need some cleansing of some sort?' he jests and Fikani laughs.

'Fvck off Regs. You need to get rid of these childish dreads of yours'

'This is the ultimate look. What do you know? What happened man? Another hijacking?' his voice conforms to a serious tone.

Fikani deeply sighs.

'I fvcked up. I fvcked up big time and I can't even defend myself because I honestly have no idea what came over me'

'Let's start from the beginning'

Fikani grabs his water bottle and takes thin sips.

'The beginning? I recently found out that I have a twin brother. That's the beginning'

Reggie pulls a frown and his head back.

'That is... carry on. I'll archive my questions for now'

'Cool. I find out that I have a twin brother. We meet up and everything. I visit home and I just... I develop these strong feelings for Kulani'

'Kulani?'

'His wife' he informs with his eyes locked in his friend's. Reggie lips stretch into a straight smile and he blinks a dramatic number of times.

'No, I have to ask. Out of all the things you could've done there, you decide to love your brother's wife?'

'Ayy man. I don't know. I admit that she's a beautiful person and all but right now, I am trying to wrap my head around me actually abducting her'

'You did what??? That don't sound like you my guy...'

'A lot doesn't make sense right now and it's driving me insane. I have been in love man but what I felt towards that woman was absolutely insane'

'I have to see this lady' Reggie says with a tinge of flirtation in his voice. The smile on Fikani's face instantly disappears.

'This is no joke. I've just told you that this is my brother's wife. Get your damn head outta there'

Reggie raises both his hands in surrender.

'Ey whoa. Don't get your bxxlls in a knot now. I was just joking. Calm down'

Fikani looks away and sits back against the pillow.

'We still haven't gotten to the stab'

'She's responsible. The last thing I remember is her running out of that apartment'

'Hectic! So what's your brother saying about all this?'

'We haven't spoken yet but I know hell is going to break loose when we meet up again'

'Let's hope he'll be understanding and the two of you can move past this?'

'Highly doubt it. From how I've seen him behave around her, I doubt this is something we can move past'

'Are the two of you identical?'

'Yup'

Reggie laughs. 'I'm sorry but this is insane. Who was stolen from the hospital? You?'

'Nah. Our mother willingly gave me away. I wasn't stolen'
Fikani coldly states.

'At this point, I am not sure if I wanna ask any further questions'

...

[KULANI]

I feel like a teenager all over again. I am waiting for my father to sleep so I can sneak out. My mom promised to handle the guards at the gate when I mentioned Kurhula's name. She's seriously about not wanting my marriage to fail and right now, it is working in my favour. She opens my door and signals with her head that I can now go out. I laugh and give her a thumbs up. I leave the yard and find him parked at my neighbours corner. It is so dark outside I almost didn't see him standing against his van.

'Hey bab—'

He shuts me up with a kiss that leaves me gasping for air. Okay? I smile and kiss him again. It's my turn to make his respiratory system panic a bit. We break the kiss and he

smiles as he wipes my lip with his thumb.

'I've missed you terribly' he says, starring into my eyes.

'Before we go any further, did you—'

'Food!' he interjects and I laugh. 'I don't have a death wish. I wouldn't dare forget'

He turns me around when I least expect it, raises a chunk of hair and kisses the back of neck.

'But first, let me show just how much I've missed you'

I swallow my smile. I wouldn't mind that. He separates my legs and leads his hand to my honeypot.

'I see we have made a habit of not wearing any underwear dear wife?'

I laugh. I knew that comment was coming.

'Panties were going to be an unnecessary distraction. Don't you think, hubby?'

I feel and hear him breathing onto my neck and this is single-handedly moistening me up. He takes out his member from his sweatpants and I feel him sliding in.

'Mmm...' the moans escapes me.

'Try to behave otherwise prepare for my funeral' he whispers into my ear and I laugh. The fear he has for my

father is hilarious. He starts moving and I hold on to the rails of the van. I am trying my best not to make a single sound. He closes my mouth with his hand when I lowly call out his name as he moves in and out of my slippery wet canal. His other hand is busy manipulating my clxtories. He empties himself into me shortly after sending me straight to cloud nine. I try to catch my breath as he wipes me with his t-shirt. He's gonna wear it after this?

'Kurhula...' I can't stop laughing.

'Do you have a better suggestion?' he continues cleaning me up. We get in the car and I dig into my pie. I am surprised he is not saying anything. I have been craving garage pie for two days now. He also brought wings, jelly babies and iced tea I had asked.

'What's that?' he asks and I look at him while chewing.

'What's what?'

His finger reaches my nostrils and he studies the particle in his hand.

'I knew I could smell... baby you're now into snuff?' he's laughing his head off. I keep a straight face. I will wait for him to finish so he can tell me what he's laughing at.

'I'm sorry' he holds his rib area. 'I'm not laughing at you I swear'

I give him a deadly stare.

'Kurhula...?'

'It's rough hey? You take drugs now?' he's still laughing.

'Underground gang cocaine'

'I'm gonna call my dad' I threaten. He tries to stop laughing but fails. He opens the door and steps out.

'Nwada mhade'

I am not doing this with him right now.

'Your people don't wanna see you happy. If they're not making you gallivant in your sleep, they're putting you on drugs'

'I'm gonna cry'

'I'm sorry nana. I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. Forget I said anything' he keeps his composure and fixes his breathing. It takes one look at me for him to fall apart again.

'Snuff at your young age? I can just imagine you pulling out that black container from your boobs while seated on the floor with your legs crossed, tapping it a couple of times before—'

I open the door to leave. He catches me by the waist.

'I'm sorry! I'm just... I'm just kidding, okay? It's all jokes

rhandzu ra mina'

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 21

I have a meeting with my father at nine. Yes, even as his kid, you need an appointment to see him. The drama of it all. He says there needs to be a clear distinction between his office and a lavatory; that we just can't barge in like we're pressed. It's half past six and I'm sitting outside, basking in the cold morning breeze. I tried going back to sleep twice but I was deeply yearning to get outside the house. My room started feeling like it was suffocating me. I love everything that has to do with early mornings but I am a failing member of the 5am gang. I have to admit that there's a breath of fresh air here at home. I love Kurhula but living in that house is a daily mental struggle. The energy is always heavy. There's no homely feel because the people there do not love one another, at all. I always used to hear about these sort of things on television, never stopping to think that one day I would be right at the centre of it all.

My heart instantly warms up when a white bird lands on the table where I'm seated under my father's lapa. I watch

it with a smile on my face. I place my hand on the surface so it can climb onto my finger. It doesn't budge. It keeps walking around leisurely. I have no idea what to say to it. Am I supposed to even talk to it? I am just so happy I'm beginning to feel overwhelmed. I sit back on the chair and continue looking at it. It has an element of peace attached to it; assurance that everything is fine. I don't know, there's a voice in my head telling me that I should give up control; that I'm holding on to too much, including my breath. I unlock my jaw, loosen my shoulders, and breathe out. The bird stays with me for some time, chirping away. Now that I'm soaking in tranquillity. It takes a few steps towards me, turns around and flies off. I laugh when I put one and one together. This is a sign that I did not bring myself out here.

After breakfast, I follow my father to his office. He offers me a seat after occupying his across the desk.

'How is home so far?'

I laugh. He knows that a huge part of me doesn't want to be here. In as much it hurts to think about, I am supposed to be at the Ngobeni royal compound right now.

'It's okay I guess. How are you dad?' I ask. His eyes twinkle.

'I have to admit, this is one of the reasons why I brought

you back here. You're the only one who truly cares about my well-being around here'

I chortle. He brought me here for his own selfish reasons.

'You're too attached to me'

He shrugs with a warm smile on his face. 'Ah ntaku yini marha? What can a father say when his little children insist on growing up against his wishes? Anyway, during your tantrum, you mentioned your underwear being stolen from here. What was that about?'

Tantrum?

'Don't worry about it. I have it under control'

If I dare say a word about this, I might as well kiss my husband goodbye. The look he is giving me tells me that he's not buying what I'm selling.

'You know very well that I haven't abandoned you, right?'

'I know daddy. However, I am never going to grow if I keep running back into your arms every time things go wrong'

'You can, actually' he's quick to correct and I laugh. 'Okay fine. And that boy, how is he treating you?'

I fail to control the smile that graces my face.

'He's amazing. He's exactly what I negotiated with my

ancestors’

My father nods encouragingly.

I chuckle. ‘There’s nothing more to say. He’s just... he’s my best friend. I feel like I’ve met him before; like I’ve known him in my previous life. That’s as far as my vocab can take me’

He bends his smiling lower lip. I close my eyes with my palms. I can’t believe I am discussing the man I am sleeping with, with the man that raised me.

‘I am still disappointed that this happened. He’s supposed to protect you with everything in him’

‘I don’t doubt that Kurhula would slide barefoot across a sharp sword trying to get to me. It’s just... this whole thing had to happen. He wasn’t even in the province when it occurred’

‘Tell me about this twin. I have known that family for years but I never knew that Kurhula had such a brother?’

‘He just recently joined the family. They were separated at birth’

‘Ah. Makes sense now...’

He doesn’t sound surprised at all. This doesn’t shock me. It was said that this was a common practice back then.

Either that, or you run off with your copies if you wanted them to live.

'He doesn't deserve this, dad. He will do everything you say because he respects you but he doesn't deserve this' I plead on Kurhula's behalf. This whole apology thing is ridiculous. They've already taken out a hefty amount for me. Now I'm starting to feel like he's scamming them through me.

'What doesn't he deserve?'

'This punishment you've set out for him'

He sits back on his chair and looks at me.

'How do we know that this will not happen again? You're also refusing to open a case against the person who did this to you. What exactly do you want me to do as your father?'

I shrug. 'I can't open a case. It will tear the family further apart'

He's still looking at me, digesting what I've just said.

'In two weeks, I want this twin here. He needs to look me in the eye and tell me where he gets the guts to manhandle you like this when I have never even pinched you. Before then, get comfortable in your father's house

my angel' he states and picks his walking rod up and his jacket.

I'm left sitting agape. He closes the door behind him and I hear him calling for my mother. Now I regret ever trying to reason with him. Getting Kurhula to understand that he needs to get his brother here will be an uphill battle in itself. I can already hear him asking if I ever heard him ask for my help. He may not understand where I'm coming from but since he's set on building a house, with the pending wedding and a baby on the way, I am not allowing him to buy expensive cattle in my name.

...

'Fikani, please wake up' Tumi gently shakes him before turning towards the side lamp and switching it on. He sighs.

'I am not asleep' he says and gets up with caution, considerate of his neck.

'We have to talk about this at some point. What's so special about that girl that you had to abduct her? You embarrassed me in front of everyone. Can you imagine how that made me feel?'

'I can try. I really have nothing to say about this whole situation, except ask for your forgiveness. I'm sorry. What I did was completely out of line' his apology is calm and unrushed.

'Out of line? Did you sleep with her?'

'God no. I don't know but her stabbing me was a blessing in disguise. I probably would've done much more crazier things'

Tumi just looks at him without saying a word. He also keeps quiet for some time.

'Have I ever made you uncomfortable, Tumi?'

She lifts a brow.

'Uncomfortable?'

'Have you ever felt like you weren't safe with me?'

'Where is all of this coming from?'

'Answer my question, please. Have I ever been rough with you?'

'You have, and I liked every moment of it'

He laughs when he gets it.

'You know what I mean'

She sighs.

'I saw the bruises on her face' she says. His eyes instantly go shut – replaying that moment when his hand sent Kuli to the floor.

'A lot doesn't make sense and I'm not going to try and figure this out. The reason I woke you up is because I have been thinking'

He waits for her to proceed, in silence.

'This is not working for me anymore. Ever since we began trying for a baby, our marriage has just been going downhill. I cannot give you a child Fikani and this new development in your life is just going to destroy the little that's left of my mental health. There's talks of you being king and—'

'Have you ever heard me putting me pressure on you regarding this matter?'

'Your aunt insinuated that I am not married'

He frowns. 'What aunt?'

'Fanisa. The time you disappeared on me? She said it was a family matter'

'Tumi, my neck is flaming sore and I have a persistent headache. I am genuinely not interested in what a stranger

has to say about you and me. If you decide to take this and put it in your heart, so be it. I don't wanna hear it'

'That's it?' she's appalled.

'The reason I'm even in contact with these people is you, our family. You think you're disappointing me by not falling pregnant. Have you ever stopped to think how I feel? That I am failing you as a husband? My life is complicated. I'm not in touch with my origin and as a man that fvcks me up. If I don't dance to their tune I'll continue shooting blanks!'

'That's not the point of this conversation'

'What is the point? That you wanna leave?'

She goes quiet. He does the same.

'Have you tried the painkillers I brought for your neck? They're a little bit stronger'

He gets out of bed.

'They're not helping. Still haven't found my main phone?'

'No. It was here in the house though. I suspect your brother might have taken it'

'Can I borrow yours?'

She hands it to him and goes back under the sheets. On his way to living room, he googles Kurhula's business

number and finds it. It rings and goes unanswered. He tries again and Kurhula answers, in a curious yet slightly exasperated tone.

'Advocate Ngobeni?'

Fikani expected the professionalism based on the number he'd called.

'Mfo, Fikani here'

'Motherfvcker. How are you calling me at five bloody AM? And what the fvck do you want?'

'I need my phone. I have important calls to make, and we need to talk'

Kurhula snorts. 'You and I need to talk?'

'I just need you to hear me out. You have every right to be mad'

'You think I'm mad son?' he questions acerbically.

'Kurhula, calm your fvcking a** down so we can talk like two grown adults'

Kurhula's laughter carries a warning tone.

'I've gotten to realize that you have anger issues weh and you need help' Fikani states.

That fake-calm, threatening laughter refuses to be

contained.

'I'd like us to meet at your earliest convenience. The sooner we lay this to rest, the better'

'The only thing we're laying to rest here is your—' Kurhula stops himself. 'I will send you the details, womb mate'

He cuts the call immediately after this. Fikani lifts his feet onto the bed and manages to catch some sleep. When he wakes up and goes to his bedroom to freshen up, he finds Tumi getting dressed for work.

'Still sore?' she asks, pulling her belt trying to find the right hole.

'Just a bit'

'Your doctor did mention that you can always pop in if you feel like something isn't right. Maybe I should drop you off?'

'It's okay. I don't want you being late for work. I'll drive myself'

'You can't even turn your neck properly'

'Fine. I'll Uber'

She shakes her head at his stubbornness and continues getting dressed. When he comes out of the bathroom, he

realizes that she has already left without saying goodbye. He finds his mothers conversing around the kitchen counter and greets while headed to the head.

‘Are you not going to have breakfast? I made you sour porridge? Just how you used to like it?’ Sarah offers with a warm smile.

‘To think Kurhula used to hate porridge with a passion. He used to always give me hassles whenever it was time for breakfast’ Xongi comments. Sarah laughs. ‘That one sounds troublesome.’

‘Don’t even mention it. He’s always been a picky eater’

Fikani walks out and leaves them to their conversation without answering the question. When he gets to the hospital, he exits the Uber at the same time Doctor Khoza is stepping out of her car, with her lunch bag, charger, peeled carrot, car keys and phone in hand.

‘If it isn’t our neck stab warrior’ she jests and he laughs. He didn’t see her before she opened her mouth. He fixes his light polo-neck.

‘Well if it wasn’t for the cute doctor, I wouldn’t deserve that title now would I?’ he returns, causing her to smile. ‘I’ll take that’ he offers, seeing that she’s struggling to stabilize all her things in her small chubby fingers. He holds the bag

for her.

'You have all your luck to thank. Are you here regarding your neck or something else?'

'My neck, unfortunately. It's suddenly stiff and the pain keeps getting worse'

'Oh dear. You've probably caught an infection but let's not jump the gun. I'll take care of you'

He glances at her. She's still enjoying her carrot.

'I'd love that...' he responds.

...

[KULANI]

I had to lie and say I needed to go see a doctor so I could come visit Kurhula at his office. Having my mom speak to the staff is still working in my favour. Something in my spirit is unsettled and I just want my man near. If my dad finds out what we do behind his back, everybody is definitely getting fired. My conscience is clean because he's never finding out from me. Kurhula doesn't know that

I am on my way. I arrive with a new vase and a bunch of flowers. His office needs some colour please. He turns his chair towards the door when I open it and immediately smiles. He's sitting cross-legged, while on the phone. He gesticulates that I may come in.

'I do love you but we aren't taking any candidate attorneys this year. I'm not gonna switch things up just because you're family'

I was about to ask who is busy being loved. I put the stuff on the table, including his coffee and croissant. He starts digging in before I can tell him to. He winks when I give him a look.

'But I never said I'm not gonna help. Of course I'll speak to the people I know and work something out. You should learn to relax' he continues laughing with whoever is on the phone. I wait for him to end the call. He gets up when he's done, picks me up, places me on the desk and kisses me.

'How did you escape the towers of Jericho?'

I laugh out loud. I am not doing this with him today. I'm not feeling well. He kisses me again.

'Thank you for breakfast. And the flowers?'

'They're yours. This place needs a pop of colour'

'I really am married aren't I?'

I laugh. 'Yes, you're someone's husband. Speaking of which, I finally managed to get a hold of the wedding planner and MC I wanted'

He nods while sipping on his coffee.

'I'm set to meet Cherize on the 22nd because she—' I stop talking when I hear the noise coming from outside. He also stopped to listen to what's going on. I get off the desk and follow him out.

'Daniel please. This is my place of work. If you cannot respect me at home, be decent enough to stay away from my workplace' the lady says. I bumped into her downstairs and my heart skipped a beat for some reason.

'I should stay away? I should stay away so you can continue cheating on me properly?'

'I'm sorry but what is going on here? Hellen, are you okay?' Kurhula asks, stepping towards the fighting couple.

'Is this him?' the man loses it and pulls out a gun. 'Is this the man you're cheating on me with Helly?!'

Kurhula frowns with confusion. The guy pulls the trigger. The next moment, Hellen is on the floor. Everything happened so fast I did not have the opportunity to digest

this occurrence. Kurhula stands there, absolutely frozen. Everyone is screaming at this moment. He disappeared. The perpetrator disappeared. Colleagues are up and down trying to call both the police and an ambulance. Kurhula is still frozen. He's just standing there, with shock glistening in his eyes.

'Kurhula?' I call. He's no longer a statue. He's trembling at this point. I'm failing to hold back my tears because something tells me that Hellen is not making it out alive. This is why I have been feeling uneasy ever since I woke up. I wasn't here for him. I was supposed to warn her but I failed her. What is the point of giving me information but simultaneously giving me nothing at all? Kurhula is shattered, and I think I know why.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 22

I was right. Hellen is no longer of this realm. The police were called, the body was packed away and statements were taken. The work day was cut short and people left the crime scene, shocked as they were. I am sitting with Kurhula in his car in the parking lot. I have his tie in my hand and no idea how to comfort him. He keeps rubbing my hand in silence as I cry. I literally have no idea who this Hellen woman is but I am carrying all her pain on my

shoulders. I hope her family comes to fetch her spirit from the corridor. Apparently she's from the North West.

'This is crazy'

He is saying this for the third time now. I can't say I blame him. A woman just died right in front of us. I wipe my tears and drink some of the water I found in his car. I don't even know how long this bottle has been sitting in here but it doesn't taste nor smell bad.

'Are you gonna go to the funeral?' I randomly ask. He turns his face in my direction and his big eyes face me.

'Traditionally, I can't...' he simply says and waits for me to respond. That look tells me that he is waiting for me to say something.

'So, that guy was right? You were sleeping with her?'

He pulls in some air. He's still holding my hand.

'It was a long time ago. I doubt this was about me'

'Exactly how long is a long time ago?' I need to know.

'Way before we met. We blurred the lines a couple of times. I didn't even know there was someone in her life'

'Mlambya, you haven't answered my question'

'Three/four months ago'

'That's yesterday. What makes you believe that this wasn't about you?'

'I don't see how he could've found out. Nobody knew and I wouldn't call what we had a relationship like that. We had... a dalliance of some sort'

'An office affair?'

'I wouldn't call it that either. The first time it happened, we were working late and she needed my opinion on a case. I had to drop her off and she offered me coffee'

'Then one thing typically led to another?'

He nods.

'The second time?'

'She called in the middle of the night. She said she wasn't feeling safe but not even once did she mention this psychopath'

Logic tells me that I have no right to be feeling jealous right now but that's not being successful at stopping me from feeling this way anyway.

'How are you feeling?' I ask. He puts his head against his seat again.

'I don't know, mixed emotions. That whole incident just

brought back memories I thought I'd never have to deal with again. Some I had managed to push back but everything just came flooding back'

His parents.

'Have you tried therapy?'

He starts the car. When it gets on the road I know that I'll never have the answer to this question.

'I have something to tell you' I confess. He glances at me and continues driving. He's already in a bad mood but I am just gonna say this because this is nothing compared to your sneaky link dying right in front of you.

'I'm waiting' he reminds.

'I was speaking to my dad about this whole apology issue'

'And?'

'I don't appreciate how he's going about this and I've stated this from day one'

He goes quiet, waiting for me to get to the point.

'I managed to convince him to drop this whole thing'

He raises his brow – looking very distrustful. He sniffs his upper lip and keeps his hand on the steering wheel.

'You don't sound believable. Why is that?'

'Because...' I'm stuck. I distort my lip as I think of a palatable way to package this. The look in his eyes tells me I'm taxing his patience. He releases a sharp sigh.

'What have you done Kulani? You suddenly sound guilty'

'You will not like this one bit...'

'U endle yini manjhe mbilu ya Kurhula?' (What did you do?) his tone is exhausted.

'He decided that he no longer wants an apology from you...'

'There's a but somewhere in there'

'He wants an apology from Fikani'

He laughs and brings the window down. He's mad.

'Do you realize that you're putting me under the mercy of that bloody fool?'

'We've spoken about this. Fikani wasn't himself when—'

'I do not care, quite frankly. He's ruined a lot of things. Even your father was assuming that I'm the one who inflicted all these bruises on you. I am pretty certain he's not the only one'

'That's not true' I try to console.

'I don't mind giving into your father's demands. And this

was an opportunity for me to actually prove that I want you in my life; that I'm not only in this because it was arranged. It's important that he knows that'

'He does. I have told him how I feel about you'

'It's not the same thing. Now I have to beg that son of a bxtch to help me bring my wife home when all of this is his fault'

'Can you stop calling him that?'

'What? A son of a bxtch?'

'Yes!'

'Why should I stop calling a son of bxtch, a son of a bxtch?'

I don't even know why I have the urge to laugh right now because I have had it with him.

'You better not teach AK this filthy language of yours'

'That's my son through and through. Genetics will do all the work for me' he jabs back. He is actually lying. Akani is more like Fikani than he is like his biological father. At first glance and impressions, they're both shy and reserved. They even laugh the same way. They have this thing they do of ending their laughter with this 'ahha' sound I don't get. I keep quiet to avoid rubbing up this grumpy bear

behind the steering wheel the wrong way.

...

'Have you ever experienced neck spasms?' Dr Khoza asks while changing the dressing on Fikani's wound while he sits bare-chested on the bed.

'No. I can't recall any'

'Does it hurt when I press down here' she applies gradual pressure at the back of his neck.

'Just a lil bit'

'How about here?'

'Yeah that hurts'

'I am not even going to ask if you followed my instructions because all you patients do is lie'

He laughs at this statement as he receives his polo-neck from her.

'But please try your best to keep this area dry and apply the ointment I prescribed for you. Wounds and moist are water and oil. Do as I say if you want to heal faster'

He nods and carefully gets dressed. She steps on the bin, removes her latex gloves, and throws them inside.

'Can I ask you a question?' he prods. She nods while pumping some sanitizer onto her palm.

'Do you have siblings?'

She laughs lightly.

'I thought you were gonna ask me something that has to do with your condition. Yes, I do have a baby sister. Why do you ask?'

He notices how her tone changes and her subtle mood drop.

'You don't sound so happy. Would you have liked to be an only child?' he jests. She sighs.

'Not really. There's just a lot going on' she takes a seat on her leather chair and pushes her laptop open. His curiosity prompts him off the bed and he sits across her.

'You can talk to me' he assures.

She snorts. 'I can talk to a stranger about my personal life?'

'Strangers have nothing against you. As an outlet? They work best'

She chortles.

‘Sir, you’re my patient’

‘Patients can’t care?’ he asks with a lifted brow. ‘I might be an angel in disguise, you know? C’mon, stop kicking your blessings and tell me what’s going on?’

‘Okay fine. I have recently buried my mother and now I am all my baby sis has’

‘My condolences on her passing’ he offers. She shrugs.

‘Such is life I guess. What’s really bothering me is that she went to the grave with important information that I have been begging her to divulge. Now I’m here, left with nothing useful but rumours’ she discloses with frustration.

‘May I ask what that information is about?’

She sits there, looking at him – contemplating whether to go deeper into this. He is surprised by the smile that follows.

‘Thank you for giving me an ear. I feel a whole lot better now’

‘Is that your polite way of telling me to mind my own business?’

She laughs out loud.

'It's called a personal life for a reason. Take good care of that wound'

'Is that you politely telling me to leave your office?'

She fails to stop her laughter.

'In fact, yes. We're done here and now that you're idle, you're digging into my business'

He raises his hands in surrender as he stands up.

'Shoot a nigga for just trying to help'

'I appreciate your courtesy'

'Just being a good citizen, giving back to a hardworking frontline worker. See it as me returning the favour' he gives her a quick wink and walks out. She shakes her head while cleaning her reading glasses.

...

[ONE WEEK LATER]

Kurhula opens the door to his house in Lynnwood when Fikani eventually arrives.

'Hey' Fikani greets.

'You made it? I was really hoping you'd get into a brutal car accident and die'

'Is this the house you apparently sold?' Fikani asks as he looks around, completely ignoring him. 'Does somebody live here? Looks like it'

'Were you gossiping about me with that mother of yours?' he closes the door and stands there for a second.

'Come, we need to talk' Fikani says and takes a seat on the couch. Kurhula chooses to sit on top of the table.

'Talk, I'm listening'

Fikani sighs. 'Fine then. Listen, I owe you a huge apology. I'd be just as mad if I was in your shoes. I'm not even sure where this thing started to be honest and how it escalated but—'

'You were bewitched, that's why' Kurhula flatly states. Fikani frowns.

'Pardon?'

'Your mother fed you some love potion' he continues and silently watches as Fikani tries to make sense of this.

'Why would Mhan Xongi... no but wait, if you know this

information, then why are you mad?’

‘You put your filthy hands on my wife, and you think I’ll congratulate you for that?’

‘That’s obviously the effect of—’

‘That doesn’t mean it will go unpunished. I don’t care what voodoo spell you were under. I want you to remember that she’s off limits even if you happen to lose your damn mind one day’

‘You still haven’t told me what the hell is going on here’

‘I don’t owe you shxt Fikani. You said you wanted me here, I came. Are you done apologizing?’ he pulls out his gun and cocks it.

‘Put that thing down. You don’t wanna take this there, trust me’

Kurhula gets off the table and Fikani stands up. They approach one another and exchange a death stare. Kurhula grabs Fikani by the neck and he flinches.

‘I’m sorry. She did say she stabbed you in the neck’ Kurhula says but still doesn’t loosen his hold. Fikani throws a fist that causes Kurhula to bite his inner cheek. He lets go and spits out blood.

‘The last time I bit myself was plenty of years ago, so fvck

you for this' he pushes his tongue against the bruise on the inside of his mouth after saying this. Fikani is still holding his neck over his turtleneck, with an extremely exasperated look on his face.

'You know what annoys me about this whole situation?' Kurhula starts. Fikani just raises his burning eyes but says nothing.

'I told you how this animalistic behaviour makes me feel and you still went and did this? Now you're expecting me to let it go just like that?'

'Bra, you've literally just told me the cause of all this mess!'

'Can you prove that in court?'

'I told you you have issues and you need help. Right now you're looking for a reason to be angry and there's none'

'You beat my wife up and you tell me I have no reason to be...' that sarcastic laughter leaves him and he fails to finish his sentence. Fikani receives a bullet in his thigh and he lets out a shriek of agony – holding on to his bleeding wound.

'I did tell you that I'm gonna kill you, didn't I?' he aims again and Fikani unexpectedly pulls out his own gun and shoots Kurhula in the arm.

'FVCK!' Kurhula sharply exclaims.

'I warned you not to do this. Kurhula, after two hijackings and the realization that I have an unhinged brother like yourself, you thought I walk around unarmed? You are literally a consistent version of me at my most furious, which a very rare occasion!'

'It will really help you to shut the hell up right now' Kurhula hisses before disappearing down the passage. Fikani calls Reggie to come pick both of them up. He cuts the call when his friend seeks an explanation and sends him the location.

Kurhula comes back with a t-shirt wrapped around his severed arm— a weak attempt at ceasing the bleeding.

'Where's my phone wena?' Fikani asks, while shoving the other one back into his pocket. A huge spot of his white-washed blue jeans was covered in blood.

'By phone, you mean this cabinet full of Kuli's pictures?'

'How did you even open it?'

'Face ID' Kurhula answers and gives him 'duh' a look.

'Is this the kind of relationship you're prepared to have?'

'Getting ahead of ourselves, aren't we? If you don't make sure that I die today, you better fix your funeral covers and

sort out your relationship with God, right now' Kurhula advises and calmly reaches for glass of liquor he'd been drinking before his brother arrived. He finishes it off and pours himself another double.

'Anger is exhausting to carry around, you know that right?' Fikani mentions and keeps his eyes on him.

Kurhula snorts. 'I hate YouTube psychologists so fvcking much'

Fikani laughs.

'If you must know, I did study psychology at some point in my life, for fun'

'I would clap for you but hey, you decided I no longer need my right hand so...'

Fikani huffs and shakes his head.

'Don't get too excited though. I'm ambidextrous, meaning I can still make this as torturous as I had initially intended' he continues drinking. Fikani chuckles. He leaves a little bit in the glass and pours it over his covered-up gunshot wound. He flinches when it stings.

'And you think you'll be able to get rid of me using one hand?' he's still unfazed.

Kurhula laughs as well. 'You underestimate me'

Silence ensues.

'How do you exist motherfvcker? I really don't like you, Fikani. I am saying this from the deepest vault of my heart'

'Ey I don't care bro. Regs is taking his time. Call an ambulance'

'I just told you my left hand is working just fine' Kurhula assures and pulls his keys from the counter. Fikani follows him out at his slow and injured pace.

'If I get to this car and you're still dragging that foot like an injured Snoopy, I'm gonna leave your a** behind' Kurhula threatens and throws himself inside his car. He starts the car and speeds off as promised. Fikani just stands there – sick and tired of Kurhula's misbehaviour. His brother comes back in reverse and brings the window down.

'Get in and make sure your blood doesn't touch my seats. The smell of it might trigger me into finishing you off'

'Just open this fvcking door'

'That door is not locked'

'Kurhula, this door is locked man voetsek' Fikani argues angrily.

'Do you wanna get in or not?'

'You do realize that you're also losing blood, right?'

'I'd very much rather lose my arm than miss out on an opportunity to watch you suffer' Kurhula says and laughter immediately escapes Fikani. Kurhula opens this door.

'You're insane, in every sense of the word'

'A 'thank you' would've been nice but I'll excuse your terrible manners. Only the devil knows where you grew up'

'Oh fvck you...'

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 23

[KULANI]

After spending almost all day with Gogo Mkhanyisi, I could feel the morosity I have been carrying around wear off. I haven't been able to forgive myself for what happened at Kurhula's office. I'm still hurting over the fact that I could've prevented it. I've been eating clean and investing in my prayer life a lot more since that day because honestly, I don't think I'll ever be the same. My awakening came at the cost of a life and that's too expensive for me. I love being here because I learn a lot from this woman. She randomly drops pearls of wisdom. I'm done washing the

dishes, waiting for her to come back. She killed and cooked a hardbody chicken specially for me when I mentioned that I haven't had it in a very long time. After we enjoyed the meal with her three boys, she went out – promising to be back shortly. Cleaning up is the least I can do.

She comes back forty minutes later and finds me watching TV. I need to call my driver because it's getting late. Today has been fun and soul-serving. It was a much-needed day out. I've been trying to reach Kurhula but his phone is off. I really hope he hasn't done anything out of pocket. He promised to behave and I choose to trust that he will. Gogo sits next to me and I lower the volume on the TV. I've easily gotten comfortable here like it's my second home.

'Can I ask you a question?' I prod. I've been wondering about this and I need someone to make it make sense. She nods with a curious smile on her face.

'The other day when I was here, you mentioned that we're all different parts of the body of God. I hope I won't be overstepping by asking this'

'Go ahead. Questions are necessary'

'You mentioned that you read the bible a lot. I came across this other video by this guy, saying something about Africa healing itself, hence the large number of people going to initiation schools. He was basically saying that the bible was a tool for colonization and stuff like that. How do our ancestors still require that it be read if this is true? I'm not saying that it is' I'm cautious in my speech and she laughs. She sighs and grabs a cushion.

'That guy might be right, or he might be wrong but the reason that some of us still heavily rely on the Word for guidance is because the people that lead us, died knowing and practicing this gospel. It is the only thing they know. People do not change after they fully transcend into the spiritual world. What I'm simply trying to say is, if your messenger requires you to read and understand the bible, you have to do that whether you believe in it or not'

She's lost me a bit there. She sees this and shifts closer.

'To be frank with you, I also used to believe that all the things in the bible were made up until I was forced to read it in order to connect nesthunywa sam. I have testimonies that God does exist but that's a topic for another day. On Africa healing itself, oh I fully agree. The problem is that a lot of people tend to assume that we're all called to be healers, which is not quite true'

I nod inquisitively. I want her to carry on.

‘There’s nothing wrong with most of the people who are going to initiation schools right now. The problem starts when you want to open indumba when you were simply called to heal a particular ancestor. If you look around, you will notice that most of them are now closed because they have no customers. When you are meant to be a healer, people are led to you by their guides in cooperation with yours. Some of the people who arrive here don’t even live in this province because that’s what I was called to do’

I continue to nod in silence.

‘Sometimes, you are required to go to initiation school so that one or even more of your ancestors can heal through you. Some are called to break generational curses. That’s all. No need to be hosting consultations and stuff like that unless if you do have that gift’

‘Makes sense. Do you mind if I ask you one last question’?

She burps and nods.

‘Why do some people get killed underwater if they were truly called?’

I have a lot of questions but I don’t want to bombard her with them.

'The family is mostly to blame is those situations. When a person disappears in that manner, people tend to call the police, helicopters, and what nots. That chaos causes a disruption that always leads to death. In the past, we never knew where to look when a person underwent underwater initiation because things were still highly sacred back then. Now, spiritual people do things in groups and squads, and they can't keep secrets. Your friends are obviously going to panic when they see something dragging you to the bottom of the water body whereas they shouldn't have been there with you in the first place'

I laugh because I am that type of friend. I would definitely panic.

'But what are we supposed to do though?'

'The family needs to consult with a trusted healer to confirm and put themselves at ease. Calling the police is always, always a bad idea'

'Makes sense I guess'

I check the time. The car is still not here. Kurhula still has not called. I don't want to start worrying because I'm going to drive myself crazy once I push that button. He's fine. I'm convinced I'd know if something terrible happened. I don't know. I just feel like I'd sense it, somehow.

'What's on your mind?' Gogo asks. I chuckle.

'Are you a mind reader?'

She laughs.

'No. I can sense stress though...'

I'm not surprised.

'I'm just worried about my husband. I haven't spoken to him in a while'

I can't help but think about what he told me about Hellen. Now I'm imagining him cheating. Intrusive thoughts of him gyrating on top of another woman are eating at my peace. I don't want to be this woman and I'm not going to allow myself to turn into her.

'You think he's misbehaving?'

'What if he is?'

She laughs and burps. It's a long one.

'Trust me, you would know if he was' she easily assures.

'I would?'

'This journey you're walking requires purity and cleanliness. Your guides wouldn't let your partner jeopardize your progress. They barely stand for such nonsense. Sometimes, you find out way before he even meets this

potential side piece'

I laugh out loud.

'I am serious. I once dreamt of an entire WhatsApp chat between my husband and his girlfriend. I am talking specific details; Paxi parcels and date night arrangements. I woke up and asked him about it. He denied at first and I let him be. The guilt ate him until he willingly confessed. That was the very last time he tried that with me'

I can't stop laughing. My transport arrives and I bid her goodbye. We hug by the door and I leave.

'You know you can always call when it gets too much, right?' she says and fills my heart with absolute warmth. She's way older than me but she feels like the friend I have always silently prayed for. She's a godsent, literally.

...

'You really can't stay away from trouble, can you?' Dr Khoza asks after Kurhula is done with his X-rays and had the bullet removed. He frowns.

'Excuse me?'

'I mean first it was—' she stops. 'Wait, what happened to your neck?'

'Nothing, why?'

'Exactly. Wait a minute, are you a twin or am I simply going mad?' she asks and immediately laughs at her ignorance when it dawns on her. 'Ah even the name is...I'm sorry. Long shift. Brain is currently a bit slow'

Kurhula quickly puts two and two together.

'Oh so you're the reason this motherfvcker insisted we come here?'

'Huh?'

'Never mind. Can I leave now?'

'Of course not. I'm still waiting for your blood and urine results'

'I promise you, I'm fine. I know myself best'

She laughs.

'No can do. You are spending the rest of the night here. Better get comfortable'

'My wife is going to kill me and you'll be held accountable'

She chuckles and leaves him in there. He contemplates removing the drip while dialling Kuli's number. Fikani walks

in limping. Kurhula just keeps his eyes on him, with a tight jaw.

'See the consequences of your stupid actions? Move' he pushes Kurhula's foot away to make space for himself. He sits there and Kurhula kicks his back.

'What did the doctor say?' Fikani asks.

'Your person says I can't leave tonight'

Fikani lifts a brow.

'My person?'

'I'm not dumb. Why did you insist on this specific hospital?'

'It's one of the best. I've been here before, remember?'

'Stop being a stupid coward and just tell her how you feel' Kurhula states through a bored tone, short of an eye roll.

'I am married?' he flaunts his ring finger.

'You call that a wife? Speaking of which, have you told her?'

'Watch your damn mouth'

'Or what? You'll shoot me again?' Kurhula laughs.

'Don't act like I'm the one who started this, and no. I'm not

calling anybody yet. You and I are gonna pretend like this never happened, do you understand?’

‘Don’t speak to me like I’m your friend ’

‘I’m serious. How do we even begin explaining this to people without looking dumb?’ Fikani asks and his phone rings. He silences the call.

‘This was a carjacking went wrong. Got it?’ Fikani is insistent.

‘Ey huma commander’ (Get out) Kurhula says and goes back to trying to call his wife. She answers on the second ring.

‘Baby. Are you okay?’ she instantly asks.

He smiles. Fikani points at him for emphasis. The smile disappears from Kurhula’s face and he raises a middle finger.

‘Awu tlhariyanga weh. Dumb a**’ Fikani slaps his hand away before walking out.

‘I’m alright my love. I’m just stuck at the hospital’

‘Hospital? What happened? Don’t tell me you guys fought?!’

‘I wouldn’t call it that. More like, shot one another’

'Kurhula!

'What? He deserved it'

'You don't even sound bothered by all of this. How is this normal? You guys are brothers for heaven's sake!' Kuli continues to chastise over the phone.

'I'd save my breath if I were you because I'm not done with him'

She sighs and cuts the call. He calls her again. She doesn't answer. He tries until she gets the phone. She's silent on the line.

'Rhandzu ra mina?'

She's still silent and fuming.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula. Why did you drop the phone in my ear?'

She sighs once more. 'I'm sorry but you're difficult to talk to sometimes'

'Let it be the first and the last time. You don't cut the call nor do you walk out on me while we're still talking, no matter how big of a fight we might be having. Am I clear?'

'Sometimes, silence is the best option' she responds.

'Then you politely state that you prefer not to talk. I will leave you alone until you're good to speak to me again but

this business of being rude is not going to fly with me'

'Why are you scolding me?'

He holds his tongue and forces himself to breathe. They both stay on the line but none of them is prepared to break the silence.

'How's my baby doing?' he eventually speaks.

'Your baby is fine. Please send me the details. I will be there tomorrow morning'

'I'm gonna be home soon. There's no need'

'I'm not asking you Kurhula!' she snaps and catches him off guard.

'I promise you my love. There's really no need for—'

'You are getting on my nerves, respectfully'

He pinches his nose bridge.

'I'm not winning this one, am I?'

'There's nothing to win. Please send me the details, right now'

'Love it when you get feisty'

'Why is this even a joke to you? You shoot your brother, he shoots you back. I'm sorry but what madness is this?'



'Why are you so sure that I was the first to pull the trigger?'

'Tell me I'm lying then'

'Should I get arrested at any point, please don't testify'

Laughter escapes her and she immediately puts an end to it.

'This is really not a laughing matter'

'You're stressing my child out over Fikani? That porcupine? We're gonna have a major problem'

...

[KULANI]

I was sleeping in the car on my way here and now my neck is sprained. The things Kurhula is putting me through? I am praying that I do not stay here longer than two days because if my dad comes back from Mokopane and finds that I'm not home, I will have a lot of explaining to do. I find Mhan Xongi in Kurhula's hospital room. She is holding onto a full tupperware – the apparent cause of this argument that's busy brewing between the two of them.



They don't even see me standing here.

'I cannot believe you think I would poison you! What do you take me for?'

Kurhula laughs. 'You don't want the answer to that, trust me'

'If you must know, this food was prepared by Sarah, not me. You need to eat Kurhula'

'You're probably mad that I shot your precious bustard of a child. You're not getting rid of me that easily'.

She gasps and stands there with her mouth pulled open by shock.

'Good morning' I greet and they both turn their heads towards me. He smiles and extends his hand. I walk in and hold him.

'I will be in Fikani's room' Xongi says and grabs her handbag. Is she leaving because of me?

'Morning Kulani' she flatly greets back and walks out. This woman genuinely doesn't like me and she's slowly revealing this fact.

'Come give daddy a kiss' Kurhula says while I'm still digesting what just happened here.

'Never mind her baby man' he insists and pulls me by waist. He pecks my lip and I stand upright, looking at him.

'Please, I don't want to fight with you. I can smell it coming'

'I never said a word'

I indeed never said anything. I can't be scolding him like he's AK's agemate. If he wants to behave as such, I will gladly let him. I am already tired of everything that's happening around me. My body is feeling heavy and that's enough to deal with today.

'How bad is the damage?' I ask. I'm nervous to hear the answer.

'It's not bad enough. He should be connected to several pipes'

'Kurhula?'

'He's fine. He can walk'

'You two are just...' I raise my palms. I'm just glad they're both conscious. I don't want to entertain this little happy feeling on the inside of me. It would be diabolic to acknowledge it but I feel like Fikani got what he deserved. I am human at the end of the day and that facet of me still doesn't like him.

'Let's stop talking about this. Come kiss me properly'

I refuse.

'Tana ka baby man'

This is no time for him to be giving me those seductive eyes. His doctor walks in while he's still trying to sweet-talk me.

'Good morning' she smiles at the sight of this and I laugh.

'Your results are back. You're in the clear. You can go home'

'Did I not tell you that I'm fine?'

She laughs.

'We still need to make sure, even when you feel fine. Please make sure you don't carry heavy stuff with that hand'

I can just tell by how I'm feeling that I'm about to have an unsolicited reading of her. I'm getting a bit dizzy and the voices in my head are speaking all at once. These people are having a full-on, jumbled up conversation in my mind and I can't make out a word they're saying.

'Baby, are you okay?' Kurhula asks, tightening his hold on my arm. The doctor pulls a chair and insists that I take a



seat. I'm not having a blackout this time. That's progress. I am fully aware of my surroundings. I just hate feeling like I'm being locked out of my own brain because at this point, I cannot access my own thoughts and neither can I comprehend what they're trying to say.

'Give her some time' Kurhula urges when the doctor starts asking about my medical history. I raise my eyes and they meet hers. The picture is immediately vivid in my head. There is no way in hell that this makes sense. She's getting uncomfortable with how I'm looking at her. I breathe out and rub the back of my neck.

'What are they saying?' Kurhula asks. This question is accompanied by a shut-lip smile. He mustn't start. Not now. The doctor offers me some water.

'Mabontle, right?' I ask. She frowns and pulls the glass back towards her.

'Jiyohhhh!' I belch and it comes out loud. I hate the noises that this reflex causes me to make, especially in public.

'How do you know my name? What's going on?' she's suddenly apprehensive. 'Is she a seer?' she asks, directing this to Kurhula. I'm running low on strength.

'Something like that' he answers. Xongi walks in and I'm immediately surrounded by heavy energy. I develop a

pulsating headache right in between my eyes.

'Please, whatever you can see, please tell me...' Mabontle humbly begs. I burp once more. Why does Kurhula's mother suddenly look nervous? This has nothing to do with her if that's what she's worried about.

'Can you please excuse us for one second?' Kurhula tries to get rid of her.

'Is she okay?' she asks and points at me with her head. There's something condescending about her behaviour and it's driving me mad. If I got a rand each time I had to keep my thoughts to myself, Patrice would be my ice-boy and call me grootman.

'She'll be fine once you leave' Kurhula doesn't mince his words. She walks out.

I love how protective he is of me. I start thinking of how he naturally brings out my vulnerable and feminine side without doing too much. I am entertaining silly thoughts now and I'm disconnecting from Mabontle. Focus Kuli, focus. She is still looking at me with desperate eyes. Out of the blue, I start feeling like a fraud and an impostor. The respect and borderline fear in her eyes is unsettling. I'm just me, a mere mortal. I just happen to see people's businesses unprovoked and right now she's looking at me

like I hold the solution to all her problems. I know I kinda do but it doesn't stop me from feeling like a scam. Now I am in tears. Kurhula is still patiently holding my hand. Should I even tell her this? My spine starts burning when I decide to hold on to this information. I can't. I'm sorry, but I cannot. If she has to find out then it will have to be from some place else. This will not be coming from me.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 24

'We both know you're lying. What really happened between you and Kurhula?' Tumi asks when she finally gets the opportunity to speak to him in private, at home.

'I don't know what else to tell you. We were together, sitting in the car when some thug came out of nowhere'

'Where did this even take place?'

'I'm exhausted Tumi and I'm tired of talking about this. Can you explain the bags?' he points at the corner where her luggage is placed.

'We have spoken about this'

'You want a divorce?'

'I never said that. I just... I need to be alone for some time'

'Who is this nigga?' he asks and she widens her eyes.

'There's no one else'

She moves her eyes away when he refuses to break the stare. He simply lets out a deep sigh and continues getting dressed.

'Going somewhere?'

'Meeting up with Kurhula' he coldly responds while tying his sneaker laces.

'Again??'

'Need I mention that he's my brother?'

'Let's just hope you won't kill each other this time'

'You care?' he's still cold.

'Bathong baby. You don't need to be like that' – she approaches him and reaches for his cheeks – 'We cannot pretend like this relationship is not draining the both of us. We need some time apart. Things are just not the same anymore'

He removes both her hands from him and walks out. He passes by the guest bedroom and knocks.

'Come in' Xongi yells. He opens the door and finds her in the difficult process of getting up from the floor.

'You pray?' he asks with a sharply raised brow. She laughs.

'Why do you sound so surprised?'

He closes the door and goes to sit on the bed next to her.

'You seem like there's a lot on your mind' she notes.

'Nex. N'le ku hlmaleni ntsena. I'm really just shocked and confused'

She slightly frowns – waiting for him to stretch this.

'I hlamariswa hi yini?'

He side-eyes her and she starts feeling uncomfortable.

She sees that contemptuous look Kurhula tends to give her when he's fed up. He takes a deep breath.

'Mhan' Xongi. I fully acknowledge that that you may not know me neh and I cannot call...whatever your actions were... I can't exactly label them as betrayal. You can only betray a person you know and love; someone you are loyal to' he speaks and rubs his eye at the same time. She fidgets a bit slightly and clears her throat.

'What I don't understand is, why you would do such a thing to Kurhula? You raised him. He's your son. Why would you want to cause a rift between him and his wife knowing very well how he feels about her? And why did I have to be in it?'

She opens her mouth to speak and he raises his hand. She immediately shuts it.

'You separated twin brothers at birth. As if that was not bad enough, you deliberately cause a stir between us just when we find one another? What kind of sick behaviour is this?'

'Fikani, I have no idea what you have heard or who you have heard it from but I don't know what you're accusing me of here'

The silent eye contact makes her severely uncomfortable.

'Don't try and play that game with me. I promise you, I'm not the one...'

'I really don't know – '

He stands up when she least expects it and she immediately protects her face with her arms. He just stands there and looks at her.

'You thought I was gonna hit you? I have no reason to turn out like your husband. None of you raised me Xongi and I'm starting to feel grateful for that. I'm going out. When I come back, you had better be gone'

'Okay, I can explain. Please sit down' she pleads with tears cascading down her face.

'I gave you the chance to come clean. I cannot sit here all day. I have things to do'

The peptic ulcers she's been experiencing for the past two weeks strike again when he shuts the door. She holds and rubs her tummy, trying to calm the inflamed area.

'This had better not be what I think it is...' she mumbles to herself through a strained voice. The pain was gradually becoming unbearable.

...

Fikani arrives at the chisanyama that him and his brother agreed to meet at. He finds Kurhula drinking beer by himself – talking on the phone. Kurhula raises his eyes to him and ends the call.

'You're late' he states.

'Why state the obvious?' Fikani responds with irritation while raising his hand to one of the two waitresses that work there. Kurhula takes a sip.

'Are you ovulating?' he asks. Fikani laughs.

'You're an idiot'

'What's eating you so much that you had to come offload it on me?'

'Your mother'

The waitress arrives and he places his order. They ask for a tray of chops, ribs and wors plus a couple of beers and no pap.

'You confronted her?'

Fikani nods.

'You shouldn't have done that. These witches don't need to see you approaching'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing. Leave her to me'

'You better not do anything crazy because I have already had enough of this family's shenanigans'

'Tough. You haven't even been here for a minute'

Fikani ignores him.

'Why did you call me here?' he asks.

'Nah you start first'

The meat arrives and Fikani opens his beer with his wedding ring.

'I need to apologize to Kulani, properly. She never gave me the time of day at the hospital'

Kurhula tosses a piece of meat in his mouth and just looks at him as he chews.

'I am already struggling to forgive myself for this so can you please stop?'

Kurhula sighs. 'I honestly don't know what you want me to say. It's too soon and expecting me to get her to speak to you is crazy. I would rather not talk about this because the more I think of what you did to her...'

'Okay, okay' Fikani surrenders and also starts eating from the wooden board. 'Where is she anyway?'

'She had to go back home. I called you because I need your help. Nah I am being unnecessarily polite here. I need you to come fix the mess that you caused in my marriage'

Fikani frowns with curiosity.

'Her father took her back to his yard. She can't come back home unless if you go there and apologize in person'

'Why don't you go and pretend to me?' Fikani challenges him. Kurhula thins his eyes and takes a patient sip.

'I should've shot you in the head'

'Relax. That's doable. I'll go. It's the least I can do'

'The apology has a name and a price tag. A Bonsmara'

'Sheesh. This is why men should date fatherless women'

Fikani says and Kurhula almost explodes with beer in his mouth. He never expected that.

'That's dark. Very dark and you're very stupid for that'

'I'm sorry. That just came out'

'I'm just going to conclude that you hit the jackpot with Tumi'

Fikani's mood dampens.

'Let's not go there'

'That's exactly where I'm headed. What's going on with you two?' he points at him with the almost empty beer bottle.

'What do you mean?'

'No man. You give me old couple vibes. Married for sixty years and still at it because she's the only thing you've known and the same goes for her. Pension buddies keeping each other company while both awaiting death'

'Okay fine you've made your point'

'So?'

Fikani sighs and sits back.

'We were honestly fine until she started with this whole baby thing. I've tried to assure her that it means nothing for our relationship but she's made up her mind that a marriage is incomplete without a child. Ever since she conceived this idea in her head, nothing has ever been the same'

'Still. I haven't known you for long but I can tell you straight that the two of you are not compatible. This has nothing to do with your lazy sperms'

Fikani huffs and decides to ignore this comment. 'How do you know?'

'I can feel it' Kurhula jokes. 'On a serious note, I think you should be glad that she's not falling pregnant. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise'

'Why?'

'Your woman is cold man. She's... ay I don't know but she's not... do you get me?'

'Thin ice...' Fikani threatens.

'No seriously. I like the other doctor more'

'Dude. You literally just walked into my life and you already think you know better than me?' Fikani laughs.

'I'm the smarter one, if you haven't noticed'

'Fvck off. I don't know. You might be right and coming to terms with that is messing me up'

'What do you mean?'

'Something happened about... two weeks before our wedding neh? Right now, I am digesting it and... in fact, I've been digesting it ever since I met Dr Khoza'

'Her name is Mabontle. You're welcome'

Fikani chuckles. 'Can you just shut up and listen?'

'Cool. Something happened. How is it connected to McStuffins?'

'I have this friend, Bongz. He has this thing of dreaming of things and they truly happen. We were in varsity together and he'd literally know if a lecturer wasn't gonna come to class. He dreamt of an entire question paper this other time'

Kurhula laughs. 'What are we? Two?'

'I'm not joking. We never took him seriously when he told us which chapters not to study and they indeed never came out. Anybody who studied CS would tell you how useful that kinda friend is'

Kurhula continues to laugh, not taking a word he's saying to head.

'Stop lying and tell me how this Bongz is connected to Dr K and your lukewarm marriage'

'Bongz was basically congratulating me, and he told me a funny dream he'd had' he raises his green bottle and wets his throat with the cold beverage.

'I'm gonna have to punch you in the face if I have to ask you what that dream was about'

'Yimanyana man utan' tlimbhisa hi beer ay' he continues drinking. 'Bongz told me that he dreamt of me standing at the altar with my bride but instead of a wedding dress, she was wearing a doctor's coat with a stethoscope hanging from her pocket. I just took that as a confirmation. Those words came back to me when I first met Mabontle, for some odd reason'

'I told you I'm smart. What did you say when I realized you had silly intentions by going to that hospital? You married the wrong doctor bloody fool'

'Shut up' Fikani continues drinking.

...

[KULANI]

I'm in pain. Great physical pain. My spine is on fire and all of this is my mother's doing. I still need answers but with the little I know, this family will come crumbling down and I can try to handle it but Rhandzu doesn't deserve that. My mom barges in as always and I feel like strangling her. Why doesn't she ever knock?

'You haven't eaten anything ever since you arrived. Are you sick?' she asks. I shake my head and continue sleeping with my temple against my clasped hands.

'Have you been crying?' she steps closer. She must just leave me alone. She puts the tray of food on my pedestal and sits on the bed, forcing me to make space for her.

'Can I be left to sleep, please?'

'How when you won't eat? You may not but that baby you're carrying needs nutrients'

I frown.

'You can't hide pregnancy from your own mother, Kuli' she smiles. 'Ooh I cannot wait. Finally. I hope it's a boy. I can just imagine him looking like his father' she squeals

happily. Whatever Kurhula has fed this woman comes from very deep roots, outside of South Africa.

'Is it hormones? Is that why you're crying?'

I sit up. I can't take this anymore. I wipe my tears and turn towards her.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Who did you find in dad's life?' I ask. She frowns, pulling her head back.

'Who did I... what are you on about?'

'There was a woman in dad's life. You stepped in and wreaked havoc'

She swallows and flares her nostrils.

'Stay out of things that don't concern you' her voice carries a threatening tone.

'What did you do to Mhan' Yvette for her to disappear with a child in her tummy? Does dad even know about her?'

'About whom? I said keep your nose out of this. You are a child. Do not think that we're peers just because we're both married women now'

She stands up and tries to walk away.

'About Mabontle? Please answer me or else I am going

straight to him with these questions'

She finally turns and walks back towards me.

'Yvette left here on her own accord. She left the same way she arrived. She didn't belong and she saw it. That's it'

'Lies! I know that you're the one—'

I am silenced by a burning backhand. I place my palm over my cheek. If it could talk? It would say this is definitely a Beat-Kuli-Up month. She stands there, trying to get her composure back.

'See why it is necessary to grow, get married and move out of your parents' home? I will not have another grown woman in this house'

'Fine. If you won't answer me, I know dad will'

She scoffs and slides both her hands into the pockets of her dress.

'I see that Yvette told you everything but left out a very important fact. You don't want to make an enemy out of me, Kulani. You've always forgotten your place in this house because your father deluded you into thinking he loves you just as much as he loves me. Ntaku dlaya ni heta ni rhila ngaku no fela hi xihlangi lexi ani xi rhandza ku tlula vutomi, wanitwa? The tears I will cry at your funeral

my girl? Don't try me'

'She's dead' I mutter, still massaging myself.

She takes two steps in reverse and marches out enragedly.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 25

Kurhula sits in the car with Fikani outside of Kulani's home. Uncle Wiseman was the one driving the van that had the trailer with the specified cow in it.

'We walk in and I'll do the talking when needed, understood?' Fikani is firm with this.

'But what does this text mean? I read it ten times and I still feel like something is wrong' Kurhula is apprehensive.

'She just said she needs you. Maybe she probably meant that she misses you, don't you think?'

'Then why would she switch her phone off?'

Fikani unbuckles his seat belt. 'I don't know. You know women. If there was something physically wrong with her, I think you would've been told. Her father may be upset but I doubt he's dumb'

Wiseman knocks on the window and urges them to leave the car.

'Don't exacerbate the situation' Fikani warns once again before stepping out. They're shortly given permission to enter. They expected to find a panel of men waiting to make their lives hell. Instead, they're directed to Baloyi's home office. The guard closes the door after they walk in.

'Gentlemen' Baloyi stands up to shake hands with them. Kurhula hands him the Remy Martin bottle and Baloyi receives it in silence, immediately putting it down. They're allowed to take seats.

'Chief Baloyi, Khalanga...we have not come here to waste your time' Wiseman starts. Baloyi looks at him – pokerfaced and waiting for him to proceed.

'We have wronged you, way too soon and for that we plead that you may accept our offering'

'Kurhula?' Baloyi calls and his son-in-law attentively raises his face.

'Then you must be Fikani' Baloyi concludes and Wiseman subtly laughs at his manner of separating them instead of just asking.

'Yes sir' Fikani supports.

'What do you see when you look at my daughter, son?'

Fikani clears his throat.

'I see my sister'

'Your sister? But you managed to lay hands on her?'

'That was a terrible and embarrassing mistake from my side. I promise that it will never happen again'

Baloyi looks at him in silence. He then grabs his phone and calls for Kulani to be brought to the office. She shortly arrives in a flowy long-sleeved ankle-length dress with a doek wrapped on her head. She quickly conceals her smile when her eyes meet Kurhula's. He is somehow assured that she's fine; that whatever was bothering her is absolutely emotional. This doesn't make him any less uneasy though. She lays her mat down, sits, and waits to be spoken to. Aunt Basani shortly walks in and sits next to her.

'N'wa Khalanga' her father calls.

'Daddy?'

'We all know what happened and why these people are here. I am giving you a choice, in front of your aunt as a witness'

Kulani nods.

'Arranged marriages are part and parcel of our culture, but abuse is not. As a father, I was under the impression that I

was leaving you in safe and capable hands. If it wasn't for the nature of this circumstance, I was simply going to bring you back home because no child of mine will be made to be a tennis ball while I watch'

Kurhula sighs.

'Your husband deserves none of my wrath so I am going to ask you this twice. Do you forgive his brother? Do you want to go back to your marital home?'

She raises her eyes to Fikani and he silently begs, more for Kurhula's sake.

'N'wa Baloyi?' her father searches her eyes.

'Yes I want to go back'

'I asked you two questions my angel'

Kulani takes a deep breath in.

'I forgive him, dad. I do want to go back to my marital home'

'Do you forgive your brother-in-law, Kulani?'

'Yes, he is forgiven'

'Do you want to go back?'

'Yes'

'You want to go back?' his tone carries some finality in it.

'Yes dad. I want to go back'

The chief stands up and tells the men to follow him. He goes outside to assess the cow and when he finds it in perfect condition, he calls his men to come lead it into the yard. He shakes the men's hands approvingly and they go back into the house.

'Basani?' Baloyi calls as he takes his seat.

'Makwavo?'

'You have heard the child'

Basani nods and nudges Kulani. 'Ahi famba. Let's go get your things'

They both stand up so Aunty Bee, as Kuli calls her, could get her ready to leave with her in-laws. Baloyi sends out an instruction for tea and a variety of baked goods for the guests. Kuli bumps into her mother in the corridor and the look she receives from her stabs right into her heart. Aunty picks this up.

'N'wananga. What is going on between you and your mother?' she asks when they get to the bedroom. Kuli closes the door and stands against it, contemplating whether to ask her aunt or not.

'Kulani!' Aunty Basani claps once.

'Hahani?'

'I asked you a question' she emphasizes while lifting Kuli's luggage bag onto the bed.

'Apart from my mom and Mhan' Poni, was my father ever married to anybody else?' she eventually decides to ask. Basani frowns.

'No. Why?'

'What happened to Mhan' Poni vele?'

'She left'

'Why?'

'These 21 questions. Where are you going with this? Are you worried that your marriage won't work out or something?'

'No aunty. I'm just curious about my family history' she lies.

'Mmkay then. Your mother is your father's first wife but before she came along, he was in a short relationship with this other lovely lady, by the name of Yvette. Oh, how I miss that woman' she responds happily, borderline emotional.

'Yvette?'

'Yes. She was a Sotho woman, straight from Lesotho. In his youth, my brother travelled a lot more than he does now. Age is slowing him down. That's where he met this woman and brought her home. Tribalism was rife back then so I think that's why she also left'

'How short was the relationship? Were you close?'

'Uhm... I don't quite remember but they didn't last a full year. I'd say so, yes. She was just a warm spirit to be around. Funny in her own way but she was a joy to be around. I randomly think about her sometimes, wondering where she might be. She's probably married by now'

Kulani smiles awkwardly, not wanting to dampen her Aunty's spirit with the information she has.

'Can you describe her? Her physical attributes?'

'Ahhh. The centre of attention without even trying. She was just lovable and bright'

Kulani laughs. 'Aunty, you haven't answered my question. You really loved this woman hey?'

Basani chuckles as well.

I truly did. She was perfect for him' Aunty continues to pack.

'But to answer you, she had beautiful and flawless brown

skin. Perfect hairline, just like yours. You know Sotho women with their good hair. She had a lot of competitors when she first arrived here because we also take pride in the thickness and length of our crowns. Upturned, pure white eyes and full lips. Curvy and thick. I always used to tease her about her stew arm whenever she cooked'

Kulani laughs out loud. 'Aunty what's a stew arm now?'

Aunty smiles. 'That wobbly upper arm'

'That wasn't nice of you'

'You've just made me miss her even more. What is with these questions?'

Kulani just shakes her head and claims pure curiosity. The woman she saw last night, silently sitting in a leaking house while it rained, was definitely Yvette. She kinda knew from the heavy resemblance she has with her Mabontle. She just felt the pressing need to ask. She goes into the bathroom and realizes that her pantyliner is damp again. The fact that she would be changing it for the third time this morning was reason to worry.

Baloyi was busy giving the boys and their uncle a tour of his yard outside – proudly speaking and pointing at his abundant livestock. Fikani's phone rings and he asks to be excused. Unknown number?

'Hello?'

The person is silent for a bit.

'Hello??'

'Uhm... I'm sorry to bother you but I need your help' the lady states.

'May I ask who I am speaking to?' he asks.

'Dr Khoza. Mabontle? I treated you for—'

'Do you honestly think I would forget you?' he interjects and she laughs. 'What can I do for you? You sound nervous...'

'That's because I am. You will think I'm crazy for this but I'm desperate. I need you to speak to your sister-in-law for me'

'Concerning?'

'I believe she has the answers I'm desperately seeking for. I saw how she looked at me. She claims that it's unclear but I just can't forget that look in her eyes. She definitely knows something'

'Mabontle?' he calls when he realizes that she's actually crying.

'Hm?'



'Can you take a deep breath for me?'

She starts breathing out loud.

'Feeling better?'

'No. I won't feel better unless she tells me what she knows' her tone comes out demandingly and she quickly apologizes for that.

'I'm sorry. I'm just... this whole thing frustrates me. It sucks when all you know about your origin is being the daughter of some high-esteemed Tsonga traveller. Where do you even start looking?'

'Have you tried consulting?'

'I am even tired now. All I come across is a bunch of scammers and chance-takers'

'Okay. Let me see what I can do'

'Thank you so much. I have to go now. Thank you once more Fikani, and I am terribly sorry for perusing through your details for personal gain'

'Quite unethical but you're welcome nonetheless'

She laughs at this comment before saying her goodbyes and cutting the call.

...

[MABONTLE]

I've been sitting in this car for half an hour now. If I have to fight with Masedi one more time, I swear I will lose my mind. I reach for my glovebox and find my mother's ring box. I wonder a lot about this. She was never married, nor was she in any relationship, not that I was aware of. I don't even know where Masedi comes from. I wonder if she got this from my father. I only found it after her funeral. She never wanted to say anything about him or even tell what his name was. Every time I raised the topic, she would bite my head off. Something big went down in that relationship and the fact that I may never find out what it is, makes me anxious. It has been two days since I called Fikani and he hasn't gotten back to me. I want to call him again but I don't want to be a nuisance. I have the other twin's number as well but he's not as approachable. I open the box and stare at the ring for the hundredth time. It is beautiful. Logic tells me that if he could afford something like this in that era, he must've been moneyed; someone important. God where do I start looking for this man or any traces of him? My mother was disowned because of him



so going back to Lesotho again will bear no fruit. I need to go inside. I grab my things and walk into the apartment building.

'Mabeauty' my neighbour calls my name as I search for my key in my bag and I laugh. This name is going to stick and I hate that. Bad nick names have that tendency. She's still in her pyjamas.

'Hey Tshego'

'Haven't seen you in a while. You okay?'

'I'm fine mama. How are you?'

'I'm okay. You don't look fine though'

Emotionally? I am unstable and I hate it when people insist in this manner because I'm gonna collapse internally.

'I'm okay' my voice fails me.

'Alright love. Please speak to your little sister on our behalf, please tog'

What has this child done this time?

'What happened?' I ask. I'm already defeated.

'She was blasting amapiano all day long'

All day? Wasn't she supposed to be at school?

'I'm sorry about that. I will definitely have a chat with her'
I assure and walk inside. I almost trip into her blazer. What the hell?

'Masedi???' I yell. I pop into the kitchen and find dishes all over the counter, along with empty noodle packets and their spices. I go to her room and find that irritating 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign. She doesn't respond to my knock so I try the door. I find her sleeping with her head hanging off the corner of the bed. The whole room reeks of weed.

'Hey Masedi?' I tap her cheek a couple of times. She's gotten so high she's barely responsive. I pull her and make her lie on the bed properly. What thirteen-year-old smokes weed and drinks alcohol? We have spoken about this but all she has to say is that I am killing her vibe, calling me a bxtch. I am twelve years older than this hazard of a child but she doesn't see me at all.

'Can you explain to me why you bunked school?' I am standing over her with my hands on my waist. She laughs, with her eyes closed. Her hair is all over the place. I am getting riled up.

'Hela ke bua le wena! I am talking to you Masedi!'

I pull her so she can sit up. She's still laughing.

I don't have the strength to fight this child anymore. She

goes from bad to worse every single day. I have been avoiding this thought of taking her to a strict boarding school but right now she is pushing my limits.

'Hobaneng o etsa tjena? Hoseng ke buile le wena hantle wantshepisha hore otlaya skolong. You promised that you'd go to school and for once stay there. Why do you insist on doing this to me Masedi? I am trying. I have also lost a mother but you're behaving as though it is my fault!' I lash out and remember that I promised myself that I would stop shouting at her. She drops on her back and turns to sleep. I don't understand why her transport driver did not call to let me know of this. I deflate my chest and walk out because if I don't, someone is going to cry and it is not going to be me. There is only one person who managed these tantrums and stunts well and now she is gone. I miss her so much it physically aches. Sometimes I think she overcompensated and accidentally loved me too much. I miss all of that. I am calling him. I pace back and forth as I wait for him to answer.

'Hey' he answers.

'Can we grab a bite?' I ask. I need to make him understand how serious this is. I also need to get out of this house.

'Well...' he's surprised and not hiding it. 'I know of this Chinese place' he suggests.

'I don't like Chinese food'

'Well I do and I'm hungry. You want to see me now and it's supper time'

I laugh. I don't have the energy for this.

'Please hle'

'Please what? Are you saying I should skip supper for you, ma'am?'

He's impossible.

'Okay fine. Send me the address and meet me at six'

'I can do that' he says and I cut the call. He's exhausting. I freshen up and stare at my open wardrobe. A black t-shirt dress and these brown slides will do. I don't have to look fancy for this but I do need perfume. I never leave the house without it. I throw a wig over my cornrows. I am exhausted and I want to come to my bed. Gluing it on is not an option. Shelly arrives to keep an eye on my baby sister. I need to pay her double for today since this is short notice. I arrive at the place and find him already seated. He stands up to pull out a chair for me. I can't help my smile as I put my bag and keys down. There was absolutely no need for this.

'Thank you' I express my gratitude after getting seated.

'I've already made an order. Hope you don't mind' he says.
I'm indifferent. I wouldn't even know what to order.

'It's okay' I waft it off. 'Have you spoken to her?'

'Straight to the point huh?'

'This is quite serious, Fikani?'

'I know and I don't want you thinking I regard it any less. I just... things are not okay at the moment so I need a little bit of time'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'It's quite personal'

'I didn't mean to intrude. I'm sorry'

The food arrives and I move my bag to the other side of the table to make space. I remember that I cannot use chopsticks as he tears the packet and breaks them apart.

'Are you okay?' he asks. I swallow my smiling lips and he frowns with curiosity.

'I can't use these' I confess. He bows his face and lets out a breathy laughter.

'So why do you look like you've just done something severely embarrassing?'

'The upper chopstick is your pencil. This one goes against

this finger but you support it in between your thumb and your index. Like this'

He tries to teach me and gives up on the second attempt.

'Let me make a plan before you break your knuckles and blame it on me' he calls the waiter and asks for two forks. I can't stop laughing at myself. This couple on the next table is laughing at me as well. They luckily have them. He hands one to me and takes the other one when they arrive.

'You don't need to give up on your sticks for my sake' I say as I stab the little stuffed dumpling swimming in soup. I hope this has an easy trip down my throat.

'I have a problem with second-hand embarrassment. I'd rather join you in eating with a fork in a Chinese restaurant than watch you go through this alone. I'm not doing this for you'

I laugh even harder. He is a piece of work. I catch him watching me with this smile on his face. I hope he's not looking to score with me. Married men are the next terrible thing after bread mould. I go through their beverage menu to find something to wash this down with.

He joins me. We end up talking about what he does and I'm taken aback. He's a bit too young to be in property, especially in this economy.

'How did you do it?'

'I won the lottery by accident'

I chuckle.

'What?'

He nods. 'My friends and I used to play this game where one would be dared to do something if they lost. Long story. So, they knew that I had a crush on the lady who worked at the gambling station in some place near the school. I was dared to go talk to her but I got cold feet and decided to make a bet instead'

I can't control my laughter. What level of effortless deceit is this?

'BSc. CS'

I continue listening to his lies and in the process, I forget about all my problems. The bill comes and we both reach for it. He insists and takes.

'I'm the one that invited you out' I state.

'And I'm glad you did' he simply says and offers me a smile. He has a beautiful set of teeth. You can't ignore them. I sometimes think I was meant to be in dentistry, judging by my obsession with people's dental formulas. He takes my bag and we leave the restaurant. He is quick



to catch me when my shoe hits the floor and I almost fall. This is what I hate about new shoes. You have no idea what their flaws are, meaning you have no idea what to expect. This is my second embarrassing incident today. He's still limping. I hope I did not hit against his wound.

'Excuse my French but you must be insane if you think I'm gonna allow you to drive in this state' he says and I unlock my car.

'I'm not drunk. I just tripped. Even if I was, I could still get myself home. I've done it before'

'Weird way to confess to habitual drunk driving but okay. What if I'm an undercover traffic cop?'

I shoot out laughter. 'Is there such? I'd know that you take your job way to seriously'

'You and I are getting coffee so we can sober you up'

I laugh. 'I am tired please. And you need to get home'

I'm serious. I stand against my car and he looks at me, with his lower lip trapped in between his teeth thoughtfully. I wonder what's on his mind.

'What's your escape?' I ask.

'Pardon?'

'When the world is silent and quiet and your demons come creeping up on you. What's your escape?'

He huffs. 'I don't have one because my tattoo artist would be sleeping by that time'

'You have a tattoo? Where?'

'Plural. You need to be patient' he is wearing this daring look on his face. I snort. The nerve...

'Is your twin also like this?'

'Like what?' that look is still there.

'You know what I'm talking about'

'He's far much worse. Beyond redemption and repair'

I laugh out loud. I am having a hard time believing that.

'Mciim ay. Thank you for tonight. I don't remember the last time I laughed like this so... kea leboha'

'Good, because sadness doesn't suit you, Mabontle' he softly says and moves my hair behind my ear.

'What suits me, Fikani?'

'A consistent smile, and I'm gonna make sure of it' he gravely states and locks his eyes in mine.

Okay. I don't know if I'm reading too much into this but I

feel like this conversation is slowly sliding out of hand. I clear my throat and receive my bag from him. It's been a beautiful evening but my sheets are screaming my name.

...

Hello, hi. I translate vernac through emphasis in English because brackets mess with the flow of a paragraph. Things may not be directly translated but you do not lose the essence of what is being said. Happy reading!❤️

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 26

'There's a lot that needs to be discussed, hence this meeting was called' Albert voices and gravely passes his eyes across everybody seated at the table.

'Number one on the agenda: Fanisa. We all know what happened but we have no idea why it happened. My sister has been accused of witchcraft and burnt without being given the chance to account. I am still trying to get to the bottom of this'

Fikani glances at Kurhula.

'She is still hospitalized due to third degree burns and I am not going to lie, it is not looking good'

Sympathetic mumbles from deep manly voices vibrate around the table, expressing pity.

'Whoever did this will be found and dealt with decisively' Solomon states – with his threat-filled eyes transfixed on Kurhula.

'You mean to tell me that you are all prepared to pretend as though you did not know that Fanisa is indeed a witch?' Wiseman asks and eyes start to roam guiltily.

'Wiseman, can you please just—'

He raises his arm, refusing to be quietened.

'What I will not allow is further interaction with Fanisa because it'll seem as though we're in solidarity with her in this whole thing. Fanisa needs to be banished and that's final. What's second on the agenda?'

Almost everyone looks at Solomon for his opinion in favour of his friend.

'Min' languta yin? Why are you looking at me like I have a hand in Fanisa's shenanigans?'

Kurhula sits back and laughs internally but his smile snitches on his thoughts.

'Number two: the mourning period is almost over and this king issue is still unresolved. As the senior advisor, I took it upon myself to go consult'

'And?'

'It's tricky but we will deal with it. Fikani is apparently older so we all know what this means. The goat has been bought and the welcoming ceremony will be done in the morning. Due to the nature of circumstances, it is not going to be anything extravagant. I don't need to explain why'

Silence.

'An issue I am facing right now is that I cannot find Xongi on the phone. I have been trying to reach her to no avail'

'I am pretty certain that Singi knows the tree where the placenta was buried. If Xongi doesn't show up, we will consult her sister wife. Life cannot stop because she decided to disappear' Wiseman suggests. Everybody nods.

...

[KULANI]

'Mandilakhe...'

This is why I couldn't stop burping. He's here. I kinda expected him because the first thing to hit my nostrils when I woke up was that tobacco smell. I can't see him though. I can only hear his voice. It's a strange feeling. It somehow feels like I'm perceiving it through my ears whereas it's in my head. I feel like it's in my head. It's confusing but one thing I'm certain of is that nobody else can hear it except for me.

'You are angering your people and by this, you're putting our child at a very great risk' he says. My heart sinks. I thought they heard my cries when I was negotiating with them last night – with candles, snuff, water, and all. I was convinced they did because that watery discharge stopped for a while. What they are requesting of me is going to crush my father's house into fine pieces. If there's one thing he despises than the rest, it's lies. He always feels like it's one outwardly undermining his intelligence.

'Do the right thing before you lose this baby. We asked for you nicely. What you are doing is causing a rift between us because we want this child to live whereas they are prepared to punish you for you disobedience. We did not put him in your womb for no reason. DO THE RIGHT

THING!

My skin instantly horripilates when he raises his voice at me. Kurhula walks in and finds me sitting on the bed. He's looking at me with suspicion as he walks towards me. I shrug.

'What happened?' he asks.

'Nothing. I'm just not feeling well'

He gets me to stand up and supports me in his arms.

'I can see that. You were tossing and turning last night. What's wrong? Talk to your husband'

I did not want to worry him but the anxiety is crippling my mental health.

'Something is happening and I am scared' I confess. He is not going to take this well. The reason I decided to keep this between me and my guides is because Kurhula is irrational. Once there's a trigger he only sees red.

'Does this something have an existing term, maybe?'

'Remember Mabontle? The doctor?' I ask. I'm still in his arms. He nods.

'That time when we were with her... I lied and said I can't see anything. The truth is, she happens to be my sister and

I can't tell my dad because I'm afraid of how he will react'

'Wait. She happens to be your sister how?'

'Her mother and my father were once a couple. Now her mother wants to right her wrongs and reunite her with her father'

He's confused.

'She's dead. Her mother died'

Now he noticeably gets it.

'Tell him, nana. I think I would want to know if I had a child roaming somewhere out there. Your parents are old and they wouldn't break up over such a thing, trust me when I say it happens all the time'

'You had better not have kids roaming out there only to reveal them to me forty years down the line' I warn and he laughs.

'I wouldn't dare' he swears. I sigh when the laughter between us dissipates.

'The thing is... my mother is the reason why Mabontle mom left'

'Okay that's a bit tricky. How so?'

'According to what I was told, when Dad arrived home with

Mhan' Yvette, she was already pregnant with their first child. She lost that pregnancy a week after being in the yard. When Mabontle was conceived, my mother told her before she even knew that there's a baby in her tummy. She then threatened her to leave and never look back if she wanted to keep that pregnancy. Yvette chose her child over my dad because well... she wasn't one to fight and all of that'

The longer I speak, the more I realize that I am surrounded by witches. It makes sense why my mother never liked me much. While growing up, I thought I was exaggerating and that it was just her personality, even though she was completely different with Rhandzu. Kurhula sits on the bed and gets me to sit on his lap.

'I don't know. I still feel like your father deserves to know'

I nod in agreement. I keep the information about the discharge and my mother's threat to myself because he's definitely gonna lose it. I tried to keep my evil mother's house intact but I failed. I am not going to do it at the expense of mine.

'Let me go speak to him'

'I'll take you' he promptly offers. The first thing I do when I get to the car is to adjust my seat so I can sleep. I sleep a

whole lot more these days and I'm okay with it. Sleep is my getaway from overthinking. I would choose vivid dreams over depressive thoughts any day. Whoever said it gets better after you open your third eye lied. It gets worse.

He gently shakes me and asks if I don't want anything to eat. I smile and shake my head. I have no appetite and I am pretty certain I will have none until this whole thing blows over. In my next life, these people better keep their paranormal abilities and let me be. I am truly jealous of people who just live their lives freely without any spiritual obligations. I believe we all have gifts but having a calling is the pits. Half a star rating, do not recommend. He continues driving until we get to my father's yard.

'I think it's best if I walk in by myself' I quickly say when he unbuckles his belt – preparing to step out. He holds my hand and squeezes it.

'You sure?'

I nod to assure him. I don't know how he does it to be honest because personally, I wouldn't be with someone of my nature. Okay, I am getting worked up all over again and I need to calm down. I tend to get quite blasphemous when I'm in this state so I need to nip in the bud as of now. I am not prepared to deal with the guilt that follows.

'Can I have a kiss?' I ask and I see that smile I love with my whole heart.

'Of course you can' he says while approaching my lips. I make it brief and step out. On my way inside the house, my mother appears from the direction of the kitchen.

'What are you doing here?' she sneers and looks back to see if anybody is approaching.

'Please, I am not in the mood to fight with you today'

There's this spirit of bravery fitting over me today. I am not as afraid of her as I usually am. I am just sick and tired of her behaviour.

'When are you going to start behaving like a proper married woman?'

I almost roll my eyes. If I have to hear her say 'married woman' one more time from here, I am going to lose it. For her, it's the ultimate achievement and nothing can ever top it. I take a few steps and she jumps in front of me.

'Can I go speak to my father, please?'

'Over my dead body' she speaks through locked teeth and starts wresting me. I wrestle back.

'Leave me alone. What is wrong with you???' I ask. She continues trying to push against me and I do the same. I

defeat her and she falls together with her long vase. It breaks next to her and the soil surrounding the roots of her plant crumbles down against the floor. What are those? My father appears at the same time with a guard from outside. He orders him to go away immediately. He never wants people from outside witnessing the stuff that happens in the house. My mother is holding onto her back. I may have broken a few things, including her vertebral column. She will have to forgive me because her marriage is soon to follow.

‘What are those?’ I ask and point to the two soiled red cloths that came from the pot. They are tied so I’m guessing they have something in them. She instantly looks alarmed when she realizes that they are out in the open. My father steps on her palm when she tries to reach for those fastened peculiar things. I wouldn’t want that shoe on my hand.

‘A question was asked. Answer it please’ he says. Mom clears her throat and shakes her head.

‘I... I have no idea what those are’ she lies.

‘Do you still want to live in this house?’ his voice is stern. She drops her eyes.

‘I did not come here to cause chaos but your secrets are

wrecking my life. Tell him what you did to Mabontle's mom'

My dad frowns at my statement. 'Who is Mabontle?'

This wasn't supposed to go this way but I couldn't keep it in any longer. And the fact that she continues to lie with evidence right in front of us is infuriating. I'm searching for what those things could be but I am too upset to connect.

'Who is Mabontle, Kulani?!'

My silence is taxing his patience.

'Your daughter. You have—'

'Hey, shut up!' mom bites before I could finish talking and dad orders her to get up. She doesn't protest. Instead, she follows him up the stairs and I am left standing there.

'I can explain. I would rather you hear this from me'

'You refused to speak' he calmly refuses to hear her side of the story and they continue walking. They continue arguing until I can no longer hear what their conversation entails. He comes back minutes later, pulls his pants and takes a seat. He then commands me to sit down.

'Speak'

I swallow. I know my dad's serious and intimidating side

but this is taking it up a notch.

'First, what did you do with her?' I have to ask.

'I locked her inside our room. Speak Kulani man'

'Okay. Do you remember Mhan Yvette?' I cautiously ask.

His heart just dropped. His face gives everything away. He truly did love this woman.

'I could never forget her. Please don't tell me that this Mabontle you speak of is her daughter?'

His voice has softened. I slowly nod.

'I looked for her everywhere until I gave up. I even went back to Lesotho although we weren't on good terms with her family but she wasn't there. What happened to her? Were you speaking to her?'

I was but not in the manner that he hopes. I don't want to dim that hopeful sparkle in his eyes. I sit a bit closer to him.

'Dad... Mhan' Yvette is... she has passed on' I sneeze after uttering these words. He puts his hands on his knees and looks to the floor.

'What happened before she left?'

'She fell sick and one day when I came home, she was gone without a trace'

'Were you already married when you brought her here?'

'To her, no but I was planning to. She knew I wanted to marry her but she still left without saying a word'

'Where did you meet my mother?'

He glances at me before wiping his moustache.

'Your mother was arranged for me. My father was still alive then but he knew he was dying soon so everything just happened too fast. The thing about being a man from a royal household is that...' – he takes a moment to breathe – 'We don't have a lot of options when coming to first wives. Not everybody is royalty so elders don't have a choice. We need heirs and we can't have heirs with diluted blood. Not that I regret any of you but in my case, it didn't help because I had to get married again since your mother couldn't give me a boy'

Men should start accepting that the fault lies with them in this case but I am not about to have that argument with him right now.

'Do you love her? Have you ever loved her at any point?'

'You learn how to live with your fate, my child. Back to Yvette, where does your mother feature in her disappearance?'

'I will only tell you if you promise to remain calm'

He sighs with vexation. I wait in silence. He eventually nods.

'Throughout?'

He nods again.

'Do you know that she was pregnant when she first arrived here?'

'Yes. I was aware. We lost that baby'

'You didn't just lose it. I was shown mom sprinkling some stuff in her shoes. That's the reason why she had a miscarriage'

He sharply frowns.

'What did you just say?'

'Calm...' I repeat. He forces himself to breathe.

'Okay. And then what happened?'

'She fell pregnant again and mom threatened her. She decided to leave so she could carry her baby to full term. Her intention was to come back but she claims she saw it best to stay away'

'Best???'

'Well, if mom could get rid of her pregnancy what could've possibly stopped her from killing Mabontle?'

'Makes sense I guess'

He's boiling and trying hard to contain it.

'Where is she?'

He's referring to his daughter. Now it starts. I cannot believe I was given the huge task of reuniting a man and his daughter. Kurhula texts and asks if I am okay. I text him back and guarantee him that I'm fine.

...

[MABONTLE]

I have decided. Masedi is off to boarding school. I cannot handle this any longer. Her behaviour is getting out of control and I am not equipped to deal with a temperamental adolescent. She literally makes me hate the idea of having kids. I want one, with my whole heart but with each and every stunt that she pulls, the idea slowly fades. I have always imagined myself as a single

mom who has her own bag with a spoilt kid. I never aspire to a stable relationship because I am a heterosexual woman living in South Africa. The dating pool is full of used tampons, piss, and green vomit. All the schools I have called so far refuse to take her and I am not quite fond of the other ones. I want her to go to a good school because I want it to serve as rehabilitation for her delinquent self. I feel like I am getting rid of my mother's baby but I am emotionally exhausted. I tried and I hope she sees that I have tried. Her shoes are just too big to fill. If I don't do this, she is going to drive me straight to a mental institution at full speed. Right now, I have no idea where she is and I don't want to think about it. The police no longer take me seriously because she always comes back. I am worried about her safety. The streets are not kind and she's roaming them freely like she's in charge of them. A call from Fikani comes through and I look at my phone ring. I want to answer it. I do. He's comforting to speak to but I feel like this is going to spill out of hand if I don't put a leash on it right now. I am not crazy and I am not reading too much into his actions. It rings again. I'm tempted to answer but the voice in my head shouts that this man is married. No. Fikani is a no-go area. I switch off my phone and get off from the couch. As I walk, I remember that my baby sister is not here and it's a few



minutes past eleven at night. I need to keep my phone on at all times. I switch it back on and walk into my bathroom. After catching a glance of myself on the full-length mirror, I realize that I have lost weight and I hate that. I watch myself even more and I fail to restrict the smile that insists on growing on my face. When women's genetics were busy negotiating with that of the father's side, my mom was like 'Not today and never that'. That girl literally said copy and paste without a pinch of shame. Hair? Copy and paste. Eyes together with her lashes? Copy and paste. Buttery skin? Copy and paste. The thickness? Control+v. I am laughing because she did not leave out the round stomach and love handles. I always get compliments on my full legs but that's not where my confidence comes from. It is bred straight from home because YV made sure in that department. Growing up, there were people who insisted on trying to make feel bad about how I look, with some calling me sdudla and the likes. My mother made sure I knew I was pretty and it wasn't just for the sake of it. I am drop dead gorgeous. That woman genuinely said 'I am recreating myself here and nobody should tell me otherwise'. I could never complain, not when I come from such magic. My phone rings once again. Fikani must leave me alone. Men in general need to relocate and find a planet of their own.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 27

[KULANI]

Kurhula tends to forget that I can sense it when there's a lot on his mind. We're on our way back home from the doctor and I've already asked him what he's digesting in that busy head of his but he claims it's nothing. Instead of addressing whatever it is, he prefers to play with my thigh instead. When we drive into his home, the guards flag Kurhula's car.

After he brings the window down, greetings are exchanged and he receives the USB stick from Nyiko, with a curious look on his face.

'What's in here?' he asks, studying the small object.

'I would rather you see for yourself. Please, speak to the boy because he's making our job highly uncomfortable'

I can pick up the exasperation in Nyiko's voice, although he's trying his best to hide it. Kurhula nods and starts the car.

'What was that all about?' I ask. He shrugs.

'I think it has everything to do with the newly installed cameras'

'You installed more?'

'Yeah, in the living room, the garage and the kitchen'

'But why?'

He keeps quiet. I don't know even know why I'm asking because I know very well where this is coming from. He parks the car and we walk into the house. We find the connoisseur of crushed beans having coffee, in this heat. At this point, I am just going to conclude that Fikani is a coffee addict. Him and his brother greet one another through a shoulder bump.

'Hi Kuli'

'Hi' it comes out flatter than I had intended. I don't know how I feel about him and I don't want to overthink it. Whatever awkward feelings exist between us, I am leaving them as they us.

'Thought I'd find you gone' Kurhula says.

'I'm leaving. Just had some paperwork to finish up. I wanna get home and relax'

'Makes sense. Junior...?!' Kurhula calls. No response.

'Ed!!' he continues.

'Is he even here?' I ask. Fikani nods.

'Probably has headphones on, as always'

The little brother appears up the stairway, looking all sorts of moody.

'Why aren't you responding when you're being called?' Fikani asks. Junior straightens his posture and softens his sour face. I have gotten to realize that he's more afraid of Fikani than he is of Kurhula. Familiarity, I guess.

'Fetch your laptop and get your dumb a** down here' Kurhula instructs as he pulls out a chair from the dining table. He gently pulls me by my shoulders and gets me to sit down. I am sleepy but I don't want to be rude. I don't think I should be a part of this, whatever it is that Junior has done.

'What's going on?' Fikani asks.

'We're about to find out' Kurhula replies, while rotating the stick in between his fingers. Junior comes back with his PC and asks why he had to bring it. Kurhula pulls it towards himself in silence and inserts the memory stick. He plays the only video that's in there and I almost go blind. What the hell? Why am I being subjected to teenage pornography?

'On the dinner table?' the annoyance is written all over Kurhula's face.

'On the spot that I always sit on?' Fikani is in disbelief. Junior has no idea where to look.

'Since when do we have cameras inside the house?' he asks.

'You are asking irrelevant questions. What the hell were you thinking? I changed you single bed to a king-size for a reason you fool!' Kurhula continues to scold.

'This is disgusting man Junior' I add. It really is. Now I am beginning to wonder if this was the first time because I have sat and had popcorn here and I remember some of them falling onto here and going straight to my mouth.

'I'm sorry sis' Kuli' he meekly apologizes. I am not the one breathing fire around here.

'What should we do with you?' Kurhula asks. His eyes show the physical exhaustion he's feeling. He did speak of wanting to join me in my nap.

'I'll clean it up'

'What is this "it" you're referring to?' Fikani asks. He now wants to laugh. Kurhula is still unimpressed.

'Everything that was happening here' Junior proceeds

trying to account.

‘What was the reason?’ Kurhula asks. Junior pushes his tongue against his cheek.

‘Now you can’t talk? Okay, let’s watch the whole thing and maybe I will understand why your escapades couldn’t wait till you got to your bedroom’ he pushes the laptop screen open and Junior panics.

‘No! Jaguar please, let’s just forget that this happened’

‘I’m not your friend, Ed’ he warns.

‘I meant bhut’ Kurhula’ Junior retracts the nickname. ‘Now please delete that. Are you sure that this is the only copy?’

‘I’m not going to dance to your tune boy’

‘Haa Bhut’ Fiks? Talk to your –’

‘Ey keep me out of your shenanigans. I want nothing to do with your pxxn career’

‘Okay. How much of it did you watch?’

Is that his biggest concern right now?

‘If you’re asking us if we think you can fvck, the answer is no’ Fikani jests.

‘He’s actually asking if we’ve seen his toddler-size dickenson’ Kurhula adds petrol to the fire. Junior is not

happy with this conversation. They're deliberately trying to upset him. The only thing we saw is his butt in between the girl's separated legs.

'There's no way—'

'Hey, go get some detergent spray and clean this table'
Fikani cuts him off before he can speak. Junior disappears in that instant.

'This boy...'
Kurhula says, watching him walk away. Fikani grabs his cup and walks out. Kurhula offers me his hand and helps me up. We walk to the bedroom and the first thing he does is to get out of his t-shirt, shoes, and jeans.

'Baby...'
I call. I have been meaning to ask him this.

'Hmm??'
he answers, while stretching his neck.

'Where is Mhan' Xongi? I saw how you and Fikani looked at each other the time Mhan' Singi said she doesn't know where your placenta is buried'

The look he's giving me confirms that he knows something.

'I don't know where she is. He told her to leave his house. We don't know where she went but we're busy looking for her'
he states and pulls me into his arms.

'What? And if you don't find her?'

He kisses me. Is he trying to shut me up?

My instincts were right. Fikani is equally a hothead as this one standing in front of me. He is going to be in trouble if she's not found. In as much she's a devil in her own way, she's still their mother and you don't treat your mother like that. Do these two understand that their actions have consequences? I wonder if she's safe wherever she is. He's already hard and he's not going to listen to a word beyond this.

'I thought you said you were tired?' I ask when he lays me down on the bed and inserts his hand in my underwear.

'Tired? Woman, I'd fvck you on my deathbed'

I laugh out loud. I don't doubt that.

'Okay but this has to be a quickie'

He nods, still kissing me and rubbing on my privates. He's not listening.

...

[MABONTLE]

Now that I am no longer in my feels, I regret ignoring Fikani's calls. I have been trying to reach him for two days now and he's not taking my calls. He could be having important information for me. He must think I'm crazy. I literally went out of my way to reach him only to ignore him like a flea. The fact that he's ignoring me is driving me up the wall. I have WhatsApp texts to confirm that his phone is within reach and both are still sitting on grey ticks. I can't see when last he was online. What if he's lying in some hospital somewhere? Or... what if he's dead? Okay I hate these intrusive thoughts. It wouldn't be surprising though, considering his hospital record. He has a history of sustaining serious injuries. Masedi is back and she's not speaking to me. I am done trying with this child because I have ran out of methods and tricks. She is definitely going to boarding school because there's no way she is going to shred her future on my watch.

'Hi kgotsii' Liesel answers my call.

'My friend...' I have no business being this emotional. I am tired!

'Hawu. What happened now? Are you home?'

I nod while wiping my tears.

'Yeah I'm home' I verbally confirm.

‘Alright. Give me ten minutes’ she cuts the call. I don’t even know where I get the energy to laugh at her regarding me falling apart with such clamancy. Please, if there’s one person who would murder people in my name, it’s my childhood bestie. She arrives with a packet of Lays and a bottle of wine.

‘My kgotsi. What’s wrong?’ she asks while getting comfortable on the couch. I am not going to tell her about Masedi because I am not in the mood to be putting out fires of their arguments. I take the packet of chips. I hate vinegar-flavoured snacks but I will have these.

‘When did you go back to being blonde?’

‘Leave me head alone and tell me what’s wrong’

I sigh.

‘Remember when I called and told you that I may have found someone who can help find my dad?’

‘The Fikani guy?’ she asks – taking a chunk out of the packet.

I nod.

‘He called at a completely wrong time and I was kinda upset because of what happened the last time I was with him. That was part of the reason why I was feeling that

way. Everything was just going wrong man' I down my glass of water.

'Are you going to tell me what happened?'

'Well... he said I deserved to be happy'

She pulls a confused face.

'And that qualifies as a violation?'

I laugh.

'No man. He said he'll make sure of it'

'I still don't see what the issue is. Was he being a creep? Like looking at you somehow or touched you inappropriately?'

I shake my head. 'He's married'

She thins her eyes and looks at me with great suspicion.

'What?' I ask.

'Honesty hour. Are you upset because this guy is married and you THINK he was making advances at you or are you upset because you like him the way you think he likes you but he's married?'

'I don't THINK. You weren't there and you know I'm not good at explaining things'

'There's nothing to explain. It sounds to me that you're seeking help from a gentleman and because you're used to that douche of yours, you're automatically processing this as an advance. What if he meant that he's gonna make sure you find your daddy dearest and that's how you ultimately get to be happy?' she asks. Wait...

'Do you think I'm overthinking this?'

She raises her hands.

'As you've said, I wasn't there so I wouldn't know. I am interested in the reason why you're crying rivers and dams right now' she stands up and goes into my kitchen. She comes back with a corkscrew.

'He's not picking up my calls. He's ignoring me'

'Ignoring? You sure?'

I shrug.

She pulls out her phone and hands it to me. I take it and she starts drinking from the bottle – influenced by pure habit. I'm not sure about this.

'Do you want to find your father or not?' she asks with great impatience. I dial Fikani's number and stand up. This conversation makes me too anxious to be had while I am seated. It is ringing.

'Hello?' he answers, casually.

'Uhm... Fikani hi'

He's quiet for a second.

'Bontle...' his tone has lost the little momentum it was carrying. I don't know why this breaks my heart. He's a nice guy and I treated him like a pest. He's well within reason, I guess.

'I am sorry for ignoring your calls the other day. I wasn't feeling well'

'Is it?'

He's driving.

'Look, I am sorry, okay? I was just wondering if you had new information'

He huffs. 'Now you wanna know?'

'Fikani please'

Liesel is busy smiling on the couch; enjoying the sight of me begging a man to speak to me. I am desperate so she can enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime show.

'Mabontle, I get that you might be going through things and futhi nas' twisisa. I fully understand that this whole thing can be too much for one but what you are not going

to do is take out your frustrations on me baby girl. Am I clear?’

I have never had anybody scold me in such a calm manner.

‘Crystal clear’

‘Thank you. Your apology is accepted’

‘So, what did you want to tell me the other day?’

‘I most certainly do but I can’t discuss it over the phone’

‘Is this a game to you?’

‘Pardon?’

Oh please! I am silent and fighting to hold on to my calm.

‘Where can we meet?’

‘I am thirty minutes away from home. I will let you know when I arrive’

‘You want me to meet you at your house? How will your wife feel about that?’

‘I don’t have a wife’

‘Cliché’

This is every married man’s mantra.

‘I thought you were only looking for your father. Why would

my wife be uncomfortable with that? Well, in the hypothetical case that I had one of course. Why are you so obsessed with my marital status?' I can tell that there's a smile accompanying this question. I clear my throat. This is not what he thinks it is.

'You will send me the details'

'I sure will'

I cut the call and hand Liesel her phone. The look she's giving me forces me to laugh.

'Oh my virgin Mary! You like this guy, don't you?'

She's crazy and I am not entertaining this. She will have to sit here and babysit my mother's rascal.

'If I don't come back within two hours after I leave here, call the cops'

'So they can find you naked in his bed?'

'Motho! I am not going to sleep with this man'

'If you seriously don't want to sleep with him, wear period Jockey panties. There's no way you will allow him to undress you with those on'

I laugh out loud. A fact a lot of people don't know about Liesel is that she's crazy and they assume she's innocent.

The first step to ruining my life is leaving me in a room with this girl. I am not doing this with her.

...

I am here and waiting for him to come open the door for me. What is taking him so long because I have already called him? The weather is gloomy and dark. I don't want to drive back home in the rain. He opens the door and I already hate that smile I see on his face. The scent of masculine shower gel is potent in the air.

'Hi' I greet.

'I was wondering what was happening with the sky kas' it's you. You fvcked it up when you were falling from the sky'

'Ah. Cheesy!'

'You have an angelic face. I am simply making an observation'

'Are you alone?' I ask.

'Eh. What do you wanna do to me?'

I thin my eyes.

He gestures that I can come in. I shove my phone in the

back pocket of my jean as I step inside. We walk across the open plan and I follow him to the kitchen area.

'Would you like a glass of wine, juice, tea or coffee?'

'Nothing for me, thank you'

I pull a chair. He turns back with two glasses in hand.

'I never said you should sit, mademoiselle'

I laugh. Embarrassing me is evidently thrilling to him.

'You said you don't have a wife. Who was that lady at the hospital?' I have to ask.

'My marital status again?' he asks with a lifted brow.

'Never mind. Tell me what you know'

'Can you give yourself the chance to feel at home first?'

I don't know why, but men in sweatpants make me uncomfortable. These for me are pyjama equivalents. Guests shouldn't see them and they don't belong in public. He hands me a half full glass of wine and I receive it. I am not drinking any but I'm not in the mood to argue with him. I challenge him with an impatient stare to get him talking. He takes patient sips of the white wine and doesn't move his eyes from me. I crack and laugh. I am truly at the mercy of a childish person here.

'Come with me' he says and walks past me. I am not going anywhere with him. Men who know that they're attractive sicken me because they think they can have everything their way. I remain seated. He stops.

'I am not taking you to my bedroom. Come' he reiterates. I sigh and leave my bag there. I am obviously going to be here longer than I had intended. I pull out my phone and text Lee.

'Forget the cops. This seems like it's gonna be a long night'

'I highly esperredit!' she texts back.

'Nothing of that sort' I return and lock my phone. I told her that the next man to separate these thighs will have to have a special skill. I am done with these diabolic aliens. We sit on the couch and he rubs his hands together.

'Was this distance calculated or you just found yourself sitting there?' he asks.

'What distance?'

'This space you cautiously created between us'

'Fikani, can we discuss what I am here for?' I am serious now. This is my life he's handling with insouciance. He smiles. Yoh, Modimo wa Nararetha...

'Fikani...'

'Pardon me. You're just a pleasing sight to feast on'

'Feast on?'

'No not me, my eyes'.

I snort. He thinks he's smooth.

'You know what? Since you have time for games, I will just have to do this myself' I get up and he does the same.

'Okay. I'm sorry'

He still has that smile on his face. Motho enoa hampone nix. I fetch my bag and march to the door.

'Mabontle, can you please calm down for a second? You'll raise your blood pressure if you continue like this?'

The nerve?

'Oh just cause I'm thick you automatically assume that I have hypertension???'

'How did we get there?'

'Take your information, wrap it in a blue cover and shove it up your a**, oa nkutloa?! Ebe o nkutloile'

'Mabontle please—'

'It will help you to keep whatever you want to say to

yourself'

I try the door and it doesn't open.

'Come open this stupid door of yours'

He inserts his hands into his pockets and watches me fighting the door. This is embarrassing. Embarrassing things will always choose me out of a nation of other deserving people. I couldn't care less because I am not seeing his face again.

'Are you done?' he asks – walking towards me. I wait for him to open. He stands behind me and I close my eyes, holding my reaction in. There was no need for him to stand there but I am going to hold my peace. He punches in the code and the beep alerts that it's wrong.

I turn and look up at him. He tries it again and still.

'I have no idea what's going on'. He genuinely looks confused. The feeling I once got when I was stuck in the lift at work is slowly coming back. I can feel a panic attack coming. I do not like feeling trapped! I coach myself to breathe. He turns me around and holds my shoulders.

'Bontle, look at me. Hey...? Look at me' he urges. I do. I am still breathing. 'I am going to call maintenance and they're gonna fix this, okay? There's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. You're safe with me...' he continues speaking. He

gets my crossbody bag off me and tells me to take off my shoes. I hate feeling trapped. I hate feeling trapped with my whole heart.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 28

[MABONTLE]

We are seated on his cold floor and he is holding me from behind. I am in the arms of a man I don't know and although nauseating to admit, it is somewhat calming and comfortable. My hands have stopped shaking and I'm getting my breathing under control.

'Tell me your favourite childhood memory' he softly speaks, directly into my ear. His voice just rippled down my spine.

'Childhood?'

He nods over my shoulder. I laugh lightly when the first thing hops into my mind.

'I burnt my mother's Christmas cookies'

'And how did that happen?'

'I don't know. I turned up the heat with the logic that it will

make them ready a lot quicker'

He laughs as well.

'And how did she react to that?'

'I was six at the time. She was defeated. She kept laughing non-stop, to a point where she had to pull out a chair and sit down because she legit did not know how to address my thought process. I have a lot of memories but that's what was first in my head'

'She never beat you for it?'

I shake my head. 'My mother has never laid a hand on me. She'd always opt for other ways of punishment. What's yours?'

'My favourite childhood memory?' he sounds surprised that I'm even asking. I nod. He goes silent. Probably still thinking about it.

'I don't think I have one'

'Come on?'

'Honestly but if I had to mention something to save two lives, I'd say the moment I got my first job and could afford to help my mother out, even though it wasn't much'

'Childhood???'

'Yeah, I was ten'

'What kind of a job was that?'

'Moving bricks for my neighbour' – he huffs – 'Sometimes I wonder if he hired me because he really need me or if he was just looking for a way to be generous without looking like he's running a charity'

'At ten? Moving them how? As in a delivery guy?'

'No. He sold bricks from his yard. After he made them and they'd dried up, I had to help pack them away nicely'

'I'm sorry you had to go through that'

He chuckles. 'It was necessary, I guess. Character development typa shii'

Does he ever take anything seriously?

'He hired the both of you?' I ask.

'Huh?'

'You and your twin'

'No. We didn't grow up together. I never actually knew he existed up until recently. Long story...'

This is my first-time hearing of twins that actually grew up apart in real life. I thought this started and ended in overly dramatic movies. He's gonna have to give me more that. I

am not signing up to be haunted by his half-stories and question marks.

'Unpack that long story'

'Ah Bontle...'

'Please. It's calming me down'

'Listen to you being manipulative'

We laugh.

'Okay fine. So, if things went according to the laws of nature, I would've been raised in some place called Mkhuhlu, in a royal house. However, I was the one who was given away. Apparently it was either that or one of us dies. That's the long and short of it'

'Dies how?'

'They would've killed either me or him'

We both go dead silent after this. He's really not interested in talking about this. His voice has died. I am curious why they could not be raised in the same place but I'm not one to trigger people. I think I've pushed him too far. I don't know. I do not know him. I have always found it fascinating how you could easily meet someone in the street and conclude at first sight that they have a pretty straightforward life whereas we're all just walking around

with layers upon layers of trauma, scathed by randomness of the hells of life.

'While we wait for this code reset, let me make you something to eat'

'I'm really okay'

He stands up either way. 'I am many things but a terrible host is not one of them'

He gets up and offers me both his hands for support. I follow him. I sit and keep him company while he gets started on supper.

'What are you making?'

'Pap and chicken' he answers while taking out the pre-chopped cabbage from the fridge.

I nod and sip on the wine that he offered to me earlier.

'So I just came from home' he states while washing the chicken thighs. I sit in silence and wait for him to extend this. He puts the pot on the stove and comes to sit on the chair next to me.

'I went for a consultation with a healer that my aunt recommended'

'Okay?'

'The aim was to look for answers based on my own life but I ended up asking about you as well'

'About me?'

He nods. I don't know how I feel about this. How do these things work? How do you consult on behalf of someone? I believe this is how witchcraft starts.

'And you got answers?'

He nods again. I laugh.

'What game are you playing Fikani?'

'No game at all. Your father lives in a nearby village to mine'

I widen my eyes. What are the odds? I'm still stuck on him consulting on my behalf but I'm more interested in what he has just said. The maintenance people park outside. I have been waiting for these people to arrive and they decide to get their timing wrong. He goes to the door while speaking to them on the phone. They are resetting it from outside. The process is quick and the door opens in fleeting minutes. He greets them in person and thanks them for arriving at such a time. I check on the meat because the onions were starting to burn. She walks in before and I freeze. Somehow, for some odd reason, I expected something like this. Men cannot be trusted and the fact

that I am behind his stove sends a completely wrong message.

'Tumi, what are you doing here?' he asks. She is noticeably appalled.

'Your face looks too familiar man. Where do I know you from and what are you doing in my house? Are you not the doctor that... hayi man ke wena!'

'Tumi' he calmly calls again. 'I asked you a question'

'I haven't been gone for long and you're already inviting whxres into my house?'

He sighs. 'We're no longer together, remember? This is what you wanted'

'Uhm... this is not what it looks like, I promise you. I was just here to—'

She charges towards me and I run round the counter. I have never been good at fighting and this area is full of deadly weapons. I am not taking chances over something that doesn't even exist. Fikani gets in between us and I stand behind him.

'Can you kindly stop this madness?' he says. I'm still using him as a shield. She's livid and if she gets her hands on me, it's definitely tickets. She stops and holds both sides

of her waist.

‘So... this is it?’ she asks.

‘What do you want from me, Boitumelo?’

Can he just tell her that we are not an item already?

She nods a couple of times, disbelief painted all over her face in bold.

‘Tumi, please just—’

‘I’m not interested in anything you have to say. You knew that this man is married aker? Aker? So I don’t negotiate with homewreckers!’ she cuts in while I’m trying to deaden the violent energy flying around here.

‘What’s with the name-calling?’ Fikani asks. He is not as bothered as he should be.

‘Okay. I’m just going to grab my bag and see my way out’

‘You asked why I’m here. I came to tell you that I’m pregnant’ she drops the bomb. He pulls his head back.

‘Pardon?’

She keeps her eyes to the floor. ‘You heard me’

‘How far?’

‘Uhm... I don’t yet. I took a basic home test not so long

ago'

This information has him frazzled. Okay, this is my que to leave.

'I need to get to work' I excuse myself and walk towards my bag and shoes. I don't even look back when I shoot past the open door. I need to get my behind out of here before I wrongfully find myself as a statistic of sidechick causalities.

...

[KULANI]

I keep dreaming of them. The people that are trapped in Fanisa's house? I dream of them frequently and this has developed in me a fear of sleeping. I would simply pump myself with Coke and allow it to block my dreams but I have a little life I have to think of now. I can endure the physical pains. They wouldn't kill but I have already been shown that disobedience is worthy of punishment and I don't want to see how far they can take it. I have been praying over this thing and I'm not getting answers on

what I am supposed to do. I can't just go there and call them out. I have never experienced such a thing before and I don't want to take chances. Things might take an unstoppable and terrible left. Another thing that is causing me stress is that my dress is not ready. I am getting married next weekend and this lady keeps giving me excuses. If this dress is not ready by Wednesday, I'm afraid I will have criminal record to my name. Everything else is going according to plan, says my planner. I want nothing to do with the arrangement of this wedding. I have bigger things to worry about. I have also told Kurhula that I do not want to be updated on the construction of the house. I mean it when I say I want nothing stressing me out for the next couple of months. I almost lost my baby and I'm not sure how hard that would've hit me. If I could, I would take leave from ancestral duties. These people should understand that I am manufacturing a human being here. I used to live with fatigue when I didn't have to share my nutrients with anybody. Imagine what I'm going through right now? My bones always feel hot and compressed. I almost jump out of my skin when I realize that Uncle Sol is watching me by the entrance of the kitchen door. I have been standing against the sink with a glass of water in hand, allowing my thoughts to run away with me. How long has he been standing there?

'Kulani...' he greets and goes straight to the fridge.

'Hi Uncle Sol'

'Where is your husband?'

I'm not sure how to answer this question. What does he want with Kurhula because everybody knows that their relationship is no different to the Gulf of Alaska.

'I have no idea. I last spoke to him in the morning' I blatantly lie. Kurhula is at the office and he should be coming home soon. He nods as down the canned juice. That's mine but I'm not going to say anything. He can have it. He crushes the can when he's done, looking me in the eye. I am looking at him as well. Is he trying to send out a message or something? He cuts the eye contact when I don't relent.

'Many have come and gone. You are no different my girl' he states. What are we talking about? I choose silence.

'This is royal house. Always a target. I know you and that boy you call a husband have a hand in what happened to Fanisa and for that, you are going to pay'

He holds my shoulder and I shift away from him. What did he just put on me? This wasn't an act of endearment. He's definitely up to something. He smiles and nods before walking away. I need a salt bath. This is the first thing that

comes to me. I have gotten to a point where I can differentiate between my own baseless thoughts and my intuition, the voice of Spirit. I go to my room and fill the tub with cold water. I do what I need to do and allow myself to dry. I moisturize and put on a dress. After wrapping my cloth on my head, I sit on the floor against the bed. I need some snuff in my system. I'm used to it now. It no longer hurts in the same manner that it used to. I don't know if I am crazy but ever since I fell pregnant, my dreams and visions have become clearer like my spirits have updated their system or something. I get visions while I am seated and wide awake. I know where Mhan' Xongi is and I'm not happy with the image I'm getting of her. She's sick and it gets worse by the day. Those are not ulcers, like her doctors believe. That's an ancestral fire that's erupting in her abdomen and if she keeps running away from the truth, she will die and that's the worst way out. I am not going to do it for her. It is not my place and I've gotten a confirmation that I should only advise her. What she does after that, is her own business. Kurhula walks into the bedroom and smiles when he sees me on the floor. He's about to start.

'Avuxeni kokwan'

I don't know if he's showing respect or mocking me right now but knowing him, it's the latter.

'I'm nobody's grandma. Well I am, but I'm not' I argue and he laughs even harder.

'Take a decision and stick to it. Can I kiss you?' he asks, already leaning in. I nod and he cups my chin.

'I got the email. Thank you' I say when he separates his lips from mine.

'Email?'

'My student number and receipt of application'

'Oh that. I told you, no biggie'

He's busy taking his work clothes off.

'Do you think that's safe for the baby?' he asks, cautiously. Probably because I bit his head off yesterday.

'It is safe for this particular baby. I'm sorry for how I spoke to you last night' I softly apologize.

'What can I say I signed up for it'

'Marha baby...'

He chuckles. 'I'm kidding. It's okay. How was your day?' he asks as he sits on the bed, after kicking his shoes off. I side-eye him while blowing my nose into a tissue and he picks them up instantly.

'Sorry' he laughs while putting them away nicely.

'My day was fine. How was yours?'

'It was just okay. I've taken the decision to take Mhana AK to court'

'Don't do that'

'She's literally refusing to give me my child. I asked that he visits and she blocked me'

'Don't worry about it. This issue will fix itself'

I don't want to tell him that Akani will fall sick. I'm told I shouldn't. There are some things that just have to happen to make way for others. He will be brought here within the blink of an eye.

'How?'

'Just watch' I burp. 'You'll complicate this further by taking it there'

'What you are basically saying is that I should let her keep him away from me?'

I nod. He's looking at me like I have a few loose bolts.

'AK is gonna come back home, permanently so. Right now, you need to fetch your mother from Mhan Sarah's place. She is dying'

He frowns.

'That's where she's hiding? In plain sight? How come Fikani doesn't know?'

'Maybe they haven't spoken in a while. I don't have all the details. I just know that she's with her'

'What do you mean she's dying?'

'She has stomach ulcers'

'I've never heard of anybody dying from that'

'That's because they're not what they seem to the doctors she has already went to. Please fetch her or tell your brother to bring her home'

My mood has dropped to zero and I no longer want to speak. I get up and slide under the sheets. He's still looking at me.

'Are you okay?' he asks. I nod.

'I'm fine. I just don't feel like talking'

He steps closer and sits next to me. He kisses my cheek and asks what he can do for me.

'You can leave me alone please' I say jokingly. I am not playing though. He needs to disappear. He laughs and gets up.

'At this point I no longer know if it's the baby that's causing

these frequent mood swings or other things’

I choose not to respond. He was about to say something before hearing an uncomfortably loud sound coming from somewhere in the house. What the hell was that?

...

[MABONTLE]

Letty hands me the bouquet of flowers when I finally get to the security gate at work. Is this the emergency? I wonder how much she charged for a bribe.

‘Please don’t chuck these in the bin. I had to pull some serious strings to get them to you at this time. I am terribly sorry for the chaos. To answer your question, it’s called trying to win an angel’s heart. That’s the game I am playing, although it is going terribly wrong so far. Have a fun time installing drips and prescribing drugs

Yours, very respectfully’

I laugh as I read the card that was buried in the mix of lilies and roses. What florist on God's green earth is still open at 1AM? This is proper madness.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 29

[KULANI]

After hearing that loud sound, Kurhula and I went out to investigate where it might be coming from. Junior is not home so it's definitely not him. We find Mhan' Maria, one of the helps, trying to figure out what might be wrong with Uncle Solomon. He is kneeling on the floor with his hand over his chest.

'I think he's having a heart attack. Should I make him lie down? What should I do?' she panics, not knowing which part of him to touch.

'My eyes!' he screams.

'Sol, can you see me?' Kurhula asks, waving his hand in front of him. It doesn't look like it. The heart thing has seemingly stopped. He is now patting the floor like he's blindly looking for something.

'I think he needs medical attention' I say.

'It's this witch! She knows what she has done to me!' he loses it when he hears my voice.

'The hospital won't help him, Mandilakhe' I hear Kokwan' Mavengana's voice. I can't see him still.

'What could Kuli possibly do to you? She was in her bedroom, about to sleep when you started screaming like a goat trapped in barbwire here' Kurhula responds. I stand still, trying to hear what this voice in my head is saying to me.

'Let them take him to the hospital but I am telling you now that this one has lost his eyesight for good'

For good? I know he tried to kill me but isn't that taking things a bit far? I think to myself. He's silent now. I'm watching as they walk Uncle Sol' outside.

'Baby can you please bring me my car keys?' Kurhula asks and I nod. He sounds inconvenienced. I go fetch them and hand them to him.

'He should've just died right there and then' he lowly jokes and I laugh.

'Don't be this person'

'Aiy' he exclaims with irritation before throwing himself in the driver's seat of his van. He should be glad Maria did

not hear him. Next thing, it will be all over this village that I am indeed a witch like Uncle Sol claims. I go inside the house and find that I have missed two calls from my father. I call him back.

'My angel. How are you today?' he answers. This always brings a smile to my face.

'I'm okay, how are you? How did it go with the healer?'

He sighs.

'Marrying your mother was the worst thing I could have ever done'

He regrets saying this. I can tell by the manner in which his voice is dying down at the tail of that statement.

'I'm sorry' he apologizes. This is awkward. They've never involved us in their business and now that I'm practically at the centre of their conflict, I feel out of place. I don't know what to say to him.

'I'm guessing it didn't go well?'

'Your mother already has a target on Mabontle's back. If I don't kill this woman today, I would've failed as a father'

He is furious and busy making reckless statements. He always advises for one to be quiet when they're infuriated but listen to him not practicing what he always preaches.

'Can I ask you to calm down?'

I can hear him sigh deeply. I zone out while still talking to him. My mother is indeed dangerous. I see her circling a grave while chanting in the dark. What on earth is she doing at Yvette's resting place now? I am tired. All of this is emotionally exhausting.

'Kulani?' my dad calls me back to earth. I need to go.

'Dad, can I call you back later? Something urgent just came up'

'First, are you okay? You sound panicked'

'I am fine, I promise'

'Okay then. Later'

I pull out my bag and start packing. This nonsense has to stop at some point. I grab the car keys to Kurhula's other car after changing into another dress. This one is for indoor eyes only. I don't even know where all this energy is coming from. I was prepared to shut down a few moments ago. I need to pack some water and fruit because if I don't, I am definitely going to have some greasy junk along the way, which will render everything pointless. I can only have that after I'm done with this. I keep getting reassured that they're with me and that I shouldn't fear anything. I stop at a fuel station to fill up the tank. I need to call Kurhula and

let him know that I'm on the road.

'Miss me already?' he asks.

'Well, yes but I'm calling to let you know that I'm on my way to go see Mabontle. It's pretty urgent'

'Okay. Who's driving you?'

'Myself...'

He's silent. A fight is about to brew.

'Are you still there?' I ask, with caution.

'Where else would I be? What do you want me to say?'

To be honest, it's quite irritating having a person in a black and white suit tag along with you, especially if it's not a one-day trip. This is an aspect of royalty I do not find cute, at all.

'I'm honestly fine...' I try to appease. He worries too much.

'Where are you?'

'Engen garage'

I haven't gone that far.

'Wait for me. I'm on my way'

I laugh. 'There's really no need for this'

'You're not driving all the way there by yourself'

He cuts the call and doesn't give me the chance to reply. I don't even know why this makes me happy. He arrives fifteen minutes later. Tony drops him off and I watch him walking towards the car I'm in. He opens the driver's door and tries to give me an angry face. I pull an innocent smile and he laughs.

'Nxn. Gets your self in the passenger seat before I take you back home'

I hop out and forcefully hug him. He still has the bored look on his face.

'It wasn't my choice, I promise'

He thins his eyes at me. My arms are wrapped around him while his hands are in his pockets.

'One day, you're gonna clean out my bank accounts and claim that the underground squad made you do it'

I laugh out loud. We get on the road and I play gospel music all the way there. He needs to eat because I'm certain he hasn't had a proper meal since he left home in the morning. That's a bad habit of his I've gotten to notice. His late lunch is on me today.

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[MABONTLE]

I just woke up from that nap that could easily connect you to the Grim Reaper by mistake. I feel disoriented and I have no idea what time it is. I am in the doctors' rooms because I couldn't drive in that exhausted state. I get a call as I'm putting my shoes on and I am asked to come to the gate quickly. Fikani had better not be up to his things again. Lord I can't stop yawning. I need to book an appointment for individual lashes. In fact, I need a day to go fix myself because even my nails are lifting. I pack my bag and take my flowers with me. My vase has been empty for some time. I wasn't planning on exiting through that gate but now I have to because there are people who apparently want to see me. When I get there, I see Kuli waiting outside of the car with Fikani's replica seated on the boot. I forgot his name and I'm not surprised. I'm no sponge when it comes to retaining people's names.

'Hey!' she offers me a hug. I hug her back. I extend my hand to her partner and he realizes that I have forgotten his name.

'Kurhula' he reminds.

'What does it mean?'

'It means Peace'

Kuli starts humming provocatively and I laugh. He warns her through a look, before laughing as well.

'Can we go somewhere where we can sit down and talk?' she asks.

'Sure. I was on my way home anyway'

...

I offer her something to drink when we get to my place and she declines my offer. Her husband insisted on staying in the car and I prefer it that way. He's too quiet for my liking. Quiet people make me uncomfortable. It's like they're judging you for everything that comes out of your mouth. Even their facial expressions can get you rethinking every life decision you've ever made. She burps and I get late in containing my facial expression. Where is that deep and guttural voice coming from? I can't get used to the switch from her mousy sweet self to this sound that resembles everything dangerous in the wild.

'Please don't think I have no manners. I'm not allowed to apologize for that' she laughs.

'You're not allowed? May I ask why?'

'It is not a normal burp. It's my guides breathing through me'

I nod. Makes sense. She does carry this powerful aura with her, especially when our eyes meet. She stares like she's filtering your soul and that freaks me out. I go check on Masedi and find her taking a nap. She looks like she's been doing homework, with her books scattered on the bed. This makes me happy. Okay, I think it's safe to conclude that this is good day.

'Mabontle...' she calls when I sit next to her on the couch. She looks uncomfortable. 'When did you move into this place?'

'Uhm... early this year'

She burps again.

'Did you cleanse the space before you officially moved in?'

I shake my head. I'm not a deeply spiritual person. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know where to start. On a day where you find me on my knees and anything related, just know that I have hit rock bottom and twisted my ankle while at it.

'Was I supposed to?'

She nods while massaging her shoulder. She suddenly looks exhausted.

'The person who lived here died on that spot' she points at the area where my bookshelf is standing. I get freezing shivers all over my body.

'Don't worry about it. We'll fix it'

'Nope. I don't want it fixed. I am moving out'

She's laughing and I mean this. There is no way I'll continue living in this place with this information hanging over head, never mind sleeping in it.

'The person's spirit was fetched. You just need to cleanse away the bad energies. There's really nothing to be terrified of. Now onto the reason I'm here. I need to confess. I was supposed to tell you what I know, the other day at the hospital'

I'm listening. I still have goosebumps all over my skin.

'The reason I didn't is because I felt like it was going to destroy my family. I was selfish and for that I'm sorry'

'I don't think I understand...?'

'You're my father's daughter. Us meeting was not a

coincidence'

I am dumbfounded. Is she serious?

'Who is—' my voice fails me. I clear my throat. 'Who is your father, Kuli?'

'Chief Baloyi' she simply and softly answers.

'You will meet him soon. Things are just a little bit complicated right now. I had to rush here because I need you to take me to your mother's grave'

'Now?'

'No. In the early hours of the morning'

I am failing to stop the tears from racing down my cheeks. I have dreamt of this day. An ambiguous version of it but I have longed for something like this. She leans in for a hug and I break down even further.

'Does he know about me?' I ask.

'He did not until recently'

She proceeds to tell me everything that happened and I finally understand why my mother did not want to take any trips down in history.

'I am telling you the kind of person my mother is so you can walk into this with your eyes wide open'

'How do I know that I can trust you?' I'm gentle with this question. I don't want it to come across as hostile. She chuckles and stands up.

'Your gut feelings are there for a reason. I'll wait for your call'

I quickly stand up. 'Let me see you out' I offer. We find the car gone and she calls. Kurhula confirms that he's parked outside. Why would he go out unprovoked? I am glad it is not that far from here because my feet are screaming at me.

'This is all so shocking to me' I say as we walk, slowly.

'I understand. I'd probably feel the same way'

'But why exactly do we need to visit my mother's grave?'

'A spell is busy being constructed in your name. If we don't, you're gonna lose everything'

I really don't know how I feel. Was looking for him even a good idea? This is why we're told to let sleeping dogs lie. I honestly have no idea how to receive all of this.

'What kind of a person is he?'

'Your father?' she smiles. I nod.

'You'll wish you'd met him sooner. He's supportive and

loving. I have to warn you though, he can be overprotective at times but he's a cool gent'

'How many siblings do you have?'

'I have five, including you. Three sisters and two brothers'

The last part of her sentence makes me feel fuzzy inside. Somehow, it makes me feel like I belong somewhere.

'I have three, including you' my voice breaks and she immediately hugs me.

'Oh Mabontle... it's okay'

Arg, I'm such a cry baby! She wipes my tears with a smile on her face.

'You look like a woman from the pictures I found in my mother's box' I tell her. Her smile grows even wider.

'I have never seen that photo but I am certain that's our aunt, my father's sister. I call her Mhan' Basani. I look like nobody else except her. Well, I look like nobody else. Rhandzu, our little sister, looks like me'

I laugh and meet Fikani's face the moment we step out the gate.

'We need to get going' Kurhula says and directs Kuli to the passenger side of his car, holding her by the waist. She

looks surprised.

'Why so quickly? Hi Fikani' she asks.

'Emergency' he responds. She says her goodbyes, nonetheless. Fikani is silently laughing. I think I know what's going on here.

'Did you tell your brother that you needed a matchmaker?' I ask.

'I did no such thing' he says and steps closer.

'You probably did. He looks like the sane one'

He laughs out loud.

'You have no idea and I do not have the energy to stand here and defend myself'

'You smell nice. You have the same scent as my former colleague' I state and he pulls me into his arms.

'Fikani...'

I run out of breath. I was not expecting that.

'Thanks for the heads up. I'm gonna change it' he says and I laugh. Hawu? He is looking directly into my eyes.

'You're not supposed to be holding me like this'

'Tell me to let you go then' he dares, huskily.

'Mciim' I laugh and untangle him from me. He pulls me by the wrist when I try to walk away and meets me with a kiss before I can say a word. He's holding onto my cheek as he softly sucks on my lips. I'm getting hot. Maybe Liesel was right. I shouldn't be, but I'm deeply attracted to this man. He breaks the kiss and I finally get a chance to breathe. That was...

That was breath-taking.

'Are you not going to invite me in?'

I pull my head back. I'm still smiling and I can't stop myself.

'For coffee. Just coffee'

'What else would I invite you in for?'

'I don't know. That look on your face tells me that your mind is racing in places it shouldn't. I am a parttime pastor ma'am. I do not partake in ungodly things'

I shoot out laughter.

'Wena? Innocent?'

'Listen if sin is buried in the North, you'll be glad to know that I permanently live in the South. Now, coffee?'

He slightly grazes on my lower lip with his teeth before kissing me again. No, he needs to go home. I'm gonna tell

him to leave in a minute. Maybe two...[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o:
CHAPTER 30

[KULANI]

It's a few minutes to four in the morning and sleep is busy evading me. My left side hurts and I don't want to sleep on my right. I turn my head towards Kurhula and I see him sleeping peacefully behind me. I miss him. He's right here but I miss him. He has been sleeping for too long, he needs to wake up. I shift towards him and put my head on his chest. His one hand goes around me and he kisses the top of my head.

'You okay?' he asks. I love his sleepy voice. I nod. He's still drunk on sleep.

'Sure?'

'I just miss you' I confess. I feel a bit sad.

'But... I'm right here love?'

'I also don't know how to explain it'

He laughs.

'You're a demon against my sleep wena. This is not the

first time you do this'

I laugh as well. He can't be sleeping peacefully when I'm failing to. He flips and gets on top of me. I'm joking. His eyes are red. I thought he would be well-rested by now. I thought wrong. It's the past consecutive nights he spent on his laptop screen coming back to bite him.

'Uhm... we can't do that' I stop him while he's kissing on my neck.

'Please...?'

'I'm meeting Mabontle. I told you'

He remembers and drops his head on my shoulder.

'You should've let me sleep. This is an abusive relationship' he complains. I laugh., He's always accusing me of having a high seggs drive but him and I are no different. He goes back to his side of the bed and pulls me towards him.

'Anyway, what time am I supposed to be dropping you off?'

'They're coming here to pick me'

We agreed that it would be much simpler that she comes to the hotel than Kurhula taking me there. The only reason he's at ease is because Fikani is going to be there. He's getting comfortable in their relationship and I'm happy to

see that. We're slowly moving past that horrendous occurrence. We know the people responsible. Holding daggers at one another would display some sort of mental bankruptcy.

I have no idea what is going on between Bontle and his brother. What I have, is a lot of questions.

'Okay. How did she take the news yesterday?' he asks. We never really got a chance to speak because he was too exhausted to stay up. After eating and showering, he fell onto the bed and was gone in a minute, leaving me to talk to myself.

'She was emotional, but happy, I think. It was just a heart-warming chat'

'Who's older between the two of you?'

'Her. She was born in 97'

'Bunch of kids' he snorts and I nudge him – laughing. He likes reminding me that he's older. He never misses an opportunity.

'I'm joking. I thought she was a bit older'

'With that baby face?' I chuckle.

'Ah. I just assumed'

I remember that I had meant to confront him.

'What was going on with you yesterday? You refused to tell me in the car'

He laughs. 'She and Fix belong together. I am doing the Lord's work'

I should've known.

'Who sent you?'

'It's also calling. I never interrogate you, so why is mine being put under scrutiny?'

Kurhula is a menace. I shake my head. I prefer not to get involved in this.

'What are you going to wear because you just came as you were?' I ask.

'How could I not with an impulsive wife like you? I'll see' he says, still playing with my hair.

'How's uncle Sol?'

'Haven't heard anything so far and I'm not interested'

I start processing this whole situation

'But this is going to look bad. He's convinced that I'm responsible for all of this and we suddenly leave without saying a word?'

'Bad to who? You did nothing to the man. If he continues with his accusations, we will pull out the camera footage. If he's adamant, we're suing him'

'No man...' I shouldn't, but I find myself laughing. I pray for the day Kurhula reconciles with everyone in his family. Having this type of 'never-mind' attitude is dangerous. The sad part about blood is that you cannot change it. Despising the one that runs through your veins gets in the way of your blessings. Whether your mother is a witch or something much worse, they remain your parent. This applies to all the other elders of the family. I truly hope his heart finds a way to calm down some day. Bontle calls me and I put her on speaker.

'Babe' I answer.

'Hey sis. I'm about to take a bath. I was just checking if you're awake'

'I never slept but thank you. Let me do the same'

'Sharp'

'You two kinda have the same voice' Kurhula notes after she cuts the call.

'I guess it comes from somewhere. Let me go get ready'

'I would help you in there but you don't want to be touched

so...' he teases.

'Who is being a demon now? Don't tempt me. You need to go back to sleep' I chortle as I get up. I leave him on the bed and go to my bag. When I turn and look at him, I find him watching me with a smile on his face. I wonder what is going on in that head of his. After quickly getting myself cleaned up, I get in an appropriate dress and wrap a doek on my head. I stole this from aunt Basani. Well, it wasn't exactly stealing because she knows I have it. Bontle texts and alerts me that she's outside. Kurhula has dozed off. I sit on the bed and peck his lips a few times. He wakes up.

'Leaving already?'

'Yeah'

'Call me if you need anything'

I nod. He's exhausted and it's showing in his eyes. They're not even fully open. He doesn't rest enough. I hope he will use this opportunity to sleep. I get up and he grabs my hand. Bontle calls – probably wondering why I am taking so long.

'I'm on my way' I assure as I grab my small bag and my jacket. I go down and find them sitting in the front together.

'Good morning' I greet while getting comfortable.

'Morning sesi' they greet back and Fikani gets on the road.

'I hope you don't mind. That place is quite scary so I asked him to come with' Bontle says like she's read my mind. I won't ask any further questions. We could've simply asked Kurhula but I'm not saying a word. I just smile and nod.

'No he didn't sleep at my place' she continues and he laughs. Hawu, I never said anything.

'Right...' I say and look out the window. We listen to music all the way to Soweto and I'm glad no one is making an attempt at conversation. I haven't fully defrosted.

...

[MABONTLE]

I promised myself that I am not going to cry today and I will not allow my emotions to betray me. I have to let her go at some point. She would want me to let her go. I wasn't ready for her to depart because she never prepared me for it. If she was sick for some time, I think it would've dawned on me that her soul is busy separating from her body. She simply called me home, told me she missed me

and we spent the entire day with her. That evening, she complained of a headache, went to sleep and that was it. I wonder if she knew. The post-mortem proved that she died of cerebral haemorrhage due to a stroke. When the anger subsided, I simply imploded and left my pillow wet. The disbelief is still there. Sometimes in moments of excitement, I forget that she's gone and remember after grabbing the phone that the person I'm trying to call will not be able to answer. We are here. Masedi refused to hear a word after I mentioned that I'll be visiting our mother's gravesite.

'I don't think I should come in' Fikani says. I was lost in my thoughts. Kuli is first to leave the car. I don't know what's allowed and what's not. I'm clueless about how these things are done. It's embarrassing to admit to myself that I cannot navigate the necessary parts of life. I don't know our names – the Motaung clan names. I don't know the first ingredient that goes into traditional beer and I have no idea how to answer any tradition-related questions that Masedi might potentially have. I step out of the car and put my coat on. It's quite chilly and I think I tied this headwrap a bit too tight. My mother's grave could never get lost because it's behind the largest tree here. I get to it and Kuli suggests that we kneel. After the funeral, I have never set foot here. She greets and sets the incense alight.

She puts in at the heads and grabs the snuff.

'Mme Yvette Matseliso Motaung. I am here. I have heard your cry and immediately got on my feet' she speaks while sprinkling the snuff. We also have a bottle of water with us.

'I am not alone. I am with my ancestors and your daughter' she's now running her hand on the soil behind the grave like she's looking for something. She tells me to hand her the stick that's next to me. I do as she says. What is she looking for? She starts digging. After a while, she tells me to come see.

That looks like a scissor. She pulls it out. The pointy part of it is wrapped in black and red wool. She pulls the wool apart and tells my mother that she's setting her free.

'Where is that coming from? Are you sure it's safe to touch it?' I ask.

'Don't worry about me. This was meant to cut everything you touch to pieces' her tone is annoyed. After giving me some of the snuff, she pours water and the whole snuff container into the area and puts the soil back in there.

'What do you plan to do with that?'

I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to be asking these questions.

'I'm gonna burn it. Whoever runs mad, can run mad' she throws the pair of scissors in a plastic bag and ties it. She burps.

Now I'm sure that this is not her usual self I'm speaking to.

'What am I supposed to do with this?' I ask when she stands up – referring to the snuff granules in my hand.

'Use it the same way I did. You can speak to her and say whatever is on your heart. Anything, really'

Where do I start? I wonder while watching her leaving me in there.

...

[KULANI]

I had to get out of there. That whole process was draining. Mentally, physically, and emotionally. Internally, I am trying to negotiate and liaise on my mother's behalf but nobody is listening to me. The words 'This nonsense has to come to a stop' keep reverberating in my head. If anybody was to ask me what it is like sharing my body with multiple people,

I would tell them that it is the worst thing anybody go ever go through. Fikani comes out of the car when he sees me approach. The sun is out but the morning cold is still persistent.

'Hey' he greets. I nod and stand against the car with him.

'Is everything okay?' he asks.

'Yeah. Nothing to worry about. I just need to burn this somewhere'

I pick a spot and go set the plastic bag alight. I was only told what to bring but I had no idea what they were for. After the scissor burns along with the wool pieces, I go back. I can see Mabontle from here and she's crying. She needs to let it all out. Nobody can bear that grief cross on her behalf.

My stomach is grumbling and I'm feeling weak and hungry.

'I will never forgive myself for what I did to you, Kuli' Fikani says and I sigh.

'It's no use letting the past hold you hostage. I have moved past that because I cannot afford to carry any hate in my heart. It will rob me of my own peace. Help yourself and forget about it as well'

I can see that it is bothering him. We're only having a

proper conversation now because I kept avoiding him back home. I wasn't ready.

'I hope that idiot knows how lucky he is to have you as a wife'

I laugh out loud. I need to accept that they will never respect one another. I'm just happy that the love between them was automatic, even though they'd both have to die first to admit it. Bontle comes back and Fikani opens his arms to her when we see the puffy eyes. She's gonna be fine. It might not be now but she's going to be okay. I notice how good they look together and I smile inwardly. I am worried though. Where is Tumi in all of this mess? Kurhula mentioned their separation but that's not an official divorce. After watching them comfort one another, I decide not to be judgemental.

...

I knew I'd find him up. The day these BioPlus sachets put him in hospital is going to mark the start of his journey of listening to his body. He walks in as I'm about to call him, with breakfast in hand. I told him I could do with a pie last night and he never forgot. This is why I love him.

'Thank you so much baby' I say before sinking my teeth into it's meatiness. I've been on a fruit diet so I mean it when I say I desperately needed this.

'Slow down' he laughs as hands me the bottle of juice.

'Aren't you gonna eat?' I ask when he sits down and starts scrolling on his phone.

'I ate on my way back here'

'All these pies are mine? All three of them? and this chicken?'

He nods. I laugh. He's trying to kill me.

'I only need two'

'You haven't eaten since last night. I was even afraid you'd collapse' he sounds worried.

I'm still laughing. 'But I can't finish all of this'

'You'll eat to your heart's satisfaction then. Better to have more food than less. You have a spa appointment at one. You need some rest before then'

'When are we going to see Mhan Xongi?'

I have ruined the mood.

'I don't know. I haven't even told Fikani about this yet'

'How about we cancel the appointment and—'

'We are not—'

'No, hear me out. We cancel it and I'll book one at home?
Please...'

I'm still eating.

'Baby, you have a baby on the way. You might not suffer the consequences but think of him and AK. The last thing I want is for my kids to be dealing with ancient things when we're both gone. These things always catch up with you along the way, indirectly at most times'

'Him?' he asks.

'Huh?'

'You said him...'

'Wishful thinking' I say. I don't want him divagating from what's important here. He's silent, hopefully thinking about what I've just said.

'With my calling, I'm putting in all the work that's required of me so that even if my kids inherit it, it does not make them suffer. This applies to everything else. I know you're mad and I'm not invalidating your feelings. Xongi has hurt you and I am not saying that she was justified. What I am saying is, you cannot write off direct family and not live to

regret it. Mlambya please hear me out. Nokombela... I am not trying to go against your decisions or what you feel is right. I am just asking you to explore another important perspective of this'

He lets out a sharp sigh and stands up.

'Fine'

'Fine?'

'You're making sense. I need some air. Please eat and stop starving my baby?'

I smile. He kisses me and licks the pie soup on the corner of my mouth.

'Yucck' I tease. He steals a bite off my pie, picks up his keys and walks out. I'm glad that did not turn into a fight. The last thing I need is him giving me his back at night because of Xongi. She is not worth it.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 31

UNEDITED

[KULANI]

He's back. He looks less tense than he was when he left

me in here. He's sitting on the chair next to the window, and he's not even aware that I'm awake and looking at him scrolling on his phone. I don't even know where mine is.

'Baby' I softly call. He raises his face and gets up to come to me.

'My sleep expert is finally awake?'

I laugh as he kisses me all over my face. I have come to terms with this title because it's true.

I can represent South Africa and win if sleeping Olympics were to exist.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

'I'm fine. How are you?'

'I'm okay. We can go, right?'

He sighs.

'Sure'

'I'm guessing you've already told your brother about this?'

'Yeah I was with him' he sits up and I continue lying on my side as I yawn.

'How did he take it?'

'He's not happy about having Xongi back into his life but

he understands, sort of'

I am not even going to ask what that 'sort of' means.

They need to fix their relationship with their mother. I will be greatly disappointed if Xongi if

Xongi refuses to confess. I get up from the bed so I can go prepare myself. I can hear Kurhula

telling Fikani that he can come. So, they were waiting for me to wake up from my sleep? I took

a shower before going to bed so all I need to do now is to make myself look presentable. I also

need to take my antenatal supplements. When I'm all done, I'm told that the bro is waiting for

us outside.

...

Mhan Sarah seems surrounded by mixed emotions when we arrive. I sense relief and some fear at the same time. It's disappointing how she always finds herself as an accomplice to Xongi's shenanigans.

'Please come in' she promptly offers after we all exchange

greetings. We follow her inside and she starts rinsing juice glasses.

'Why did you keep her here and not say a word?' Fikani asks.

'Trust me, I wanted to but she insisted that she didn't want her family to know that she's sick.

'Where is she now?' Kurhula asks. Sarah points at the room with her head and tells us that Mhan Xongi was sleeping the last time she checked.

'Can I go in?' I humbly asks and she approves. I get up and head into the room we were directed to. I find her indeed sleeping – facing the window, with two crutches against the wall. I step closer and I realize that he whole body is covered in sores, ones that resemble bed bug bites – including her swollen legs. The problem is definitely not the bed. My heart is breaking at the sight of this. She looks weak, even in her sleep.

I pick up a chair and sit closer. She turns towards me and coughs.

'Kuli...' she calls, with a slight frown on her face.

'Mhan' Xongi...'

She tries to sit up and I insist that she continues lying

down. She fully turns in my direction instead and lies on her side. I don't understand the look in her eyes.

'You look beautiful' – she coughs once again – 'You don't just look beautiful. You are beautiful' she randomly compliments and catches me off guard.

'Uhm... thank you'

She weakly smiles.

'You remind me so much of myself. I was so innocent and naïve when I got married off to Edward' she starts reminiscing. Is she trying to say I'm gullible or am I being slow?

'I was so young. I was seventeen at the time. He was older but extremely charming and gentle with me at first. I honestly cannot tell you where it all went wrong'

I don't find this surprising. Sometimes I feel like I am a walking oxymoron. People have a tendency of not liking me at first sight for no reason at all but at the same time, they tend to feel very comfortable with sharing their business with me – even strangers. So, I don't find her immediate ramblings strange at all. I'd make a bloody good detective.

'I experienced my first slap from him after a month of being married to him. Lydia was there and the first thing

she said was to leave him. She wasn't afraid of him like the rest of us' she laughs. Why do I feel like Xongi is sure that she's dying? I have never imagined her speaking about Lydia in a good light. This is like listening to Fanisa admiring Aunt Lee's fashion sense or something of that quality. She sighs. This honestly not how I expected this to go.

'There was no way I would allow myself to be a return soldier. I wasn't the first woman to be beaten by her husband and I was certainly not the last'

She goes quiet after this.

'Do you regret it?'

She raises her eyes at me.

'Staying through the abuse. Do you regret it?'

'He killed my child, Kulani. Do you understand how strong you have to be to continue sharing a bed with a bed of that beastly nature?'

I go quiet.

'Please open these windows' she asks. I get up and do as requested of me.

'She was beautiful. I named her Masana, meaning sunrays. Till this day, I still hear her cry like it was just yesterday

when she was being suffocated to death by her own father' the tears finally drop and instantly get absorbed by the white pillow cover. Something is missing from her character. Xongi always carries around this majestic energy that introduces her place in the royal homestead without her having to say it out loud. Those were my first impressions of her. It's like she's already given up.

'He pulled her off my nipple like he was grabbing an empty water bottle. That man looked me dead in the eye and told me that I have a rotten and cursed womb'

Yoh...

I extend my hand and hold hers.

'I did not come by myself' I inform.

'I can hear their voices' she says.

'Can I help you get dressed?' I offer and she nods. She needs some fresh air and this whole room smells of disease. It's weighing me down. She shows me where to find a comfortable dress and I help her get in it. I hand her the crutches and she walks ahead of me. When we appear, Mhan' Sarah tells us that her garden needs some attention. Kurhula stands up when he sees Xongi. She is really not in a good state. Fikani remains seated. He helps her get seated on the couch. He's trying to mask the heartbreak

but I think I can say I know him. He's not okay. Those few steps drained the life out of her. We're all waiting for her to catch her breath.

'I'm sorry...' that's the first thing she says after getting her breathing under control. They both insist on not making eye contact with her.

'I shouldn't have allowed myself to be Fanisa's pawn'

These men are still silent.

'Let me start with you, Kurhula' – she coughs – 'Everything you have watched me experience was not for eyes of your age at the time. I understand your anger, trust me. I remember all the times you have begged me to leave, with you. I cannot undo anything of the past. The only thing I can do... is try make things right because I no longer have any time left'

She wipes her tears with the back of her hand. Kurhula sits back on the couch. I feel like he's been waiting to hear these words. I don't know. Like he's finally receiving the apology he never thought he'd ever get.

'Fikani...' she clears her throat. 'I named you after your grandfather and you went to copy everything he was in terms of his calm demeanour' she beams. He doesn't return the smile.

'I had to give you away. I had no choice my boy...'

'I am over that' he interjects.

'Please let me finish'

He holds his tongue.

'When you came back home, that was supposed to be the happiest moment of my life. It truly was but I had to go mess it up. That's what I was always do. Maybe I was not meant to be a mother but in all that I have done, I humbly ask for you forgiveness. I would kneel in front of you both but you can all see that it would be take a couple of years to get up' she laughs at her own joke.

'You can still fix this by coming back home. I need you for my ceremony to go well'

'That will not be possible'

Xongi starts looking uneasy. Fikani impatiently drops his hands, like he's not surprised that she doesn't agree.

Kurhula stands up and Fikani picks up his car keys.

'Can you both please calm down?' They're forcing me to speak.

'Let's go' Kurhula says to me. I beg with my eyes. He's not having it. He shakes his head and continues waiting for me to take his hand.

'I'll follow after you'

He rolls his upper lip and looks at me. He's irritated. Fikani has already walked out of the house. He follows him. Xongi looks away when I turn towards her.

'This is not the end of you. You know that, right?'

She still refuses to pay attention. Luckily for me, ears don't have lids so I will continue to speak. She will listen even if she doesn't want to.

'Are you not tired of this back and forth between you and your sons? Let us go home. All you need to do is confess to what you have done and all of this will be over. You will be healthy like you had never fallen sick'

'Confess what? I already have'

'I am not talking about Fanisa's love portion. I am talking about what happened between you and your husband the day he died'

She widens her eyes.

'What are you talking about?'

'Kurhula already knows. He just hasn't mentioned it because he doesn't care about his father, he never did. All because of the things he had to witness him do to you. That's not enough? It's not enough to tell you how much

he loves you even though you never choose him?’

Now why am I crying? I need to calm down. Xongi is covered in shame.

‘I can say the same thing about Fikani. You never choose him as well and you’re surprised that he’s acting the way he is? Now he needs you. He might not say it but he needs you desperately so. You’re his mother but you’re prepared to sit here and die instead of fixing his life? One you’re responsible for the state it is in right now?’

‘You’re still my daughter-in-law. Don’t scold me like you’re talking to your peer’

I’m forced to pull in some air.

‘I am sorry. I did not mean any disrespect. I am just begging you to come back home. Please stop abusing Mhan’ Sarah’s kindness. Come back home, tell the elders that you killed your husband and do the ceremony that’s required of you. That’s all’

‘Those people are going to burn me, just like they did to Fanisa’

‘The worst the family can do is to tell you to leave but in this case, they need you just as much as you need them. They need a king. Things are stagnant because your husband is stubborn and spiteful. I am begging you for the

last time'

She's thinking about it. That's something, I guess.

...

[MABONTLE]

I am in the car with Kuli and her husband. My father is expecting me and I am nervous like I'm on my way to an interview. My father? The sound of this is a little bit weird in my head. We have been on the road for some time now, my butt is starting to hurt. Kuli is sleeping in the reclined front seat and I'm seating behind Kurhula. She was the one who was holding the conversation in the car and now we're just listening to music. Masedi blatantly refused to come with and told me that I am shoving my 'deadbeat dad' in her face. When it comes to leaving me speechless, she never misses. These chips have gone cold because I have lost my appetite.

'We're here' he says after pulling the car to a stop. Kuli wakes up and stretches her arms. She looks back at me and squeezes my hand. Her husband is now talking to the

guards at the gate.

'Why do you look so lost?' she laughs. I chuckle as well. I didn't mean to. I'm just extremely nervous, that's all. The clouds are dark and it's already drizzling. I don't know if I am overthinking this but every time I'm with her, the weather misbehaves. We drive in and Kuli is the first one out of the car. The chief comes out of the house and hugs his daughter. Kurhula opens the door for me and I remember that I was supposed to step out as well. He's trying not to laugh at me. The chief looks at me and I see warmth on his face. He opens his arms for me and I walk towards him.

'Finally' he says in a low tone when he wraps his hands around me.

I am not gonna cry. I am not gonna cry. I am not gonna...

Too late. He's rubbing my back now and I'm getting hysterical. I feel a tear drop on top of my head. We both seem to have forgotten that we're standing in a threatening rain.

'Come greet you sister' I hear Kuli yell and we break the hug. I see the girl that looks like her standing by the door, with folded arms. She doesn't look happy. She turns back into the house and I feel my heart drop.

'Don't mind her' Kuli says. Chief Baloyi remembers to greet Kurhula and apologizes for being rude. Kurhula laughs it off and assures him that he understands.

'You look just like your mother' Ntate Baloyi says to me. My shyness forces me to drop my eyes even further.

'Please, come in' he offers.

'I need to go back home' Kurhula alerts.

'Can I stay for the night?' Kuli asks.

'You sure?'

Kurhula looks worried. She nods. When Chief Baloyi turns to leave, Kuli steals a kiss from her husband and I laugh. She's so cute. Motho ke gone girl. Our bags are taken out of the boot before the car leaves. Dad is making small talk as we walk inside the house – holding both our hands. I have so many questions I am yearning to ask him. The rain is starting to pour. Kuli shows me to the guest bedroom and I finally get the chance to ask where her mother is. She is the main reason I am feeling so apprehensive.

'She's not here don't worry' she assures and sits on the bed. My heart almost stops when lightening strikes right in front of her. She's also terrified.

'Are you okay?' I ask. She slowly nods. She's still frozen

with shock. When she finally processes what just happened, she stands up.

'We can't sleep here. Let's go' she says – in a hurry.

...

[KULANI]

I had no choice but bring Mabontle here. Dad had no choice but to understand but he heard that loud thunder. They did not get the chance to bond but we will see to all of that in the morning. I have started a war with my own mother and I'm not sure if I will laugh last. Listen to me already allowing doubt to fill my heart. I am still traumatized. Junior is keeping my sister company in the living room. I find Kurhula sleeping with his t-shirt off and I sit on the bed. My life just flashed right in front of me and I am struggling to be okay.

'Baby? Are you okay?' he asks. I shake my head. He comes to stand in front of me.

'Talk to me'

'I almost got hit by lightning' I laugh. I am definitely not amused by any of this. He frowns.

'What? Are you serious?'

I nod.

'I'm just not sure if it was meant for me or Mabontle but yeah. That's what happened'

'And where is she?'

'She's here'

He envelopes me in the warmest hug. He really does not know what to say but this is enough.

'Are you sure you're completely okay? Physically?'

I nod.

'I feel we need to consult'

'I told you I don't do well with traditional healers. I will be fine'

He continues hugging me for a while, I end up feeling like I'm falling asleep in his hands.

'Let me go check on Bontle before I take a bath'

I am so drained I am partially failing to carry myself. I show him that because he'll just conclude that I'm sick. He

gets dressed and we walk out. We bump into Aunty Lydia in the corridor and she excitedly offers me a hug. I will conclude that she and Kurhula have already greeted each other.

'Is this the wedding glow or are we baking something in the oven?' she's says with suspicion.

'Aunty, leave my wife alone' Kurhula bails me out.

'Speaking of the wedding, how far? Can we see the dress?' she repeatedly snaps her fingers. She's reviving my stress.

'The lady called me yesterday and said she just got the material that I wanted'

'What???' she's astonished. I pucker my lips and nod. I'm so used to my things not going the way they're supposed to. This doesn't shock me.

She gasps. 'Did you go to those backstreet immigrants?'

'No. She's a well-known wedding-dress maker'

'Malays and The Dress?'

I nod.

'For someone with such a huge business, she sure has a small brain. Kurhula, fetch me my car keys. She and I are going to spend the whole night making that dress!'

Kurhula is just standing there scratching his brow with a smile on his face, instead of stopping his aunt. She is going to get there and bulldoze the dressmaker. I don't want my dress arriving here with tear stains.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 32

[MABONTLE]

For the very first time after her soul left her body, I dreamt of my mother's smile. This is confirmation for me that I am not lost. I am indeed at home. I might not be at my father's premises for step-motherly-witchcrafty reasons but I am home. The issue with the lightening bolt is still untouched. Kuli organized one of the driver's to chauffeur me around. She still looks a bit shaken and I don't want to stretch her already frail nerves.

I have a date with my father. The road to the mall is a little bit tedious because I'm used to being five minutes away from everything. I am not complaining. I am trying not to. I appreciate the fresh air and the change of scenery. Trying to reach Masedi is genuinely wasted effort. She always has her phone in her hand so I know for a fact that she is ignoring me.

I find him already seated and having coffee with two of his guards behind him. There's nothing I can do about it but the attention he attracts makes me a bit uncomfortable because it's now contagious. He gets up and offers me a hug. He's such a warm individual, man. I always wonder why the sweetest men usually end up with hex experts or generally unpleasant people.

He holds my hands and looks me in the eye, then hugs me again.

'You're an exact copy of her' he says. He's telling me this for the second time.

I smile.

'I've heard...' I awkwardly respond. I don't know what else to say. I don't think either of us knows what to do, or what exactly to say.

'Would you like some ice cream?'

I laugh at how random this is and how sincere it sounds. He shrugs innocently as I laugh.

'You can have whatever you want. I'll pay'

My head falls to the side as I contemplate this with a smile.

'You know what? I actually do want some ice cream. Let's add some waffles to that'

He's quick to call a waiter to our table after I confirm. I never thought that I would be having ice cream with my father at nine in the morning. I don't even like ice cream but I am not going to tell him that. I will start liking it today. Maybe it might even be our 'thing' from now on.

'How did you and my mother meet?' I ask after I get comfortable. His eyes immediately brighten up. If he tells me that she was the love of his life, how can I argue after experiencing that – just from the mere mention of her name?

'It was all by pure happenstance to be honest' he starts. 'I was in Lesotho because my father had some business acquaintances that side. Her father was one of them, begrudgingly. She interrupted the meeting wanting to speak to him about something urgent and that's when she stole my heart. I couldn't act on it because he was obviously going to step on my throat'

I chuckle at how he says this. I know nothing about my mother's side of the family. Asking her about her past was no different to kicking a hornet's nest. That was the one thing that was a definite mood-killer for her, and ultimately everybody else. I wish I had been stubborn and pestered her about it. Who knows? Maybe she would've cracked. Maybe violently but as a consequence, I wouldn't be in the

dark. I believe there are some questions that only she would've been able to answer in-depth, but instead, she chose to take everything to the grave. The deathbed has a special skill and tendency of getting patients to confess to spine-chilling skeletons but it definitely bowed to my mother.

'And then what happened?' I prod. Theirs sound like your common forbidden love trope.

'I bumped into her at a convenience store later on that day and I knew that the opportunity couldn't pass me by'

'You sound like you were confident she would be yours' I tease as I eat the dessert we ordered for breakfast. He laughs.

'Well... your father did know his way around the ladies' hearts'

A loud cackle escapes me. If he wasn't my dad I would say he's one of those arrogant bastards who think they can get away with everything based on their looks and their pockets but because he is my father, I will pretend that this thought never left its prints on my mind.

The shared laughter soon evaporates and I start thinking.

'Dad?' I call.

'Yes?'

'Would it be an overstep if I asked you to take me there?'

'Where? Lesotho?' he raises a brow. I start feeling nervous but I nod, regardless.

'We didn't separate on a sweet note but I do understand why you would want to go. I will do right by you' he affirms with a squeeze of my hand. There's a crazy thought at the back of my head. I keep thinking that the passer-by's here must have concluded that he is my sugar daddy. I've never had a dad. He is brand new, so I don't know how to act or even feel around him. But I know what it's like having a sugar daddy, although it was never for the sugar. In fact, it was quite a bitter experience.

We are both avoiding the elephant in the room, the same way Kuli and I are successfully doing.

'Let's talk about you. How was your childhood like?'

Is he asking what it was like being raised by a single parent? I laugh internally at my silliness. Thank God for the inner voice. If we could access each other's thoughts, a lot of relationships would be non-existent. I need some water to wash down all this sugar coating my throat.

'Uhm... my childhood was fine, I guess. We were poor but I don't remember going to bed hungry'

The expression on his face tells me that his heart just dropped. My mother has her own set of mistakes like everybody else on this hypocritic planet but if there's one thing I wouldn't fault her for, it would be loving her kids. She worked too hard for us to have everything we needed. Most of my wants went ignored to a point where I grew the intelligent muscle of keeping them to myself. I remember when I was transitioning from primary to high school. That was an eye-opening moment for me because I had to choose silence. I couldn't tell her that there was a theme for the farewell party because I knew it would cause her stress. Anything that had to do with school, she always prioritized. However, I had to grow up at that point and realize that festivities did nothing for my future. That was my life from there on. Even in varsity, I still had to choose silence. There's a lot of things that my body had to pay for that she never found out about and I'm not talking about lux bags and insta-worthy vacations. This body had to pay for my registration, fees, and accommodation during my first year because I refused to let the lack of privilege get in the way of my dream. I only secured funding from my second year.

'Sweetheart?' he calls.

'Hm?'

I was kinda lost there for a moment. I've come a long way.

'I said I'm really sorry that I could not be there for you'

We're still holding hands.

'It's okay. It is no one's fault'

I am blatantly lying. We both know who to blame. Anyway, I need a dress for Kuli's wedding and he's coming shopping with me.

...

[Narrated]

After Kuli leaves, Fikani budes into Kurhula's room and finds him reluctantly putting on a shirt.

'Hurry the fvck up' Fikani urges. 'And change that t-shirt. We're not going to match like we're two-year olds'

Kurhula laughs. They were both wearing white tees on black pants and black sneakers. Kurhula shrugs and opts for a black one instead.

'Where is this bachelor party being hosted? I'm too

exhausted for this shxt'

'Your friend just told me to make sure that you arrive. You don't look excited. In fact, you look like a zombie'

'The fvck I'm not. I specifically told Khalanga that I don't want this but him being the fool that he is, he just had to go ahead and do it. Fatigue has me by the bxxlz. I was really planning on sleeping tonight'

'Cool then we won't stay long. I'll make sure of it' Fikani assures and picks up Kurhula's phone and wallet for him. They get into his car and he drives out of the open garage.

'Don't tell me you're part of the I-know-my-car squad' Kurhula says, noting the fuel. Fikani chuckles.

'I do know my car'

'I'm not getting stuck with you in the middle of nowhere. Take this route. It'll get us to the gas station faster'

Fikani chooses not to argue and they indeed get to an Engen. He leaves the car with the intention of buying an energy drink for the zombie he's travelling with. Kurhula opens the glove box looking for a charging cable and what he finds in there leaves him maddened than surprised. Fikani comes back and hands him the cold can. Kurhula just stares at him.

'For how long are you planning to sulk like this? We can go back home and I'll tell Khalanga that you caught a bug or something'

'You take drugs?' Kurhula asks. Fikani sharply frowns.

'What?'

'I don't stutter'

'What is this bag of cocaine doing in your car?'

'I will answer that question after you explain why you're snooping around in my car'

'I'm not going to ask you this question again mate'

Fikani loudly exhales and sits back against his seat. Kurhula does the same in an attempt to calm down. Then silence ensues.

'I'm not going to lie. I'm very disappointed in you. Not that I ever expect anything applaudable from you but drugs?'

'Kurhula, I'm not a user dammit. That wasn't supposed to be in there. There was a miscount and it had to be taken out of the batch'

Kurhula lifts a brow as he processes this.

'Wait a minute. You're a dealer?'

'Too many questions' Fikani attempts to retreat from the

conversation and starts the car.

'Motherfvcker?'

Out of acute irritation, Fikani stops the car abruptly.

'Kurhula, how exactly do you think I got this far without a trust fund?'

He quickly reminds himself to breathe. That just came out. He wasn't willing to have one of these arguments ever again.

'Are you gonna blame everything on your upbringing? You're driving around with this thing in your car. I'm not defending you once you get arrested'

'You very much will' he returns and they simultaneously shoot out laughter.

'Fool. Get this thing out of here before it lands you in trouble'

...

[KULANI]

The nerves are only gripping me by the throat now. I have known about this day ever since it began approaching but I'm only starting to feel overwhelmed right now, the day before my big day. I am supposed to be at home but instead, I am booked into a guesthouse with my newly found sister. Aunty Basani left a couple of hours ago. Being at loggerheads with my direct relatives has lead me to doing things in an unconventional way. Rhandzu is supposed to be here but her phone has since been off. I think I know why. She has chosen a side. She chose her mother and I wouldn't be surprised if she has already been poisoned against me. They've always been close. Sometimes I would feel like I was the odd one out. Mabontle keeps telling me that we're in the same boat. There's a funny and peculiar method to this life thing. It's the random backflips it does that always get me feeling there's a genius behind all of this madness. My mother's power lies in the things she's been planting in that yard for all these years. I am not going to play into her territory. She meant it when she promised to kill me and if I don't do away with her first, she's going to finish me. Last night, I was shown the old man who is supposed to teach me traditional herbs and bulbs. It's going to be a slightly expensive process but it has to be done. My application has been successful and I don't know how to feel. I was

somehow expecting an 'We regret to inform you...' email. I've learnt to let go of expectations. I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing but being numb is always better than getting your heartbroken each time things don't go your way. I left Mabontle sleeping in the bed. I am seated on the floor. Musa is calling me. It had better be serious because people who call at ungodly hours tend to make me anxious. My first thought is always that someone might have died.

'Hey?' I answer.

'Hello sesi...'

'Are you okay?'

'There's people here'

'People?'

Why is she reluctant to speak?

'Musa?'

'People arrived here saying they're here to introduce a child'

'Whose child?'

'Kurhula's'

The same Kurhula I'm supposed to be getting married to?

Also, who does such things at this time? It's one in the bloody morning.

'Where is he?'

'He's not here but Uncle Simon insists that these people sleep here. I just thought you would want to know'

Mabontle is looking at me with sleepy eyes. I thank Musa for the call and drop the line.

'Is everything okay?' Bontle asks.

'I don't know, really' I scoff and turn to sit against the bed. I don't need this. She gets off the bed, fixes her pyjama bottom and sits next to me. Her bxtt had totally swallowed these shorts, so much that they looked like underwear.

'You can talk to me'

I feel like Kurhula wouldn't keep something this big away from me but this is a man we're talking about. I want to give him the chance to explain. Before Musa's call, I was planning on climbing the bed and catching up on some sleep before I become the bride with eyebags. I don't see that happening. My sister, Mhan' Poni's first born promised to arrive in the morning. Her dramatic self is going to have me if I look anything apart from well-rested.

'Kuli hle...' Mabontle calls. For a moment, I forgot she was

right next to me. I am lost in my own head.

'Apparently, there's people who have come to introduce Kurhula's child. One that I know nothing about'

She's stunned.

'At this time?' she asks the grand question that I too do not have an answer to. Simon's blind self must be having the time of his life with this. Anything that could potentially break my heart is good news to him. Aunty Fanisa is still in hospital. If she was out, she probably would've been the first to inform to me.

'Call him' Mabontle suggests. I am defeated. She grabs my phone and puts it in my hand. 'Kuli call this man before you drive yourself insane. He owes you an explanation'

She's right. I get up from the floor as I wait for him to pick up. This is not a conversation I can have while seated. I could suffer a stroke.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula?'

'Where are you?'

'I am on my way home from the party. You don't sound okay. What's wrong?'

'Everything. How many kids do you have exactly?'

'Err... you've lost me. Where is this going?'

'You'll call me once you have an idea of what I'm talking about'

I cut the call and Mabontle stands up to offer me a hug.

'I'm sorry doll' she wraps me in her arms and brushes my back. My phone is vibrating in my hand. I can't stay mad at him for long. Even though I'm mad, I still want to talk to him. Bontle lets go when I answer the phone.

'Please explain to me why we're fighting. I can't defend myself in the dark'

'Kurhula, get home and deal with your issues. You will be in enough light then'

'We're driving in right now'

'Good. Call me after an hour'

He sighs. I do not need this. Not right now.

...

[Narrated]

After driving into the garage, Kurhula leaves the car and takes fast steps into the house – with his curiosity pulling him by the shirt. The moment he steps inside, his eyes meet his ex’s – sitting beside her two aunts.

‘Kgahli?’ he lowly calls – not knowing how to digest the shock. Fikani walks in after him and greets everyone.

‘What’s going on?’ Kurhula asks. Kgahli hands the baby to her aunt and asks for permission to speak to Kurhula in private.

‘This is crazy’ Kurhula mumbles to himself. They step outside and he looks at her like he can’t wait a second longer to hear what she has to say.

‘I didn’t know how to tell you’

‘Tell me what? And how are you arriving at this time? This is taboo’

‘My aunt insisted. You know how she can get. She listens to no one’

‘Since when do you take advice from your drunk aunt?’

‘Kurhula please. I know how this looks and I’m sorry. You’ve been kind to me, even after we broke up. I would’ve ended up on the streets if it wasn’t for you. I am not trying to abuse your kindness’ she states in her innocence-filled

voice.

'Kgahliso, do you know that I am getting married in a couple of hours?'

She drops her face.

'I'm sorry'

'How do you show up here with an entire human being? I hate surprises and by far, your idea is the worst'

'Let me go back inside' she leaves him agape on the entryway. Fikani approaches.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' Kurhula asks.

'She's the one that's been living in your house, isn't she?'

Kurhula clears his throat.

'You my friend, are playing with fire and you're gonna get burnt'

'This is not what it looks like. I'm not cheating, if that's what you think'

'Did I say anything of that sort?'

'Fvck off'

'Well, are you?' Fikani asks.

'Am I what?'

'Are you cheating?'

'This is not the time for your silly games. Give me your car keys'

Fikani reaches into his pocket and takes them out.

'Don't have make-up sex in my car, I am begging you'

If it was a random day, Kurhula would've laughed at this. Instead, he snatches the keys and walks past his brother.

'And these people here?'

'You handle it since you're so concerned'

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 33

[KULANI]

When Mabontle heard that Kurhula was on his way here, she offered to go out for some fresh air. I couldn't allow it because what kind of a sister disturbs the other's sleep to that extent, all because of relationship problems? Plus it's not safe outside. We live in a fvcking rape capital for Christ's sake. Okay, why am I swearing? Kurhula's filthy habits are rubbing off on me. I will be meeting him in the car. Mabontle needs to stay here and get some rest. He

calls me when he arrives and I change into the dress I was wearing in the afternoon.

'You shouldn't have come'

That's the first thing I say after getting comfortable on the passenger seat.

'I know it's bad luck to see the bride before—'

'I'm not sure I'm still a bride anymore' my thoughts race down and out of my verbal channels before I can stop them. He looks like a little child that just got caught with his hand trapped in a sugar jar.

'I swear, I did not know that she was pregnant. I'm not even sure if that kid is mine'

'You said the same thing about Boitumelo's baby. Should I blame genetics for the method of thinking?'

He frowns.

'Why am I being crucified for whatever the fvck is happening in FK's life?'

I keep quiet. I hate speaking when I am boiling because I don't have the superpower of taking words back.

'I have a confession to make' he says. I don't like the sound of that nor the silence that accompanies it. I'm still

quiet. He reaches for my hand and I shift it away. We can talk without touching one another. I need to be able to think straight.

'Kgahli is the last person I dated before you came into my life'

I'm waiting for the confession. Right now he's stating the obvious.

'I—' he stops and takes a deep breath. 'I'm going to need you to believe me on this'

'Believe you on what?'

'I never sold the house because she needed a place to stay'

I laugh because I'm convinced he must be joking.

'So you lied about selling it?'

'I was afraid you wouldn't understand, and I couldn't just throw her out to the streets. I was the only person she knew in PTA. Baby please trust me because I'm not losing you over this'

'Start from the beginning'

Why is he breathing so heavily?

'She was supposed to be a one-night stand, to be honest.

It was never anything serious but when she found a retail job close-by, we ended up spending a lot of time together. I don't want to discuss her personal life but life in general hasn't been that gentle with her. I didn't want to add on to that'

'And the baby?'

'As I said, I'm not even sure that it's mine. We've always used protection'

'It breaks'

He scoffs. 'At my big age?'

'Okay big man. I need some sleep'

'You can't always sleep your problems away' he softly says. I don't know where to get mad at this or to laugh at his tone. What does he want from me?

'What happens if the child is yours?'

He clears his throat.

'I... I'll do right by him... or her'

'And the mother?'

'I'm not going to turn this into a polygamous circus if that's what you're asking'

'When are you planning on doing a DNA test?'

'Immediately after the wedding'

I sigh. I am honestly too young for all of this mess. My peers are in their res rooms stressing about their academics and I'm here – stressed out because this one might have another child. It's not the child I'm worried about. It's his character that's in question. Nems are consistent frauds and they're very good at disguising this fact. There's nothing I hate more than the idea of being a loyal clown to a whxre. I am questioning a lot of things and my head is buzzing with doubts and what-ifs.

'Go back home. I'll see you at the altar'

He locks the car when I'm about to turn to step out.

'I don't like seeing you like this. It was never my intention to hurt you'

'We cannot undo the past and I won't hold it up your face. Of course I'm upset but only because I never expected any of this. I just need you to promise me one thing'

'Anything...'

'No more surprises?'

'No more surprises' he gets closer as he speaks and I laugh while moving further from him.

'You're not even supposed to be here. Don't touch me'

'Just a soft peck on the lips and I'll let you go. I promise'

I give him what he wants and of course, it does not end there as expected. I break away from him when he starts fondling my bxxbs. He needs to go. He can save all this energy for our honeymoon.

[NARRATED]

'Mommy?!' Rhandzu yells from outside her mother's newly rented house.

'Mom?!' She repeats. Her mother appears through the butler-proof door of the kitchen, with an apron covering the majority of her dress.

'Why didn't you call?'

'I tried. Your phone is off' she responds. 'Come and unlock this gate Pamela please. Why is it even locked?'

Her mother laughs at how the child just called her by her second name, while searching the large pocket for the house keys.

'The battery must've died'

She opens the gate and Rhandzu walks ahead of her, then

into the house.

'I know you're baking. I can smell the vanilla flavouring from here'

'You know your mother too well. How are you? How's your father?'

'Before I answer you, when are you coming back?'

Rhandzu asks before picking up one of the scones – flinching upon touching it because she'd undermined how hot it would be.

'Sorry. Just took those out of the oven. Isn't that the question you should be asking him?'

'I think I deserve to know if you two are going to be getting a divorce, and why'

'Isn't it your dear sister went out of her way to bring a bastard child into our home? My only sin was disagreeing with that whole thing' she continues to take out the rest of the cookies from the oven.

'You're not going to like what I'm about to tell you now' she says while trying to take cautious, minute bites.

'Out with it. There's juice in the fridge'

'She literally brought her into our home. They were there but they never stayed long'

'What?' Pamela acts surprised. Rhandzu nods.

'I don't like where this is going. All of this is going to divide the family mom'

'Don't you worry. These things have a way of working themselves out. What I do not want, is you fighting with your own sister, okay?'

'But—'

'No buts. You are gonna go to that wedding and make sure you hug all of this out. I don't want any bad blood between the two of you'

Rhandzu nods – reluctantly so.

'But why are you not coming? Is it because dad is going to be there?'

'I will arrive at the venue a bit later. I still have a few things to sort out. Hold on, my lips are dry' she scurries into one of the three rooms and closes the door behind her.

Rhandzu starts looking for a container to take some of her mother's famous baked goodies. When she comes back, she finds her daughter already packing them into a transparent Tupperware without permission.

'You and food' she says this dismissively while laughing – reaching for a hug. When she has Rhandzu wrapped in her

arms, she brushes her back, puts her palms on her shoulders and they stay there.

'What was that for?' Rhandzu asks, still chewing.

'Nothing, I'm just proud of you. You have grown to become a strong and smart young woman and that's what every mother wants to see. Now go off, and don't forget to clear the air with your big sister'

'Okay fine'

'What did I say you'll do?'

'Apologize with a hug' Rhandzu answers passively while responding to a text on her phone.

'Good girl. Off you go now'

[KULANI]

My Louboutins don't fit. Out of all the days my feet could choose to swell up, they just simply agreed on my wedding day. Mabontle is kneeling and trying to get them in. I just know that we've failed from that loud breath she has just let out.

'You are getting married in slippers, I'm afraid' she says it

like it is something of great normalcy.

'Try again Bontle please' I beg. These shoes are going to fit me and they're going to fit me today. My dad keeps calling and I'm not going to answer because the moment I hear his voice, I am going to have a breakdown. I know I am late. Aunty Basani is just as relentless with the phone calls. My make-up artist is already packing her things. She came in her own car so she's leaving for the venue now. She's also worried about the predicament I'm facing right now.

'Just wear your slippers. Your wedding gown is chunky. Nobody is going to see them if you walk carefully' Bontle is still on this crazy idea of hers.

I end up laughing. She smiles.

'This is not the only dress I'll be wearing. Please stop talking'

'Okay' – she raises her hands in surrender – 'I need the bathroom quickly'.

'Are you going to be fine?' My MUA asks, ready to leave.

'I'll be okay babe. Thank you and please drive safely'

Bontle's phone starts ringing and I shout for her to come out of the loo.

'Answer it please'

'Hello?'

'WHERE are you guys? Your driver says he's been waiting for eight billion years now. Kurhula is about to lose his fvcking mind'

Fikani? Why is his number not saved?

'We're on the way' I answer and cut the call. I stand up from the bed and get into my white slippers. Mabontle is right. If I'm careful, I can get away with this. And even if I don't, I'm pregnant. If this is not enough to convince anybody that I have the right to this, then it's out of my hands. In this life, you cannot please everybody.

...

We've arrived. It's awfully quiet outside here in the garden area. Everybody is already inside the marquee. One of the waiters politely greets us before walking past. Bontle has left me to go get my dad because he has to walk me down the aisle. The nerves again. Somebody taps me on the shoulder and I almost jump out of my skin. I didn't even hear her approach.

'Hey sis'

'Rhandzu. Where are you coming from? I was convinced you weren't going to arrive'

'Now? I needed the loo. Look, I'm sorry about being cold the last time I saw you guys. It was totally unnecessary'

She's right. She acted like a spoilt brat and the last thing I was planning to do was running after her. She gives me that cute smile of hers. One she knows very well that I cannot resist.

'Huggy?'

I roll my eyes and laugh.

'Of course'

She wraps her arms around me and I feel my heart skip a bit.

'You look gorgeous!' she loudly compliments. Mabontle appears, along with my father. They all exchange greetings and Bontle is obviously surprised by Rhandzu's courteous behaviour. She'll get used to her. If there was a global award to be won for mood swings, it would come with her name engraved on it.

'Ready?' dad asks and I nod even though I'm not.

'Please don't walk too fast' Bontle warns him and he pulls a surprised face. I'm laughing because knowing him, he wouldn't care what type of shoes I have under this dress. The only thing he's concerned about is if he's handing me over to the right man. He sends a signal and the music starts. When we appear, I immediately see Kurhula's face shedding all the worry and his eyes lighting up. Was he worried that I was going to call this thing off? I laugh internally. That's what you get for treading on thin ice. When we finally get to him and after my dad hands me over, Kurhula whispers and asks what was keeping me.

'My shoes didn't fit' I fail to contain the laughter. He lightly frowns.

'What? Then what are you wearing now?'

'Indoor shoes'

We're still whispering. He turns his face away from the guests and laughs.

'That's okay. I still love you the same'

'As you should. It's what you get for wanting to marry a pregnant woman. We could've done this after birth'

'I would do it over and over and over again'

The pastor calls us to order and we both clear our throats.

I see Aunty Lydia. Of course she's the most stylish woman in the room.

...

After vowing to be his ride or die and slipping his wedding band on his finger, I feel a sharp pain travel down my spine. It forces me to stop and listen to my body. I'm not trying to alarm him but something is wrong. Almost every elderly woman in here is ululating and this noise is making me dizzy.

'Are you okay?' he asks. I suddenly feel very cold. The temperature was just fine when I first walked in here but now I feel like I'm standing in the middle of Antarctica. The pain shoots straight up my tummy and I yell. I can't keep it inside anymore. Kurhula holds me by my arm and my waist – trying to figure out what's wrong. There's liquid travelling down my left thigh. It could be water, it could be blood. Everyone starts panicking. Aunty Basani, my dad and Aunty Lydia come running to where we're standing. Kurhula picks me up and marches out of there. Fikani is right behind him, along with Mabontle. The slippers that I never wanted anybody to see have fallen off and I am



certain I wasn't hallucinating when I saw a drop of blood on one of them. I am slowly losing consciousness and if what's happening is what I think it is, death wouldn't be such a bad idea.

[08/24, 12:46 pm] #o: CHAPTER 34

[UNEDITED]

[MABONTLE]

Out of all the things that could've went wrong today, this was the most unexpected of turns. I am in the hospital bathroom and I just cannot get myself to stop spilling out tears. Kuli deserves none of this. She's literally an angel living in flesh. Life usually doesn't make sense to me for this reason. They've been busy with her for hours now and it's beginning to frustrate me. Her doctor seems like he knows what he's doing but it doesn't stop the feeling of wanting to be in there. Truth be told, my heart is hanging by a dilapidated thin thread. Her temperature kept dropping and by the time we got here, she was cold as ice. Her wedding dress had to be cut to get her out of it. My question is, what the hell happened? Was I supposed to worry when her shoes wouldn't fit? Every pregnant woman

goes through that. Now I'm grasping at straws trying to play detective. I'm just struggling to believe that this is just her body betraying her. I just cannot shake off the feeling, especially with the kind of mother she has.

That lightening! Is she having a delayed reaction? I need to get out of here before I drive myself crazy. I'll never forgive myself if I'm the reason for all this chaos. I get up from closed toilet seat and wipe my wet cheeks with my palms.

'Where's everyone?' I direct this question to dad. He's sitting with Aunty Lydia. By everyone I mean Kurhula and Fikani.

'They're outside'

I think I know why. I heard him shouting at one of the nurses. I'm guessing his brother had to drag him out. I don't blame him for losing his mind. No one cares to update us and this fact has my nerves in a freezer.

However, as a medical professional, I know that no news is sometimes good news. I don't know where Rhandzu disappeared to. I could swear I saw her getting into one of the cars during all that frenzy but she never made it here. There was just a lot going on and somethings are just not worth remembering right now. I have my heels in my hand and I have no idea where my clutch bag is. I'm hoping it is in the car. Masedi posted a WhatsApp update this morning

and that's enough to let me know that she's okay, even though she's ignoring me. Her sitter will call if there's anything they need. I need to be back at work tomorrow morning. The plan was to leave tonight but I do not see that happening. This dress is also adding to my stress because it's uncomfortable. I need to be in sweatpants and a bare face in such situations. Even this facebeat feels heavy, I had to strip off my lashes. I haven't spoken to Fikani ever since the last time I saw him. I'm trying not to feel like I did something wrong because I'm done with that life. Men will act shxty and find a way to make it your fault, all for their ego. He just went silent like he never existed. I caught him looking at me a couple of times at the wedding venue and I was trying not to care. I still am.

...

[NARRATED]

'Here...' Fikani offers Kurhula some chapstick as they stand outside the hospital building, against the rails next to the entrance. Kurhula throws one glance at it and looks away.

'I can only imagine what you're going through but you need to calm you're a** down'

This manages to pull out suspended breath out of Kurhula.

'If she doesn't make it I—'

'Get your mind outta there'

'What the hell is taking them so long then?'

Fikani shrugs absentmindedly – chewing on his lower lip. Kurhula turns towards in his direction and studies him for a brief second – while thoughtfully rotating his new wedding band around his finger. He decides to ignore whatever is eating him. He felt he had more important things to worry about than his grown brother. His father-in-law calls his phone and commands him to come back inside. They both dash inside the hospital and find the doctor waiting on him. They greet before the doctor can start talking.

'What's wrong with my wife doc?'

'Uhm... Mr Ngobeni, her case is complicated. We've ran a couple of blood tests and her creatinine levels are shockingly high'

Mabontle immediately puts her hands over her head. This makes Kurhula uneasy.

'The short meaning of this is that her kidneys are failing but we're doing everything we can to save her. That's our main concern right now, and stabilizing her temperature'

Chief Baloyi defeatedly pulls his pants and sits back down.

'And the baby?' Aunty Lydia asks, with zero hope in her voice. The doctor puckers her lips and slowly shakes her head.

'We've lost the pregnancy. I'm sorry' she briefly squeezes Kurhula's upper arm before quickly walking past to attend to the nurse calling her down the corridor. A tear drops from him and Fikani puts both his hands on his brother's shoulders as a means to comfort him. A

'Bontle, what are these creatinine levels she's speaking about?' her father asks with a hint of impatience and a frown on his face.

Mabontle swallows the water in her mouth and closes the bottle.

'Waste, simply put. Her body is retaining waist instead of getting rid of it'

'Do we need to move her to another hospital?'

She could sense the desperation in his voice. Kurhula on the other hand, had gone awfully quiet.

'No dad. I think they have everything under control. Let's give them a chance. Does she have a history of kidney problems?'

'No, not at all. Kulani was a sickly baby but kidneys never. This doctor doesn't even sound like she's sure of what she's doing here' he speaks with conviction and certainty.

'Must be acute then. Give her a chance please' Mabontle spoke from a point of relation and sympathy – knowing what it feels like to always be undermined in the workplace, either by senior colleagues or even patients. However, she knew it wasn't the time to be sparking such an argument with her father.

...

'Let's go home my boy. You need to freshen up' Aunty Lydia tries after Fikani had failed to convince Kurhula to go home. He stubbornly clings onto his silence.

'Kurhula, the hospital will call you when they decide that she can have visitors. Right now you need some rest'

'Before you go, can I have a word with you, son?' Chief Baloyi asks and walks ahead before Kurhula even agrees.

He sighs and follows his father-in-law. When they're some distance away from everyone, Kurhula only notices now that the sky has caught darkness from the window he's standing next to.

'I think we both know how much Kulani does not want to be associated with traditional healers, for valid reasons but I feel we need some intervention here. I cannot take that decision alone since she's a married woman now'

Kurhula sniffs and stares ahead.

'Kurhula?'

'I really don't know. I—' he holds his tongue. He had strong suspicions that his family had a hand in this but he felt he shouldn't say that out loud. 'I'm not gonna lie. I don't know what to do'

'How about we consult? Just consulting. We don't have to bring him here'

'She once mentioned something about being hidden away from those people but if you feel it's going to bring closure then sure. I need to rush somewhere'

He marches off and leaves his father-in-law just standing there. The moment Fikani sees him, he runs off after him. He catches him in the parking lot and asks where he's going. He throws himself in the car as well when Kurhula

doesn't answer. The car flies to the royal house and the moment Kurhula steps out, he starts shouting his uncle's name.

'SOL!'

His aunts and other relatives try to stand in the way and ask how Kuli is doing but none of them receive answers, including his friend Khalanga. He offered to come with to the hospital but Chief Baloyi said it was already crowded and blatantly called him a stranger.

'Where is he?' he asks Mhan' Singi. He walks past when she begins to stutter. He walks out the kitchen door and finds him sitting with a few men in the patio. He grabs him by his shirt and lifts him off the plastic chair. They collectively separate the hostile duo.

'What is wrong with you?' Albert asks – while picking up Sol's walking stick.

'I know you're going through a lot but you cannot take your frustrations out on Solomon every time something goes wrong in your life. We have guests. Please behave' Wiseman sternly urges.

'You still don't believe me when I say him and his wife are the reason why I'm blind today?' Sol's accusatory tone fuels the fire. The voice in Kurhula's head wants to

verbalize the fact that he's going to kill this useless Solomon one day but the lawyer instinct in him kicks in at just the right moment. He keeps his words to himself. Fikani pulls his hyperventilating twin back inside the house.

'You need some sleep' he states – watching all the tears welling up in front of Kurhula's reddened eyes, and consistently twitching lips. Kgahli walks in with an empty feeding bottle.

'You're still here?!' Kurhula asks. She drops her face.

'Uncle Solomon said we could stay. I'm sorry about what happened. I heard'

'You're sorry? You show up and things suddenly go wrong?'

At this point, everyone was guilty – including the absent Xongi.

'Mara lala...'

Kurhula leaves the kitchen for his bedroom.

'Hi. I didn't know he had a twin. My name is Kgahliso' she introduces herself. Fikani drops both his lifted brows and shakes her head.

'You can call me Fikani'

'You studied overseas I'm guessing?'

'I have to go' he also leaves the kitchen. He didn't want to blur the lines on whose side he's on.

...

Mabontle also came back to fetch the rest of her stuff. She was planning on going back to the BNB they were booked in. She wasn't feeling comfortable being at Kuli's marital home without her there. The advances from some of the men there weren't something she was prepared to deal with. After two hours of sleep and a quick shower, then brother were ready to go back to the hospital. As they were about to drive out, Fikani sees her talking to the community drunkard insisting on holding her wrist against her will. The music had been turned off but the yard was still full of people who were there for the purposes of food and free alcohol. He leaves the car and walks up to them.

'You've had enough alcohol. It's time to go back home' he says as he untangles the almost black fingers that have charred by cigarette stompies.

'Ahhh Kurhula my man. I am still trying to talk to this beautiful lady' he explains while his other hand is holding

on to the waist of his falling jeans.

‘You can’t see that she’s uncomfortable?’

‘Ahh Kurhula... don’t be like that. You know you’re my guy’

The real Kurhula gets vexed of waiting and hits the hooter out of impatience. Fikani pushes the drunkard towards his friends and he falls right in front of the calabash – immediately earning insults from spilling their communal beverage. He lays there and even doses off.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks.

‘Now you wanna know?’ Mabontle snubs him and walks off. He catches her by the waist and she stops.

‘I’m not ignoring you. I promise I’m gonna explain’

‘Bye Fikani. Your brother is going to leave you here’ she says when she hears Kurhula’s engine roaring and threatening to drive off. She walks away before he can say another word. He gets back into the car and they immediately leave the yard.

‘Are you gonna tell me what’s going on?’ Kurhula asks as he drives.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The tension between the two of you stinks. What

happened?' he says – in a better mood than he was a few hours ago. Fikani sighs.

'I'm trying to keep her away from my bullshxt, just until I have my life together'

Kurhula glances at him with a raised brow. 'The drugs?'

Fikani nods.

'Why do I get the feeling that there's more to this than you're letting out?'

'You have enough on your plate. Don't worry yourself about me'

'Speak motherfvcker'

'It's nothing major man. I wanna leave the business and focus on property. It's too risky'

'I want you to get to the bullshxt part'

'It's not easy to exit. If they find out about her, they might wanna use her against me'

'Logic tells me that it's Tumi you're supposed to be worried about. No?'

'They can't use her against me'

Kurhula stops the car.

'Say something sensible please'

'Eish, Kurhula. Her father is in this as well. Don wouldn't want to step on his toes but with Mabontle, he has nothing to lose by hurting her. She can't be linked with me, not now'

'You're causing me a headache. Can we talk about this later? Properly?'

'There's nothing more to say. How are you feeling?'

'In terms of?'

'Everything. The miscarriage?'

'I don't know how I'm supposed to be feeling. I just want my wife to wake up'

'Can I give you some advice?'

'If it's about Sol and anger management wara wara, you can keep all that to yourself'

'Okay' Fikani simply retreats and pulls out his cell phone. They get to the hospital and find everybody else gone. When Kurhula inquires if he can see Kuli, the request is declined.

'She's still in a very critical condition. We will let you know if there are any changes but I cannot promise that you'll be

able to see her anytime soon. Please go home'

'By critical, what exactly do you mean?' Fikani asks.

The doctor swallows.

'Her other organs are beginning to give in as well. Her systems are fluctuating in terms of progress so...this is all I can say for now'

Kurhula pulls in a sharp breath.

'I can't lose her, bro' he says after the doctor leaves. Fikani puckers his lips, not knowing where to start comforting him and also not wanting to give him false hope. 'If she dies, where the fvck am I expected to start digesting the misery? Nothing will ever make any fvcking sense!'

'What do you think she'd do if roles were reversed?'

Kurhula shrugs. 'Don't know. Talk to her people I guess'

'Maybe you should do the same. Don't you think? You're married. You're basically one so you can intercede on her behalf?'

'What's the point? They're already halfway through failing her. She's literally always there for everybody else, solving people's crap. You'd think they'd be in the forefront and show up for her but instead all of that is thrown back in her face? They seemingly get some sort of kick out of

making her life hell so I'm not interceding for shxt!

'Man don't allow your anger to—'

'Save it' he walks off and leaves him there when he feels he can't listen to his nonsense any longer.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 35

[UNEDITED]

[KULANI]

He's here. He's been here for some time and I can sense the heavy energy surrounding him. He hasn't said a word, probably must be thinking that I'm half-dead and loading. I can hear the movements around me. I 'woke' up this morning. It felt like peeling off an inner layer over my eyes. It was a strangely familiar feeling after gathering the fact that I was in a coma. I live between two different worlds on a daily basis so there was nothing really shocking about easing back into my physical body.

I wish I hadn't. I wish I never came back. I tried to negotiate but they wouldn't hear it. Life is exhausting and I don't have the energy to continue being one of God's strongest soldiers. I never signed up for any of this. I don't

really care about the fact that I never got to enjoy the rest of my wedding day. What has completely shredded my mental health is the fact I had to say goodbye to the bestie I was busy nurturing in my womb. He was never planned but I had plans for him. I was already imagining how heavy he would be feeling at nine months. Kurhula is always gentle with me but upon finding out that I was pregnant, he became extra-cautious like a four-year old holding an egg, and I was enjoying experiencing him in that light.

I imagined what he would look like, our baby. I did that a lot and I was convinced that he would look like AK. I was hoping he would. It's insane how two people can play around with their genitals and in between those orgasms, a breathing combination of their genitals would come out. I'm not heartbroken, I am shattered. It doesn't hurt, it's extremely unbearable.

'Crazy how from the first moment I saw you, I just knew I was gonna make you a mother' he says – busy rubbing my palm. Right now, my motor systems are down. I want to squeeze his hand and assure him that I'm recovering. He sounds so downtrodden and defeated. I can hear the rhythm of his shallow breaths.

'I know I was looking forward to starting a family with you baby but right now, I just want you to wake up. We'll deal

with everything that has transpired together. Almost everything doesn't make any sense and I don't know what to allow to hurt me more. I don't know what the hell I was doing before you came along but I cannot do this life thing without you, Kuli. You can do it all but dying is not an option'

Is he crying?

'You're my fvcking heartbeat woman'

It wouldn't be him if he didn't swear. I don't like it when he does but in this moment, I am happy he did. It's assurance for me that he's still in there. What would happen if I never regained the ability to open my eyes ever again? Would I be declared dead? The thought of being put in a casket while my brain is this alert is making me feel uncomfortably claustrophobic right now. How many people have been buried while they were in fact alive? Is it a thing? Does it ever happen? I stand a chance of having that happen to me because I do exit my body and it's slowly becoming a habit? I will just settle this with the possibility that they just eventually freeze to death at the morgue. That would be sad. Imagine having to hear your family wailing conclusively that you're no more? Although mostly unpleasant, life is a funny set of experiences.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula, I can always shoot some more babies

into that tummy but I can never do it with another woman. I can never have another you. I need you to wake up. Yes it is for selfish reasons but I need you to wake up'

He swallows and pulls his chair forward.

'I wanna buy you all the designer bags you could ever wish for. That's the kinda shxt that makes me stay up all night working; knowing that I have a woman I need to keep happy'

Wasn't he complaining about my expensive taste injuring his bank account?

'I wanna take you on all the vacations you have saved on your Pinterest. I wanna hear your snorty giggle for the rest of my life'

I feel a tear drop on my wrist. I am trying so hard to move but it's not happening. I can hear him but at the same time, I feel like I'm listening to him from outside of my body, like this one is not mine.

'I miss your jokes. Apparently, women aren't funny' his laughter comes out through the nose. 'But I think you're funny. It might be because I love you and everything you do is pleasant to experience but still, I miss that side of you...'

He goes quiet. The warmth of his hands around my fingers is replaced by a cold breeze. Is he preparing to leave? I

don't want him to go. The only reason I'm sure that I'm not dead is because I've been told. Otherwise, I would be sure that this is what happens when we give up on our bodies.

'Fvck, what have you done to me? You've literally destroyed my ability to exist by myself, for myself. I know how psycho this must sound but it is what it is'

He's gone silent but he's still here. I'm happy he hasn't left. My heart is definitely going to crack when I hear that chair screeching away from me.

'If anybody was to ask me to describe our relationship, I think I'd say it's a proper catch twenty-two. In a world where things went completely my way, I would do anything to keep you away from my family and their dangerous tactics. However, they are the reason why I even know your name'

He thinks they're responsible. I know they have their tricks and things but they have nothing on the Dracula that gave birth to me. The hatred in her voice when she told me she would kill me was enough confirmation that she meant it but I still undermined her. I do that a lot. I tend to focus on the good in people and completely disregard the bad. Some people's conscience cannot be saved. Pamela is one of those people – the people that are beyond repair.

...

[MABONTLE]

My dad is making hints about me transferring here and I will continue ignoring them until he says it out loud. Even then, I will not have it because in as much as this place is a breath of fresh air, I do not see myself living here full-time. I would run mad, certainly. If it isn't the heat then it's this thing of being far from everything. The fact that Kuli is in hospital has hit him hard. His smile is not as wide and his walk has lost its usual momentum. I really hope she makes it. She has to. I am meeting up with him for brunch in a few and I'm crossing fingers that I manage to cheer him up.

I thought I was hearing things. There really is someone knocking on my door. I'm still here at the royal house. Aunty Lydia insisted I stay and I have no idea how to say no to that woman. She even gifted herself with my most expensive perfume last night. What a bully. Half of me is a little upset because I could never afford that bottle myself. The other half is a little relieved she took it off my hands because in as much as it smells good, the person it's from

cannot spell good memories.

I open the door and I find her waiting. Judging by the impatience I see written all over her face, I can tell that she was going to let herself in if the door wasn't locked.

'I've been banging this door since 2004. What took you so long?' she walks past me and straight to my suitcase. I just stand by the door, in a towel and confused. Don't tell me she's here to steal more of my things.

'You have a date. You need to get dressed'

Excuse me?

'Uhm...'

'Girl, you're wasting time. Not only yours but mine as well'

'Aunty but—'

She's hastily rummaging through my clothes.

'Come on. The mood around here is already sombre. If there is an opportunity to smile, why not snatch it with both hands?'

I am still very much confused. Is she setting me up for a blind date?

She sighs, impatiently.

'Do you love that man?'

'Which man?'

'Fikani man'

Oh... I've just run out of strength. She indicates with her fingers that I should come closer. I do and we sit on the bed.

'Do you have any idea what your feminine power is capable of achieving for you?' she asks. From the look she's giving me, if I was guilty of something I would swear she was suspicious. I shake my head. What class is this and when did I enrol for it?

'I don't know what he did but he's sure that he fvcked up. His words not mine. This is your opportunity to milk his regret'

'Milk wh... why?'

'Oh you slow child. I have no idea what's going on between the two of you but the man sounds like he'd do just about anything to calm you down. This is a financial opportunity'

I never intended to, but I find myself laughing. This is her nephew she's talking about. But then again, I don't think I ever expected less from her. She gives off goldigger-and-proud vibes. She laughs with me. This is a first, literally. I am noticing now that she actually doesn't laugh nor smile much.

'How are you feeling?' she asks. I know what she's referring to. I sigh out loud.

'I don't know. I was really not expecting the wedding to turn out like that. Kuli has fast become one of my favourite people and in all honesty, I believe she never deserved any of that'

She rubs my back and says nothing.

'How are you feeling?' it's my turn to ask.

'There's nothing to feel. I just want that poor child to get out of that incompetent hospital'

'Hao, incompetent?'

Where is that coming from?'

'Their coffee tastes like mud. That's how you tell that it's private but still no good'

I laugh once more. You cannot trust her to react accordingly. She always has to say or do something a normal person wouldn't say on an average day.

'She's going to be fine. Might look and seem like an innocent sweetheart, which she is but deep inside there lies a fierce fighter. Mark my words' she assures. I am going to ride her hope-filled wave because I'm slowly running out of faith.

'Now...' she gets up and pulls my brown bodycon dress out of my bag. 'This is perfect. It says 'I never put any effort into this look but I still managed to look sexy so you should watch your step because I can easily attract another you down the street'. He needs to know that he's skating on thin ice' she says and throws it to me.

'I'm not going' I say after I catch the dress.

'Do you love this man?' she asks.

'What did he tell you?'

'Do you love this man?'

'Love is a big word. I was interested in him, yes' I admit.

'Past tense?' she questions with a raised brow.

'He ghosted me'

'Speak English?'

'I mean, he disappeared. One moment we were fine, the next, it was like we never happened'

'Well are you still interested?' she prods. I'm not sure.

'Ma'am???'

'I don't know aunty. My instinct tells me he's bad news'

'I'd say, beat him at his own game'

She stands up after this and slowly walks away like she's just given me the most profound advice – humming her way out with her hands carried on her back.

'See you downstairs?' she asks with a devious smile accompanying this dare. I laugh, then nod. I think I can call this the Lydia effect. Plus, I need to hear what he has to say for himself. I'm not going to stay long.

...

[KULANI]

When I opened my eyes, I woke up to my dad sleeping by my bedside. My doctor said I wasn't showing usual signs of a recently comatose patient. I have no time to be explaining why. I asked my dad to take me home so I can surprise Kurhula. I don't want him knowing that I'm awake. His excitement might cause him a car accident on his way here. I'm a pessimist like that – always expecting the worst.

When we finally arrive, I'm welcomed by Mhan' Maria and Mhan Xongi. I am taking careful steps here because I'm

still in pain. I'm struggling to accept that my womb is now empty. I am faking this smile because to be honest, I am not happy to see any of them. The only person I want to see right now is my husband. They insist on helping me up the stairs and I'm grateful. I wasn't going to make it by myself. I tell them I'm fine when we reach the last one. I can handle the distance from here. I was hoping I would find him asleep in our room but he isn't here. I go out and straight to the study. Junior appears and I immediately hush him before he makes a noise. He holds it in and swallows his smile.

'You good sis?' he whispers. I nod.

'Is he in here?' I lowly ask and he gives an affirmative. He offers me a fist bump and I oblige. I missed his silly head. He then walks past and I knock on the office door.

'Come in!!' Kurhula responds. He's in a foul mood. I knock again. He doesn't respond. I try once more. I internally laugh at how he's gone deliberately mute. He does this when he's annoyed. He chooses not to speak. I open the door and show my head. He immediately gets up from his chair. That's the smile I wanted to see.

'Heyy you...' he's soft in his greeting, while walking towards him.

'Hi there...' I greet back before he envelopes me in a hug – making me stand on my toes. He pulls back, looks at me and hugs me again.

'Why didn't the hospital call me? I would've fetched you'

'I made sure they didn't. I wanted to surprise you'

'You mean make me look like a terrible husband?'

I laugh out loud.

'Never. If you were, you wouldn't have been crying your eyeballs out earlier on' I tease.

He frown-smiles. 'You could hear me?'

'Every single. Every single promise. You owe me bags, shoes, and vacations mister' I claim and he chuckles.

'I owe you my fvcking life' he kisses me immediately after saying this. He breaks it and goes back to hugging me. We stand in each other's arms for some time before I pull away and hold both his hands.

'I need to cuddle you to sleep. I can tell you haven't been resting much' I note. I'm not happy with how he looks. I do not want to address the elephant in the room. Not now. Another thing on my mind is the fact that I need to go see Gogo Mkhanyisi for a cleansing.

'Guilty as charged' he agrees. 'But first...' he strides back to the desk and I wait. He comes back and slides my ring back on the rightful finger.

'Perfect' he remarks and kisses the back of my hand.

'You carried this everywhere?'

He nods.

'And you just couldn't wait, could you?' I continue to jest around.

'You're someone's wife. That finger needs to be occupied'

I laugh as I admire it. I never really got a chance to. I know I'm the one that chose it but I'm only realizing it's true ornamental valour now. Maybe I have a newly developed appreciation for the beauty of things. I've heard that near-death does that to people. Someone knocks on the door before he can say another word. It's Mhan Maria, one of the helps and she's panicking, for some reason.

'What's wrong? Please breathe' Kurhula urges.

'You are going to kill me' she says and we both frown. Kurhula is silent, waiting for her to give a reason for this belief. I step closer.

'What's wrong?'

She moves her eyes from me, to Kurhula, to me again and back to Kurhula.

'Please speak' he's running out of patience.

'Remember you told Kgahli to leave?' she starts – popping her knuckles. He doesn't respond. He just stares.

'Well, she told me that she had no idea how she would take care of the baby and that she needed a place to stay until she could get a moment to speak to you...'

She turns to me when Kurhula doesn't respond. I nod for her to continue talking.

'Well, I just went to check on her now and...' she swallows a lump again.

'Check on her where? The quarters at the back?' Kurhula asks. This is a rhetoric question.

'There's no pulse. I tried and tried but... there's no pulse'

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 36

[MABONTLE]

'Thank you for coming' he says after opening the door for me.

'Why is the driver leaving?' I ask.

'Because his job here is done' he responds as he ushers me inside.

'I wasn't planning to stay, actually'

'That's fine. I can always take you back home whenever you decide you're sick of me. Chardonnay?'

I nod as I place my bag down. This place has a vintage feel to it but it is still stylish. I don't think whoever is renting it out makes a lot from it. People rarely go for farm style, unless if it is something they're actively looking for, which would not be in a busy town. The type of people who'd go for this sort of thing are usually looking for absolute tranquillity.

'Those shorts suit you' I say as I continue to admire the place. He hands me the goblet and I receive it.

'Thank you' he mumbles. Is he blushing? Don't tell me he's the type that cannot take compliments.

'You're a beautiful man Fikani. You're just full of yourself' I had to let that out of my chest. The longer it sat there, the further it would char my lungs. He's instantly covered in shame and his face goes sour. I thought he would receive that a bit lightly but it seems I touched a nerve. If I did, I am glad. He takes my glass back and puts it down along

with his. He then reaches for my hands and I step away. He nods once – impatiently before saying ‘Fair’.

‘Listen, I know I fvcked up. I should’ve continued fvcking up because it’s for your sake but I just cannot stay away from you. Knowing that you’re mad at me keeps me up at night and I can’t live like that’

I scoff. What does he mean he should’ve... you know what? I choose silence.

‘One day, I will be able to explain why I acted the way I did but for now, I am asking for your forgiveness’

‘What you’re saying is, I should blindly forgive you for disappearing on me and coming back to say a whole lot of nothing?’

I pick up my glass and down it.

‘Can we maybe calm down?’

I want to laugh at his facial expression but I won’t. I don’t think there’s anybody else who can pull off a sincere scowl. How does one manage to look apologetic and disgusted all at the same time?

I feel embarrassment rolling out with the burp that just let itself loose. I forgot the animosity that exists between me and this type of wine. The last time Liezel got it, years ago,

I had to sleep in the toilet. I'm crossing my fingers not to experience any diarrhoea because that would be mortifying.

'Don't tell you're also part of the thokoza squad like your sister'

From a simple burp? I can air sweeping across my intestines, causing them to rumble.

'On a serious note, am I forgiven?'

I have no idea what he's just said but I nod as I bring my one leg in front of the other. I need the toilet. Why is this happening to me?

'Are you okay? Why are you looking at me like that?' he looks quite concerned.

'Like what?'

'That. You're not even blinking. It's creepy'

'I... Would you mind if I used the bathroom quickly?

Thanks' I dash off before he can say a word. If I stand here a minute longer, the consequences of that will result in me having to block him and moving to another country. I bolt into the loo and quickly shut the door. The moment my cheeks land on the seat, thunder erupts. I hope he didn't hear that but what I'm more concerned about right now is

the cramps that I feel cutting through my abdomen. If my allergies don't have enemies, then that would simply mean that I would be dead. To be betrayed by your own system in this manner in front of a man who has done you wrong is no different to a patriot converting into an undignified snitch.

...

[KULANI]

This fresh dream of me breastfeeding a dead baby is like an unrelenting sprite. After checking for time on my phone, I'm now aware that it's a few minutes after twelve. I am in his hands as always and I don't remember what happened before I sank into sleep. While reaching for my phone, I was clinging onto the blind hope that it would be dawn. I carefully and sneakily find my way out of the warmth of my husband's hold. We still haven't touched the topic of our guest's failed suicide attempt. The baby is sleeping in the helpers' quarters while the mother lies in hospital. Somewhere in the past, I would be sitting damp in an empathetic puddle of my own tears. Now? I am too



exhausted to care. I don't know if I should be simply concerned or actively mourning my conscience. When I got off from the bed, the aim was to go wash my face in the bathroom. I am already on the floor because the distance of twelve steps seems too far. There's a cricket in the house making a persistent noise and it's succeeding at getting on my nerves. If I catch it, it's over.

As I sit here, I am feeling burdened and guilty. My chest is feeling compact, like a bolt tightened for good measure. I'm not necessarily struggling to breathe. I'm just struggling to feel. I'm having a hard time immersing myself in appropriate emotions whereas I shouldn't even try, it should just unfold organically. I have just lost a child and I am here, digging for tears. Kurhula has tried to ignite the topic but I quickly shut him down. I don't want to talk. A verbal exchange will not bring him back. I'm trying to describe whatever it is I'm feeling to myself. Maybe I need to unpack it in order to understand it. I am trying to describe this to a person who has never felt such pain before. In disappointing terms, it is like losing a timeless and priceless stone into the vastness of an ocean, at night while standing on an unstable boat under a violent storm. Impossibly little to null prospects of ever getting it back. The part of my palm that once held its preciousness is still warm, but empty.

I wonder if my mother is celebrating her victory wherever she is. Her smile is slowly forming in my head and like bile, anger boils up my throat. I unlock my jaw when I realise that I'm biting too hard. I need to ask this woman if she's happy with the work of her scaly claws. When I look back at Kurhula, I find that he's still sleeping. I am not surprised. He's exhausted. He was bound to shut down at some point. I get up to go find his grey sweatsuit because if it's this chilly inside, then the outside is probably a bit brutal. After getting dressed, I try to find one of my hair ties but I find none. I have no time to be looking for these little rubbers that are addicted to hide-and-seek. I find my keys and his. As I walk, a flash of intelligence hits me and immediately stop by the door. I need to change car keys. The van's windows are not dimmed and I don't want to raise any suspicions. I do that stealthily, trying my best not to wake this jaguar next to me. While trying to accomplish this little mission, I find a gun in the drawer. Is Kurhula insane? AK's hands know no boundaries. How could he be so reckless? I get that he hasn't been here in a minute but still, this is no way to store such a deadly weapon. I walk out carefully and a few steps down the corridor, I bump into Aunty Lydia with a laptop in hand. She gestures for me to stop while she yawns.

'And where are you going dressed like a man?'

'Uhm... I—'

'On second thought, we will speak in the morning. My eyes are strained and this man's location is not making any sense. I don't need you infecting me with your insomnia and adding to my problems'

She walks past me and I feel a breeze of relief wash over me. I don't need her interrogating me, and possibly waking Kurhula up.

'Uhm... Kuli?' she softly calls from behind me. I turn my head. 'You good, girl? Are you okay?'

I know what she's asking and quite frankly, I'm not. I'm not good. I fake a subtle smile and nod. I see a similar expression on her face.

'It gets better. If there's anyone's words you should trust, let them be mine'

I don't understand what she means but I nod once more. She steps into her room and closes the door. I feel the salty waters welling up my bottom lids. This question is a bloody legend at cracking one's strength. Am I okay? Am I okay? Of course I'm not.

I wipe my tears and strongly remember that gun. I'm going to need it. I go back into the room and grab it. It feels weird holding it like this. Kurhula moves and I almost drop

it. My heart just skipped a beat. I quickly put it behind me and I immediately feel the coldness of the heartless steel kissing my lower back. I don't know what I'm doing but I'm glad to be doing something apart from sitting around and driving myself nuts.

...

Her kitchen light goes on the moment I park the car by the gate. I am not surprised that she's not sleeping. These are ungodly hours and people like her are usually on night shift. I want to feel something. I don't know, fear? Anxiety? I feel like my spirit is somewhat stale; like I'm housing death. She's coming out. I wait in the car. She has a wondering face on but one thing I know about her is that she's brave. She would confront an armed burglar and definitely would not let an unannounced car to park by her yard. She knocks on the window and I roll it down. She then straightens her back as we share a stare.

'Oh, it's you...'

What is that supposed to mean?

'Are you happy?' I ask. She rolls her eyes and inserts her hands into her pockets.

‘Come in and tell me what you’re on about. I am not about to stand in the middle of the street at this time like I have no sense’

She walks back inside and leaves me there. There’s a hole in my heart and it’s leaking. I force myself to take a couple of deep breaths before stepping out of the car. At this point, I’m not concerned with the fact that she could see my tears. It’s her time to shine anyway. She’s already taken centre stage and outperformed all the evil I’ve ever experienced in my life. I walk past the lawn and go inside the house. I almost choke on laughter when I find a bible spread open on the kitchen table. She pours the both of us some juice and I take it. I down it all in front of her and put the glass down. I saw the look in her eyes. She was expecting me to turn it down. If it wasn’t for the resemblance, I would’ve already begun searching for my biological mother.

‘Did I not teach you not to be found in people’s homes at questionable times?’

She did. I remember getting a proper beating because I had to go to a friend’s house to fetch my textbook early in the morning. I remember her repeating the words, ‘People have not yet had breakfast and you’re already at their doorstep?’ – slashing me with a belt after each word.

'Did it hurt?' I ask. She takes a sip.

'You came all the way here to speak in riddles?'

'I mean the time you gave birth to me. Was it painful?'

I am asking this question from a valid stance because I highly doubt that the labour means were memorable.

'It took me 18 hours to bring your ungrateful self to this world. Eighteen bloody hours of sweating bullets to give birth to a brat. If I knew what you would become, I would've simply aborted you my child' she gulps down the rest of her drink, while I stand here open-mouthed – with absolute shock coursing through me like cold shivers. You'd think I would be used to her sharp daggers by now but I keep expecting something different. She's still very much unbothered. It even took me a minute to see that my silent phone is flashing in my pocket. Mabontle?

'Hello?'

'Where on earth are you? I had to lie to Kurhula and said you're with dad. Do you see the mess that you're forcing me into?'

'You could've said you don't know'

'He caught me off guard dammit. Come back home!' she continues to scold me through locked teeth, like she's

trying to conceal this phone call from someone that's closely behind.

'Thanks anyway'

She immediately ends the call. I see that there's a dozen missed calls from Kurhula. I lock my phone and put it back into my pocket.

'Why are you here, Kulani? You and I are not relatives anymore. I have disowned you a long time ago, in case you haven't noticed'

'What hurts me the most...' I pause and lick my gums. I need strength. She's still looking at me with contempt wrinkled between her brows. 'You had to use Rhandzu to do your dirty work'

'That is my child. What happens between family has nothing to do with you'

The words stab like a sharpened dagger straight into heart.

'You're not gonna deny it?'

'Deny what?'

'That you killed my child!'

'You had a child? Hmphh'

She's mocking me. I swallow my saliva and continue

staring at her.

'What? You fall into a river by mistake, you hallucinate into thinking you have special powers and you destroy everything I've spent so many years building. What did you expect? I warned you. Can you truthfully stand there and say I never warned you?'

She staggers back when I pull the gun and point it at her. I want her to feel the same pain that's busy festering on the inside of me.

'You w-w-w-will put that down if you know what's good for you?'

Now she can't speak? Since when does she stutter?

'I want you to admit that you killed him. Was it him you were after? Or me? Or both?'

'Kulani, you know nothing about guns. This is not you. Put that thing down before one of us gets hurt. What does a sweetheart like yourself know about shooting anybody?'

Now she's trying to inveigle her way out of this. A sweetheart? She mustn't patronize me.

'Maybe that's why I'm never happy. You all think I'm a fool!'

My heart almost stops when her brain blood scatters against the wall and she instantly drops to the floor. I am

standing here agape – struggling to process what the hell just happened. This confirms that I'm indeed walking bad luck. Couldn't my inexperience warrant me a miss? I am sweating from every pore of my body. I drop the gun and take out my phone. I can't even see the screen because of the blur created by my tears. I need to call Kurhula. I can literally hear my heartbeat in my ears. Anger led me to the destination where I'd throw my life away and I followed like a ghost behind the grim reaper. Answer, dammit! My temples are itching.

'Hello?'

'What took you so long? I did something stupid'

'Uhm... your husband's phone was caught between the couch seats. I was still looking for it'

I'm processing it now that it's Fikani. Kurhula wouldn't have answered the phone like that.

'Is he there with you?'

'No he just left. What's going on, Kuli? Take a deep breath and tell me what's up'

Where was Mabontle calling me from? I quickly shut down these thoughts because they're not important right now. What's important is this reckless decision I've just made. I should've just stayed at home. I should've just stayed in

bed. Even the floor was fine.

'Stop crying and tell me what happened'

'I... I think I just killed my mother'

He goes silent, then clears his throat.

'How certain are you that she's...'

'I shot her in the head'

Silence again.

'Did the gun have a silencer?'

How is this the first thing he's asking me?

'No' I sob louder.

The bang is still ringing in my ears.

'Okay. Here's what I need you to do and I want you to listen to me carefully, alright?'

I nod.

'Kuli?'

'I'm here. I'm listening'

'Who else is there?'

'No one. I'm at her house in the News-stands'

'Apart from the gun, what do you remember touching?'

I look around.

'Uhm... I don't know. A glass juice?'

'That's all?' he sounds sceptical. 'What about the door handle?'

'I never touched it. Even the gate. She opened them herself and I just walked in'

'I know you're devastated right now but I need you to be one hundred percent sure on this'

'Are you suggesting I flee?'

'Do you want to go spend the rest of your life in jail?'

I go silent.

'What are you wearing?'

'Sweats'

'Pull the hood over your head then take that glass and the gun and get the hell out of there'

'And the body? Fikani what are you saying?'

'You'll send me the address once you get out of that neighbourhood. I'll take care of the rest'

There's this darkness penetrating his voice. It's making me uncomfortable.

'Why do you so calm?' I ask. It comes out more accusatory than intended.

'Don't ask questions you don't want answers to. Get your a** out of there'

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 37

[KULANI]

It's for the second time this year that I find myself confined within the four walls of a prison cell. When I arrived home from my mother's house, I found Kurhula waiting for me, perceptibly irked with my disappearing act. The first thing he did when our eyes met was to extend his palm like a loan shark waiting to receive all that belongs to Ceasar. I dropped my head because I couldn't bear looking him in the eye.

'Bring it back' he firmly emphasized.

'It's in the car' I quickly confessed.

'Why did you even take it? As far as I know, you don't even know how to shoot'

I wiped the streak of sweat from my forehead and

immediately stopped when I realized that my hand was shaking – following the crazy tempo of my heartbeat. He silently tapped the empty space beside him on the bed and I followed the unsaid instruction.

‘I’m not mad at you...’ he softly assured. I continued to sit there without a word. ‘I was just worried about you when I realized that the gun wasn’t here and you also had left without saying shxt. You know you can talk to me about anything, right?’

I nodded, without fully processing what he was saying.

‘What’s going on?’

I swallowed and almost choked on my guilt.

‘Nothing’ I answered. He immediately sighed.

‘So you’re just going to sit there and lie?’

I couldn’t tell what was in his head. I couldn’t look at him. A lot was busy getting topsy-turvy up in my head and this wasn’t a pleasant experience. It made me super anxious. I was struggling to accept the fact that I had no ability to turn back the hands of time.

‘I’m not lying’

‘Baby, I do this shxt for a living. You’re saying one thing but your body language tells me another. What the fvck is

going on?’

He was the first person my heart wanted to run to when the incident was still fresh but at that moment when he asked, I felt like... I don't even know what I was feeling. The tears cascaded down and under my chin when it finally hit me. I had done it. All those intrusive thoughts of wanting to retaliate had finally won. Under all these empathetic and peace-seeking layers of myself, lies a true version of my mother's daughter. Growing up, there was a saying my father really liked. When people would express their disbelief and equal disappointment when a well-mannered woman happened to mother a troublesome menace of a child, he would usually say that pastors seldomly raised better pastors; they always birthed common thieves and unscrupulous politicians. Right now as I sit here on this cold and hardened cemented floor, I disagree. A lion's offspring is always innately predatory. None of this should surprise me because after all is said and the sun eventually sets, I am still Pam's daughter, grotesquely so.

What was barely even a conversation between Kurhula and I melted into a silent hug. When I couldn't speak, he pulled me into his arms and allowed me to further crumble against him. Fikani's knock kicked me out of the thin semblance of calm I was slowly seeping into. He asked the both of us to meet him in the study and that's when I

blurted it out that I had shot my mother to her death, and that his twin brother knew. The judgemental frown that creased his face crushed me internally.

‘You did what?’

‘I don’t know what I was thinking. I just wanted her to confess to killing my baby. I shouldn’t have went there but I did...’

He seemed to calm down. Probably because of the mention of our baby, the baby that he was looking forward to giving the world from the moment he was informed of its formation. Somehow, I just knew that he was going to be a daddy’s boy. I watched as Kurhula’s chest dropped in loud signs of defeat.

‘When the cops show up here, you know nothing. Are we clear?’ he commanded after a long and dreadful moment of him keeping to himself.

‘What?’

‘I’m the owner of the firearm. You probably forgot that important fact but I’m not gonna allow you to set foot in jail. I promised—’

‘But—’

‘I promised I’d always protect you, even when you’re being

reckless!’

He was annoyed, and there was no opportunity for me to get mad at the tone he was taking with me because he had a point. I applied zero thinking in this instance.

However, I wasn’t going to allow him to do time on my behalf. You don’t do that to the one person who would carry the world on his shoulders and set it alight if the need arose, all in your name.

We both got up and I followed him out. When we got to Fikani, we found him sitting on the office desk – typing on his phone.

‘Took you long enough’ he mentioned without raising his face from the screen. I was paranoid that more than two people knew about this. A weak part of me wanted to go report this to the police but it was getting arm-wrestled by the fear of being locked up for good, and the latter was winning.

‘Where exactly were you standing when your mother was shot?’ Fikani asked. I raised a brow. Why is it important? He loudly exhaled and jumped off the surface he was seated on and Kurhula occupied his chair – visibly stressed. Fikani pulled the notebook and asked Kurhula for a pen. He didn’t hear him. Fikani tapped the desk and only then did Kurhula start paying attention. Fikani got the pen

and handed it to me.

'I need you to draw your exact position in relation to your mother's when the gun went off'

He was stressing me out. Did I look like I was the mood to be partaking in kindergarten activities right now? Drawing? Really?

'You were inside the house with her, correct?'

I nodded.

'I have reason to believe that you're not the one who pulled the trigger. You might be convinced that you were because you're inexperienced but I highly doubt that you were alone at that scene. Just draw quickly please' he was getting impatient. My blood was chilling at this realisation. At the same time, I was desperate for him to be right. Kurhula was just watching us speak. If only I had a penny for his thoughts. I took the pen and dotted my position, then my mother's as far as I could remember, using the door behind me and the window for some reference.

'Thought as much. There was no way you could've shot with such great precision with your inexperience. Bro, do you recognise this brass?' he turned towards Kurhula, who silently opened his palm for Fikani to drop the bullet casing. He studied it for a few seconds and shook his

head.

'This ain't mine' Kurhula responded before putting it down.

'Then I guess we have nothing to worry about. Just as long as you're sure that you touched nothing else in that house'

'Tell me something Mlambya. What exactly was your plan by going to the crime scene?' Kurhula asked.

'Damage control'

Kurhula was silent but the suspicion was like badly matched foundation on his face. Fikani was confident in his vague statement and it was clear that he was not prepared to say anything more. The silence was starting to get too loud for me, so I left. When I heard the cry coming from the back, I remembered that there was a baby in the yard whose mother was in hospital fighting for her life. I wanted to ignore the cry as I showered but the little one was not letting up. I got dressed in sleepwear even though people would be awake soon. I left the house and went to knock so I could attempt to calm her, and that's how I felt in love with the nameless baby. She was like a soothing lullaby in the middle of a raging storm. Something about her innocence made absolute sense. She eventually quietened her down as I sang to her. If babies knew what waited ahead, they would be inconsolable. I thought

calming her was my biggest feat of the day, until the police came knocking on our door. Now I am sitting here wondering how she is doing. I can still smell her natural babyish scent. New-borns smell like a medley of sweet things.

There's two other women in here. One is sleeping and the other is staring at me. I am pretending that I don't see her because if anybody has to teach her that staring is rude, it is not going to be me.

'You seem out of place here' she finally says and she sits up. She has this masculine and dominant air about her. That's what she's been trying to decipher all along? Why I am here? Why is she in here?

'Ey, Beauty. Do you talk?' she asks. I almost laugh because this question rightfully reminds me of an incident where I had to pretend I was mute for a man to leave me alone at the mall. It worked, and I'm thinking of pulling that stunt again. That man had also given me a name as well, a name I can't recall now.

I sigh.

'Murder' I say. 'Alleged murder'

She scoffs. I know what she finds amusing. This is an adjective usually reserved for the third person. I just felt I

should say it; I didn't do it. I'm confident that I did not do it. I just allow the fear and the panic to switch off a few buttons on my logic board. I did not do it.

'Let me guess' she gets up from the bunk bed and comes to sit beside me. 'A man?' she asks.

I don't respond. I don't have the energy to.

'I'm not judging you. If so, very good'

I shake my head.

'My mother' I correct her before this further gets misconstrued. I also need that silence back.

'Sheesh...' she goes – not sounding shocked at all.

'And you?' it's my turn to ask.

'No dead bodies. Just drugs this time'

This time?

The other lady raises her head from the bed and looks at me. She also gets up and comes to sit in front of me, reeking of alcohol. If she hadn't caught her balance, she would've fell right on top of me.

'Oh aram skepsel. Let me pray for you my child' she offers and tries to take my hands. I decline. She looks slightly older than the both of us. I was under the impression that

she was asleep while she was furtively listening to our conversation. Not that I mind. I do not care.

'I'm okay, thank you'

'You don't want me to pray? It's for this reason that you are in this God-forsaken place' she spits. The other cellmate laughs while rolling a blunt. Is that even allowed in here?

'People who usually announce that they want to pray for you are pretentious. You could've silently prayed for her there by your bed, instead you are, playing heaven clerk whereas you're also arrested maybe for far more heinous crimes' she says, still rolling. I laugh internally.

'I'm sorry but what could be more terrible than killing your own mother?' the question comes out before I can secure a leash on it. She glances at me before handing me the weed she has just nicely rolled up. I politely turn her down. She shrugs and pulls on it.

'Let me guess. You also don't drink?'

I nod and she subtly laughs.

'I have a feeling your mother provoked you' she shares.

'I didn't do it'

'You look like you're beating yourself up about it though.'

Stop, otherwise these grey walls will drive you insane before you even make it to court. Tamia...' she offers me her hand. I can't help but smile.

'Kuli'

The intoxicated prayer warrior had passed out on the floor.

'We both got here yesterday. She poisoned all five of her kids, in case you're wondering' Tamia states and blows out the smoke.

My eyes widen at this unsolicited piece of information.

'How old?'

'Between the ages of two and eight. When I tell people that just because you can have kids, it doesn't mean you should, they think I'm crazy. Look at her now, going through a helluva lot' she stands up and goes back to her bed, honestly unbothered.

'Someone's here to see you' the police officer says, looking at me. The previous one told me that we cannot have visitors. I am hoping it's Kurhula, or my dad. Seeing either of them could help salvage the little sanity I have left.

I get up from the floor and wait as the heavy metal is being unlocked. I wait for the handcuffs but she just offers me a tight-lipped smile and gestures that I should walk ahead of

her. I find Kurhula in the visitor's room and he immediately stands up when he sees me. He calls the officer by name and is acknowledged with a friendly nod. We are left to be alone and he pulls me closer to him.

'Are you okay?' he asks, and I just stare. I don't know. Is this what I'll refer to someday when it's fitting to say, 'I've been through worse'?

'You're not going to stay in here for long. I promise you this' he offers me his pinky finger and I laugh, before crossing it with mine.

'Have you eaten?' he asks and I shake my head.

'Please say something my love'

I sigh and pull out a chair. Standing here is making me a bit dizzy.

'You never said anything right?'

I shake my head. I'm too tired to speak, especially anything about this case. If I am to go to prison for life, so be it.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula, I'm going to need you to be strong otherwise the prosecutor is going to shred you to pieces. There's no case here... well if you play according to my rules'

I raise my brow. Why does that sound so sinister? He

takes a seat across me.

'The only thing the police have on you is a single eyewitness, nothing more'

'Someone saw me. That's enough to put me behind bars'

'Why do you think they call me Jaguar?' he asks with a confident smirk and I chuckle.

'You are going to deny ever being at your mother's house at the time of her murder. Aunt Lydia is prepared to be your alibi'

I laugh breathlessly. Why am I not surprised? If there's anyone who would shamelessly be prepared to lie under oath, it would be her.

'I don't know baby. I feel like this is going to backfire'

'If you've never trusted me before, I'm going to need you to trust me just this one time, with your whole heart'

I'm really not sure about this.

'Why can't I tell the truth? Can't you get me off that way?'

'You're their only suspect. They want to put someone behind bars for this. If you admit to ever being there, that will give them the stamina to bury you. Now they're operating on hearsay and nothing else. Please trust me, I

know what I'm talking about'

I find myself fidgeting. He puts his hands over mine.

'I know you're scared, with good reason but I promise you my love, if you do as I say, this whole thing will be chucked out of court, okay?'

I wipe my tears and nod. I've been trying to convince myself that I would be okay with whatever outcome but this gets real as each minute passes by. I am not prison material.

'How's the little one?' I ask and he immediately drops his chest.

'Do me a favour?'

I look at him expectantly.

'Please don't get attached to that baby. We're here today because you couldn't handle heartbreak my love...'

I drop my eyes.

'Don't get me wrong. I am not judging you. I just don't want to see you hurt, okay?' he softly pleads as he gets up. He has a point, as always.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 38

[UNEDITED]

'I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God'

With her hand on the bible, my mother's best friend declared. I consciously command my feet to stop tapping the floor and remind myself of Kurhula's words. I promised to look unshaken, like a person who is wrongfully accused yet sure of their innocence. I pleaded 'Not guilty', however, I am still struggling to wrap my head around what happened when my mother died.

'Mrs Lekgotla, do you mind explaining to the court in sequence what transpired in the early hours of the 12th of November 2022?'

She threw her despisal eyes at me over her glasses and I just knew that she was determined to put me behind bars. I continued to plead with my brain to get my heart to calm down. It was thrumming nervously and agitating my limbs in tandem.

'A gunshot went off and immediately caused me to wake up' she begins. The prosecutor nods to encourage her to speak some more.

'I was scared but I got up and went to check through the window to see what was going on since I wasn't sure from

which direction the loud bang had come from’

She looks at Kurhula, and tightly swallows.

The court is silent and this is exacerbating the unstable state my nerves are in. If a stud earring was to fall, everyone would hear it. Kurhula was focusing on his documents and I was desperate to have him hold my hand.

‘Carry on Mrs Lekgotla’

‘After a couple of minutes, I saw Kulani walk out of her mother’s house’

‘Looking guilty?’ the prosecutor asks and Kurhula immediately says ‘Objection My Lady. Counsel is leading the witness’, looking appalled that his colleague even said such a thing.

‘Sustained. Advocate Masilo...’ the judge warns.

‘Apologies my lady. Allow me to rephrase my question. How would you describe Miss Baloyi’s demeanour while walking out of the house?’

Mrs Lekgotla clears her throat.

‘Uhm... She had a hoodie over her head and she was walking really fast’ she confidently claims.

‘How well do you know her for you to be sure that it was

her?’

‘Her mother was my best friend’

This woman speaks as though I grew up right in front of her.

‘Right. So it was inevitable that you would see her a lot. Makes sense. Do you think that the accused had a motive to murder her own mother?’

She straighten her back and gives a confident ‘Yes’. The court starts rumbling in an aghast cacophony.

‘SILENCE IN COURT!’

The noise is quick to die down, with a few low belligerent voices that also soon came to disappear. The prosecutor clicks her heels towards the witness, with a visibly interested look on her face. Kurhula still looks calm and collected, poker-faced.

‘May I ask why you believe the defendant would want to commit such a crime?’

‘During the past two days, she was always worried that her daughter would do something to hurt her’

‘By she, you mean the victim?’

‘Yes advocate’

She must be lying. My mother was never afraid of me. In fact, she has always seen me as a minute bug she could easily squash.

'Thank you. No further questions My Lady'

...

It's Kurhula's turn to question her. He picks up his pen and gets up from his seat.

'Mrs Lekgotla, can we please rewind a bit and go back to when you heard the gunshot from your house?'

She clears her throat once more.

'My Lady. He's being repetitive' the prosecutor objected.

'Advocate Ngobeni, is there a point to this?'

'I am trying to establish an important detail that will prove that my client was not the one who was seen walking out of the deceased's house on that fatal morning, My Lady'

'I'll allow it'

'Thank you My Lady. Should I repeat the question Mrs Lekgotla?'

'No thank you. After hearing the gunshot, I quickly got up from my bed, wore my slippers, walked to the window, and pushed the curtain aside. That's when I saw Kulani walking out of her mother's house'

'You saw the person whom you think is my client walk out of the victim's house?'

She nods.

'Immediately when you got to the window?'

'Yes. I mean no. I had to—'

'Yes? No? Which one is it?'

'I had to wait for a few minutes before I could see what was going on' she answered with a trembling voice. She was already nervous when she took the stand. He's just made it worse.

'Can I ask what the person you saw walking out, whom you claim is my client, was wearing?'

'Uhm... oversized greyish tracksuits'

'Oversized tracksuits, with a hoodie over the head. In other words, this person tried to be as disguised as possible?'

'Uhm... ' Mrs Lekgotla failed to answer.

'Objection!'

'Apologies. Can I ask that you estimate the distance between your bedroom window and the victim's walkway, by that I mean between the gate and her front door?'

'It could be...' she began thinking. 'Between here and that door' she pointed at the door I came into the court through. Kurhula nodded, brought towards him a blank paper, and wrote something on it.

'I see you're bespectacled. Do you mind telling the court what your prescription is?'

'What?'

'Why do you have glasses on, ma'am?'

'Because... because I'm myopic'

I almost laugh when I figure out where this is going. I married to a legal bustard.

'In Layman's terms, you cannot see from afar?' he prods as he walks towards the door she pointed at.

'Were you wearing your glasses when you saw the person whom you claim?'

Her temples are taut.

'I...'

'You're under oath, ma'am. Please try your best to

remember this fact'

'I don't remember'

'Let me exercise your brain for you. When I asked that you repeat the sequence of events, there is no where, where you mentioned that you reached for your spectacles, but you remembered that you wore your shoes'

Mrs Lekgotla did not reply.

'If it pleases the court, can you please take off your glasses and read this for me?'

She did as told, and he raised the paper.

'SPECSAVERS', that's what he had written in capital letters and I could see it from here. She squinted for some time and he lost his patience.

'How long have you been wearing these glasses?' he asked.

'About 37 years now'

'Now how are we expected to trust the deteriorating eyesight of a myopic individual standing behind a window at dark hours of the night, watching a majorly disguised figure walk out at such a distance? The witness is unreliable and inadmissible'

'My lady, Exhibit 2 clearly shows when my client went home from the hospital and I don't think that it makes sense for a woman who has just suffered a miscarriage to be wanting to murder somebody just hours after being discharged from hospital. I would like to believe that she was in pain and therefore in bed'

The judge kept writing things down as he spoke. A document is passed around the legal birds and it's travel is the only thing being listened to in this court room.

'This whole trial is an insult to the criminal justice system of this country. The prosecution is wasting everyone's time including yours, My Lady. The detective handling this case said it himself that my client's fingerprints were not found at the scene so this is a case of mere speculation and hearsay. The prosecution and the investigative SAPS team have failed in their responsibility to this country and it will be unfair to allow my client to be another statistic. This respectable court cannot possibly allow this case to continue as it will be a further waste of resources and I repeat, time. I ask for my client to be acquitted and for this case to be thrown of court. No further questions My Lady'

He offers me a quick wink before holding his gown towards his abdomen and taking a seat.

Watching him in his element has just made me fall in love

all over again. Watching this evenly toned dark-skinned man treat this court like his jungle has me forgetting that I could easily go to jail, if the judge decides to. He walks and talks with so much charisma and has the confidence to back up his intelligence. I love him. I truly love this Jaguar of mine. That notorious fresh cut is also not helping.

...

[MABONTLE]

That cannot be a tyre puncture, not at this time of the night. Dad pleaded me not to go but I couldn't afford to stay any longer. After the court case, I had to take my bags and leave because my leave was over. Now I'm here, stuck in the dark. I step out of the car to confirm if it's indeed what I think it is. This shouldn't be happening, not in the dark. Nobody should get me wrong. I can change my own tire, just not in the middle of nowhere. I reach for my phone to call Fikani but before I can unlock it, I'm hit by his everyday scent. When I try to turn, something locks me in position and places a pungent cloth over my nose. I'm seeing stars, feeling heady and losing all balance on my

feet.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 39

[KULANI]

‘My lady...’ the prosecutor continues trying to fortify her stance. ‘A woman was killed in cold blood. The stats keep going up in this country whereas there is absolutely zero justice being served most of the time. We surely cannot discredit the only witness to parts of this act just by ASSUMING that she did not have her glasses on and therefore couldn’t see’

‘Then let us go back and scrap the entire meaning of eyewitness. Shall we, counsel?’ Kurhula counters. Advocate Masilo closes her mouth and bites her tongue just when she was about to speak.

I have just made eye-contact with the judge and all my pseudo-calm is crumbling internally. She’s busy studying the documents nobody can see behind the high wood in front of her – with a grave face that reports on the seriousness of her thoughts. Whenever she raises her eyes, I’m always the first they find. She gently takes off her glasses, squeezes the inner corners of her closed eyes

and puts them on again. She then elegantly clears her throat as she turns in the direction of the witness stand.

'Mrs Lekgotla, what time did you call the police after seeing the accused allegedly walk out of her mother's house?' the judge begins questioning the witness herself. Mrs Lekgotla starts sweating bullets. It goes silent, while we are all waiting for her to answer.

'I... I am not the one who called the police'

I see Kurhula trying to repress a smile.

'The information given to the court by the police confirms that they were only alerted of the crime around 5AM. What could be the reason why you had to wait that long for you to reach out to the arm of the law? Seeing that you're the key witness?'

The whole court starts rumbling again.

'Silence!'

Mrs Lekgotla starts stammering when the noise dies down. The judge keeps her eyes fixed on her, unfalteringly awaiting an answer.

'I think I was traumatized Your Honour. I mean... My Lady'

The whole court starts laughing. The prosecutor is visibly chewing on steel.

‘Are you aware of the gravity of being under oath? I could charge you for being in contempt of court if I were to find you guilty of perjury. I do not appreciate it when citizens do not respect my courtroom’

‘Objection My Lady but—’

‘Overruled!’ the judge cuts off the prosecutor mid-sentence. ‘The only leg the prosecution is standing on is the motive that the accused apparently had, which is information relayed by somebody else, automatically rendering it inadmissible. Ms Baloyi, I am terribly sorry to hear about the loss of your baby. May the Almighty heal your heart. The court would also like to apologize that in your condition, you had to endure two nights in prison. Section 174 of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 involves the right of the accused to be discharged from the offence, he or she has allegedly committed where, at the close of the State’s case, there is no evidence on which the court may draw the accused to the charge. The prosecution has failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt how this case should return a verdict of guilt. I therefore acquit the accused of all charges laid against her. This trial cannot be allowed to proceed and has therefore reached its conclusion’ she pounds her gavel and immediately stands up after the statement that has just emancipated me from the shackles of being a prime suspect.

I am already in tears by the time she steps out of the courtroom. Kurhula approaches me with an endearing smile, with his arms wide open. I fall into them and he envelopes me with his black gown. Under the wings of a legal eagle, I'm feeling my most protected. Aunt Lydia and my dad come down to hug me as well. My face is a wet mess.

'You will find us in the car' dad says before giving Kurhula a firm handshake. He releases a loaded sigh and Kurhula silently shakes his head in what I don't know to be disapproval or something similar.

'I'm definitely running you a bubble bath with rose petals when we get home. You need to get rid of the filthy stench of prison' Aunty Lydia says.

'She needs a traditional healer for that. Not a bubble bath' my dad argues. Aunty Lydia jerks her head in his direction and I'm already feeling embarrassed of what is yet to come out of her mouth.

'And you claim to have sense. How is using more unpleasantly smelling—'

'Okay, okay. Let's meet outside family' Kurhula extinguishes the fire before it blows up and engulfs us all and encourages both of them to walk out. I laugh when

they do.

'If I allowed her to speak she was going to dissect his chieftaincy, all his qualifications and entire existence'

He did say no one is spared from her slicing tongue. She wasn't going to shock me if she rained insults on Chief Baloyi – a man revered by most and feared by many.

'I'm sorry for ever doubting that you could ever get me out'

He wipes the streaks of my tears with his thumb and secures my face with both his hands, making me look him in the eye.

'There's not a thing I wouldn't do for you. I just wish that you had trusted me from the onset of this mess'

He turns when he notices that the prosecutor standing behind him, still covering me with his one hand. The court was almost empty at this point.

'And he strikes again huh?' she says with a narrow smile and he laughs lightly.

'I... I just came on here to say I didn't know about your miscarriage however, I do know the pain that comes with it – very well. I hope you know that I was just doing my job' she directs this to me. I just nod. I have no idea what to say. She purses her lips and turns to my husband.

'See you next time, learned friend'

'We both know you don't want that'

'As painful as it is to admit, I learn a lot from you each time'

'The first time? I can agree, even if I say so myself. Now? I doubt there was anything to learn. You my friend, just don't know how to pick your battles. I think you should start calling me to ask which cases to take because I'm questioning the respect I have for you right now'

'Wow Jaguar. Ever so arrogant...'

They both laugh before she turns and walks away. He frown-smiles at me.

'Why are you pouting like that?' he asks. I start playing with his tie.

'Why was she looking at you like that and speaking that way? Wow Jaguar. Nyweva so nywarrogant' I imitate her nasal English tone. He laughs out loud.

'Wait. Are you jealous?'

'Mciim...' I gently brush his rich hairline forward with my fingers. He's still laughing.

'Awulavi kutwa chumu hi nuna wa wena? Hm? Love seeing

this side of you. I feel claimed. I feel loved' he expresses with semi-serious countenance. I lightly hit him on the chest as I chuckle.

'I'm serious. These women must know that this wedding band is not for the purposes of drip and swagger. But if you must know, Masilo is a great friend of mine AND she only has eyes for women. You stand a greater chance of hooking her interest than I could ever do'

'Friend? Are you serious? One would think you're enemies from the lack of grace you guys were showing one another just moments ago'

He huffs out laughter.

'This is a courtroom, not a social media platform. I have no friends in here. Ask Khalanga'

'You once went head-to-head with your best friend?'

'I obliterated him and later bought him drinks to nurse his wounded ego'

'I could watch you play defence all day. I even forgot I was the accused for a moment there. All I could see was my husband at his sexiest'

He bites his smiling lower lip. Is he blushing.

'Thank you baby. I appreciate the reassurance'

'Pssh please. A beast like yourself needs to be reassured?'

He pulls me closer and briefly kisses me. 'You clearly have no idea how much your opinion means to me, do you? You're the only person I don't find it hard to respect'

The last part shouldn't be as funny as I find it.

...

[MABONTLE]

I just woke up and the first thing I notice is that the room is spinning. I can see a man in front of me but my vision is too blurry for me to even capture his face. My head is feeling a little lopsided so I decide to stay put. The dumbest decision you can take when feeling dizzy is to try and stand up. These bright lights are also not helping. He sits next to and brushes my head.

'I'm sorry I had to do this to you. The side effects should blow over in the morning' I hear his voice but I'm too numb to even open my mouth and speak. I once tried weed out of curiosity. I was never this high. I feel so out of touch with the physical aspect of reality; like the thing that are

near me are way too far for me to reach and touch, including him.

The next moment when I wake up, I am met by rude sunlight penetrating the window. I lift my legs off the bed and see my suitcase on the corner of the room. I don't know what the primary cause of my exhaustion is between sleeping in skinny jeans and being doped. The general theme of this room tells me I've been here before. The manner in which my head is pounding in disabling my thought-processing abilities. When I turn to my right, I see a glass of orange juice and paracetamol tablets next to it. I'm sceptical. It could be laced with something stronger than whatever was in my system last night. Why do I keep attracting the wrong ones? I had my misgivings about Fikani but a huge part of me wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. I walk barefoot out of the room.

'Fikani!' I yell, hoping his face will appear from somewhere in this house. He owes a sound explanation. I catch a reflection of myself on the round mirror and I'm unimpressed with the state of my hair. The least he could've done was to try find my silk bonnet. That's the very least he could've done. If he wants to kill me, I would appreciate dying like the bad bish I am. I immediately laugh at this thought. Trust me to have senseless thoughts when she could be in danger. I open the fridge so



I can pour myself a glass of water. If this man doesn't show up in the next fifteen minutes, I am breaking windows and getting myself out of here. It's crazy how even in this circumstance, I have some faith that he wouldn't actually harm me; that there is a sensible explanation for all this.

'Hee Mabontle... do you realise that you hardly know this man' I say to myself as I drink my water. If this is his idea of being romantic then we are going to have a problem.

I see his car pulling up outside and I wait behind the counter, next to the knives, just in case. I've never been so conflicted. If it gets rough and bloody between him and I, I will definitely cut my losses with banna. I continue waiting as he unlocks the door and he steps in.

'You're awake...'

Is that the only thing he feels fit to say? Is that blood I see on his shoulder and his white t-shirt just has a red patch? I step closer.

'What's that? Are you hurt?'

He looks spent. Now I'm worried.

'I'll be okay. I just need a shower'

'Where have you been?'

'Doing something I should've done a long time ago'

This is all he says before walking away from me. I follow him.

'I feel like you owe me an explanation...'

His hand goes over the red patch I was just questioning him about and I can see that his grimacing in pain while standing behind him.

'There's a first aid kit in my car. Speaking of which, where is it?'

'It's outside'

He looks... I don't know, haggard and distraught? A part of me wants to hug him tight and assure him that everything will be okay. Another demands an explanation.

'You can go have your shower. I will attend to you afterwards' I softly say. He turns towards me and I see a shadow of a smile on his face. 'Thanks, doc'.

I make a quick breakfast because I'm famished. He comes back down the moment I cover his plate. He walks out of the house bare-chested in denim shorts. He comes back with the kit and hands it to me. The silence between us is now awkward. I am not prepared on saying anything more until he tells me what I want to know. I lead him to one of

the barstools and open the black bag on top of the counter. I then wear my gloves and take out a patch. He has stopped bleeding so I just disinfect the area and cover in up. The cut is not that deep for me to be going above and beyond. He's starring at me as I work on his mysterious wound. I'm avoiding his eyes because I might just lash out.

'It would've killed me to know that I had lost you and it was all my fault' he says. I glance at him and walk to the bin to go throw the used cotton pads.

'Lost me?' I ask.

'I want to tell you the truth, trust me. I'm just not sure how much it is going to freak you out'

I don't think I like the direction of this confession. The sombreness carried in his voice and shining in his eyes is already chilling to the skin on my back. I patch up the wound and he asks if I'm done. I nod. He takes me by the hand and walks with me to the couch. He rubs his palms and sits his elbows on his knees.

'Remember the joke I made about winning the lottery?'

I huff. I wasn't sure if it was a joke or not.

'Yeah?'

'It was just that, a joke. I didn't get up here by gambling or

making stupid bets. It took blood, fear, and tears.
Literally...'

'I had the wrong person take me out of poverty and I became infinitely indebted to him'

I shouldn't be focusing on his toned self and bare back but here I am, getting distracted. I blame the abstinence I went into. And the fact that he's fine as fvck.

'Are you listening?' he asks. I quickly nod.

'It reached a point where I wanted nothing to do with the shady business and I wanted out. Don wasn't hearing it so he began making threats...'

I lift both brows.

'What threats?'

He looks up and swallows.

'He started watching my moves without my knowledge and discovered you' he huffs humourlessly. 'Do you know what he called you?'

I just stare, waiting for the insult.

'My Achilles heel. He wasn't wrong...' he keeps the stare. The butterflies tumble around and into themselves.

'Fikani...'

'Mabontle. I'm no murderer but Don went too far so he had to go. It was either him or you, and there was no fvcking way I was going to sit by and allow the latter'

Wait a minute. Does he mean... what does he mean???

'If it wasn't for Stone, Don was going to kill you last night. I had to intercept before you could fall into his trap. I will totally understand if you want nothing to do with me after this but I want you to know that I'd never allow anything to happen to you, my fault or not, rain or thunder'

I'm at a complete loss for words. Surprisingly, instead of being scared, I'm now seriously worried about him.

'You... did you...?' I fail to say it but he sees it in my eyes, since he's nodding.

'What if someone comes after you?'

He takes my hand and kisses my fingers.

'It's all over. I promise you'

'This Stone. What's in it for him?'

'He was his right-hand man. He betrayed him because he wanted to take over. We both win in this case. I get to leave the business and he gets to sit on the high chair' he speaks like this is a simple board game.

'What kind of relationship did you have with this Don?'

'The man practically raised me and taught me everything I know, and I'm not just speaking about the dodgy part of things. He... Don stepped up and became a father to me. I'm just sad that it had to end this way but the afterlife is anything worth talking about, he knows that he left me no choice wherever he is'

I'm failing to conceal the shock waves coursing through me. He stands up and gets me to do the same. He pulls me into a warm, lengthy hug, until this cushioned feeling almost fools me into slumber. He then pulls away and kisses my forehead. I'm not even sure what the exact cause of my tears is.

'I'm terribly sorry that our love story couldn't get a chance, but I regret nothing about last night. Your safety had to come first. Maybe someday, the timing will be right' he hangs my car keys in the air, waiting for me to take them. My heart...

I take my keys and smile back. I don't know man. I walk to the door and stop when I hear him call my name. Why did hearing that come with this sense of relief?

'Your bag' he's quick with his steps, wanting to fetch it.

'Fikani!' I yell. He's already at the top of the stairs. He looks

back curiously. I drop the keys on the floor and quicken my steps towards him.

'I don't want the bag' I say as I walk. Confusion shrinks his face. 'It's you that I want' I say. I don't know where this bravado is coming from but I'm going to allow my desires to defeat me and kiss this man. He catches me and matches my fervour. I stand on my toes and suck the life out of this man. Whatever happens after this is inconsequential. This is what I want right now. This is who I want.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 40

UNEDITED

[KULANI]

She's gone. The reality of her irreversible absence is only starting to permeate my system now. Contrary to expected outcome, I am actually hurt by my mother's demise, but what I will not do is waste my time mourning her. I wonder what my father is planning with regards to her funeral. He wouldn't hear it when I tried asking about this matter. I am in the rosy bubble bath that Aunty Lydia had promised me. Kurhula had to attend something urgent

at the office. He said him and I need to have a serious talk when he comes back home. Nothing makes me more anxious than a pending, ponderous conversation. From his tone, what is on that mind is not about Mary biscuits and the weather. I noticed his mood changing in the car but he denied it. I leave the tub when the water has lost all its heat.

After getting dressed, I find a text from my dad – inviting me to dinner. I slightly raise my brow at this. I know he must be relieved that I wasn't charged but I don't think this is appropriate, considering what the family is going through. I am certain that some members of the family are still firm with the idea that I am responsible for this. The question still stands though. If I'm not the one who pulled the trigger... who did? While I'm still trying to draw some sense out of this loose end, I receive a call from unknown number. I have no idea who this is but I am certain that I am not in the mood for them.

'Hello?'

They're silent but I can hear them breathing. I cut the call and throw the phone on the bed. I am too sleep-deprived for this tomfoolery. It rings again.

'I'm going to murder someone, for real this time' I regret this string of words the second after it leaves my mouth. I

search for some maturity within me and take the call once more.

'Hi. Please don't drop the phone. It's me' she immediately shoots.

Does this lady have a name or is she a special case? I continue being silent because at the rate that my patience is busy disintegrating, I might ruin someone's day.

'Ke nna, Kgahli. Please I need to talk to you'

Wow. My brows are eager to meet and share this puzzlement I'm feeling right now.

'Uhm... how can I help you Kgahli?'

'By coming to the hospital. I cannot talk on the phone'

I don't know if I'm being paranoid after what just happened but I'm not happy to be interacting with this girl right now. She may sound sincere but this is the very same person that showed up on the eve of my wedding day. My instinct could be on to something but then again, I may be suffering from JCD – Jealousy from Common Dxck syndrome. I agree to go see her. Plus, I need some sun. The air in this room feels dense and recycled.

...

When I get to her ward, she waves both hands in the air so I could easily spot her. She should've just told me that she's the only light-skinned person in here and that would've done the job. She brushes the fly-aways on her straight back with her hands as she waits for me to get to her bed. If she's trying to look decent then it's not working. We both look raggedy and lost. I'm the only one who is unbothered by this fact. That oversized hospital gown is not helping her case at all. I need to pick a day to get some maintenance done. Waxing, nails, cornrows, and all. I look like I've given up on life, which may not be entirely false. A bit of me feels bad for not bringing a basket of fruits for the patient I'm here to see, but then I remember that we are not friends. This fact singlehandedly wipes the guilt.

'Thank you for coming'

This is the first thing she decides to say. My mother was a horse of a very unique colour but one thing I'm grateful for is her always emphasizing that you do not talk to a person without greeting them first.

'Hi, Kgahli'

I want to smile, I really do. It is the energy I do not have. What exactly am I doing here?

She clears her throat. She keeps dodging eye contact with me.

'How are you recovering?' I try to break the ice while sitting on the empty space on her bed.

'I'm coming alright. Thank you for asking'

'May I ask what happened?' I pry. Her face immediately changes.

'Unfortunately no. You may not'

I wasn't fighting but I will not bother trying to explain this to her.

'Why am I here?'

Sister Emma walks into the room and loudly greets me. I greet her back. We used to be classmates in high school. She's one of those 'friends' I outgrew but kept in my WhatsApp for no particular reason.

'Long time no see hey!'

'I got your number from her. If you mind, please blame me and not her' Kgahli says. I assure that it's okay and continue discussing old memories with the former classmate. After she's gone, I turn to my husband's... old flame?

'I called you here because I wanted us to have a conversation as women. Listen, Kurhula loves and respects you'

I don't think I'm going to like the crux of this. I simply nod inquisitively. She's visibly trying put her thoughts into words.

'I've been thinking. The reason why he's adamant on pushing us away is because of you. He's afraid of you'

I laugh with zero intention. Kurhula? Afraid of me? Are we living in an alternate universe? I am still without words because I have no direction of where this ship is sailing to. I am still waiting on captain Kgahli to get to the point.

'Bona neh, I am not attacking you. I just want my baby's father to be there for his child. You're a woman. You might be a mother le wena and—'

I instantly feel like my heart has been submerged in ice water. Yup. She hit a nerve. And what does she mean by "might"?

'Kuli please don't hear me wrong. I am just saying that... you know? Make him see reason. If it fails, I will just accept that he just wants nothing to do with our baby and leave. However, I feel like... again, don't take this the wrong way. I feel like you're standing between him and his

daughter. I'm just asking you to assure him—'

I leave before she can even finish her sentence. And that damn tear wasn't supposed to fall in front of her.

...

[MABONTLE]

I was sleeping peacefully in this man's arms until the fall that did not happen – causing me to want to find balance in the air. My mom used to say when you feel like you're falling over while asleep, then it means that there is a spider web somewhere above you on the walls. I laugh when I catch the smile on curious smile on Fikani's face. He doesn't look like someone who has been asleep.

'You want to defy the rules of science?' he asks and I break out in laughter. This shouldn't be as embarrassing at it feels right now.

'Mciim. You should clean your walls' I say while sitting up. I have no idea how long it lasted but I needed that nap. Kuli won the case and that's one thing off my stressor list. I need to make time to go see and pamper her.

'Excuse me?' Fikani asks. I explain my mother's theory to him and he chuckles. 'You're blaming your imaginary fall on spider webs?'

We both can't stop laughing. His face tells me that he finds this absolutely ridiculous. I need to go back to my place to prepare for my night shift but first...

'You know what I'm craving?'

My mouth is already watering as I say this.

'No but I wouldn't mind the information'

'I haven't had a kota in a minute. I want one with an egg and a beef patty in it'

'That's not a kota...' he argues. I frown.

'What do you mean? What is it then?'

'Unnecessary creativity. Next thing you'll be stuffing prawns and avocado in it. Eggs do not belong in a kota'

'Well I want one with an egg and all the works in it AND you mister, are gonna make a plan'

His laughter is immediate.

'Yes ma'am'

I really thought he was going to argue some more.

'You're going to love it. I promise you'

'I am not having that. I actually do not feel like anything greasy right now' he's adamant.

'What are you going to eat for lunch then?' I ask while finishing off the glass of water that was by my bedside.

'You' he simply answers like he didn't just say the most risqué thing. I laugh before I can stop myself, then struggle to contain the smile on my face. He's not moving his eyes from me. I get up from the bed and go grab my toiletry bag. He's bold. I have to give him that. I can feel his eyes on my back as I walk to his shower. I turn back and look at him. He still has that provocative yet subtle smile on. We both laugh and I disappear into the bathroom. I'm speechless for now but I'm coming back with an answer. He's not the only one with a smart mouth around here. I have a habit of not thinking straight when I'm turned on. But he's insane if he thinks he's just going to have me. He needs to sweat for all this and I'm going to make sure of it.

When I step out, I hear him taking a call on the corridor. I gather that he's talking to his brother and I'm wondering what silly thing Kurhula has just said that has him laughing like that. I smell of a man's lotion and I'm not complaining. The outfit that I would've preferred to wear for this simple date is not in this suitcase. He walks back inside while I'm

still fuddled with what to wear.

‘Sorry. I thought you were still in the shower’

He’s talking to me but his head has left this room and it has taken my body with. Why do all men think with their private parts?

‘Would I be mad if I wanted to go to my place for a more summery outfit?’

‘Yes’

I gasp. He wasn’t supposed to say agree. He laughs.

‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening’ he confesses. ‘Let me leave you to...’ he gesticulates with his hands and I conclude he means ‘to finish off whatever it is I’m doing in here’.

‘Running away from your meal...’ I poke and continue sorting my clothes – never attempting to raise my eyes at him. He huffs. I’m just teasing him.

‘You might not make it to the kota place if I take it there. You still need those legs to walk’

He leaves the room after saying this. I felt the last part of his statement race down the nerves in my spine. He’s done it again. He has left me speechless. I need to get dressed already.

'Son, you need to come back home' I hear an elderly male voice on loudspeaker before I could take the next step down. Fikani's couch is facing away from me so he doesn't see me.

'Why do you sound so serious? Did something bad happen?'

The person clears their throat – clearly uncomfortable.

'You need to be here when we go ask for your bride's hand in marriage'

'Come again?'

The person goes quiet.

'What bride, Uncle Wiseman?'

'Your royal bride'

...

[KULANI]

I hate disappointing my dad so I eventually decided to honour his invitation. Aunty Lydia said we will do

everything but leave her in that house by herself. Luckily, we were the only ones invited so I do not have to deal with any drama and accusations. I am in the TV room and I have no idea where everyone disappeared to. Apparently dinner is not ready yet because Chief Baloyi decided on a feast to celebrate my freedom on short notice. There's this vibe between him and my husband that I don't quite get but I know I will get to the bottom of it. My dad is acting super friendly around him whereas Kurhula is giving awkward vibes. I wonder what they are discussing in that study room. I don't even feel like being here so I want this to be over and done with. When they come out, Kurhula comes to kiss me on my cheek and asks to be excused. He promises to come back and fetch me. He leaves while I'm still trying to process what he's just said to me. Why does he suddenly need to leave? I try to forget about it and focus on these yt people displaying their camping skills and sharing tips on how to survive the wild. I need the stats to confirm that these people have a higher mortality rate compared to us because they're always testing nature. I eventually decide to get up so I can go get some fresh air on the balcony. I'm hearing voices, meaning it's already occupied. I laugh when I realise that my dad and aunty Lydia are at it again – arguing.

'Why are you such a salty woman Lydia?' he asks. I wonder

where this started.

'I should be asking why your presence resembles that of a bathroom fly'

She sounds really pissed. This is not her usual 'I'm intentionally trying to hurt your feelings because I enjoy seeing people hurt' tone.

'Should I pour you a refill?' he asks, still calm as ever.

'I came out here for fresh air. Do you mind?'

'You're on my balcony'

'That gives you the right to disturb my peace?'

'You're a guest in my house. Don't you think it's my duty to ensure that you're okay when I feel like you're not?'

'Out of all the things you could've done with your life, you simply decided to be a self-appointed babysitter? To a grown woman like myself?'

I'm still here – eavesdropping. My dad sighs.

'I genuinely hope you heal from whatever hurt you, Lydia. This is no way to live'

She scoffs.

'You're not only a babysitter but a psychoanalyst as well? I love me a multi-talented man' she says, sarcastically. My

dad simply lets out breathy laughter.

'You're impossible' he remarks.

'You should've used these skills to pick out a sensible woman otherwise you wouldn't have married a witch. I think they would've also done you some good in picking out a good scent. You're too damn old to be wearing oud. Please move. I am suffocating'

I scurry away before I'm seen. I also do not want to experience my dad's reaction to that.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 41

UNEDITED

[MABONTLE]

The problem with eavesdropping is that it bars you from confrontation. If you hear upsetting things that you were never supposed to hear, you can't ask about them because you had no business listening in on that conversation in the first place. My mood went completely foul after hearing that some village wife is being organized for Fikani. That kota almost went down the wrong pipe. He's driving back to his house now and we're silently listening to music.

My peripheral view tells me he's stealing glances of me while I watch the sunset. Also, I have no idea why I am mad at him because he sounded just as surprised while on the phone.

'Can we talk about it?' I hear him ask, bringing my busy thoughts to a halt. We're parked outside the house. I didn't even notice that we had arrived.

'Hm?'

'Can we talk about whatever is bothering you? And don't tell me that it's nothing'

I sigh and undo the safety belt.

'You heard the conversation between my uncle and I, haven't you?', he sighs.

I clear my throat. 'It wasn't my intention to eavesdrop. Anyway, I need to get to work since you need to get going'

He just turns and looks at me. He eventually nods after some time and tells me that he's fetching my suitcase. All of this was too good to be true anyway. I am a medical doctor. I swore to myself that I'm going to stay married to my work, focus on raising my little sister and travel the world because men have never given me a sound reason why I should bet on them. He comes back with my luggage and puts it in the boot of my car.

'I'll drive you' he offers when I reach for my car keys. I let him do as he says he will. He's the prince here so whatever he says goes right? Arg, now I'm just being plain childish. Kulani and her husband got married the same way. It's his way of life I guess. I have no reason to be mad about it.

...

[KULANI]

The dinner at my father's house was okay. I have taken the decision that I will not be attending my mother's funeral. There's no point. Now I want to get out of these clothes, do my skincare routine and get into bed. I find Kurhula on his PC when I leave the bathroom. I gently close it and put it aside. Him and I need to talk. He said it himself.

'What is going on between you and my father?' I ask, after taking a seat beside him.

'What do you mean? Aku humeleli nchumu – nothing is going on' he shrugs.

'Ungani endli xilema Mlambya. I am asking you nicely'

I hear him exhale.

'First of all, I'm the one who requested this meeting between the two of us'

I keep quiet.

'Baby, I understand that our relationship is fairly new but there's one thing in particular that I want to address. When I hurt your feelings, I expect you to be vocal about it so I can know what I did wrong and therefore fix it'

I keep nodding as he speaks. I wonder where this is going.

'I expect the same energy from you. I did not want to speak about it while you were still in custody because you had bigger things to worry about'

'What did I do wrong?'

'You trusted my brother over me. That's what you did wrong'

'What do you mean?'

'After a shooting incident that took your mother's life, the person you trusted to fix it had to be—'

'No no. It wasn't like that at all. I called your phone baby and he answered it. My head was all over the place and I was terrified. I'm sorry it seemed as though I relied on him

more'

'I'm not seeking an apology. I just don't want it happening again. I need you to know that whatever problem you may face, I will always try my best to make the load easier for you'

He's firm in his speech. This really upset him. I can even see a thick vein taut on his temple.

'Is this why you were a bit offish towards me after we came back from court?' I ask. He lets out heavy breath.

'I was not offish'

I tickle him and he laughs.

'DON'T—' he warns and tightens his hold on my wrist.

'Don't fvcking do that to me. No matter how happy you may get'

I missed that smile.

'Okay. Let go of my hands and I'll stop'

'Kulani...?' he's still paranoid.

'I promise I won't tickle you anymore. Let go of my hands'

He slowly lets go and I immediately try again. I love listening to him laugh and watching him smile. He looks so much like AK when he does. He runs from the bed and

goes to stand by the door.

'I'm not joking baby man stop it' he's trying so hard to keep a serious face.

'Okay, joke's over' I stand up and approach him. He meets me halfway and envelopes me in a hug.

'Have you spoken to Akani's mother?'

'There's nothing to talk about anymore. I'm gonna fight for my son the best way I know how'

'The legal route?'

He nods

I look up at him.

'That's a bit extreme, don't you think?'

'You never said that when she decided to keep him away from me'

'I am not taking sides. I just want the two of you to put your egos aside and remember that he needs both of you. That's a baby, not a prize to be won'

'Tell that to her'

'I just might' I sternly state.

Someone needs to talk some sense into both of them. If I

have to be that person, let that will be done. He hooks his index finger under my chin and raises my face to his. He pecks my lips, my nose, and my forehead.

'I appreciate the love you have for my son baby trust me, I do but I've given mhana AK plenty of opportunities to come correct and she chose not to' he kisses me once again. 'Let me take a quick shower so we can go to bed, yeah?'

I simply nod. He steps into the bathroom and I glance at his phone on the bed. I scratch my neck and distort my lips as I contemplate whether to go ahead with it or not.

'How about we go somewhere this weekend? Just for some fresh air?' I hear his voice competing with the water hitting the shower floor. Arg, let me just...

I grab the phone and sit on the bed.

'Baby??' he calls when I take too long to answer.

'Sure!' I agree. I'm not in the mood to be out of the house to be honest. I unlock his phone and go through his contacts. I have no idea what he saved her as. I decide to go to messages and search AK's name for this to be quicker.

'Even if it's just for one day' he adds.

'I don't see why not baby'

I find her saved as 'Mhana Boy'. I send the contact to my number and delete the text after it's delivered. He continues planning the retreat while in the shower. If he finds out about this, he's going to spit fire but I'm doing it anyway. Had my baby lived, I know for a fact that he would've been raised in a warm home. Thinking about him stings but mourning has never brought anybody back. AK exists and he doesn't deserve the BS that his parents are putting him through right now.

...

[NARRATED]

Instead of going straight home, Fikani stops by Chief Baloyi's palace first. The guards call the house to let the chief know that he has a guest. After establishing who it is, he keeps quiet – still deciding whether to let him in or not.

'Chief?' the guard calls, thinking that the line maybe got cut. Baloyi simply sighs and orders them to let him in. He drives into the yard and Baloyi comes out and the door

guard follows him. Fikani steps out of the car with an expensive bottle of brandy – one that he saw the chief drinking the last time he was here. He greets the chief and they exchange a firm handshake, one that leaves Fikani's fingers traumatized.

'Mlambya. What can I do for you?' he asks while studying the bottle. He hands it to the guard and orders him to go store it along with his recent bottles.

'I would like to have a conversation with you chief, if it's not a problem'

Baloyi gestures that he follow him inside and they walk in. After they are seated on different couches, the chief looks at Fikani with impatient expectation.

'Erh... Firstly, I'd like to apologize once again for that incident that occurred with Kuli. It was never my intention, at all'

'I stated the fine and I shortly received all that was due to me, so what are you doing here?'

'I have a problem on my hands chief and I'm going to need your help'

Several folds grow on Baloyi's forehead.

'What's the matter? I do not have all day. Shoot straight to

the point'

'As you may know, I have recently been reunited with my biological family and now my elders are speaking matters of a royal bride'

The chief nods, encouraging him to go.

'I had a conversation with my uncle and he told me that he's already set the matter in motion'

'And I rejected his plea. Did he tell you that?'

Fikani raises both his brows.

'I am not following...?'

'How are you not following? I do not want you marrying my daughter. After what has happened with Kulani, I cannot trust you with Rhandzu, son'

'I... Sir I don't think we're on the same page. Let me say I did not know that Rhandzu was the potential bride that they were speaking of but I'm here on Mabontle's account. I would, not now but I would like to marry her someday'

'Do you see the havoc that you want to wreak in my household now? Listen, Kurhula told me about what happened that night when my wife died. I appreciate your efforts. Lord knows how the whole thing would've turned out had you not found' – he clears his throat – 'You know

what I'm talking about. However, as grateful as I am, I cannot allow you to marry or even date any of my beautiful flowers'

Fikani quickly puts two and two together. Experience gives him four.

'Don't tell me you're the one who...'

The chief maintains eye contact.

'Those are the lengths I am always prepared to go whenever my cubs are threatened. I am not the man to mess with, Ngobeni. You can see yourself out' he pats him twice on the back and walks away.

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[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 42

[UNEDITED]

[KULANI]

'Why are you up so early today?' Kurhula asks while fixing his tie.

'Early? It's seven in the morning' I argue while still in bed.

'For you? My lazy wife? Way too early' he says and laughter escapes me. Mciim he mustn't start. I'm so happy he didn't bring work to the bedroom last night, nor did he disappear into his study. I enjoyed the simple conversations we were having during our cuddling session. I love listening to him speak because I learn something new each time. He picks up his blazer and comes to kiss me goodbye.

'Don't you want to go out today?' he asks after dropping a peck on my forehead.

'Are you asking me out on a date?'

'Eish... not really baby. I have a full day today. Two court cases and meetings at the office' he explains while pulling out his card from his wallet. 'Just go out and get some fresh air, otherwise these walls will close in on you'

I receive the card and tell him I'll think about it. He kisses me once more and leaves. I pull out my phone the moment he steps out of the bedroom. I decide halfway through the text that I should call her instead. We've never had a conversation before. A call just makes sense. I breathe in and out, hoping that this does not blow up in my face. I wait for her to answer as it rings on speaker phone.

'Hello?'

'Nikiwe, how are you doing? It's Kuli' I state and remember that she might not even know who I am. 'Kurahula's wife', I add for clarity.

'Oh...' Bewilderment is thick in her voice. 'Uhm... I'm doing okay. How—... how are you?'

'I'm fine, thanks for asking. I was wondering if you'd be available for a meeting?'

'With you and him?'

'No no. Just you and I'

She goes quiet for a bit.

'When and where?'

'Today? Over lunch if it isn't too much of an inconvenience'

'If it has to be today then let's make it over breakfast. I have orders to ship in the afternoon and I'm also meeting up with my supplier'

'Fine by me. You'll text me the details?'

'Sure'

That went better than I had expected. I don't even know what I was expecting. I get out of bed and start fixing the sheets. I always do this myself because I don't understand

the concept of another person making my messed-up bed and washing my underwear. If it was up to me, the helpers wouldn't even enter our bedroom because I believe my bedroom is a sacred space. The gag is that this room is way too big for me to clean all by myself. If Aunt Lydia finds out about this, I will be in for an earful. I'm in the mood for a bath but I'll opt for a shower because the former will definitely make me late. I pick out an outfit first. Why? I'm likely to change my mind if I have nothing to wear. After getting ready and ditching the make-up idea, I grab the keys and my phone then leave the bedroom. My mom would ask me why I'm leaving the house like I'm going to a street fight, all because I don't have a handbag with me. I'm not in the mood for a lot of things today but this needs to be done.

When I walk into Mugg & Bean, I find her already seated. We're both on time so I do not feel guilty that she arrived first.

'Morning' I greet when I reach her table and she gets up for a hug. I hug her back. She's polite. I don't even know why I expected different. I guess first impressions do not last after all because the first time I saw her, she was spitting fire. She orders a slice of chocolate cake and I settle for a cup of coffee.

'Dessert for breakfast? I am judging you' I tease and she laughs.

'Girl if you knew the week I've just had, you shut the hell up'

'Customers giving you hell?'

'You don't know the half of it. Two people did not receive their wigs and one returned it because apparently, the knots refuse to get bleached. If you see the state of that hair right now? You'd cry on my behalf'

This is why I'm not a businesswoman. I would go nuts because this 'The customer is always right' mess would not fly with me.

'Don't tell me you'd given her a refund?'

'Gave her half of her money back. The back and forth isn't worth it. She's a well-known influencer so one wrong word from her would destroy me'

'Ahhw... sorry about that'

She just shrugs and receives her plate when our order arrives. I grab a sweetener and empty it into my cup.

'So... what am I doing here, Mrs N?'

I take a sip and clear my throat.

'Listen, I don't mean to overstep but I feel like the two of

you need to sort your issues out before this gets even messy' I try to approach this as gently as I can. I didn't even know where to start. Her fork digs into the chocolate sponge and she throws the piece into her mouth.

'Did you speak to him first before coming to me?'

'I did. He's adamant on taking this to court. If it gets there, there's a great chance that you will never see your baby again'

'I don't know what this is but he has sent you to see if I'm shaking in my boots, tell him to bring it on'

'Nikiwe...'

'Kuli please. This is between me and your husband. Kurhula does not have a womb'

'You can't use a child to fight your personal battles'

She scoffs after I say this and wipes the corners of her lips. I immediately stop her when she attempts to stand up from the table. She sighs and I see her calming down. She sits back in her seat.

'I wouldn't take sides if I were you. Kurhula will only love and respect you for as long he's still in a relationship with you and for your sake, I hope nothing breaks you apart'

'What do you mean by that?'



I feel my brows pulling together.

'Can you believe that he called me a whxre? Me? The mother of his child? Just because I introduced AK to the man in my life? Hhayi suka'

Yeah... coming here was a bad idea. I've no words.

'Kurhula doesn't want an amicable relationship between him and I. He wants to take my baby away from me and for as long the sun is responsible for daytime, that will never happen'

I breathe out because I'm running out of wise words.

'All I am saying is, Akani does not deserve all this. He deserves to have both of his parents present in his life, no matter the differences that might exist between the two of you. And I repeat, you don't want this matter to get to court because he stands a greater chance of getting full custody than you do. He's married, has a stable salary and travels only occasionally. You're always on the road and AK is practically being raised by his grandmother. If this me stepping on your toes then I'm sorry, but I'm just telling you the truth. Call that man and make him see reason if you still want access to your son'

I leave some notes on the table for the bill then stand up and leave because there's nothing else to be said.

...

[NARRATED]

Fikani arrives home and finds his uncles waiting on him. He greets all four of them that are present through handshakes and takes a seat.

'Finally. We've been waiting on your arrival, son' Uncle Albert says with a hit of complaint.

'Forgive me. I had a minor issue I had to handle on my way here'

'I hope you were not out seeing mistresses that will later stir trouble in your marriage' Wiseman jokes and they all laugh. Fikani doesn't.

'I doubt he knows that he can't just pick and choose when it comes to that' Solomon adds.

'You've lost me my elders...' Fikani seeks clarity.

'You're set to be king. If you feel the gap for any mistress at any point of in your matrimonial relationship, you need to come to us so we find one who will be suitable for you'

'That's actually why I came down here in the first place. We need to have a chat about that'

'You haven't met her yet but you're already planning to cheat on her? Jah, it truly runs in the blood' they continue to laugh out loud and he realizes that the bottle on top of the table is the root of this barbaric behavior.

'No. What I mean is, I am not ready to marry at the moment and when I am, I have the perfect candidate in mind'

"Fikani, son..." Uncle Wiseman puts his palm over Fikani's hand. 'After the lengthy chat we had over the phone, I don't think I have managed to make you understand. You can't just marry a nobody. She has to come from a good home with standards that align with ours. We don't want to be dealing with another Mandilakhe situation here. Once was enough'

'Who is that?'

'Long ancient story. The point is, everything is already sorted. Yours is just to prepare for her arrival. We have done our part and as always, things went smoothly and perfectly. We wanted to go dip our hand in the same pot at first but Chief Baloyi blatantly refused. A friend of mine asked for association and because I trust his parenting

ways, you now have a beautiful Tswana bride'

Fikani sharply frowns.

'The fvck?'

'The mourning period is over. We have a council to report to and I have already explained that we cannot inaugurate a bachelor as king. That would be a great insult to our people. A lot has already gone wrong. We need to wrap this up before that chair is snatched away from us' Albert explains.

'Please understand that we are not saying that you will never marry the woman of your dreams. This one is ours. She's a necessary helper to your kingship. She's the one who is going to bear your firstborn son – the heir to the throne. Otherwise, your seed will always remain dormant'

'Can I speak?'

'Of course. Your word is always order. Your word is always law. Mlambya' Wiseman clasps his hands together in show of reverence. Fikani pinches his nose and takes a deep breath. He opens his mouth and immediately decides against it.

'I need some air'

The chair screeches back and he stands up to leave. He

walks out of the house and takes a walk up the green hill that's in the same yard.

When Kurhula comes back from work, he finds his uncles still at this matter.

'Valambya' he greets. They greet him back. 'Is that Fiks' car I'm seeing outside?'

They nod.

'He's outside boy. You might wanna take get him a drink. A strong one...' Aunt Lydia says and walks past them. She'd been sitting behind the wall that makes the entrance arch, eavesdropping. Kurhula raises a brow. He goes to his bedroom to find his wife, finds that she's not there and pulls out his phone to call her.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula. I'm not seeing any alarming notifications from the bank so where are you?'

She laughs.

'I'm at home'

'When will you be back?'

'Later today. I just want to spend some time with my father'

Kurhula keeps quiet, thinking of the heartbreak that awaits

her should this can of worms fall over.

'Are you okay?' Kuli asks.

'I'm okay. I'm just concerned about you driving late. Should I come fetch you?'

'It's okay. I'm gonna be fine, I promise'

'The only promise I need from you is that you will not be driving in the dark'

'I promise I will be home before the sun sets'

'I love you'

'I love you more'

He smiles and cuts the call. He leaves his bag on the bed, decides to take his aunt's advice, and goes to his study to fetch a bottle of cognac. He sees his brother sitting at the apex of the hill and heads there as well.

'Broski' he says after sitting beside him with his knees up as well. He loosens his tie and unfastens the first button of his white shirt.

'Hi, Judas' Fikani greets. 'Why didn't you warn me?'

'I would have if I knew what you needed to be warned about. What did they do to you?' Kurhula calmly takes a sip and hands him the bottle. Fikani takes it and gulps it down.

'Whoahh...' Kurhula reaches for the bottle and takes it from him.

'I was a fool for thinking my life will finally make sense after reuniting with my biological family'

'I agree'

Fikani turns his face towards him and the nonchalance on Kurhula's face forces him to laugh.

'You're an idiot'

'After what you've just said about you being a fool, that would make a lot of sense'

'They didn't even give me the time to sort this shxt out'

'Does this shxt have a description?'

'They went and fetched a wife for me'

Kurhula scoffs. 'Why am I not surprised? This is their modus operandi, these fossils'

His phone rings and he pulls it out of his pocket.

'Mhana AK' he answers.

'Since when are you such a coward?' Nikiwe lashes out. This gets Kurhula in his touchy feelings.

'Excuse me?'

Fikani's curiosity grows at the sight of Kurhula's discontent in countenance.

'You can do it all but what you will not do is send your mousy wife to fight your battles for you. This is my son and you'd have to kill me first if you want to take him away from me'

'YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S KEEPING HIM—' he bites his tongue and drops his high chest. 'You are the one who is keeping him away from me, not the other way around'

'Because you want to micromanage how I raise my own child. The only that will get through that thick skull is if I take him out of this godforsaken, load-shed mess of a country so you never see him again'

'You want to kidnap my son and take him to that loser you're dating in Dubai? I'd like to see you try' – he scoffs – 'That idea should've come to you before putting my name on his birth certificate. Don't test me, Nikiwe'

'Kuli, Kuli, Kuli... KULI!' he punches the air. 'I asked her nicely to stay out of this'

'What happened?'

They see her car driving through the gate and Kurhula immediately stands up. Fikani catches him by the wrist.



'Calm your MFng a** down, will you? You're gonna get there and say some stuff you will later regret. Speaking of which, what the hell happened on that night of the murder?'

'I'm not in the mood for any of your dumb questions right now'

'How long have you known that Baloyi was the one who pulled the trigger?'

'It wasn't him'

'Quit playing with me before you find yourself rolling down this hill'

'He's not the one who pulled the trigger. He hired someone. A bloody amateur if you ask me'

'And you knew?'

'Of course not. Are you dense? He confessed after Kuli got arrested'

Fikani looks around to make sure that it's still just the two of them up he there.

'Don't you think this is something she deserves to know? To find out from you?'

'That woman adores her father and I can't stand the

thought of watching her heart break, again. She doesn't deserve all this chaos that keeps coming in her direction. If you keep your pipe shut, I don't see how she will find out. Excuse me because my wife has some explaining to do' he thumb-points in the direction of the house.

He leaves Fikani there and takes fast-paced steps to the bottom.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 43

[KULANI]

He knows, and he's overtly enraged. We are walking to the bedroom and his grip on my hand is tighter than usual. My heart is pounding. The way he is marching down this corridor is forcing me to match his pace. I was really hoping that I would get through to her without his knowledge. He opens the door with his lower lip tightly locked between his teeth and motions for me to walk in. I do that and he follows after me and I hear the door click as it closes. He clasps his palms together and puts them against his lips.

'I'm terribly sorry baby' I go before him.

'I thought we spoke about this. Did we not?'

'We did but—'

'NO BUTS' he raises his voice and I take a single step back. I see him forcing himself to breathe.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula...' he calmly calls.

'Hubby?'

'This marriage is not a dictatorship however when I tell you not to do something and we agree that you will not do that particular thing, to me, that discussion is over'

'I am still saying that the both of you are allowing your egos and arrogance to get in the way of AK's happiness. I was just trying to help'

'I have decided that I want sole custody of my son. I don't want you standing in the way of that. Why did you go above my head??'

'As I said, I was just trying to help'

'Did I ever say I needed your help?'

I look at him disbelievingly.

'No I am being serious. You're supposed to be on my side. You are MY wife. Umtivela kwihi Nikiwe? Since when are you two friends?'

'This is not about taking any sides. It's about Akani. Why don't you get that?'

'This is exactly what I'm saying. That woman is my ex. I know her better than you think you could. You can never strike common ground with her. Now she is convinced I've sent you to her like you're my lap dog or some shxt!'

'Exactly. You two have history, hence the animosity. I have nothing against her. I thought I would be able to get through to her'

'And then what?'

I am not doing this with him.

'Don't you walk away from me while I am talking to you'

I stop in my tracks and turn back.

'Okay. I am sorry for getting involved when you said I shouldn't. Can we put this matter to bed now? It won't happen ag— ahh!'

A sharp pain shoots straight into my tummy and I lose my entire train of thought. What the hell was that? Why do I have a feeling that my mother's curse continues to destroy my womb?

'Baby, what's wrong?' he asks while holding both my arms as I crouch down. I know this pain all too well. It just

reminded me of that day. The day that was supposed to be the happiest of my life but quickly went sour before we can even reach reception.

It's gone. I try to stand upright and manage to. I'm fine.

'I'm okay'

'You can't say you're okay after screaming like you're being stabbed. What's wrong?'

'Kurhula?! What's happening in there?' That's Fikani outside the door. His brother sighs with irritation in front of me.

'Can you give me a moment with my wife?'

'What the fvck are you doing to her?'

He angrily twists the knob and the door flies open. 'What could I possibly do? Strangle her? Please respect me man'

Fikani studies the room and his eyes meet with mine. I assure him that I'm okay with a smile. Oddly, I find this heated interaction between them funny. I feel a thick, warmish to hot liquid slide down my private bits.

'Please excuse me' I leave them there and go to the bathroom. When I slide my panties down, I am met by grey slimy discharge. Is this an STI? Panic tells me to smell it. It smells... it has a distinct sharp and acidic odour. Is this

normal? Maybe it is. I've just had a miscarriage. Kurhula knocks on the door.

'I can tell that you're not fine. Please open this door baby'

I quickly pull my underwear up and let him in. I don't want him seeing this.

'What's up?'

'I'm not sure. My discharge is unusual'

'Unusual how?'

I'm still disgusted. I can't bring myself to describe it.

'Let me see'

'What?' I laugh. He's serious.

'No baby man. It's grey... and... slimy'

'Yeah let me see' he insists with a shrug.

'How will that help? You're not a medical professional'

'What are you afraid of? Woman, I've spread your inner lips with my damn tongue. Let me see' he's now squatting and willing to bring down my underwear. I can't stop laughing at what he's just said. He looks up and smiles.

'Please. Maybe it's a cause for concern'

I show him and he picks on the discharge with his fingers

before I can stop him.

'Kurhula?!'

'What?' he's smelling it. 'This pungent smell and the pain you've just felt? I don't know but I think we should go see the doctor baby'

'We'll go tomorrow. It's late now. The sun has set and besides, Mabontle should be arriving any minute now. I want to be home when she does'

He takes out his phone. 'Your sister can wait. I know that scream. I have PTSD from it. I am not taking any chances'.

PTSD? He's exaggerating but this makes me stop and think. Ever since we've lost our baby, we've never had an in-depth conversation that's centred around him and his feelings. He puts the phone on speaker.

'Alexa, hi'

'Advocate Ngobeni. Where's my title?' she's laughing. They sound well affiliated.

'I'm sorry. Hi Dr Lex. You good?'

'I'm okay. Just wondering to what do I owe the pleasure after decades of not hearing from you, old friend?'

'Erh, I need a favour. Are you still running a practice in

town?’

‘Yeah. We’ve even expanded our offices now’

‘Nice! Well done Lex!’

She giggles. ‘Thank you. Now speak, I’m running out of patience’

‘I know you’ve probably closed but my wife has an emergency’

I’m still silently listening to this conversation.

‘You’re in luck. I was planning to pack up but I’m still at the office. How fast can you get here?’

‘Can you give me 30?’

‘Sure. You owe me after this! Should I get sued for botching a c-section, God forbid, I’ll be knocking at your chambers’

He chuckles. ‘Well you should know that I can’t personally help you there, unless if you steal medical supplies then sure. Theft is part of my speciality, not negligence’

They both laugh before she lets him know that she’s waiting on us. I need to quickly change out of these clothes and wash these panties before we go. I would’ve preferred my gynae but I appreciate him for this.

I quickly do that and we leave.

...

'How do you live with this hazard of a human being?' she asks while running the ultrasound device over the cold substance lining my tummy. I laugh anxiously while also watching the screen. Kurhula is sitting by the desk.

'Defamation, Lex? Unprovoked?' he laughs as well.

'I have my ways of dealing with him' I answer and she chuckles heartily. Her frown keeps growing sharper as she studies the insides of my tummy. She asks me to raise my legs as she changes into a new set of gloves.

'Try your best to relax because if you don't, this will be uncomfortable' she warns and I nod. She then inserts her finger in there and gently presses the one side of my tummy. She does the same to the left.

'Did you say you've had a miscarriage before? Recently'

I nod. She's scaring me because she asked if I had a history of endometriosis. Is that it? Kurhula stands up and comes closer. She keeps prodding into my vxgina and inserts another finger.

'What's going on, Lex?' he asks.

'Listen...uhm... I don't know. I feel like I'm going to need a second opinion on this before I diagnose you'

'Just tells us what you think the problem is' Kurhula insists. I was about to say the same thing. She's making me uneasy.

'Okay. There's good and slightly bad news'

'Start with either' I say before she says anything further. I am losing patience.

'Combining the results from the ultrasound imaging and the pelvic exam, I am a little bit confident to say that you might have a very rare condition. I have never come across it in practice but it is a thing and it exists'

'Speak Lex'

'You have what we call a uterine didelphys. Statistically, it occurs to one in every 2000 women, globally'

'That's a 0.1% chance Lex. Are you sure? And what the hell does it mean? Please don't tell me it's some sort of cancer?' Kurhula interrogates. The doctor lets out a light chortle.

'No it's not. It is just an anomaly. It's congenital, meaning Kuli was born with two uteruses and inevitably two

cervixes'

I feel my heart skip a beat.

'What are the health implications?' I ask.

'Painful menstruation mostly, and a pregnancy with complications, which often needs to be monitored closely'

'Okay now the good news?' Kurhula asks. He's freaked out and failing to hide it, that's if he's even trying to. I still don't understand what this woman is saying. Is this a disability of some sort?

'The good news is... you are still very much pregnant. I have no idea how the medics who've cleared out your first miscarriage missed the second uterus but it's right there. Very difficult NOT to see' she points to the screen. I see a smile growing on Kurhula's face as he observes this.

What? I want to be excited but I'm still engulfed by shock, and I feel like excitement jinxes things. Being the person that I am spiritually, I am not surprised that my baby was hiding. This is why they were not responding when I was busy cursing them out for allowing this to happen. I even distanced myself from them and their ways but they still kept quiet and watched me silently lose my damn mind.

We hear the loud ring from reception.

'That's probably security. Excuse me for one sec' she leaves the room and Kurhula sits on the chair she was occupying then wheels it towards me. He holds my hand with both of his and looks at me.

'How are you feeling?' he asks.

'I don't know. Can we keep this between us, please?'

He immediately nods.

'Of course baby. Your wish is my command'

'Not even your brother must know. I know he's harmless but—'

He kisses my mouth shut. 'I understand. I won't say a word mommy'

My heart is full. I'm still her – a mother to a 'wikkle' somebody. The Lord does restore after restless nights and several ruins.

...

[NARRATED]

The busy movement at the royal house takes Mabontle by surprise when she arrives. She decides to park outside so she can call Kuli, to make sure its okay to just walk in.

'Hey sis' Kuli answers the phone.

'Hey babe. I'm here but I'm seeing women walking up down with big pots and stuff. Can I come in?'

'I'm not home at the moment but sure you can go in. I'll find you inside'

'Yoh. I'll wait in the car' Bontle protests, gripped by social anxiety.

Kuli laughs. 'No man. Aunt Lydia is probably in there. We'll literally be there in ten'

'Okay then'

She grabs her phone and leaves the car. She then walks into the house and greets whoever her eyes meet with, while looking for Lydia. She almost runs into a boiling pot of tea and the handler immediately apologizes.

'So sorry sesi. Ey, the visitors keep coming in and we're running late. Are you one of the caterers? Here's your apron' she grabs it and throws it to her before Mabontle can squeeze in a single word. She stands there puzzled by what just happened. The frustrated lady had long passed.

She just laughs it off and acknowledges everyone in the kitchen while putting the navy apron on.

‘Where can I assist?’

‘There’s a bag of carrots. You can find a peeling device in that drawer’ one lady says to her, then frowns. ‘Your face looks familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?’

Bontle smiles and shrugs. That matter passes with the wind and she shortly blends into the laughter filled conversations and the vibes. From this, she eventually finds out that all this is in preparation for the arrival of a bride. She continues with a fallen heart but does the job, nonetheless. For some reason, she thought he wouldn’t go ahead with it.

Kuli walks in and finds her seated and peeling away. She takes quick steps towards her and pulls her up by the arm, guiding her outside.

‘What are you doing?’ she asks through gritted teeth, eyes popped with shock.

‘Hao, I’m helping out. Is it wrong?’

‘You want dad to have my head? You can’t be seen doing any of this’ she chastises while untying the apron from her back and pulls it out her head.

Bontle is still wearing a confused look on her face.

'You are not just an average human being. You're a princess. What you are doing here is impermissible. If your father hears of this, he's going to fine us all here!'

'Ohh? Okay I'm sorry. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to'

Kulani exhales before resting her hands on the sides of her waist.

'No, I'm sorry. I'm just... I've had a stressful day. But still, you're not supposed to be serving anybody here. It's taboo'

'Wanna talk about it?' Bontle prods into the matter.

'Not really, no'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Tell you what?'

'About Fikani. Well I kinda knew but I didn't realise that it was this official'

'You two are still together?' the shock is dense in Kuli's voice.

'There you are. Hi Mabontle' Kurhula's voice sounds from behind them.

'Hello' she greets back courteously.

He drops Kuli's slippers at her feet and insists that she should change into them. The smile spreads involuntarily across her face.

'Thank you baby' she says as she fixes her feet into them. He takes the other shoes and pecks her forehead. 'Shout if you need anything, alright?'

She nods and he leaves.

'Where do you guys find such husbands while we're outchea kissing bloody frogs?' Bontle asks and Kuli laughs.

'Don't be fooled. He's very mad at me'

'Such lies!'

'No no let's not change the topic. Back to. You never answered my question'

Bontle just waves it off and takes out her phone.

'It was never serious. Where do you guys keep your drinks?'

They go back inside the house and Kuli demands a full briefing when they get to the guestroom, which she doesn't get for free, in exchange for a bottle of champagne.

'I need Jager bombs' Bontle says after inhaling that bottle.

'You need to sleep before you get drunk'

'Has the perfect bride arrived yet?' Bontle asks while unclipping her bra.

'Nah, it's too quiet down there. Give me your car keys so I can fetch your bag'

'Why?'

'You need your pyjamas. I am serious about you sleeping. I've been telling you to put that bottle down'

'Come on. I'm not drunk. Just a little bit tispny. I mean tispny. TIPSY! Is what I'm trying to say. But yes, be a good sister and fetch my jersey. It's getting chilly' she says and hands over the keys. Kuli shakes her head and takes them, before leaving her in the room. She bumps into Fikani in the corridor.

'Where is she?'

'Well hello to you too Casanova' Kuli jabs, with attitude.

'I'm sorry. Is she still around?'

'You owe her a sound explanation. She's in that guestroom' she says with irritation and walks on.

...

[MABONTLE]

Kuli is right. Maybe I did have a tad too much to drink. The plan was to sleep here because I wanted to spend some time with her but now, I'm no longer sure. A lot happens in full houses. I don't see a key on that door. I don't want to wake up only to find myself in bed with a stranger or have some of my valuables get lost. However, I am really not drunk. I can drive home. It's late but dad surely won't mind. Is he here? I didn't see him. I don't think he is. If he does make an appearance, I am leaving with him.

'Come in!' I yell when I hear that someone is at the door. With this music, I doubt they can hear me. I stand up to go open.

'It's you...' I turn back after discovering that someone's groom is at my door. Well, this is not my door. It is at the moment but... you know what? Whatever. He walks in and closes it.

'I am not here to gate-crash your wedding. I had no idea it was happening. I'm here to check on my sister. Don't stand there and start thinking that maybe I want to stop—'

He pulls me towards me and puts his finger against my lips.

'Marry me'

What?

The manner in which he's so calm and collected does not say that he just threw a grenade at me. I find myself laughing until I can't stand upright any longer. He is still standing on the same spot. He does not find what he's just said amusing?

'What the hell? What kind of mind games are you playing?'

'Absolutely none'

'We barely know each other. We can't just get married'

'And this bride that's being spoken of?'

'She's getting married into the family, not to me'

I can't lie and say my heart is not broken, because it is. However, what I will not do is to jump into a dark well trying to save a man. Kuli lets herself in and comes to put my bag on the bed.

'Are you okay or should I stay?'

I assure her that I'm fine. She walks out. I open my bag to take a jersey out because that bottle was cold and this weather is also not helping. I feel him enveloping me with his hands from behind and warmth immediately surrounds

me.

'Nothing has changed, Mabontle. I still want you the same way I did the moment I realised you exist. You're literally my first and last thought. This life is too fvcking short to be stuck with people whose potential death doesn't threaten to make your heart stop. I acknowledge the fact that I have shoes to fill and certain things are expected of me'

The tears are simply rolling down my cheeks and I'm letting them. This bastard broke my heart. I expected him to put an end to all this but what does he do? He comes home to get married and doesn't bother to let me know.

'I know what this looks like, but I'm not the man to be doing back and forths with people who are clearly not willing to listen. I believe in the loudness of actions, love. The first thing I did when I arrived here was to go speak to your father'

A hiccup attacks me. He did what?

'He shut me down but I am still willing to fight for you and bring you home, even if it sadly means destroying all prospects of a good relationship between him and I. YOU ARE my royal bride, no one else. I too have no idea what our relationship has in store for us but I am intentional

about committing to you. I need you to hold my hand as we throw ourselves blindly into this. I promise to tighten my grip...'

His soft lips land on my neck. From this single act, I feel my self-respect almost leaving my body. He knows exactly what he's doing. I'm also aware of it but hell, these feelings are overpowering me. No man. Pull yourself together, Bee! You are not about to fall for this crap. The only thing you need is a bed and some proper sleep, not a man touching up on you. I put my hands over his and remove him from me. I lead him to the door, let him out and close it. I am not doing any of this, especially in this tiddly state of mind.

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 44

[KULANI]

Crowds easily exhaust me. I tried to keep up with the fake smiles but no, I had to come back up here to be by myself. The one we're waiting for has not yet arrived and people are starting to ask questions. Eyes are roaming and to be quite frank, I do not give a damn at this moment. I hate how caught in between I already am in this whole thing.

Fikani and Mabontle have history and Mabontle is my sister, whom I'm trying to build a solid relationship with. On the other hand, Larona has done nothing wrong and as the first junior wife in this house, I am expected to show her the ropes – considering the fact that she knows nothing about our ways. Things are about to get really awkward but I'm getting worried now. The clock is heading to nine and she still hasn't arrived. By law, she's late. There's also no full moon outside. I have a terrible feeling about this but I refuse to entertain it. The light from the passage invades the darkness I'm swallowed in. I am lying on the floor with my hands covering my tummy. I don't turn to check. I know it's him. Confirmation of this is in his scent getting stronger as he gets closer. He's taking his shoes off. He then lies in the same manner as me – with our heads connected somewhat at their centres.

It's silent for a while. I'm glad he didn't switch the lights on. I enjoy the mood that this darkness is setting. It's calm. Balanced. My thoughts aren't racing and that for me resembles peace.

'I miss you'

I didn't want to speak, but hearing that didn't feel like he was disrupting the silence. Breaking the silence in this instance would mean flinging a rock into still waters and

creating an unnecessary ripple effect. Instead, his words are comforting. They feel like a weightless paper boat, taking motion orders from the gods of the stream. His words are gracefully welcomed.

'I'm right here' I respond, fighting a smile.

'Then how do you explain this uncomfortable gap I'm feeling?'

I am not surprised. We had a fight. It's an inevitable element of every relationship. I feel it too – the gap. It's tormenting because it is our first time pulling in opposite directions.

'Can we talk about it? Are you up for it or would you rather be left alone?' he offers. He's sincere in his approach.

'To be honest, no. I don't want to speak about it right now' I feel him nod against me.

'I also don't want you to leave' I quickly add when I feel him wanting to get up. He lies still.

'Kurhula?'

'Yes, baby?'

'Can I ask you a question?'. I've changed my mind. I do want to talk.

'Sure you can'

I sit with it for a while, trying to package it.

'Have you always been an overachiever?'

He huffs, then sighs. Must be wondering where this is coming from. He's thinking about it. I'm going to give him all the time he needs – uninterrupted. He takes longer than anticipated.

'I'd say so. Initially, it wasn't by choice'

'Please expand. Is there an emotional reason for your drive to succeed? To overtake on the road? The arrogance?'

He laughs out loud.

'You think I'm arrogant?'

'You have your moments. Your colleagues would surely agree'

He continues laughing. Then the snorty chuckles slowly evaporate.

'I don't know. Probably because I was raised by a bully, Kuli. Coming home with a 70% warranted me a beating. With a 98, I had to account for the missing two percent, and even after that, he'd never acknowledge the effort, the good attempt. To him, it's either you take all or nothing at



all. There was no in-between'

Every time I listen to him speak about his father, I develop a growing hatred for a man I've never met.

'In as much as he was abusive, he was also the most intelligent man I knew, still is. For that, I looked up to him a lot as a kid, wanting to make him proud until I started drawing affirmations from his constant derision' – he scoffs – 'The whole thing became about me and how I felt about myself. I stopped celebrating even in times where I'd come top of my class. The goal was never to just pass; it was to prove that I was a fvcking genius'

'Prove to who?'

'I told you; it wasn't about him anymore, or anybody else. I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't an average human being. Then it became a habit, eventually a character trait I guess'

'Thoughts on broken promises?'

I feel his head turn a bit, as if wanting to see my face.

'Wait. What are we doing here, love?'

'I'm trying to get to know you better. Now please answer my questions'

'Mmkay... Broken promises? I don't know. I don't

understand why people make promises they cannot keep, unless if there's a good reason why they couldn't fulfil them of course. Why can't a person just shut the hell up? And it's mostly unprovoked. That's what annoys me about the whole thing'

Silence.

'Have I answered your question?'

'You have. Last question?'

'...Sure' his approval comes out with a bit of reluctance.

'Hypothetically. Here I am, giving you a device that you can only use once to turn back the hands of time, either to correct or undo something entirely. How many years are you moving back and why?'

He laughs. I'm glad he finds this amusing. This conversation is not the most fun to have but I also wouldn't want to have it with the grumpy side of him. It certainly wouldn't end well.

'Only once?'

'Only once hubby' I respond, while playing with my wedding ring.

It takes him a moment, longer than I expected it to.

'I'd go straight to the year my parents met to make sure they don't cross paths'

His tone catches me off guard and I shoot out laughter.

'No, baby man. You can't go that far back because you weren't in existence then'

'Your question was vague. Your rules were not limited to my existence however, considering the fact that you've mentioned that the device can only be used once, this then means I cannot take back anything I've said. I have answered your question, ma'am'

I cannot stop laughing. He's such an idiot. Fine, I'll give him this one because he has cornered me.

'Okay fine. Now answer the why part of the question'

'For the same reason why I didn't want to marry you. Well, that was prior to me meeting you for the first time'

'I was never told that you didn't want to marry me, and I'm offended to be honest'

'Do you doubt my love for you, Nwa-Baloyi?'

'Of course not but—'

'Then what is the issue?'

'You're such a clown!'

I can sense the contagious smile on his face.

‘On a serious note though, my father was the first man to teach me that men typically love the children they make with women they love and respect – unconditionally. I never wanted to become that guy. If you weren’t the person you are, you’d be a constant reminder of that. Especially as a mother to our kids, that’s of course if it got to a point where we forced things. My mother stayed for the status and benefits of being the first royal wife but deep down, that woman knew the truth. Edward showed her in every worst way possible that he didn’t give a flying fvck about her. That’s what happens when you’re forced to marry a woman you do not love. You end up resenting her and her breathing ways’

‘I am curious. What was your plan that night?’ I ask.

‘Which night? The night you were brought here?’

‘Yeah’

‘The intention was never to show face, but I had my boy with me and I wasn’t about to make him sleep in a hotel when he had a home’

‘You’re not only arrogant but you’re disrespectful as well’

He snorts.

'I'm serious. Your father was going to come here and get you himself. You were saved by this heart of mine and its wayward feelings'

We both laugh out loud. This one is unwell in the head.

'But still, you didn't know me'

'I have told you this before. I am starting to think you enjoy listening to me tell this story. There was something in your anger about my being late that immediately told me that you're not the one to mess around with. And all that beauty? MADDENING. Call me weak but I don't blame myself for not being able to resist'

Arg, now I'm blushing!

'It's my turn in this DIY backyard psychology of yours' he states.

'Shoot'

'Worst fear?' he starts.

What is my worst fear?

'It used to be drowning in a large, dark body of water' I respond. Before my dreams where I'm living in water 60% of the time, I used to have an irrational fear of lakes, beaches, and oceans. I would have a slight panic from just seeing one on television.

'You spoke in past tense, meaning you've overcome it?'

'Yeah. My biggest fear now, God forbid, is losing you and... and this child I'm carrying, Kurhula'

I feel him drop his arms. He sits up and I do the same.

'Come here' he brings me towards him and hugs me from behind, protectively covering my tummy.

'Nothing is going to happen to our baby, okay? I'm gonna make sure of it. Lex said she needs to monitor our pregnancy closely and I'm gonna take you to every appointment myself and ensure that you take all your antenatal supplements. You're also stuck with me for life, unfortunately for you miss'

He drops a kiss on the back of my neck as I laugh. I really am scared. Every time I feel some discharge my first thought is always blood. This is not a healthy way to live and all of this, is the good work of my witch of a mother. That woman scarred me for life.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula???'

'Hm?'

'I'm calling you for the third time now. Come back, you're zoning out. Why were you asking me all those questions?'

I turn to face him so I can hold his hands.

'Because... I want you to understand that in this marriage, like you've said, neither of us are in a dictatorship. In this relationship, you're not an advocate, I'm no prosecutor. We will not do that thing of wanting to prove each other wrong, okay?'

He gently squeezes my arms in silence.

'I admit. I was wrong by going to see Nikiwe behind your back but I will never regret fighting for AK's emotional and physical wellbeing. You lost all exclusive rights to him the day you made me your wife. That's my son as well. Allow me to care about him, please?'

'What do you mean the day I made you my wife? You fell in love with him at first sight' he lets out breathy laughter. I join him. He's telling no lie. 'I hear you baby. Trust me, I do. I'll try to win him back through conversation then, but if it doesn't work, promise me you won't fight me all the way to court'

Finally.

'Thank you, and I promise to stay out of it'

He gently grabs the back of my head and kisses my forehead. He keeps his lips there and I continue hugging him. I feel the sincerity in his energy and I'm happy we had this talk.

...

[MABONTLE]

She's here. The car hoots and ululations confirm it. Why was I hoping otherwise? Anyway, I think I'm coming down with a flu because this headache and raspy throat chile? My heart is sore. I cannot deny that but nothing lasts forever and that includes a broken heart. I lost my mother and remained sane. That woman was my anchor and amigo, my confidante. If that doesn't tell everyone about the resilience of my mental health, I don't know what else will. Aunty Lydia barges in while I'm still trying to garner some sleep.

'Get up' she commands.

'But aunty I'm not feeling—'

She pulls the sheets off of me. 'It wasn't a request. Get your thick a** out of this bed'

She fetches my luggage bag and opens it. She puts together an outfit and throws it to me. A form-fitting elastic skirt, my jersey, and sneakers.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

'Let's just say, you and I are going to boycott this sham of a marriage'

I am confused. She rolls her eyes and comes to sit next to me.

'I can see how much you want this man. He wants you just as much'

'If he did, he wouldn't be getting married'

'You can love a man all you want but what you're not going to do is put your faith in a goat'

I laugh out loud. She is so... flippant about everything and anything. Everyone needs an aunty Lydia at some stage or another in this life, except those that despise her guts.

'How are we boycotting it?' I ask.

'Fanisa is not here. If I also leave, there won't be any ceremony. They can't have it without his father's sisters. That would be an abomination'

I continue laughing.

'Aunty no man'

I see her smile.

'It's either we do that or we go join everyone downstairs.'

The choice is yours but you're not going to sit and self-pity in this bed all night'

'I'll be okay. I promise you. I shouldn't have come here in the first place'

'Okay fine, but I want to show you something outside. Just two seconds'

She's unrelenting. The more I say no, the further she's going to go with trying to get me out of this room.

'Fine. Just two seconds'

I wonder what it is she has in store for me. I follow her out and we use a backdoor I didn't even know exists. This is one behemoth of a house. If it's only one person who is responsible for cleaning around here, she deserves the salary of a supermarket manager. We get to Fikani's car and aunty opens the passenger door for me. I find him on the driver's side.

'What is going on?'

'My job here is done' she says while pushing me inside. Isn't Fikani supposed to be inside?

He starts the car while I wait for an explanation. The security flags him when he gets to the gate and he stops, then slides the window down.

'Sir, do you need anything?' the guard asks with an element of curiosity in his tone.

'No I'm perfectly fine. If anybody looks for me, tell them there's no need'

The guard looks back at the other one and nods – with his countenance still heavy with questions.

Fikani drives out and speeds off so much that I began pressing non-existent brakes, hoping to miraculously slow down the car.

'Are you kidnapping me from your own wedding, sir? Where is your fiancé waiting for you inside?' I ask.

'I'm afraid I am' he responds without turning his eyes towards me. This has to be the craziest night I have ever experienced. I keep cracking in laughter full of nothing else but disbelief.

'Where are we even going?'

'Nowhere in particular'

That's it. He's not willing to talk so I'm also going to keep my mouth shut until he comes back to his senses. If there's one person with a chaotic love life on this planet, it has to be him. After some time, the car gradually slows down and I have no clue where I am. He switches the

engine off and sighs out loud. He then steps out, comes to my side, and opens the door. I get out of the car as well. He pulls me towards him and hugs me from behind, while balancing his weight against his beastly Beamer. We are in the wilderness and if anything carnivorous pounces out of this darkness, it's over for the both of us.

'This place is cold' I remark.

'There's a river not too far from here' he replies, resting his chin on my shoulder. 'I come here whenever I need to clear my head'

'How did you discover it?'

'I was just driving around, trying to get to know this place I guess'

We stand in silence for some time.

'How can the guards tell you apart? I saw how shocked they were that you were leaving'

'Must be the car' he sighs. He sounds exhausted. He's not willing to hold a conversation

'Why are you doing this?'

'Doing what?'

'You know exactly what I'm talking about. Why did you

bring me here if you're uninterested in talking to me?' he's starting to get on my nerves. He turns me around and pulls me towards him.

'Calm down and look around you'

I do as he says and I see nothing, with good reason because I have a shxTTY eyesight and it's dark! I shrug in silence.

'What do you see?'

'Nothing' I answer.

'If that woman was meant and chosen to be mine, this whole place would've been lit up by a full moon.

Apparently, it's always there when the rightful first wife of the king is being brought home. That title belongs you and I'm not doing any guesswork here. I know exactly what I'm talking about'

'If it was up there, were you going to go ahead with it?'

I need to know. I hear him breathing out loud.

'I need you by my side when I take over this paramount responsibility'

'You're not answeri—'

'Let me finish talking, please? I believe you're the one for

me. However, if you truly are, I need you to understand that my life is always directed and led. For the longest time, I never understood why things happened the way they did and why things I had no solutions to ended up resolving themselves. I'm on a journey of self-discovery right now and I understand that I cannot just do things for the sake of it. They'll backfire. If I was meant to be with Larona, I wasn't going to fight it but I wasn't willing to let you go either. This is me being honest'

Wow.

'There's something I need to tell you. I wasn't going to but I feel like I'm already treading on thin ice...'

Laughter escapes me. Why does he make it sound like I'm dangerous? I'm still quiet.

'You won't be able to see nor talk to me for some time'

'Why? Where are you going?'

'I cannot tell you that. I just don't want to disappear and leave the country without a word' he gravely states.

Why is my heart suddenly freezing?

'If you can't tell me where you're going then you shouldn't bother telling me you're back'

'That's IF I come back' he replies jokingly. I am serious

here, and what does he mean by that?

'You're scaring me now...'

He rubs my upper arms comfortingly and hugs me, with one hand on my head.

'I need to go get leopard skin. That's the long and short of it' he speaks whisperingly.

'That's all?'

He nods in silence. Then why does he make it sound so... wait...

'Are you going to buy it?'

He's silent.

'Don't tell me you're speaking about a live leopard?'

I try to move but he's holding me tight. My heart is drumming out of control now.

'Why can't you take your dad's? He had one right? He was a king before?'

He huffs.

'I can't. He was buried with it. Every king is buried with his skin. It's protocol, my love'

'You are going to wrestle a leopard until one of you dies?'

'I can't talk to you about this. Please don't make me? I just didn't want you to be worried'

My intestines are in a very tight knot! Why do I feel like I'm having a nightmare while standing here?

'Please tell me you're pranking me?'

He hugs me even tighter in silence. He really is not joking?

'I need you to promise to come back' I urge. Why is he so calm about this?

He chuckles. 'If you promise to marry me upon my arrival'

'Even if I do, my dad said no'

'Leave Chief Baloyi to me'

I try to exhale all the fear out. I approach him for a kiss and he pecks my lips. I kiss him again and he breaks it.

'Bontle...' he calls, through a suddenly strained voice.

'What?' I keep teasing him. I'm trying to dilute this heavy energy surrounding us.

'Let's not go there. My body yearns for you right now and I cannot promise to control myself'

I giggle. Hearing him say that has just turned me on.

'And what's so wrong with that?'

'That's the thing. I can't. Not right now'

I scoff. 'Are you rejecting me, SIR?'

He kisses my forehead.

'I'd never. I want to but I shouldn't. Just wait for me to come back, okay? Can you do that for me?'

...

[KULANI]

I almost have a heart attack when I turn and almost bump into the old man. I haven't seen him in a minute. I hold my chest and try to regulate my breathing.

'Is it possible for you not to sneak up on me? With all due respect?'

The more I see him, in dreams and him standing right in front me, the easier it gets to speak to him. He's always dressed in the same manner.

'Mandilakhe. How are you? Do you realise that in the same manner you hear voices others can't, we equally and clearly hear you when you insult us?'

I immediately drop my head.

'Don't make it a habit. You won't be able to deal with the wrath that will fall upon you next time' he interjects before I can apologize and grabs the chair in our bedroom. I am waiting to hear what he's doing here because he's definitely not visiting for leisure.

'The time has come'

My heart skips a beat. He comes bearing bad news. I can just feel it. I am still contrite, while waiting for him to speak.

'The time has come for you to take over your job as the royal healer. A consensus has been reached. Edward is no longer fighting for Kurhula to ascend the throne but his acceptance of Fikani comes at a price'

'I hope it has nothing to do with my baby, please' my involuntary thought verbally let itself out.

He looks at me and taps his walking stick twice on the floor.

'Kurhula needs to carry the legacy of expanding the royal family, which was originally his to begin with'

'I don't think I understand...'

'Your mother has destroyed your reproductive system, Mandilakhe. The child you are carrying is the only one you

will ever have'

My heart instantly sinks. What is he saying? Where is he going with this?

'We have brought your husband a second wife to carry royal heirs for him, and to be a helper to you since you'll spend most of your time in your new house now. Tell him he's wasting time. Midnight is near'

The tears just fall down. My insides are burning. I feel like my head is on fire. This was not the initial agreement!

'You mean... Larona was never meant to be Fikani's but Kurhula's wife???'

He stands up, comes to squeeze my shoulder while I hyperventilate and then calmly leaves the room. I cannot digest this. I'm even shaking. Hubby walks into the room and turns the lights on.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula. What's wrong mommy?' he holds my hands and follows my eyes. I cannot bring myself to stop crying, my t-shirt is even wet from the tears.

'Hhawu. Baby what's wrong? Who hurt you?' he asks while looking at my phone on the bed. I cannot find the words.

'Please talk to me...'

'Did you know?' I ask.

'Know what?'

'Did you know that you're the one who has to marry Larona?'

'The fvck did you just say Kuli?!'

[08/24, 12:47 pm] #o: CHAPTER 45

(UNEDITED)

[LARONA]

'Lala, wake up'

I keep trying to ignore Kago's voice but she's persistent. What does she want? The sun is not even out yet.

'Lala weeh'

'Yoh yoh! Kago I was on the road for almost the entire day yesterday. I'm just begging for just two minutes of some rest. Is that too much to ask for?' I lose it. I did not intend to snap at her like that. I can see that she's shocked at my reaction. 'I'm sorry. Ke eng?' I retreat.

I love my cousin slash best friend but sometimes she has zero emotional intelligence.

'No man. I just want us to talk. I'm worried about you'

'You want us to talk?' I respond because I don't understand. I check my phone and discover that it's almost half past four in the morning.

'I don't like the vibes I'm getting in this house. It's almost like you're unwelcome here'

'It's okay. We're just here for a couple of days' I respond.

'Why do you sound so unbothered by this whole thing? You are getting married to this guy'

She's not going to give up on this topic so I sit up on the bed. My bonnet has even come off from my head full of yarn braids.

'Not so long ago, you were crying till you were red in the face about coming here and now it's like you do not care. What is going on Larona?'

I let out a sigh.

'Let's just say... I'm seeing the bigger picture. The grand scheme of things'

She raises her brow.

'Kago, what do you want from me? You were the one who was put up to encouraging me to accept this mess. Now

that I have, you're suspicious. What do you people want from me?'

'I know but that does not mean that I want to see you unhappy. What are you planning in that smart head of yours?'

I can't stop the giggles.

'I have decided to look at this in a different light. It's been two years now of trying to secure articles and my dad has been getting in the way every chance he got. What does the universe do? Puts me in close proximity with one of the most successful advocates in SA. Do you see where I'm going with this?'

'I do not because from what I know, you wanted to be an attorney. Since when are you into advocacy?'

'There's always room for redirection. He could be my mentor. For pupillage'

She's quiet. My excitement slowly dies down and I pull my blanket. I wasn't looking for her approval anyway. I feel her hand on my shoulder.

'Look, I just don't want you to be disappointed, again. You've been through a lot of that while trying to kickstart your career. What if he thinks like your father? What if he believes your place is in the kitchen? Speaking of the

kitchen, I bumped into him in there and he doesn't seem like one of the nice ones babe'

'I am not looking for friends here Kago. I am looking to build strong connections. He's the perfect person to shadow if I want to pass this bar exam'

'And what's in it for him?'

'Nothing. I can sense that you're about to be negative and I'm not going to have that. I'm going to shoot my shot and if he turns me down, there will be no point in me staying here. I'll go back home. My father can keep his inheritance and shove it where the sun doesn't shine'

'I am not going to sit here and listen to you being disrespectful to your elders Lala'

I roll my eyes. She can be such a killjoy sometimes. I am certain that she would've been the perfect biological daughter to my father. She's such a patriarchy princess, it's so sickening.

'Anyway, do what you must but make sure you don't end up getting disowned by the whole Kgoro at the end of it all'

I just find comfort in knowing that my mother would never abandon me. If it was up to her, we would be living in our house far from anything that has to do with dictator she chose to be my father.

'But he's not that bad right? In fact, he's not bad at all. He's quite hot' Kago says.

'Huh? Who are you talking about?'

'Your new husband. Duh...'

'Do you always have to be thinking about men all the damn time?'

'It's true what they say. People who are always in luck rarely ever see it. If I was given the opportunity to be married to a financially stable man coming from a royal family? Honey I wouldn't see the need to even lift a finger for anything. But here you are wena mbokodo, wena corporate baddie. Instead of trying to secure your place here as a wife, you are thinking about advocacy'

'The fact that a man has money does not always mean he has a working head between his shoulders; that he can successfully lead a family. Move, I need to get some sleep'

'Where should I sleep when you have your booty on my side of the bed?' she complains and pulls the blanket. I pull it back with greater force. Kago is childish and I don't see her growing up any time soon. I get out of bed to go sleep with my aunt, even though I am going to wake up to a lecture about my nose-ring. She has been on my case about my barbell nose ring.

'Lala, earrings belong on your EARS. But no, you are so unruly you had to put it on the side of your nose. What kind of a child are you?' she kept on saying all the damn way here but at this point, I'd rather endure that than Kago's barbaric ways.

...

[KULANI]

I left everything. I left my phone, my cards and just walked out of that house. I did leave Kurhula a note so he shouldn't burn this whole village down, looking for me. I don't know, but betrayal from your own underground squad his different. You don't know who to confront and how. You're just left feeling abandoned and powerless. So I came to the one person who makes sense; the one person who understands before I can even say a word. It's six O'clock in the morning and I'm in her hands, crying my eyeballs out. She's like the mother I never had but now do. She keeps brushing my forehead while humming a song that I cannot help but feel moved by. I feel like it's originally a chant, a cry for help. When my chest eventually

stops heaving and I gather myself together, only then does she start speaking.

'Are you ready to tell me what happened? Is the baby okay?' she asks. She already knows about my pregnancy. I'd told her about it over the time. I haven't had time to come and see her.

'I don't even know where to start...'

'The beginning would make sense'

I snort.

'He's taking a second wife' I bluntly state. She widens her eyes and shrinks them, trying to conceal guilt. She knows something. I can tell from how she's scratching her neck.

'What is it, Gogo?'

She clears her throat.

'My child, it was bound to happen. This is a gift he's had since birth'

'How is polygamy a gift mhane?'

'It's the same as a spiritual gift or a talent. You cannot run away from it and it's not for everyone. It needs a certain level of wisdom and self-awareness. I just did not think it would happen this soon'

'Were you aware that it was a fate I was faced with?' I ask.

She nods patiently. 'I knew everything about you from the first day I saw you. Us meeting was not a mistake'

My eyes hurt. I am quite certain they're red.

'They said this is the only child I'll ever have'

She sits closer to me and brings my head to her bosom.

'How am I supposed to sit back and watch another woman receiving the same kind of love and treatment I get from my husband?'

'My child, the fact that this is hurting you in this manner means you truly love that man. That's a good thing. You're the perfect first wife for him because you have no ulterior motives'

How is it a good thing? How is it a good thing when it's destroying me on the inside?

'This is not an easy journey. It won't be for all three of you but for now, I would like you to remember the little life that growing inside of you right now. Your child can sense whatever emotion you're going through. You're affecting him with all this distress. Let me make you some sugar water so you can calm down and get some sleep, neh?'

'But why do I always have to have bad things happen to

me? Who did I offend?’

‘Nobody. Having a spiritual gift is both a blessing and a curse. Especially one of the calibre of yours...’

Kurhula’s car parks by the gate before I can respond. We wait for him to come in and I quick in wiping my tears. They greet each other respectfully after he steps into the yard. Gogo excuses us and tells us to shout if we need anything.

Kurhula stands over me, looking at me. I can’t tell what’s on his mind. He eventually decides to sit beside me on the stoep and puts his keys and phone down.

‘How did you find me?’

‘There’s only one Gogo Mkhanyisi that people know here. You had me knocking on people’s doors before they could officially wake up, looking for directions. Why are you doing this to me?’

‘I needed to clear my head baby, otherwise I was going to run mad in that house’

‘You are the one who insisted, or rather emotionally blackmailed me into playing along with this nonsense and now you’re punishing me for it?’

‘I was just relaying a message, but it doesn’t stop any of it

from breaking my heart. And I did not emotionally blackmail you. I was telling you the truth. I will not allow my baby to be caught in the crossfire between you and your ancestors'

He's still looking at me. I'm looking at the chickens picking God knows what from the ground towards the gate.

'Did everyone else know about this except me?' he asks.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, Fikani was the one who was supposedly getting married but he disappears without a word and he doesn't take any of my calls. I'm not fighting. I'm just curious'

'I don't know what Fikani knows. I just know what I've been told. There's more to what I told you last night'

I hear him sigh heavily. I continue talking anyway.

'We... I need to build a hut, where all royal consultations will be taking place' I turn to see his reaction. He frowns.

'Why? We have a seer?'

'He's apparently not the right person for the job. Never been'

'But... how does a royal wife turn into a seer? Where have you ever see that happen?'

'You're asking the right questions, to the wrong person'

'You will be doing no such thing'

'Did you hear a word I said?'

He stands up.

'Let's go home, love'

'I'm not ready. I'll come home when I feel like it'

I can see him restraining himself. His lip is twitching. He wants to say something potentially offensive.

'Fine. Let it not be later than this evening, and please call me so I can come get you' he says before taking out my phone from his pocket and handing it to me.

'Thank you' I take it. He comes in for a kiss and I return it.

'I'm off to the office then. I love you'

'I love you too, baby'

He kisses the back of my hand and leaves. The way he drives off and the dust he leaves brewing behind him tells me he's big mad.

...

[LARONA]

Kago is standing behind me while I try to secure my hair into a high ponytail instead of helping me.

'Are you sure about this?' she asks, for the fourth time.

'You said it yourself that he's already left. If I don't find him there, I would've taken my chances'

'And transport?'

'I was told that I can driven around anywhere if I need to. Don't worry about that'

'Can I come with?' she flutters her lashes, hoping to soften me up.

'Forget it. You'll get there and be yourself then ruin everything for me' I reply while trying to put on a matte red lippie at the same time.

'Did you have to dress formally though?'

'I am not going to a picnic. I am going to ask this man to be my mentor'

'You are taking this way too seriously. I'm just waiting for you two to hit it off. Cannot wait to be a maid of honour' she squeals in excitement. I laugh.

'You're dreaming. That man is married'

'To you too!'

'Can you forget that and help me choose my shoes? The loafers or these high heels?'

'I don't like those Mahindras. Plus, the heels are going to elevate your appearance. You're already short. No one is going to take a penguin seriously'

I throw a cushion at her. She's always coming for my height. She continues laughing while I fit myself into the heels. I'm going to take a pair of sandals in my tote bag just in case I get tired of walking in these towers.

'How do I look?'

'Stunning!'

My aunt walks in while I'm trying to gather my belongings and documents into my bag, including my degree.

'And where do you think you're going?'

Kago's eyes start roaming aimlessly across the room. She knows hell is about to break loose.

'I'm off to see Ku... my husband at his office'

'Did he say you must come to him?'

'YES!' Kago intervenes. 'He called about an hour ago'

Aunty looks at the both of us with suspicion.

'Okay but you cannot go dressed like that'

'What's wrong with my outfit? My skirt is just below my knee' I complain.

'You look like his business partner, not his wife'

'I have packed beautiful long dresses for you. Pick one and cover that head'

I swallow my words because I know they're gonna hurt her feelings and my dad will soon know about this interaction. Then a meeting will be called in my name. When are they leaving anyway? They've accompanied me and I'm thankful. It's time for them to go back home. I change into the outfit of her choice and this leaves her smiling from ear to ear.

'You see now? You look respectable. You can go'

I want to punch someone, but I leave anyway. After getting into the backseat car, I pull the headwrap off and fix my edges.

'Should I wait for you, ma'am?'

'You'll find me waiting for you here, ma'am' the driver says after switching the car off.

'Thank you' I acknowledge with a smile and step out. I can't believe I'm here to meet my potential mentor wearing a royal blue maxi summer dress with brown slides! I'm supposed to be wearing black and white. I am going to stand out like a sore thumb in these premises. I walk in, nonetheless.

'I'm here to see Advocate Ngobeni' I say to the receptionist after we exchange pleasantries.

'Do you have an appointment?'

'No but I won't be long' I assure.

She looks at me regretfully. 'I'm so sorry. He specifically asked not to be disturbed today. He's very busy'

'Just two minutes'

'I wish you came at a different day. I'm new here so I don't want to step on any toes. Askiies'

I turn away and stop when I get to the entrance. I can't bring myself to leave without speaking to him. I go back to the reception desk.

'Miss—'

'Just alert him that his wife is here to see him. That's all I ask'

She heaves a sigh, then shortly grabs the phone. She doesn't take long on the phone before telling me that I can go to him. Relief befalls me as I clutch onto the handles of my bag. She tells me the way to go and it takes me there. I see the name on the door written in black caps, on a metallic plate. I knock and he yells for me to come in. I step inside and he frowns. He wasn't expecting me, with good reason.

'Hi. I just need two minutes of your time' I state before he throws me out. I could tell he had no time for me last night. I don't care about any of that arranged matrimonial stuff. I'm here on my own career business. He silently gesticulates that I can take a seat. I rush to chair and take out my file of documents.

'What can I do for you?' he probes and closes his MacBook only marginally.

'I know this may be unexpected but I'm here to put in a request for mentorship next year' I hand him my documents and he receives them, with a curious scowl persistent on his face.

'You have an LLB?'

I nod.

'I see that you've served in a couple of law societies but I

don't see your academic record'

I dig in my file until I find it and hand it to him. He studies it in silence and then raises his eyes at me.

'You started off well but then what's up with this consistent streak of 50 percents in your second year?'

'The Wits Edge was edging' I joke and he doesn't laugh. I feel a 'No' coming. 'But I improved' I promptly add.

'I asked you a question and I don't remember getting an answer for it'

I clear my throat.

'I was going through a lot'

'A lot? You mean you failed to keep up with your academics because of your personal life?'

'You can say that. Yes'

He goes through my CV.

'You're 24?'

'Guilty as charged'

He looks at me and drops his eyes back to the page. Okay. I should stop with all these lame jokes because he doesn't seem to get them.

'There's a gap here. What happened after you completed your degree?'

'I began travelling'

'Never wanted to start with your pupillage then?'

'I... Let me be honest. I actually wanted to serve articles but I couldn't secure any'

'And you gave up?'

'I knew I wasn't going to get any. My father made sure of it'
He makes a condescending face. He's gonna say no.

'I decided on travelling also because I believe I worked hard in my penultimate and final year. This degree took a lot out of me and my results speak for themselves'

'You prioritise your mental health a lot. Correct?'

I don't know where this question is going. He gives me back my documents while I'm trying to construct an answer.

'Do you want my honest opinion?'

My nervousness compounds in intensity but I nod anyway.

'I don't think this field is for you. Try YouTube or some other platform for content creation. You have the personality and the face for it. Close the door on your way

out' he pulls his laptop open. I guess this is his way to say we're done talking. I can feel a hot flush in my nostrils. I'm offended.

'I was following the Van Staden murder case you were on. I thought you were a brilliant lawyer'

'So you're a fan?'

I scoff and shove my documents into the file.

'I am nobody's fan. I just give credit where its due'

He smiles and sits back on his chair.

'Listen Larona. I did not mean to get you riled up but it is a common misconception that just because you went to an internationally recognized institution then it means you're automatically good enough. "Brilliant" litigators are born, not made. Take my advice and save yourself the time' he challenges me with a stare. He's intimidating and he knows it but I am not going to play into his palm.

'And there goes all the respect I had for you. I've never stopped to consider the possibility that you may be one of those black people who want to be the only ones to get ahead. Those who have been taught but never want to teach. The type to make their way up and then deliberately kick the corporate ladder when they see others making an attempt to climb. Coming here was a waste of my time but

going after this goal will never be'

'Pardon?'

'Enjoy the rest of your day, advocate'

[08/24, 12:48 pm] #o: CHAPTER 46

[KULANI]

I'm back home. I've taken a bath and I'm a lot calmer than I was this morning. I've been sitting on the balcony by myself, listening to the serene chirping of the birds that always find a way to surround me. There's also a bee that's idling on my toe. It has been there for the past fifteen minutes and I'm allowing it to do its thing while I sit with my legs crossed. To say there's a lot on my mind would be undermining the true current activity of my thoughts at this moment. I have tried to get some sleep but it's been a futile exercise, hence my decision to come out here for some fresh air. I see one of the cars driving through the gate, and Larona comes out. I wonder where she's coming from. Mhan' Mavis, one of the helpers, opens the sliding door and asks me if there's anything she can get or do for me.

'I'm fine thanks, but you can take this with you' I hand her the tumbler I'd been drinking orange juice from. She always bends both knees when giving and receiving stuff. She's the humblest of them all but I can't shake of the feeling that there's something bothering her, and it has everything to do with her teenage son. However, right now is not the time for me to be an empathetic and try to carry everyone's burdens on my shoulders. I have enough on my plate. I'll talk to her about it when I have the emotional capacity to do so.

'And can you please call our guest to come join me up here' I quickly add before she can disappear.

'The new bride?'

I nod. She nods back after me and leaves. It's eleven in the morning. After this conversation, I want to turn this into a maintenance day. I need my lashes, nails and hair installed. If Rhandzu and I were on good terms, she'd be doing my cornrows right now. I need something to make me feel good; I need to cheer myself up. Probably should've went earlier because I also need to get some shopping done, but we'll see what I can and cannot do.

Larona appears and greets me with a smile. She looks nervous. I return the same friendly energy and offer her a seat.

'Would you like anything to drink or snack on?' I ask.

'Nah this is fine' she lightly shakes the half-full 500ml of sparkling water in her hand. I nod. I am all forms of exhausted and I'm afraid I might be looking like my problems right now. I introduced myself to her last night then claimed I had a terrible headache and needed to sleep. The truth is, I was avoiding her and the mess she comes with.

'I'm not here to cause any trouble, Kuli. In fact, I am going back home first thing tomorrow'

This comes as a shock to me. Going back home?

'May I ask why?'

She looks to the green mountains, looking defeated.

'I had only one goal when I came here. It did not go as planned so there's nothing for me here anymore. Even though I know my dad will chase me away when I get to North West, claiming that I'm bringing nothing but disgrace to the Mokwena name. That's the only thing he cares about' she responds with growing disdain on her face.

'I don't understand...'

She scoffs. 'Where do I even start?'

'You don't have a great relationship with your dad? And why did you come here if the intention was never to stay?'

After a heavy sigh, she puts the bottle of water on the glass table and changes her sitting position.

'If you want to know who my father is, think Osama Bin Laden. Or General Aladeen if you're movie person'

I laugh out loud. He can't be that bad.

'Come on?'

'I am telling you. It's either his way or the highway. I once ran away from home in high school because he wanted to put me in boarding school. I was gone for so long people began speculating that I was dead. It even came out in the local newspaper. Do you know what he said when I was finally found?'

I shake my head with anticipation.

'Tantrums are for people who are capable of independence, not spoiled brats like me. That's what he said'

'You lie?'

'I'm telling you. He was never worried. And then he took me straight to the school I was running away from the very next day'

'That's...' I really don't know what to say.

'That's when my hatred for him grew stronger. I've always wished for a normal childhood, a normal life free of everything that comes with being a princess because wow. It's hell in there. You're always seen as commodity in exchange for resources and alliances'

'I know exactly what you're talking about' I relate. 'What happened after high school?'

'I went to do law. He wasn't exactly chuffed about that because he believed Joburg would corrupt me and I'd come back unfit to be a married woman someday'

I nod, wanting her to carry on. She's a good storyteller. I don't know if it's that or the radio host voice of hers.

'There I was graduating, not knowing what the future held for me' she grabs the bottle and takes a sip. The look on her face tells me she's about to tell me some seriously gloomy stuff.

'Stuff happened while I was still in varsity. And I appeared in papers, in a negative light, again'

'What stuff?'

We look eyes and I see her jaw tighten.

'In second year, I...' she stops. The empath in me is

starting to absorb the pain she's busy recalling. I honestly hate that I'm in this person. I don't disturb. I'm just sitting here, quiet and waiting.

'I went to his office to consult. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I was wearing blue denim shorts and a pink shirt'

Oh Lord. I just know where this is going and I don't like the direction this conversation is taking.

'Larona...'

'He...' – she scoffs humourlessly – 'Let's just say I stopped wearing shorts that day and I stopped going for consultations by myself' she wipes the single tear that just dropped to her cheek with her index finger.

'And the funny part is that that's not the worst of it. I eventually reported the incident and it became a case of my word against his. He was the favourite sweetheart lecturer so you can just guess who people believed'

'Babe...' I have no idea how to comfort her right now.

'After that, every time I tried to secure articles, my own father made sure that all the newspaper articles ever written about me got to my potential employers. Nobody wants to work with a "troublemaker". That's how he stood in the way of me becoming a lawyer because he believes it

is not a job for women. In fact he believes women are born to make men comfortable. That's the only thing we should focus on, according to him'

I am still listening attentively. Every single day, I learn that everyone has a backstory; that no scar can go unaccounted for.

'So when I heard of the fact I was getting arranged for marriage, I lost my mind for like a week. I even had thoughts of running away from home again but let's be honest. Where would that have taken me when the cards I use are being controlled by the self-appointed god of my life? I fell back into depression until I found out which family I was actually getting married into'

I don't know how to process that.

'I meant it when I said I'm not here to stir any pots, Kuli. I respect your husband, or rather I used to before coming here. No offense' she raises both hands to exempt herself.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'The intention was to ask him to be my mentor because I want to write my bar examination next year. Today, he told me to my face that I'm not cut out to be a lawyer'

'What?'

'I have no reason to lie'

I'm sorry but that sounds nothing like Kurhula. Okay I know how big-headed he can get but to go that far? She's talking but I'm no longer listening. I hear her voice as the background of my thoughts.

I see an image of her carrying a baby on her back. One that's a splitting image of AK but a younger version of him. Wow. This woman is here to stay and she doesn't seem to know it yet. This imagination carries on to a point where I realise that the baby is actually mine, not hers.

'Kuli???'

'Hm?' I respond. I had zoned out.

'I was saying that I actually need to go pack right now because my aunt thought it was a good idea to unpack for me. I don't want to pack in a hurry and risk leaving some of my stuff here'

I simply nod. She gets up, gives me a subtle awkward smile and leaves. I can't deny the clean aura that she carries. It's a little... overwhelming.

...

[LARONA]

Aunty and Kago are not here. Probably sitting with others in this yard. Either that or they have went sightseeing. I'm just happy they are both not here. I am not interested in what they're up to.

I release my braids and scratch my scalp. That conversation was unexpected. I hadn't spoken about that incident in a very long time and now it feels like I was picking at a scab. I did go to therapy but still, I am not willing to forgive nor forget. If I were to get locked up in the same room with that professor, I would certainly kill him with my bare hands. And I cannot believe the nerve of that one called Kurhula. For him to say I allowed my personal life to mess with my academics? ALLOWED? If there was a glass of water on top of that desk, I would've baptized him in the face.

I keep letting out breaths of laughter because what the hell? The audacity to tell me that I am not cut out to be a lawyer? The cracks in this country's justice system keep me awake at night. If this simplicity in my passion does not convince him, I have no idea what will. I hear screaming coming from downstairs after I take off my dress. Lege bare di voice dia tshwana, the person screaming is my aunt. I grab

my gown and quickly tie it to go see what's going on. When I get there, I find the lady whose name I forgot strangling Aunt Mmamosese to the floor.

'You call me ghetto, I show you ghetto!'

'Aunty Lydia!' Kuli is trying to separate them, with the help of the chef. I go in as well and we manage to get this woman off my aunt.

'Yohh my eye! You have blinded me. She has blinded me!' aunty Mmamosese continues crying. I know she's lying.

Kuli is trying to see this eye that is being spoken about and my aunt's palm is strong against it. I laugh internally.

'Let me leave before this woman finishes me off' she says through sobs and goes away. She's going to get up there and call my father. I am enjoying the consequences of their actions a little too much.

'Yes, RUN! You greasily bxtch!' Aunty Lydia continues cussing her out. Her Peruvian wig is all over the place, including the front of her eyes. I fail to contain my laughter and Kuli gives me a look.

'I'm sorry but...what happened here?'

'Shouldn't we be taking your aunt to the hospital?'

I waft away this suggestion.

'She's not bleeding, right? She's just being dramatic as always' I assure. This is my father's sister. I know her very well. Kuli looks hella worried. She keeps looking up the stairs in the direction that my aunt went.

'I'm telling you. She once pushed me and when I tried to hold on to her so I don't fall, she screamed like there was burglar in the house. When everyone came, she claimed I was trying to push her over the balcony. She said I was trying to kill her in broad daylight' I cross my fingers. I'm not lying.

'I can't say I find that shocking. Pack your manipulative mongrel in a cage and send her back to the zoo she came from' Aunty Lydia says and refills her white wine.

'How can you say she's from the zoo when you're the one behaving like an animal?' Kuli castigates.

'Exactly. I belong in the wild. I will wound her!'

'Are you going to tell us what happened here?' Kuli impatiently says to her.

'I am not going to waste too much of my breath but to summarize, we were having a civil conversation until I said marriage is not the end all and be all in life. Did she not say she could tell I was a feminist and that feminists are miserable people? That I should start my cat collection

since I'm not woman enough to raise kids? If she hasn't been told, please do your mother a favour Larona and tell her that I was arrested overseas on several occasions in prisons she wouldn't be able to pronounce. I am a mobile hospital for retards. I will not hesitate to rearrange her guts if barking mad is a habit of hers. I'm not the one' she raises her wine bottle while downing the liquid in her glass then walks away.

Hee banna. I never thought for one second that such a pretty lady could be this gangster. Is this the same person I was getting classy and super posh vibes from last night?

[08/24, 12:48 pm] #o: CHAPTER 47

[MABONTLE]

I am about to take one of the biggest and possibly dumbest decision of my life. I asked to speak to my father and he told me to wait for him on the couch while he goes to take an apparently important call he couldn't afford to miss. I feel like chieftancy should have a retirement age. He is old but he's always busy. I keep fidgeting around while I wait. I want to get this over and done with.

He eventually comes back with a bouquet of flowers and a

chocolate slab.

'For you' he says and hands them over.

'Awww...' my heart melts as I receive both. He is so sweet. I love it when dotes on me.

'I don't know which flowers you like so I just sent for roses. You can never go wrong with roses' he awkwardly says. I try to affirm him with a smile.

'Thank you, dad. I love them'

I smell flowers before placing them on the coffee table. I saw a vase in the kitchen. I'm going to put them in water after this. He sits next to me and puts his hand behind me – prompting me to lie on his shoulder. I get comfortable.

'So, what is bothering my butterfly?'

Lord, where do I start?'

'I want to speak to you about the man in my life'

'Oh oh...' he says with immediate disappointment and I laugh. What's with dads and not wanting to hear about their daughters' relationships? I am a grown woman. If I was a man, he'd be eager to know where this person is from.

'Dad...' I softly try to reprimand.

'Okay. I am all ears and I hope you're not about to tell me that vaku tshove nenge. I'd strangle the boy and his parents'

'What does that mean?'

'Pregnancy'

'No, not at all. It's nobody new. It's the same one you know and he is ready to make things right, traditionally'

I feel the mood go sour. He is quiet now. The joker has left the chat.

'I thought you broke up with that Fikani character'

I have no idea how to answer that.

'How long have you known this man for? Tell me'

'It's been a couple of months now'

'And you're ready to throw yourself into a lifetime commitment with him?'

'I hope this doesn't come out bad but... you literally set Kuli up with a man she didn't know at the time. How is this different?' I calmly argue. Cat catches his tongue.

'I knew that boy and the kind of family he was raised by. That's the difference' he eventually finds an answer.

'From what I saw, they're literally the same person, trust

me'

I feel hot air on my forehead as he sighs.

'That man is not who you think he is and it is not my place to lay out his true colours for you to see. How do you expect me to live with myself if he kills you?'

I laugh out loud.

'Now why would you take it that far? Do you realise that you are doing the exact same thing that my grandfather did to you when all you wanted was to love my mother?'

'It's not the same thing. Ours was just blatant tribalism. I am trying to protect you here. And if you feel a resemblance between me and him then it means I'm now wise enough to understand his rationale since I am father myself'

'I cannot do this without your approval'

'Then it means you won't be getting married to this person because I am never agreeing to this nonsense. Over my dead body'

I really need him to say yes. Having to watch Fikani marry another person would break me. I've had a taste of what that feels like and I want none of it anymore. If it doesn't work out, we'll simply get a divorce. We wouldn't be the

first nor the last couple to separate even after vows were said and papers were stamped.

'Why do you hate him so much?'

The vehemence he speaks with tells me there's more to this than meets the eye. There is simply disliking a stranger for whatever 'gut feeling' reason, then there is despising a person and all that he comes with.

'Bontle, if you want to get married, there are many princes in this country who would jump at the opportunity to have you as a wife. All you need to do is just say the word and I'll make it happen'

He doesn't get it, and I'm not very good at expressing myself. Maybe that is the problem?

'Dad, this is not about marriage or getting the ring. This is about being with the man I love who happens to need a wife right now. This is just simple terminology and legal processes. It's no different to vat n' sit really'

'You call tying yourself to another family simple terminology? If your mother was still alive, she'd have a lot of explaining to do'

I am running out of the strength to further drive this conversation.

'Trust me, I gave this a LOT of thought and I have decided that this is what I want to do. It may seem like I'm rushing into things but this is the love story I'd like to be the main character in. We can't all do things the same way. You keep saying it's going to backfire but what if it works out?'

'Ey...Cinderella, I have work to do my baby so please excuse me' he stands up and I hold his wrist. These are the best puppy eyes I can pull off so he better get convinced.

'Where is he?' he randomly asks.

'Uhm... why?'

'I want to sit the both of you down and explain to you why you cannot be together. Maybe you'll listen when you hear the truth coming from him'

'What truth? He said something about leopard skin and not being in the country for a while'

'You're not supposed to know that. But then again, what else was I expecting from him?'

'I'm the one who was asking too many questions dad. Don't put the blame on him. Please consider what I am saying'

'No. We are not doing this. Not with Fikani'

I drop all the hope I was carrying in my chest. If only he'd understand the feeling I get just from the mere thought of this man. The fact that I cannot speak to him right now is driving me up the wall. I am trying not to worry about him at the same time. I want to believe that he knows what he's doing.

...

[KULANI]

Mhan' Singi has called me to her house and I have honoured the invitation. I did not feel like it because I wanted to catch up on some sleep but I also did not want to disappoint her. There has never been a day where this woman has made me feel like an outcast in this family. She's one of the few kindest hearts I've gotten to know. Plus, she's always baking and I love her tender and buttery scones. They just easily collapse in the mouth.

'How are you, Nwa Khalanga?' she asks – her words packaged in absolute earnesty. I continue pouring myself a cup of rooibos while I figure out how I really am. She has brought out her fine china and although I do not feel like

much of a guest because she's right next door, this makes me feel special.

'I called you here because I want to make it clear that I had no hand in this. I was not even aware that Kurhula and his uncles were planning on getting him a second wife'

My hand finds its way to hers, to assure her that I am not mad at her.

'I know, but thank you for feeling the need to clarify'

'How are things between you and the new bride? I saw you sitting up there by yourself and I wasn't impressed by how down you looked'

I don't have the energy to explain, to be honest.

'We're okay. Just like you and Mhan' Xongi' I say and she laughs before picking up her cup, along with the saucer.

'It wasn't always like that. Do not be fooled'

'Tell me more'

She laughs even harder and accuses me of being a gossip-lover. She started it.

'When I first came here, Xongi wasn't overtly opposed to my arrival but she also did not make my stay here very comfortable. We just happened to find a way to make it

work because we knew we were just making life difficult for both ourselves. And if you think it is too soon, wait until I tell you that I got married a month after her'

'What?'

She nonchalantly nods.

'I heard there was three of you...'

'OFFICIALLY. If I had to start counting the women that came in and out of Edward's life, we would pull an all-nighter'

I feel my insides churn.

'I do not mean to scare you but you're royalty my child. How many royal people do you know? And I am talking immediate royal family members? We prioritize multiplying generations and we take matters into our own hands, why? Chances of a royal randomly coming across another royal and falling in love are close to nil. Hence the need for arranged marriages, to keep the blood undiluted'

'Did it hurt every time he cheated?'

She sighs.

'Kurahula is not the type to cheat. That boy is my son and he grew up right in front of me. I can assure you that he's nothing like his father. I cannot say the same for Junior

though' she shakes her head. Junior is a topic for another day. We all pretend not to see his shenanigans because he does not listen. Just last week, him and his big brother fought because of the dog he bought and brought home. Kurhula has been on his case about getting rid of it. Junior claims we'll all get used to it and that he'll keep it chained.

'But to answer your question and I'm going to be very honest with you because I trust you. At the beginning stages, yes it did hurt. When you are married to a man like my late husband, your heart eventually turns to steel because even in pain, you couldn't confront him. Not unless if you wanted a few broken bones. This stays between us'

I nod. She does not know that I already know the type of person her husband was.

'I remember the day I came home to a dead woman's body in my house. I don't know what made me more furious. The fact that he had brought her into my house or the fact that he didn't respect me enough to get rid of her before I could see what he had done'

Listening to this is blood-chilling.

'We walk around here with smiles on our faces like we haven't seen some of the worst things that this evil world

has to offer. We've held the sharp end of the knife and to this day, we are still bleeding. That's where the pride of our womanhood comes from' – she takes a sip – 'That woman was bleeding so much that if you had to take a mop and clean that mess, you'd have to do it twice'

'What had he done to her?'

She laughs. Not because she finds any of this funny but because the trauma is obviously somewhat still fresh.

'He had mutilated her for the purposes of traditional medicine. He believed a lot in it, him, and that witch of a seer. All her privates were gone, including her tongue'

Both my hands cover my mouth. What?

'He did not give me the time to even make sense of it all. I walked in. He came from behind me and said, "Masingita, be a lovely wife and clean this mess before fetching the kids from Xongi's house"". I just stood there, confused. I only came back to earth when I felt his cold hand wringing the back of my neck. I had to watch the whole community looking for that girl, knowing very well that I helped bury her'

Her mind is no longer here. She's venting but I doubt she hears herself. I shouldn't have come here.

Wait, who is Kurhula shouting at outside? I didn't even

realise he was back. Mhan' Singi and I step out to go see what's going on.

'Did I not tell you to take this thing back?'

'Bro, Danger bothers no one. I don't get what your issue is' Junior argues back.

'This is fvcking pit bull! Where is Akani supposed to play when he's home? You want this thing to shred him to pieces??'

Kurhula is inflamed with anger. He's been irritated with this issue but now, just as much as he'd concerns are valid, I feel like he's taking out his frustrations on Ed.

'This thing is harmless. I'm going to personally train him and you'll see'

Kurhula leaves him on the pavement and bolts off.

'Please talk to your husband' Junior says to me.

'Your brother is right. Those dogs are dangerous, especially to kids' Mhan' Singi responds. It's like she has read my mind. Junior sulks and pets his dog while it's on a leash.

'Can't you get another breed? A less harmless one?' I suggest. Kurhula comes back with a gun in hand and aims it at the dog. Junior shouts for him to stop.

'Kurhula!' We both shout for him to stop. What if he shoots Junior by mistake? The boy is adamant on protecting his new best friend, as he calls it.

'Move out the way' Kurhula urges to his brother.

'You're gonna have to shoot me first' Junior is stubborn. I try to walk towards them but mhan' Xongi pulls me towards her.

'Stand here before you make things worse'

Kurhula pulls Junior towards him and gets the opportunity to shoot the bull in the head without his brother in the way. The dog cries as it dies.

'When I tell you to do something, you do it, do you hear me? I might haha and kiki with you every now and again but I am still your big bro!' he says and pushes him away. Junior charges towards him, now in tears. Kurhula catches his by the neck and restrains him.

'What do you wanna do? You wanna fight me?' he laughs. 'Okay', he says and slides the gun across the floor, towards the door. That's when aunty Lydia comes out. This is getting out of hand.

'Will you two stop acting like madmen???' Aunty Lydia shouts while picking up the weapon. Junior has both his fists prepared. Kurhula undoes his cufflinks, puts them in

his pocket and rolls his sleeves.

'You better give me your best shot and make sure it knocks me out. Otherwise...'

Junior is enraged and still in tears. Aunty Lydia goes in between them and slaps Junior in the face.

'Stop this madness. Right now!' she reprimands. There is a spirit of war roaming this yard today and it's relentless.

...

[LARONA]

I cannot wait for tomorrow morning so I can drag my bags and leave this madhouse. I was taking a nap when the gunshot went off. I was so scared someone had been killed only to find that it's a dog? My aunt doesn't know that I'm planning to leave but what can she do to stop me? Call the cops on me?

I waited for everyone to go to bed before coming to the kitchen to get the ice cream I left to freeze in the afternoon. After the day I have had, I need me some stracciatella. My

jaw hangs loose when I realise that someone took several scoops out of the container. Batho ba bantse yang? Was I supposed to write 'DO NOT TOUCH' with a permanent marker on the lid? Argga man.

Let me just find consolation in the fact that they did not take all of it. The high and mighty advocate walks in while I'm looking for the spoon drawer.

'Hey' he greets and puts an empty bowl in the sink. I look at it, then at him.

'It was you, wasn't it?'

He turns in my direction with that frown on his face.

'Are you gonna tell me what you're on about?'

'It was you who helped himself to my ice cream. The least you could've done was ask. How rude!'

He stands against the cupboard and laughs.

'Listen, Warona...'

'L-A. Larona'

'Lady, I don't know how things work in your house but nothing belongs to anybody here. Once it goes into the kitchen, it is for anyone who'd like to consume it'

He walks away after this. Tswana girls don't play about

their food but you know what? I'm just gonna let it go. I'm not in the mood for this. I find the spoon and rinse it. I hate gold-plated cutlery but it will have to do. It's no biggie. He stops by the entrance arch and steps back.

'And I do not appreciate the stunt you pulled this afternoon. You don't come to a man's office to insult him unprovoked. I am teaching you this for your future interactions with people you actually need help from'

I close my eyes and try to find peace from within.

'You're right. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. Please accept my apology' I hope this sounds sincere, even though I've tried so hard not to pull it out the most disrespectful parts of me.

'But since you ate my dessert, we have to be even now'

That slipped out. My intrusive thoughts won. His face is expressionless. He opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of water.

'Court starts at 08h30 tomorrow. Don't make me wait for you because I won't. AND please, don't come down here dressed like a children's book cover. Show up like the advocate you think you're capable of becoming'

He leaves me in the kitchen while I try to make sense of this. Wait? Does he mean? I almost scream but I manage

to stop myself in time. I keep jumping around like a little girl because I just cannot contain my excitement, trying to make less noise as possible. What??? What do you mean I am going to be a mentee of thee Adv. KM Ngobeni?

[08/24, 12:48 pm] #o: CHAPTER 48

UNEDITED

[LARONA]

It's 5am and I am waiting for my mother to pick up the phone. I really hope she's by herself and my dad isn't there. It's a Thursday. He can't be home. I wanted to call her last night after my conversation with Kurhula but I knew she would be drunk on sleep and saying the most incoherent of things.

'Mababy?' she finally answers. She sounds like she's been awake awhile.

'Hey mom'

Now tell me why I am getting emotional from just the sound of her voice? My mom's humility and softness screams peace, and that everything going wrong right now will eventually be okay.

'How are you?'

'I'm okay. I have great news'

'You want to tell me that your aunt got jumped?' she giggles. I laugh as well. I knew this would be pure entertainment to her the moment she heard.

'Wabona? Don't be this person' I say.

'Forgive me. I just never thought that she would one day meet her match'

I cannot stop laughing. My aunt bullies my mother a lot and my mom is not the type to speak up for herself. I'm always fighting her battles because I don't play about my bestie like that.

'So... the good news?' she brings me back.

'Kurhula has agreed to be my mentor. I still have to apply for pupillage but he said we'll go to court together today'

'Whoa... whoa. Speak slowly. What is this pupillage? Is it the same as what you've been saying you want?'

'Uhm... not quite but it's also in the law fraternity. I'm gonna study to be an advocate, instead of an attorney. See, attorneys work directly with clients and advocates argue cases in court'

'So he's going to hire you after all this?'

I chuckle. She really does not understand. 'No mom. Advocates work as independent entities. Nobody hires them but he could put in a good word with his group in their chambers. Maybe I could secure membership them. I don't know but for now I'm focusing on being a pupil'

'Whatever it is, I'm just glad you're finally going somewhere. No parent wants to see their child depressed and rotting in bed'

Yeah that was a tough time in my life.

'And mom?'

'Yes sweetheart?'

'Please don't tell anybody about this. Especially dad'

'My lips are zipped'

I smile. 'You sound busy. What are you up to?'

'I'm preparing to leave for the Basadi-Pele conference and if I continue speaking to you, I'm going to be late'

'Okay. Be safe on the road'

'Thank you baby. Enjoy your day in court as well'

She cuts the call and I'm left feeling rejuvenated. I should also start getting ready because I want to do my face. Did I

even bring a pair of lashes? I'd kick myself if I forgot them at home. I go through my make-up bag and luckily find them. I got these from Shein and I was very surprised with the quality.

Kago is snoring her life away and I wish she stays like that till I'm done. I'm going to wear the outfit I was intending on the other day. My aunt will have to understand.

Two hours later and I'm done. I'm still tired from putting on these stockings while trying to make sure they don't get runs at the same time. The struggles of having acrylic nails on.

'I'm really proud of you, you know that right?' I hear Kago's voice coming from behind me while I try to tuck my shirt into my skirt. She's still in bed. I blow a kiss to her and she catches it. I love her so much. I don't think I'd still be sane if Kago wasn't in my life. She's always there to listen when I need to vent. She never tires from listening to my rants. And the fact that I have a stylist I do not need to pay? I'd never exchange her for anything. I always joke and say I'm gonna buy her a Pajero one day. She's back on her phone. TikTok needs to start paying her for staying on that app 24/7 because the addiction is getting out of hand now.

'What time are you leaving?'

'I'm not sure but I want to grab my things and go wait for him downstairs'

'Okay. Let me catch some sleep before your aunt comes in here'

I take my tote and contemplate whether to bring my PC or not. Am I going to need it? I don't think so. I dash out of the room and go grab a banana because I won't be able to stomach any breakfast. I am nervous like I'm the one who's going to be speaking to the judge whereas I'm just going there to be a spectator. Kurhula comes down a few minutes after me.

'Good morning' he greets and walks past me.

'Morning' I quickly stand up and grab my things to follow him. He unlocks the car and I go in the backseat because I'm not trying to deal with any awkwardness. Sitting in the front with a stranger with nothing to say to each other? A stranger whose head you've bitten off before? No thank you.

His cologne is filling this whole car up and reminds me that I forgot to put on mine. He smells quite expensive, I must say. I don't know if he's a naturally quiet person or if he's still mad about our unpalatable encounter.

His phone rings and he answers it while connected to

Bluetooth.

'Bennet, it's still early what do you want?'

The person on the line laughs.

'Ahhh is that how you greet your old friend?'

Kurhula laughs as well.

'It's because I know you. You never call unless you need money or a favour'

'Okay let me just be honest. You see that van of mine?'

'I don't see shxt. What's going on?'

I find their interaction funny. The smile on his face tells me he's very fond of this person.

'It broke down and now we need to fetch my uncle's things from his house. He's quite sick now and you know he lives alone'

'Sorry to hear that man. So you need to bring him home?'

'Yeah. He'll be closer to the hospital this side'

'Where do I feature?'

'I need you to borrow me your double cab'

'I'm not borrowing you my car Benzy'

'Kurhula man. I'm serious here. You know I'd make a plan but I'm currently unemployed'

'I can tell that you are serious but I'm still not changing my mind. Next thing I'm gonna be receiving calls from my tracking company. I know you phela wena'

Bennet laughs guiltily.

'But what I can do for you is hire a moving company. Is that okay?'

'I knew I could rely on you. Thanks man...'

'No biggie my friend. Speedy recovery to malumz, yeah?'

'Thanks. We'll talk later'

He immediately gets Siri to call an Andy Mathebula for him while he drives.

'Good morning boss'

I know this accent. It's that lady from reception.

'Hi Andy. Please do me a favour and hire a reliable moving company for me. I'm gonna park in about two minutes and I'll forward you the number of the person you're supposed to give to them. Is that okay?'

'Not a problem at all sir'

'You're darling. Thank you'

Friends like these? I guess he's not as bad as I thought he was. The car comes to a halt when he reaches the court parking lot. He steps out and I do the same. He opens the boot, pulls out his black wheeled bag and closes it.

'They usually start with cases handled by private lawyers before those handled by legal aid so we should be out of here in about two to three hours' he informs and I nod. He takes a look at me before continuing to walk.

'Why do you look so nervous?'

I shrug.

'I don't know. I just... I've been waiting for something like this and something just keeps telling me that you'll change your mind'

He stops.

'That day when you came to my office...I shouldn't have spoken to you in the manner that I did. Please forgive me'

He can apologize?

'It's okay. So, what does this entail? What am I getting myself into?' I try to make conversation.

'Erhh... you basically attend your classes then come to the chambers to a couple of things'

'What couple of things?'

'Research, drafting. Not only for me but the other advocates as well'

'Exciting'

We walk in and run into his colleague, a prosecutor. They greet each other and he introduces us to one another.

'The legal field is getting infiltrated by beautiful women each day. It's a pleasure to meet you' he says while shaking my hand. I smile and nod.

'Likewise'

'Don't afraid to shout if you need anything' he says and we continue to chat while Kurhula is on the phone with his wife. This man now wants my number. Why can't men just compliment us and keep it moving?

...

[KULANI]

The dream I had last night has set the tone for the rest of today. I'm in a good mood and I'm not going to allow

anything to ruin it. I dreamt I was watching Kurhula playing with our son. He was about one, more or less. I cannot believe I already know what he's going to look like before officially meeting him. Maybe this gift is not all bad. I laugh to myself while washing my face in front of the bathroom mirror. It truly is not that bad. It just has its ups and downs. When it makes you happy, it's way over the top. Equally when you're sad, it's hell. I'd never trade having the ability to see the future and sense danger for anything. The one thing I hate most, is the trials and tribulations that come with being a child of the living waters. There's situations I've gone through that the past me wouldn't have survived.

Anyway, this dream has eased up my anxiety. My child is going to live. Nothing is going to happen to him. I'm taking the decision to stop living in fear because that also can manifest bad things. I've gotten to learn that the mind is a powerful tool. The ability it has to build, is no different to its capability for destruction. From today onwards, I am going to be speaking life and green pastures in everything that has to do with me, and the people surrounding me. There was a point in my life where I was prepared to die by my own hand. I couldn't do it. I was too much of a coward to leave this world in that manner. I just felt like I was seeking rest and peace of mind but I went out that way,

my spirit would experience far much worse. Yesterday, I kind of felt like I was spiralling back into that dark place. I blatantly refuse. And if I am not going to die, I refuse to live in misery. There's a pro in every con and I'm always going to take a conscious decision to find it.

This installation better last me a week for the price I paid for it. I did not manage to do any shopping yesterday so that's what I'm going out to do today. I need to go to Clicks to get some cosmetics. I also need new underwear and socks for Kurhula.

He's calling and I'm in shower. I know it's him because of the ringtone. I grab a towel and wrap it around my wet body to fetch my phone from the bedroom.

'Hubby'

'Hey baby. How are you? I didn't wanna wake you this morning'

'It's okay. I'm fine how are you my love?'

'We've just arrived and I wanna get this over and done with. What are you up to?'

'I was in the shower and I'm wet'

I'm feeling cold.

'Don't say such things baby. I'm in public'

I shoot out laughter.

'That's because you have a naughty mind, mister'

'You wouldn't blame me if you had a wife like mine. Listen, I'm calling to let you know that I have a surprise for you this afternoon'

'Does this surprise need me to dress up? Because I can't I'm too tired for that.

'Not really no. I just need you to be comfy'

'It's not an extreme sport, right?'

He laughs.

'You're pregnant. What do you take me for?'

'Juuust making sure. But I'm going to start off at the mall and you'll fetch me from there'

'Stay at home. I'll take you to the mall myself. I have to go now. I love you'

'Love you loads baby'

I'm gonna take my time and wait for him. I'll probably manage a nap in between. I love going out with him because he literally gets everything done. He's the one to carry my bags, to swipe, order food and drive. I don't have to do a single thing when my man is around. Once he

holds my hand, I know I don't even have to think. All I need to do is know the answer to "What do you want?" and that's it. He does everything on my behalf and I love it for myself. I get into a set of clean pyjamas so I can go back to bed. It's already made so I'm just going to grab a fleece and sleep on top of the sheets because I am not in the mood to make it again when I wake up.

—

I feel his kisses all over my face and open my eyes.

'Hi baby'

He just stares at me lovingly after I greet him. How long have I been sleep?

'Are you still up for up and downs at the mall?' he asks. I nod. I want to get out of this house.

'Okay let's get changed then' he suggests and I get back. Why is it so hot? I decide on a knee length linen dress and Lock It flat mules. He's in denim shorts, a white golfer and slides as well. His wardrobe is super simple and predictable. I've tried to get him styled up but he blatantly told me to stop stressing him; that he has far more

important things to worry about. Kurhula literally owns the same things in different colours and brands. We leave the house and chat about his day on the road. I'm always in charge of the music whenever we're in the car because he's a deep house head and it bores me. We get to the mall and struggle to find parking. It's packed and I already know I'm not going to stay long here. Are people not supposed to be at work or something? I decide to leave my bag in the car and he laughs.

'What are you gonna pay with?' he asks and closer the driver's door.

'I don't have to pay for anything. My husband is here' I say with a pout.

He pulls me closer and kisses me.

'That's right. Where are we going?'

'Let's start at Sheet Street, then Clicks. After that we'll go home'

'That's it?'

'Oh and Truworths. You need new socks'

We walk in and I go get everything I need. I literally got seven items from Clicks and they all amounted to R2335. That shop is a scam and we don't seem to know how to let

go of it.

‘What would you like to eat because I know you haven’t eaten all day?’ he scolds.

‘I don’t feel like sitting in so any drive-through will do’

‘KFC?’

‘Nah. I don’t feel like chicken’

He laughs.

‘Ay, women... You just said any drive-through’ he says while headed to McD. We get burgers, fries and drinks then leave the mall. He takes a route I was not expecting and I ask where we’re going while feeding him and eating as well. I even hold the drink for him because I don’t want him multi-tasking while behind the wheel.

‘I told you I have a surprise for you. Be patient’

I shake my head and focus on my food. We arrive at what looks like an abandoned farm. The place is in the outskirts of the burbs and I’m certain I’ve never been here before. It looks a little creepy, especially that building over there with a rusted roof. There’s two cows feeding at a far distance. I can hear a horse but I don’t see it.

He takes my hand and we walk in. We stand in an open field and he hugs me from behind, covering my tummy

with both his hands.

'Utwisa nwana ku hisa. It's already hot here' (You're heating up my baby)

He laughs.

'You're so silly'

I put my hands over his.

'What are we doing here, Mlambya?'

'I know how much you'd like to move out of home'

'But you know that's impossible'

'I know that too. That's why I got this place. You'll have your farmhouse where you can destress because I know how much you value your peace'

What? I turn to face him with a smile on my face.

'Are you serious?'

He nods.

'I also got it for this one in here. I want him to have something tangible he can point at and say I did for him. Something he won't have to fight for with anybody else because you know royals and inheritance. He might can a piece of the mine but I can't rely on that because it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the family'

'This right here is a sign that I am having a baby with the right person'

I bring his face closer so I can smother him in kisses, which he laughs at when I refuse to let him go.

Then I remember.

'Baby?'

'Mbilu ya Kurhula?' he responds.

'Can we address the elephant in the room?'

'The second wife issue?' he asks and I nod. He drops his head.

'This is something we both cannot avoid so we need to start talking about how we are going to make it work?'

'Larona doesn't seem to be interested in all of this'

'It's not her choice to make. Neither of us have a choice here. You want more kids and I can't give that gift to you, and it's not only about you. Your ancestors are deeply involved here'

He's silent. I have told him everything his grandfather has said to me. He knows what is expected of him. I don't know why he's going on like this is going to disappear.

'This thing will sort itself out, baby. If it's meant to be, it

will fix itself. Now can we celebrate the reason why I brought you here?’

He turns me around again and we look in the same direction, while I’m still in his arms. I hear him sigh. I’ve managed to ruin his mood.

...

[NARRATED]

Days days later...

Everyone stops chewing at the dinner table when they hear car hoots and ululations from elderly women outside, including Mhan’ Singi. They all get up to see what’s going on.

‘He’s here’ Uncle Albert says to Kurhula.

‘Fikani? Hhawu, why did he not say that he’s coming?’

Uncle laughs. ‘He’s not supposed to announce. This is the announcement!’

They stand by the entrance and Fikani steps out of the car, wearing the leopard skin with a golden walking stick in

hand. The celebrations erupt even further when they see his face. His uncles greet him with great reverence.

'Khwembe ra ndlela xi upfa hi moya.

Nsizwa ayidavuki ku davuka ilicwe.

Thamb' le nyoka lihlava lim'zondhayo

Mkhatshwa, Mlambya' Kurhula calmly greets with a smile on his face and they exchange a handshake.

'Get outta here' Fikani teases and they laugh. He was no longer the person Kurhula last saw before he disappeared. There was thick air of power surrounding him. The kind that gets strangers to respect him without him having to say a word but the silliness between him and his brother came back with him.

'Welcome home bro'

They exchange a shoulder hug. He is welcome home by everyone and pleasantries are exchanged. Mhan Singi suggests that food fit for a king should be cooked and Fikani insists that they shouldn't bother.

'I'm exhausted. I just need my bed right now' he says. He then signals to Kurhula to join him outside. Kurhula humbly asks Kuli to bring them a bottle of Hennessy from the study. She brings it to them while they sit outside,



along with short glasses on a tray.

‘Thank you baby’

They exchange smiles before she leaves. Kurhula pours.

‘You two seem fine. Uncle Wiseman told me what happened’ Fikani notes.

‘You left me with your mess here’ Kurhula chides before handing his brother his glass. ‘Anyway, that’s a topic for tomorrow. How does it feel to be back home?’

‘Considering that I almost died? Fvcking good’

Kurhula laughs.

‘You did what you had to do. Does Mabontle know you’re back?’ Kurhula asks before taking a sip.

‘Not yet. Where is she anyway? And don’t tell her I’m back’

‘Kuli told me she went back to work. Why mustn’t she be told about your arrival?’

‘I want it to be a surprise. And besides, I made a promise I cannot fulfil right now’

‘Expand’

Fikani raises both brows with a naughty look on his face. Kurhula laughs out loud when he finally gets it.

'Ohhhh... I get it. You haven't healed?' he probes with confusion thick in his voice, referring to his circumcision.

'I have but not completely'

'You're weak. I think mine took about seven days to completely heal'

'You were a still a little boy' Fikani argues.

Kurhula shrugs. 'Fair'

'So, you're taking her?'

Fikani nods with zero hesitation.

'That's my wife, bro. I knew about her way before I even met her'

'I can't dispute. You look good together and she's well mannered. She's fit to be a queen so I don't see why not'

'I have a favour to ask'

'You don't have two minutes back here but you're already asking for favours'

They both laugh.

'I need your big head as part of the mediators when I go ask for her hand in marriage'

Kurhula swallows dramatically while squinting his eyes

provocatively at his twin brother. Fikani laughs when he realises that Kurhula is about to say something stupid.

‘You do know that I get paid to speak, right?’

Fikani backhands him lightly on the chest.

‘Are you going or nah?’

‘You know I got you, bro. I’m gonna fetch your wife and bring her home’

They clink their cognac glasses and fist bump right after.

[08/24, 12:48 pm] #o: CHAPTER 49

[UNEDITED]

[NARRATED]

When Kurhula arrives at Chief Baloyi’s home to pay him a visit concerning his brother and the chief’s daughter, he finds him playing chess with Kuli’s uncle. He greets both with firm handshakes.

‘Son, sit down. This coward is about to leave because he can already see how dire his future looks on this board’ the chief jokes and they all laugh. Uncle G was already on his feet.

'You like playing this game with me because you know I don't like it, which always increases your chances of winning'

'Just admit that I always win fair and square' Baloyi argues back. Uncle G shakes his head and says his goodbyes.

'Let me go see those men before they lose their patience' he says.

'No problem. We'll do this some other time' the chief says in a less playful tone this time. His brother leaves and Kurhula occupies the outdoor chair across his father-in-law. He silently moves a pawn.

'Oh you're challenging me?'

'Are you afraid of a challenge?' Kurhula respectfully asks with a smile on his face. The chief laughs.

They start playing.

'What are you doing here, Edward Junior? I know this is not just a plain visit'

'Can't I spend time with my father-in-law?'

'You're a busy man and it is written in your eyes that there's something you want to say? Is it related to the rumours I hear about you taking a second wife?'

Kurhula tries to package an answer.

'I will not react, son. You think a man of my age, who is a custodian of our culture and tradition would stand in the way of you living up to your birth right?'

'That's the thing. I wasn't ready. I had no intention of hurting Kuli in this manner'

The chief sits back.

'I've been married a couple of times and I can tell you now that no woman would just accept this with their arms folded. Some just cry, some might put your life in danger'

Kurhula laughs and says nothing. This wasn't what he came for but he appreciated that he could vent to his father-in-law.

'Royals do not speak about love. It's an ephemeral concept to us. I wish I could sympathise with her but that would just make me a shameless hypocrite. Her only sin was being the daughter of a chief. This is all part of her growth. She is spiritually gifted, heavily so. There was no way her life was going to be easy'

He moves a piece.

'In all this, I trust that you know how to handle your own wife' he says and raises his eyes so they meet Kurhula's,

who nods.

‘What’s the worst that could happen if I reject an ancestral wife?’

‘You’d be turning away a huge chunk of your blessings. See, when we say we are nothing without these women, we mean it. Most of our wealth, monetary and otherwise, usually arrives with them and when they leave, they take it with’

Kurhula lifts a brow.

‘You will understand someday. I might not be around to applaud you for finally getting it’ – he laughs – ‘But the most important thing here, our gods do not take kindly to being ignored and having their instructions disregarded. They’ve lived before and all their lives, they were the ones making the rules. They were never subordinates to anybody. What happened to the life you had set up in Pretoria?’

‘Things were just not going my way’ Kurhula answers even though he does not understand what this has to do with the topic.

‘Do you think that was a coincidence? Your life falling apart when your father was on his deathbed?’

‘But it has been established that I’m not the one who’s

supposed to be king?’

The chief huffs and picks up his box of cigars. He offers one to Kurhula and he takes it out. ‘You have a role to play. Not everything starts and ends on the throne. You see that man who was sitting on that chair?’

‘Uncle G?’

Baloyi nods. ‘The next time you see him, ask him what his role is with regards to the wealth of this family. Specifically the cows that we own. For now, let’s focus on the board’

He says before gently knocking off and capturing one of Kurhula’s chess pieces.

‘I appreciate the conversation we’ve just had however, I am here on a different matter’

‘Let me guess. Your hooligan of a twin brother?’

‘He’s nothing like that’

‘We both saw what he did to my daughter. Do not speak like you weren’t there’

‘Khalanga, you’re the father to the woman I love and that makes feel honoured hence I respect you as such. In this case, I need you to understand that Fikani was not at fault. My aunt knows very well what she did that made him react

in the manner that he did'

'You speak like the two of you grew up together'

'The bond is natural. No third person would understand it except for the two of us. We might be different but at the core of our beings, he is me and I am him. That's what I've gotten to learn'

The chief sits back and stares thoughtfully, while puffing on his cigar.

'Different how? In that you haven't laid a hand on any of my daughters?'

'And won't. It was never supposed to happen in the first place and he regrets it each time he remembers. Have I not proven myself to you?' Kurhula asks.

'You have but I don't understand what that has to do with Mabontle'

'If you truly believe that Kuli is in safe hands, then please believe that I wouldn't be here speaking for Fikani if I believed he has no control over his anger. If anything, he's the calmest of us two. And this is the man who made sure that there was nothing incriminating your daughter on that fateful day'

The chief sighs, looking around to see if they don't have

company.

'You are provoking someone who holds the future of your father-daughter relationship with Kulani. And if she finds out that I knew that you were involved all along, I'm a dead man walking'

'Are you boys blackmailing me?'

'Not at all. All I'm asking from you, with all due respect, is for you to give their relationship a chance. They clearly love one another. And if you won't do it for Kuli, so that she never finds out about this, then do it for Mabontle. She will never forgive you if Fikani marries someone else. Which he will if you don't give him the go ahead to marry the love of his life. Let this be the once in a lifetime event where a prince and a princess want to marry one another without anyone being forced into it. Checkmate' he says after cornering the chief's king on the board and standing up – preparing to leave. Baloyi stands up as well and lets out a heavy sigh, accompanying him to the gate.

'Son, I don't know whether to feel disrespected due to the fact that you drove all the way here to give me an ultimatum or to feel proud to see how much of a man you are, sticking out for your blood in this manner. As someone who was once stabbed in the back by their own brother, I have to applaud you for this' he offers him a

handshake and Kurhula obliges.

'You've made solid points and because I trust you...' he goes silent. The anticipation keeps rising in Kurhula.

'That is my baby girl – one that I was never afforded the opportunity to raise my way. If anything happens to her in the hands of that boy, the two of you are going to pay dearly for it'

Kurhula has no idea whether to process this as approval or a threat. His hand was still tightly held by his father-in-law.

'You can send your men. Come well prepared because I'm not happy with this' he says with a subtle smile. Kurhula laughs.

'I see us going bankrupt because of you'

'I make drop-dead gorgeous kids. That's what you get for wanting to pick expensive flowers in the same garden'

Kurhula gets into his car and leaves after they've cleared the tension between them.

...

[LARONA]

My back is sore. I am sitting in Kurhula's office and I'm so glad he's not here. I walk on eggshells when he's around and it flares up my anxiety. I've already started studying for my exams because I don't want to put myself under pressure next year. They have a library here with all the material he's guided me to use. I'm currently ignoring calls from my dad and I don't know what the consequence of that will be. I am not in the mood to listen to him pretend he cares about me. Andy has shown me where I can find taxis during our lunch break. That's where I'll be headed after packing up here.

'You're still here' I unexpectedly hear Kurhula's voice coming from behind me and I almost have a heart attack.

'Uhm... yeah. But I was preparing to go home soon' I was seated on the chair across his and did not hear him coming in because I kept the door open. I couldn't take the heat and I have no idea how to turn this aircon on. I'm pretty sure the problem is with the remote though. I thought he said he wasn't coming in today. I was so tempted to sit on his chair the whole time I was in here. Imagine if he caught me sitting there? I would be stuttering right now. He goes to the file cabinet, takes one out and peruses it in silence. He puts it back and takes out

another one, which turns out to be what he's looking for.

'It's half past five. Everyone must be gone by now. Let's go home' he offers. I'd never say no to a lift. I pack up my stuff, including my lunch bag. I carry lunchboxes now because I don't have the money for everyday take-aways.

I follow him out and we walk into the elevator.

'What were you reading on today?' he asks as he presses the button for it to close.

'Criminal procedure act'

'Summarize'

'Can't we do this after I've taken a bath and had supper?'

'I also haven't had anything to eat the entire day but I'm willing to listen. The lift jerks, makes a noise and stops moving.

'What's happening?' I ask.

'Relax' he says and fiddles with the button. Nothing happens. Do not tell me that this is what I think it is.

'It's stuck' he states and takes out his phone. 'And there's no reception in here'

'Help! Someone please help!' I yell. 'Help!' I try again.

'Our best bet is Peter. He likes working late. If he doesn't

back here, we'll be stuck here till tomorrow morning'

This sends all the sirens off in my head. Does he see how small this space is? We're suspended in the air. The first person to open this elevator might get hurt because people do look to see if the lift is there or not. We typically just walk in. This cannot be happening man!

'HELP! SOMEBODY!!' I keep trying. 'Why are you so chilled about this?' I ask. He sits with his knees up. If he wants to spend the night here he can do it by himself. I am getting out of here, today!

'I don't see how panicking is going to help us right now. But carry on since you have the energy for it'

I look at him, then around the elevator. I press all the buttons and still, nothing. I look back at him. His calm demeanour is making me look crazy. I do breathing exercises before deciding to lift my bag off my shoulder and sit down next to him.

'I've been meaning to ask you something' I start. I might as well take the opportunity since we're stuck here together. He turns his face in my direction and says nothing.

'Whatever you do, please don't speak to my father about you mentoring. Or anything that has to do with my career'

He raises one brow.

'Any particular reason why?'

'He just... he has a talent for ruining things for me. Just don't say anything to him. That's all I ask'

The look on his face tells me he's suspicious. I hear him breathe out loud.

'Fine. I've seen what I needed to see. I'll officially mentor you next year, which is just around the corner'

'All this while you hadn't taken the decision? What was this? A trial run?'

'I like to spend a little time with my potential mentees just to make sure I will not be wasting my time'

'You must be a pain in the neck to work with' I say and immediately regret it. 'Sorry'

'I might make your life a little difficult but trust me, it's always for your own good' he responds. I thought he was going to take offense. Gape he's unpredictable this one.

'Please tell me you have water in that flask slash bottle of yours?' he asks. I pull it out the litre and hand it to him. It's about half-full.

'Take small sips enough for both our survival'

He laughs. 'Stop being dramatic. Thank you' he receives it

and starts drinking. I hear his stomach rumbling as he drinks. I take out a banana and a Kellogg's energy bar from my lunch bag and hand them to him.

'We might be in here for hours' he warns. I wave my empty lunchbox in the air.

'I've had lunch. You've had none. Take these as a token of appreciation' I hand them to him and he says thanks. He starts with the bar and I can immediately tell that he doesn't like it.

'This is terrible' he says with disgust, struggling to swallow.

'Wow. Talk about being ungrateful'

He laughs out loud.

'What other snacks do you have in that sack of yours?'

'For someone who's desperate, you're very disrespectful' I laugh as well. I search my bag and feel a packet of something in the back pocket I hardly open. When I unzip it, I find biltong.

'Here. But it's been in here for weeks. Not sure how many'

'It's dried meat. That means nothing' he takes it from me and rips it open. I watch him enjoying it.

'I was really craving that when I bought it. Are you not

going to share?’

‘If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have remembered that it exists’

I thin my eyes at him. I try to snatch it away and he holds it very far from me.

‘Take your gym snack and have it. I will have my biltong’

‘Come on. Let’s share. Just two slices’ I say, still trying to reach for it.

‘This is my gift from the gods. There’s a reason why you bought and forgot it. It was never meant to be yours’ he says and I’m left laughing in defeat. He then puts the open packet in front me when he sees that I’ve given up.

‘Here, before you start crying. I saw how upset you were over ice cream. I don’t want to die in an elevator. That’s undignified’

I take out a slice and start chewing on it.

Since there’s nothing to do, I am going to watch a movie. I take out my laptop and find the one I want to watch. It’s something Kago recommended and I promised her I’d watch it because she guaranteed that I won’t see the ending coming.

‘Are you serious?’ he asks when the movie starts. I forgot

my airpods at home and I'm not going to allow boredom to have its way with me just cause he's here. I take off my shoes to maximize comfort. He loosens his tie and undoes the first button of his shirt. I take out my glasses and put them on.

'What else do you have in mind? I am not going to sit here starring at silver walls' I counter. He keeps quiet and continues chewing on his biltong.

'This guy gives me major stalker, creepo vibes' he comments, fifteen minutes into the movie.

'Oh you're watching now?'

'I don't know about you but I find it very difficult not to pay attention to my surroundings, miss'

I choose to say nothing. He looks more invested than I am but he was judging me moments ago.

'Now tell me how he found her if she's on public transport and threw away her phone? See why I don't entertain this fictitious bullshxt?'

'Maybe he followed her?' I argue deliberately.

He gives me a bored face. 'He was in a different town when she left'

I see his point but I just find it funny how absorbed he is by

this, when he pretended not to be interested at first.

'Don't watch with a lawyer's eyes, trying to find loopholes everywhere. It's a YouTube film, probably shot with a phone. You can see the quality'

'You are asking me to switch off my brain but keep my eyes on?'

'I am only watching to see how her love story with Jack will turn out.

He makes a face.

'What?' I ask.

'Nothing. You've just never struck me as a hopeless romantic'

I look at him. He wants me to say something. He wants an argument. What is that supposed to mean?

'Give five first impressions of me. I raise my hand to count as he speaks'

'Number one? Chakra hun' he says and bends my pinkie. I chuckle.

'Guilty. Number two?'

'Likes action movies, but you've proven that to be wrong so let's go to three'

He's still snacking.

'You listen to the likes of Lalah Hathaway'

'Who on earth is that?'

'You listen to Tamia then?'

'I am a Chymamusique girly. A granddaughter of The Godfathers of Deep House' I correct him. He straightens his posture.

'Are you for real?'

I nod.

'Not bad. At least there's something interesting about you' he jabs. Wow. 'Do you listen to private school piano?' he asks

'Listen, if there is no sound of kids playing at the start of the song, then it's not the one'

He finishes off my sentence and we both laugh. The meaningless conversations carry on until I start to feel cold. The time says fifteen minutes to eight and I've already concluded that there is no Peter coming to save us. Someone is going to come looking for us. We can't both go missing and have no questions asked. I pull my bag so I can use it as a pillow, wrap my arms around myself so I can take a nap on the floor. Maybe I'll pass out and when I

wake up, it will be morning time. I feel Kurhula covering me with his suit jacket. It's been a long day and the particles of his scent are still intact and steadfast in doing their job. I keep wondering what cologne he uses. It smells good. Manly but not overpowering. Strong enough to get you asking questions about who was in the room but not triggering to one's sinuses. Now I miss my uncle. He's the one who's obsessed with colognes and their notes. Once he starts and says, "Darli, can you tell that this one comes from a special tree in the depths of the rich land of Switzerland?", high on whiskey? Just know that it is going to be a long night.

[08/24, 12:48 pm] #o: CHAPTER 50

SEASON FINALE

[UNEDITED]

[LARONA]

When I get up from the cold floor of the elevator, I see Kurhula standing over me – waiting for me to get up. He's the one who shook me out of sleep. The doors are open. I cover my mouth as I yawn. I am desperate for the comfort of a bed right now.

‘What happened? Did Peter come?’

‘The lift just opened’ he offers me his hand. I hold it and stand up. I give him his jacket back. He holds it in the same hand that has his file. I then pack up my things and we leave the building. I’ve never appreciated fresh air more than I am in this moment. It feels so good to be outside.

He starts the car and by the time we get to the royal house, it’s a couple of minutes to nine. We find Fikani sitting with Junior playing PS5. The little brother’s smile disappears when we walk in. I know why. I greet them both and they greet back. Kurhula brushes him on the head and he stubbornly moves his head. Oh he’s big mad. Kurhula sighs.

‘Boy?’ he calls – contrite in his tone.

‘I’m really sorry about how I reacted. I shouldn’t have shot your dog’

‘You’re right. You shouldn’t have’ Junior responds, sounding more malleable this time.

‘Were you two working late?’ Fikani asks. The look on his face is riddled with suspicion. My feet are killing me and my patience is running thin so I leave to go submerge myself in a hot water. Kago and aunty left. I don’t know but that makes me feel more of an outsider here. I’ve been

meaning to talk to my mom about this but she's been busy the whole day. I dial her number as I take off my clothes. She doesn't answer. I wrap my nakedness with a towel and sit down on the bed to try her again.

'Mababy?' she picks up, finally. She sounds very sleepy.

'Hi mama. O sharp?'

'I'm alright. I'm just exhausted. How are you and how was your day? I tried to call you earlier on but I couldn't reach you'

'I had no network' I feel lazy to explain. 'I want to talk to you about something?'

'I'm all ears'

'So... I want to find a cheap place to live around here but you know dad will never agree to that agree?'

She's silent. This is always her way of saying I should carry on whenever we're speaking about serious matters.

'I want to move out and find a student friendly room around here. Andy say I can find one for about one point two a month but the money I have saved up won't carry me all the way through. I can pay for pupillage myself and see what I eat but I need your help with rent money' I softly ask. I have no one to turn to. My uncle has already said

he's too committed, which I understand because he's building a new home and recently got a new car. Everyone else would lose their minds when they learn that I want to move out of my marital home to go live by myself.

'Have you told your husband about this?'

'I will. He won't mind. We don't have that kind of relationship'

I hear her exhale.

'Okay sweetheart. I'll send you about R2K a month and you'll guard this secret with your life aker?'

I squeal with joy.

'Thank you, queen'

She doesn't sound pleased though.

'I am really sorry there was nothing I could do to stop you from being married off without your full consent. You know your father'

'I understand mom, genuinely. If anything, he has put me closer to the goal and he doesn't realize it

'Goodnight my angel'

'Goodnight'

I cut the call and walk into the bathroom. The tub is filled

to my satisfaction. I put my braids up and carefully step inside. I respect tubs because I once fell in one as a teenager. I can still taste the blood on my tongue when I bit myself upon impact. I feel like if I were to develop dementia, that would be the only memory I'll have left. It's so strong and persistent. I feel my muscles surrender under the heat of the water. I needed this. My phone rings from the basin. Whoever it is will have to wait. I have a strong feeling it's Kurhula's friend – that prosecutor guy. I've been avoiding him but he doesn't seem to get it. LLB gents have this thing of wanting their juniors to feel like they are their saviours. He keeps speaking about how he'd be of great help to me and all that. He thinks I have a dumpling for a brain. There's only one thing he's after and he's going to continue dreaming until he gives up. But what if it's someone else and it's important? I step out of the water to get my phone. It's Andy. I hope she's okay. Why would she be trying to reach me at this time? I return her call.

'Babe' she answers.

'What's up?'

'I hope I didn't wake you up'

'No I was just taking a bath'

'Okay. Let me get to the point. My aunt says she has a

room available for you but you'll have to make an offer before this weekend ends'

She's a godsent.

'Thank you so much. Same price as you've mentioned?'

'She says the room is a bit smaller than the rest so it's just one thousand'

'Are they decent?' I cannot help but ask. Why is she laughing?'

'They're okay. They're not raggedy but still not the same standard as the apartments in town'

'Do they come with a bed?'

'Yes but it's a single bed. Is that okay?'

'Why would it not be? I am single, am I not?'

She laughs again. Andy must be the one person in the world who thinks I'm capable of being a comedian. She's always laughing at everything I say.

'Thank you so much for your help babe. Where are meeting then tomorrow?'

'The mall. I need to send a parcel and maybe we could grab a bite to eat? It's on me'

'I could never say no to that'

She's laughing, again. I really don't know what we're going to do with these giggles of hers but we cannot work like this. I think to myself with a smile on my face. I like this girl. She's unproblematic – from the little I've seen.

'Are you sure you're a princess?' she asks.

'Banna. Where does that come from?'

'I don't know. You behave... normal. Like the rest of us'

I laugh. She thought I was joking when I first told her where I come from. Said she expected me to be stuck-up or something.

'Goodnight Andy-Bandy'

'Goodnight, friend' she says and I smile. That did not freak me out like it normally would. I hate it when people get too familiar too quickly but she's... she's my person man.

...

[KULANI]

He's back. I can hear him laughing with Junior in the corridor. They've resolved their issues? That's good, I

guess. He comes inside our bedroom and I hear him take his clothes off. I am facing the other way. He must think I'm asleep because he would've already started talking if he thought otherwise. I am livid. There's a flame erupting in my chest and it's burning too closely to my heart. He gets into bed and cuddles me from behind.

'Where have you been baby?' I ask. Still staring towards the window with my both my hands under my head. I have been sitting this way, in darkness for the past two hours. My right ear is beginning to feel blocked. If he had turned that light on, I swear I was going to lose it. He just has his sidelamp on.

'I thought you were asleep. I didn't want to wake you'

I keep quiet. I want an answer, what he's telling me right now is insignificant.

'I got stuck in the elevator baby. I tried to call you but there was no reception'

'I was worried about you' I say.

He kisses my exposed shoulder. 'You should've called the cops. Maybe I was going to get out sooner'

'I knew that you were perfectly fine. I would know if something terrible was to happen to you. Was she also stuck in there with you?'

'Yeah, we were on our way home'

'Mmh' I simply say and go silent. That fire? It's now engulfing my internal organs. I am not one to speak when I'm upset because I'll just end up crying.

'This is not what you think it is, I promise you'

I still choose not to speak. I'm also still incapable of any movement. He gets off the bed and goes to turn the light on. It overwhelms my eyes and I shut them. He comes to squat by my side of the bed.

'Look at me' he says. My eyes remain closed. He puts his hand on my cheek.

'Baby please. I was not doing anything I shouldn't be doing with Larona'

'And what is that? She's your wife, isn't she?'

'I know that but this is not the right time to be starting anything with her. I wouldn't do that, not in your condition'

'You don't have to neglect her because of me. I'm just hurt by the lack of transparency when it's still so early. What kind of relationship are we going to have?'

He stands up and gently pulls me out of bed. He sits down and gets me to straddle him.

'I understand why you are feeling the way that you are feeling. I know very well what this looks like. I swear and I want you to believe me. I was not out wining and dining with Larona, never mind fvcking her'

I put my head on his shoulder. He sounds sincere and truthful, but that's a skill every man masters even though they would be lying through their teeth. His hands are on my waist, under my loose pyjama top.

'I'm got the footage from the office so you can see—'

'There's no need for that' I cut him short. There really is no need. I want to trust like I've been doing all along. I am just struggling right now but at the same time, I don't want us to be the couple that always has to produce receipts.

'I want to put your mind at ease'

'I'll be okay. This just needs some getting used to'

I'm far from being okay.

'What's on your mind? He asks.

I am going to be straightforward and blunt with him.

'Thoughts of you having sex with another woman dig at my kidneys'

'Why are you having such thoughts in the first place when

you could be reminiscing about all the things I do to YOU
in bed?

Laughter leaves me before I can stop it.

'Don't do this to yourself. I am begging you'

'It is going to take some getting used to, as I've already
said'

'You know that this changes nothing between you and I,
right?' he whispers.

I nod.

'All your feelings are valid. I'm your husband and you have
every right to claim me as such. I appreciate the fact that
you can speak to me about them. Now please stop
stressing'

He cups my chin and pulls me closer for a kiss. He slowly
caressing me and I laugh.

'What are you doing? I'm still mad'

He laughs as well.

'I am dissolving all that anger because it's not good for
you' he kisses me again.

'Baby man'

'Please? I miss you. When last did we make love? I heard it

strengthens the baby's immune system'

I laugh out loud.

'What does?'

'His father's semen. Cumming inside...' he continues trying to seduce me.

He's still sucking on my lips. I miss him too. With everything happening around us, the miscarriage and cleansing, we haven't been paying attention to each other's bodies. And I was mostly not in the mood for any of that. He's been so supportive but now I can feel like he can't take it anymore. I feel the same way. He gets up and puts me on the bed. My top comes off. He continues kissing me while fondling my boobs. He was about to go down when I pulled him up.

'I want you inside me, now' I shamelessly confess. He laughs. I bite my lip trying to get my smile under control.

'Sure?'

I nod. Our lips smash into each other. I take off his underwear and he does the same to mine. He raises my leg and gently enters me. I close my eyes when he fully disappears into me. I voluntarily part my legs. We hold hands above my head as he thrusts in and out. He's gentle and slow.

'I've missed this so fvcking much...' he whispers into my ear and his voice travels in every sensitive channel in my body. He knows how to make love to me and he absolutely hates it when I try to take charge. I've gotten used to him doing all the work.

'I've missed you too baby'

Hearing his groans and moans always makes me reach orgasm faster. The vulnerability in his voice? The knowledge that he's receiving all this pleasure from the warmth of my body? It's so satisfying. I explode and legs start vibrating like an Alcatel old model. He massages my under thigh and keeps going.

'Mbilu ya Kurhula?' he calls – his voice weak.

'Baby?'

He groans even harder and fails to respond. He spills everything inside me and I continue kissing him. He has lost all his strength and this is a sexy sight to me. We needed this. I hug him and wrap my legs around his waist. His member is still very much pulsating inside me. We stay in that position for some time. I keep brushing his hair and kissing his forehead. He eventually falls asleep. I am done crying about this. If I am going to share this man, I am going to make the most out of the time I get to spend

with him. I cannot fight what is written in the stars.
Kurhula has shown me in more ways than one how much
he loves me. I have no reason to punish him for any of this.
If Larona stays out of bedroom, I'll stay out of hers too.

...

[MABONTLE]

I am screaming. I cannot contain my excitement because Fikani is at the gate and he's on his way here. I am in my underwear because preparing to go to work. I don't know what to touch and what to forget about. My hair is wet and I have a towel wrapped around my head. Why did he not tell me earlier? I am running crazy in this room trying to tidy up. I remind myself to breathe. There are dishes in the sink. What is he going to think of me? But it's not that bad. I decide to take the pap pot and put it in the cupboard so it looks less messy. Everything else look fine. I dust the cushions and look around. It's tidy. It's just the thought of the dishes nibbling at my inner peace. It's just two bowls, a plate, a glass, and some cutlery. Why am I stressing? He's the one who decided to rock up here unannounced. I am

so happy he's back. I would dismally fail if I were to decide on pretending I'm not. He knocks when I was about to go back into my room to go find my hairdryer. I grab my thick, blue gown and wear it. I push my feet into my slippers and rush to the door.

'Are you okay?' he asks. He was about to say something else. I know why he's asking. I'm running out of breath.

'Hey to you too' I said and attack him with a hug. He laughs while hugging me back. He unexpectedly picks me up and I scream. He walks inside and kicks the door closes.

'Hi momma'

I am not used to being carried like this but I'm enjoying every moment of this. There's something different about him. Is it the scar that's slicing his eyebrow? His upper arm is also bandaged.

'How have you been, my Hellen of Troy?' he asks. He's into Greek mythology?

'It was getting unbearable not being able to reach you' I get off from him.

'I know, and I'm sorry. I'm here now. The plan was not to come here so soon but I also couldn't bear not seeing your beautiful face, the face that launched a thousand ships' he

says and kisses both my hands.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' he asks, with a subtle smile on his face.

I don't know. He's... there's this air about him. It's making me nervous. I can't quite look at him in the eye whereas he's insisting on looking in me. I also don't know what I expecting. For him to come here in his royal traditional attire and stuff? He's in a simple black t-shirt, black jeans, and brown leather boots.

'Nothing' I lie.

'Speak' he commands.

'Can I make a confession?'

He nods and looks at me with anticipation.

'When we first met, one of the things that attracted me to you was...' I clear my throat and laugh. He gives that eye that says 'Speak, woman'

'It was your sex appeal' I say and quickly look down. I'm not done.

'Ohh. Why do I feel like that sentence is incomplete?' he's enjoying this.

'Now, I feel ten times worse'

'May I ask why?'

'I don't know. You're exuding this... strong sense of masculinity'

'So I wasn't masculine before'

'That's not what I mean. You're just... you reek of testosterone, of Sovereignty. There's this majestic aura about you'

I am not going to lie. Ever seen a man and your first thought was to wonder how good he is in bed? Fikani gives off big dxck energy. The silent but deadly type.

He's laughing. This is the best way I can explain it. He hooks my chin with his index finger and forces me to look up at him. Am I imagining things or his eye colour has also changed?

'So you're attracted to alpha males?' he asks. I'm afraid I am.

'See, I like to be dominated' I flirt back.

'Give me a scale'

Our eyes are still locked in one another. He is so damn fine!

'Depends on what you're capable of. Have you ever watched Fifty Shades of Grey?'

'I don't need to'

I scoff but I'm crumbling inside.

'Why do you feel that way?'

He turns me around and places one hand on the side of my abdomen. He comes down to my ear and I feel his breath touch my skin. My heart is drumming against my chest.

'Because I might as well have written the damn script'

I pull in some air and fail to expel it.

'Pack your bags, Mrs Ngobeni. Your title awaits. You'll find me in the car'

Wait. What?

...

See y'all in season two! Excuse any errors, if any. I'm due for a nap.

Don't forget to like, comment and share.

Halaview! 🤗❤️