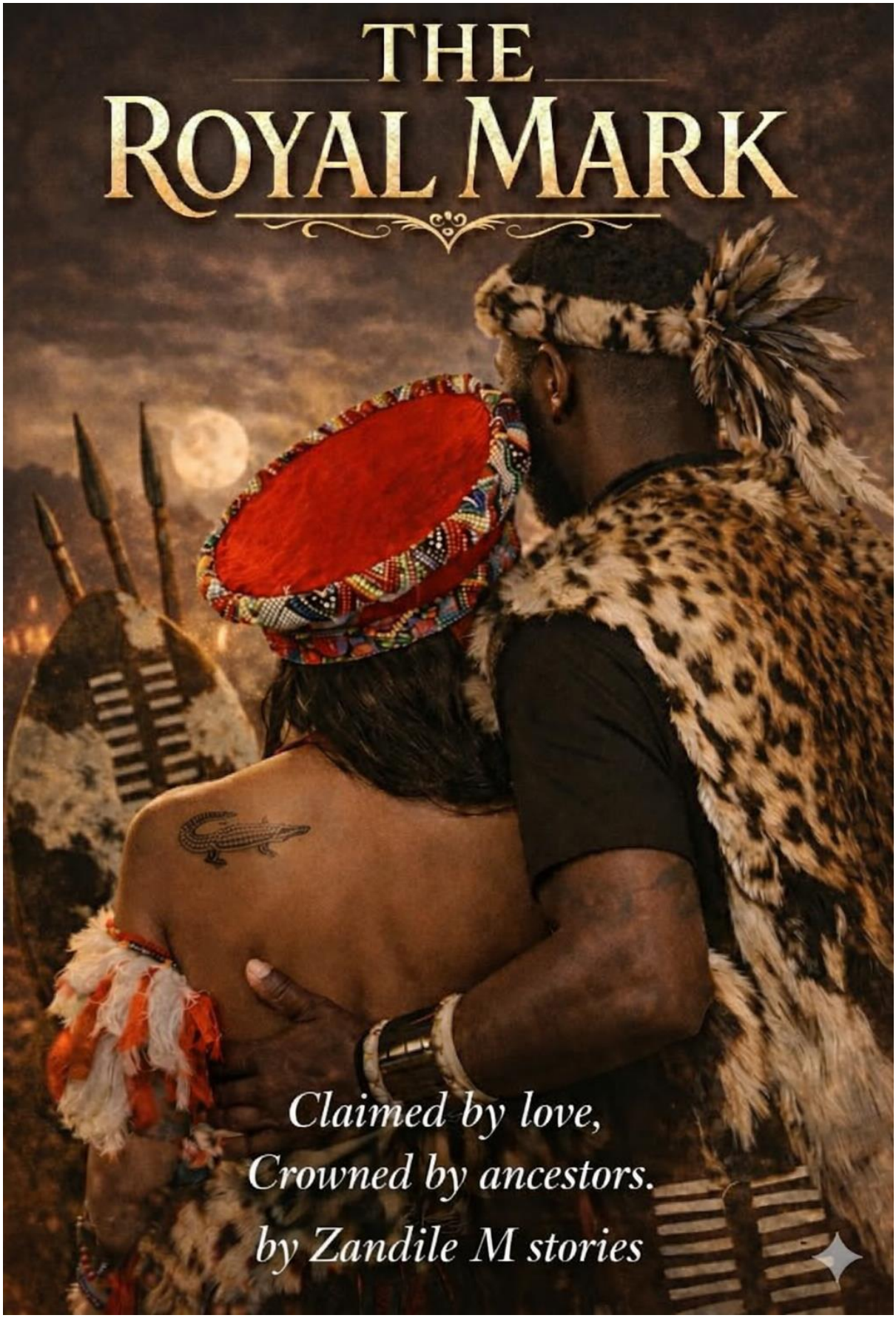
THE
ROYAL MARK
Claimed by love,
Crowned by ancestors.
by Zandile M stories

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The Royal Mark by *Zandile M stories*

Chapter 1

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Refilwe

FLASHBACK

"Dad, please. I've only just turned eighteen. I'm supposed to go to varsity, not get married. I won't do it."

My stepmother bursts out laughing. That evil laugh of hers that makes my skin crawl. She has always hated me from the moment she entered that door. And I did nothing to her but be a child. A child that had just lost a mother and was devastated.

"It's not like you have a choice." She crosses her arms, looking at me like I'm trash.

My voice is barely a whisper.

"Papa?"

I look at my dad, searching his face for any sign of love or care. But I see nothing. His eyes are cold. You would swear I'm not his daughter. I have suffered under his care for years and still he wants to make my life a living hell.

"Enough!" He slams his hand down. "You will marry Motaung. That's an order. As your father, you will listen to me. If you don't want to do as I say, there's the door. You will leave my house."

I look at him, my mouth trembling. Tears are already running down my face. I can't stop them anymore. I don't understand why he hates me so much. He's supposed to protect me, not sell me to old men in the name of marriage.

"Papa, I am begging you please. I will do anything but this. Ntate Motaung is old enough to be my father. How can you agree to this? You're supposed to protect me."

I drop to my knees in front of him, my hands grabbing onto his leg as I cry. I'm begging like my life depends on it.

Because it does.

He kicks me off him. Hard.

I fall backwards, my hands slamming onto the cold floor. The pain shoots through my palms but it's nothing compared to the pain in my chest.

"Fix yourself and stop this nonsense. They are coming tomorrow. You should be thanking me."

My stepmother walks around me, looking down at me on the floor with disgust written all over her face. "Motaung is actually doing you a favour," she says. "Who would even want you as a wife?"

She laughs again, then follows her husband out of the room. Their footsteps echo down the passage, leaving me broken on the floor.

END OF FLASHBACK

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I shake my head, trying to push the memory away. I wipe my face quickly and get up from my bed. My morning is already ruined after receiving that call earlier.

My father has passed away.

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and stare at myself. I don't know how to feel about his death. Part of me is relieved. Part of me is angry. I can't help thinking about everything I went through in that house.

It's been ten years since I ran away from home. Ten whole years. It wasn't even a home. I don't know why I keep calling it that.

The wife called me this morning. I still don't understand why. My father made it crystal clear: if I dare leave, I should never come back. Ten years of silence. No calls. No messages. Nothing.

I wash my face with cold water, apply my makeup, fix my hair, and put on my blazer. I grab my laptop bag and handbag, take one last look in the mirror, then walk out of my apartment.

The morning air hits my face as I get into my car. I start the engine and pull out of the parking lot, heading to work.

A small laugh escapes my mouth as I drive. I'm thinking about my journey. Everything I went through to be where I am today. Head of Development at the biggest software company. Me. The girl they said was worthless.

Yes, I did that.

It's just sad that I have no one to celebrate with. No one to tell me how proud they are. My father never believed in me. He told me I would amount to nothing. I'm glad I proved him wrong. I'm glad that didn't break me.

I pull into the company parking lot and make my way inside. The security guard greets me and I wave back. I take the elevator up to my floor and walk straight to my office.

I have a few projects to go through and approve today. I drop my bags on the couch and settle into my chair. Just as I open my laptop, my phone rings.

Unknown number.

I frown but answer anyway.

"Hello?"

"Refilwe, your father passed away and even on his death you still disrespect him?"

My jaw clenches. The audacity of this woman.

"Askies? And who is this?"

"Your aunt, Disebo. Come home, Refilwe. It's bad. No one is able to help bury your father."

Ah. There it is. My evil aunt. My dad's sister. The one who used to laugh when he beat me. Now I understand why I've been getting calls all morning. They want my help. My money. How did they even get my number?

"Aunt Disebo, without being disrespectful, I would really appreciate it if you all stopped calling me. My father made it clear he doesn't want me at his house. So why should I come back now that he's dead? I would like to honour his wishes."

"Bathong, wena Refilwe, you think you are better, heh? You thin-"

I cut the call. I press the red button and toss my phone on the desk.

Honestly, nothing she's going to say matters. They have hurt me enough. They don't get to guilt trip me now.

I turn to my computer and try to focus on work. I need to distract myself from all of this. I want to feel sad that my dad died. I want to cry and mourn him like a normal daughter would.

But I can't.

The only thing I'm feeling is rage. Pure, hot anger. How dare he die without apologising? Without acknowledging that he was wrong? How dare he leave this earth without owning up to how he treated me all those years?

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Before I know it, it's lunchtime. I'm still staring at my screen when Senzo walks in carrying takeaway bags.

Senzo is my work friend. My only real friend, if I'm being honest. We tried dating once but it didn't work out. We decided to just be friends, and honestly it's been good.

"I bought us lunch." He places the bags on my desk with a smile. "Still busy?"

"No, not at all. Come in. I'm starving."

That's a lie. I'm not hungry at all, but I don't want to be rude.

We start eating but my mind is somewhere else. The food has no taste. I'm just chewing mechanically.

"What's wrong?" His voice pulls me back. I realise I've been staring at nothing, my fork halfway to my mouth.

I hate my father for this. Even in death, he's still messing with my head.

"My dad passed away."

Silence.

We just look at each other across the desk. He knows everything. My whole story. It's actually one of the reasons things didn't work out between us, but that's a story for another day.

"Are we crying or celebrating?" he asks quietly.

I let out a long breath. "I don't know how to feel honestly. They want me to help with funeral arrangements. He died broke, I guess."

"And? You don't want to be involved?"

"I want to forget. I want to pretend he never existed."

He pushes his food aside and shifts his chair closer to mine. His face is serious now.

"I say help them," Senzo says. "For closure. Right now you're hurt that he died without apologising. Right?"

I nod. I can feel tears forming in my eyes already.

He reaches across and touches my hand, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on my skin. "You need this to heal, Ref. You're not doing this for that family. You're doing this for yourself. So you can finally close that chapter and move on. But hey, that's just my two cents."

"I'll think about it," I say, sighing.

I pull my hand away and wipe my eyes quickly. I need to change the subject before I break down completely.

"Anyway, enough about my sad reality. How's Mbali?"

Mbali is his girlfriend. They've been dating for six months now. As for me, I'm not interested in dating. I'm taking a break and focusing on myself. I know time is ticking but the streets are not safe. I'd rather be alone.

"She's amazing, yoh." He smiles. "I think it's time you two meet. We can do dinner. And I have a friend who's single. You never know, maybe something might happen."

"No, thank you. I'll pass. And I don't want your girl to feel uncomfortable. We were once together, remember?"

"She doesn't have to know that."

"But we know. And that's not fair to her. Our friendship stays here at work, Senzo. You know that. Work buddies, that's it."

"Yah, yah, I hear you, ma'am." He raises both hands in surrender, and we both laugh a little.

We finish eating in comfortable silence. He clears the takeaway containers and heads back to his office. I'm left alone with my thoughts again.

Senzo's words keep playing in my head.

"You need this to heal."

Maybe he's right. Maybe I do need closure. Maybe it's time to go home and face my past.

Even if it kills me.

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My shift has ended and I decide to go to my favourite restaurant for some air. I don't want to go back to my place yet and sit there depressing myself. I need to breathe.

I arrive, park, and walk inside.

My mind is everywhere as I push the door open. I'm not even paying attention to where I'm going, and I walk straight into something hard. Concrete. I stumble back and look up.

I am met by a very, very handsome man.

I freeze.

He is tall, broad-shouldered and dark. The kind of handsome that makes you forget your own name. I notice the leopard-skin umqhele on his head. I am literally staring. Like a whole idiot.

"Hey, are you okay? I'm sorry." His voice is deep. Really deep. It snaps me out of whatever trance I was in.

I clear my throat and force a smile. "Oh my God, are you made of steel?"

I rub my forehead dramatically. He chuckles. Low and quiet.

"I don't know. Maybe." He gives a small side smile. Almost invisible. But I catch it. God, this man is handsome.

"Uhm, I'm sorry about that. That was totally my fault."

He steps aside and makes space for me to pass. I walk through without looking back. I cannot look back. I am too embarrassed. I just hope he didn't notice me staring at him like that.

Like I was drooling.

Which I was.

I find a spot close to the window and settle in. The waiter comes over and I order a light meal. I'm not even that hungry but I need something to do with my hands.

I rest my chin on my palm and stare outside at nothing in particular. I can't function well today. My mind is all over the place. As much as I don't want to think about it, I keep coming back to the same thing. Going home. The funeral arrangements. Facing that family.

He was evil to me. He made my life a nightmare. But at the end of the day, he was my father.

And now he's gone.

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Nqobizwe

I am having drinks with my friend Sizwe in one of my restaurants. It has become our favourite spot. Well, my favourite, because of one person who doesn't even know I exist.

"Man, stop staring." Sizwe shakes his head at me. "I told you to go talk to her and ask her out. Not this staring contest you do every day."

Damn. I was staring at her again.

I put my glass down and look away. I don't know what's wrong with me.

"I should've said something when she bumped into me," I mutter.

"Of course you should have. I am tired of coming here and waiting for your crush to show up. How long has it been now?"

"Six months and three days."

Sizwe stops. Looks at me. Then slowly shakes his head. "Angeke. Never. This has to stop."

"I can't do anything about it," I say. "You know that. This is as far as I can go. Just admiring."

"Well, you can just have fun. Vibes, no strings attached."

"Mmmm."

I glance at her table again before looking back at my drink.

"The way I feel when I see her, I don't think I can survive 'just vibes.' I will definitely fall in love."

"Eyy, my prince, your life is complicated," Sizwe says.

"I didn't even choose for it to be this complicated."

I look over at her table again. She is eating but she keeps tapping her fork against the plate, staring out the window. She is not her usual self today.

"She doesn't look okay," I say.

Sizwe turns and glances at her table. "How do you know that?"

"Look at her. She keeps tapping her food. Staring outside for too long. Something is on her mind."

"Leave the poor girl alone." He laughs. "Now back to your miserable life. When are you going home?"

"I'm flying tonight. Before my father sends the whole army to come fetch me. I don't know what the meeting is about but I have a bad feeling about it."

"Try to control yourself," Sizwe says. "You know your family always finds a way to get under your skin. Don't let them."

Sizwe is the one person who knows me better than anyone. Better than my own family. I am the rightful heir to the throne of the Ngwenya Kingdom, a royal bloodline rising from the sacred soil of KwaZulu-Natal. I left and built my own life in Pretoria. My family doesn't know half of what I do. Or who I really am. And I want to keep it that way.

When Sizwe says "control myself," he means it. He knows what I turn into when I'm angry. But I have managed to keep it together around them all these years. I will do my best.

I take the last sip of my drink and stand up. "I'll see you when I'm back."

We do our handshake and I take one last look at her table before walking out.

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I am on the plane. Fifteen minutes from the private airport. I lean back in my seat, eyes on the ceiling, asking myself the same question.

What could it be this time? With a family like mine there is always something.

My mind drifts to Refilwe and without realising it, a small smile forms on my face.

Of course I know her name. I had to find out who this woman is. The one who occupies my mind every single day.

I have never felt this way about anyone. And I can't allow myself to either. I am a prince. The next in line. I cannot fall in love with anyone until my ancestors choose the one for me. The one who will rule beside me. She must be royalty.

I thought Refilwe could be her. The chosen one. But she is not royalty. Unless I haven't dug deep enough.

"We are here, Prince."

My guard's voice snaps me out of it. I straighten up. The royal cars are already waiting on the tarmac. I fix my jacket and step off the plane, my guards falling in behind me. In Pretoria they protect me from a distance. Here I have no choice but to let them close.

We drive through the gates of KwaNgwenyendlovu palace. Royal cars are already parked outside. We have visitors. One of the maidens comes rushing towards me before I even reach the door.

"Prince Nqobizwe, the King requests your presence in the Royal Council Chamber." She bows and hurries back inside.

I exhale through my nose. I can't even breathe for five minutes.

I walk to the Chamber and push the doors open. Chief Bukizwe and his family are seated on one side, my family on the other. My mother, Queen Liyana, sits upright and composed. My father's other wife, Queen Thobekile, sits next to her children. Sbonga, Nkanyezi, and Buhle. I am my mother's only child. First-born son.

I bring my hands together and bow. "Sanibonani. Baba, Ngwenya, Mabuya, Mathebula. Ngibingele kini Ma. Nkosi Bukizwe nomndeni. Ngiyathemba niyaphila." (Greetings. Father. Greetings to you mothers. Chief Bukizwe and family. I hope you are all well.)

"Ndodana." (Son) My father nods. "It's good to see you. Sit down."

I take my seat beside him.

"I am glad you made it," he says. "It is time, son."

"Time for what?"

"We have been waiting for the ancestors to bring us your chosen one. It has been too long. I am getting old. You are getting old. You are about to take over the throne. How can you do that without a wife?"

"Baba, we talked about this. You heard what the seer said. In due time it will happen."

"Why not get married now and wait while married? To be on the safe side. When your chosen one comes, you can take her as a second wife."

"No."

"We have already spoken with Chief Bukizwe. His daughter is more than willing. She is beautiful. Educated. A good woman."

"I won't do it. I will not marry her."

"Just get to know her first. One week. Then you decide."

I clench my jaw. I am trying. I am really trying to keep my voice calm right now.

"Baba, with all due respect, I will not do it. The only woman I will marry is the one chosen by my ancestors. That is final."

"Princess Nolwandle."

A young woman stands from across the chamber. She is beautiful, I won't lie. But that changes nothing.

"My King." She bows gracefully.

"You see?" He gestures towards her. "Look at her."

I look at my father instead. "Then you marry her. Leave me out of it."

I push my chair back and walk out. His voice follows me down the corridor calling my name but I don't stop.

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Narrated

The King's face is tight with fury. His son just walked out on him in front of his guests.

"Liyana!" His voice rings through the chamber. "You better talk to your son. Is that how you raised him? Is that how he addresses his King?"

Queen Liyana stands calmly, keeping her face neutral. "I will speak to him. I apologise, my King. May I go to him?" She bows slightly.

The King gives a stiff nod, his jaw still clenched.

Queen Thobekile leans back in her chair with a small smile playing on her lips. "So disrespectful. He gets it from his mother. That boy is not ready to be king."

"Thobekile." His voice is flat and cold. "Not now."

She straightens up and says nothing more.

"Chief Bukizwe, I apologise." The King turns to his guests. "We will continue this meeting once I have spoken to my son."

"We will wait to hear from you, my King," Chief Bukizwe replies.

Chapter 2

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Nqobizwe

I am in my house now. My brother and I each have our own houses within the palace grounds. I have barely sat down when my mother pushes the door open and walks straight in.

"Wena Nqobi usuyasangana? Is that how you speak to the King now? Is that how I raised you?"

"Mom, not now please."

"NOT NOW? NOT NOW, Nqobi?"

She stands in the middle of the room, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Mom, I am not marrying that girl. If I have to wait a hundred years for my chosen one, then so be it."

She lets out a long breath and sits down on the couch. The fight in her voice settles slightly.

"Kodwa Nqobi. You still didn't have to disrespect your father like that. In front of his guests of all places."

"Why is he doing this. Why the sudden change?"

"I don't know. But it has something to do with Thobekile."

I shake my head slowly and chuckle without humour.

"I should have known. When will she stop with this. I thought she had moved on from hating us."

"Hayi. Have you eaten? I'll ask one of the maidens to bring you something."

I nod and she walks out quietly.

I sit with my thoughts for a moment. Queen Thobekile has always been trouble. My father refuses to see through her. My parents' story is not simple. My mother was his chosen one, his first wife. But when she struggled to fall pregnant, he took a second wife. Then the moment Thobekile arrived, my mother conceived. Thobekile has carried that bitterness ever since. And it has never left.

I get up and step outside to smoke. I only smoke when I am angry and need to calm down. Or when I am stressed. Tonight it is both.

"Prince Nqobizwe. They forgot to mention that you smoke."

I turn around.

It is the princess. The one I am supposed to marry. Standing just outside my door with her hands folded in front of her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you," she says. "I will be straightforward. I have always had a crush on you. We all know you have a chosen one but given this situation, I don't mind. Maybe we can just get to know each other and take it from there."

I take a long drag and look at her.

"No. And do me a favour. Unless you are invited into my house or anywhere near it, do not come here. Go back inside and leave me alone."

Her face drops. The confidence she walked in with disappears.

"Why are you so rude, you cou…"

"Yeyi. Do you want me to call the guards?"

My voice is ice cold. I am not shouting. I don't need to.

She closes her mouth, turns and walks away without another word.

I bring the cigarette back to my lips and watch her go.

First thing in the morning, I am leaving. I don't have time for any of this.

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Refilwe

I have made my decision.

Friday I am going home. After ten years, I am going back to bury my father. I have savings that can cover what is needed. I already know it is going to be a long, painful weekend. I don't know why my father's family has always hated me so much. They hated my mother too. For reasons I still don't understand to this day. And the wife? Don't even get me started. She is a whole other story.

I pick up my phone and dial her number before I change my mind.

It rings three times.

"We are in mourning, Refilwe. Why are you calling so late?"

Still vile as ever. Even when she needs help, even when her husband is lying cold somewhere, she can't manage basic decency.

"Still the same, dearest stepmother."

"Ausi wee, if you have nothing better to say then end this call."

I roll my eyes.

"Mxm. Anyway. I will help bury your husband. Send me what is needed and I will transfer the money. I will be there Friday and I will sort out the rest when I arrive."

"Oh so you finally came to your sen…"

I drop the call.

She is useless. Absolutely useless.

I toss my phone onto the bed and stare at the ceiling for a moment. A few minutes later my phone buzzes. It's her. A long list of what is needed and her account number sent without a single word of thanks.

I look at the message and shake my head slowly.

This woman. She really cannot help herself.

I save the details and put my phone on charge. I have a long week ahead of me.

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Nqobizwe

It's morning and I am having breakfast with my family. After this I am leaving. My father is still angry. It's visible all over his face.

"I hope your mother put some sense in that head of yours," he says.

I continue eating. I choose not to say anything to him.

"I will organise the meeting again with Chief Bukizwe."

"Father, I will not marry her. And I am not interested in getting to know her either."

"I AM YOUR FATHER, NQOBIZWE. You will listen to my orders."

"Your orders? I HAVE A CHOSEN ONE. Unless you forgot."

My voice rises to match his.

"Don't disrespect me. Remember who you are speaking to."

The rest of my family sits in silence. Just watching. Listening to my father and I go back and forth.

"Why are you forcing that girl down my throat when the ancestors have already chosen someone for me? You want to choose for me too?"

"Listen, I know what's best. Maybe something is wrong. It's been too long. You should have met her by now."

"And I will meet her."

I turn and look directly at Queen Thobekile.

"Queen Thobekile."

She looks at me with attitude written all over her face. Not that I care.

"Stop filling father's head with ideas. Let Sbonga marry her then. Why involve me if she's that important?"

"Yeyi wena," she snaps. "I am not your friend, yezwa. I am not your mother and you will not speak to me like that. Who said I gave your father ideas? Heh?"

"I don't have time for this. You see how I stay out of your business? Do the same. Stay out of my personal life."

"ENOUGH, NQOBIZWE," the King says. "That is your mother."

"She is NOT my mother!"

"NQOBIZWE!"

My mother shouts, angry at me now. I didn't mean to upset her but Queen Thobekile always pushes my buttons in the wrong way.

"I will not sit here and listen to you disrespect my mother like that," Sbonga says.

"Sbonga, you better keep your mouth shut, my boy. Trust me."

"You think you are all that, well-"

The King bangs his fist on the table. The glasses shake.

"STOP IT. ALL OF YOU!"

I am fuming. My chest is rising and falling. My jaw is tight.

I stand up and push my chair back.

I am not listening to this anymore.

As I reach the door, the royal seer walks in. He stops when he sees me.

"Prince Nqobizwe." He bows and I nod in return.

My father comes to where we are standing, his face still tight with anger.

"Ngubeni, kwenzenjani? Savakashelwa uwena ekuseni kangaka?"

"My King. I need a word with you and the Prince."

"Come. Let's go to my study."

I exhale slowly. I wonder what is going on now.

I follow them down the corridor to the study. The seer walks ahead of us, tapping ishoba on his shoulders and making low humming sounds.

Once inside, the King closes the door behind us and sits down.

"You may speak."

The seer clears his throat.

"The ancestors left me a message. My Prince, your time is near."

"Not possible. I haven't found her yet."

"How, Ngubeni?" the King asks. "He cannot rule without a Queen."

"He has found her."

"No I haven't."

"They say you have. And you know it. She is right under your nose."

My mind starts racing. Who could it be? Why haven't I felt it? I scratch my head, trying to think.

Could it be Refilwe?

But she is not royalty. Or is she?

"It can't be. She's not royalty."

"What?" The King sits forward. "Nqobizwe, why didn't you say anything?"

"Because she is not royalty. And I just have a crush on her. She doesn't even seem to know I exist. Or feel anything."

"We will know once you lie with her," the seer says. "You know how it works."

I rub my face with my hand. How am I supposed to do that when I haven't even made a move on her? I get nervous when I see her. Something that hardly ever happens. I am always in control. But with her, it is a different story.

To know for sure if she is my chosen one, I have to sleep with her. There will be heavy rain. In the morning she will have the royal mark on her back. The Ngwenya mark. That is how you know. Then the seer confirms it as well.

I clear my throat.

"We are not even dating. Look, I only know her from a distance."

My father throws his head back and laughs.

"I can't believe this. You are scared of asking a woman out? While you make yourself the boss in this house? You are able to disrespect me and stand your ground. But you are scared of a woman? Not me, your father, THE KING!"

"I will stand my ground when it matters. You were forcing that princess down my throat. And now look, my chosen one has arrived."

The seer smiles and shakes his head.

"You both know now. You are to tell no one about this until it is confirmed."

"Hopefully Queen Thobekile won't be told," I say.

"NQOBIZWE!!"

I put my hands up in surrender and walk out. I leave them in the study.

I am going back to Pretoria. To see if I can try to talk to her. Try to ask her out maybe.

•••

Narrated

The King is left alone with the seer in his study. He sits down heavily in his chair and pours himself a glass of whiskey.

"He takes after you," the seer says.

"And that makes me angry. He reminds me of myself when I used to do this to my father. If this is how my father felt, I definitely owe him an apology."

The seer laughs and shakes his head.

"At least he has found the chosen one. I was starting to get worried."

"I was worried too. I even listened to Thobekile advising me to arrange a marriage with Chief Bukizwe's daughter. I hate to admit it but I am glad Nqobizwe refused."

"Mhm. And don't mention anything about the chosen one to her or anyone."

"I know, Ngubeni. I know."

Later in the afternoon, the King is in the bedroom with Queen Thobekile. She is angry about how Nqobizwe spoke to her. The disrespect.

"Did you hear how he spoke to me?" she says, pacing. "He might be next in line but he will not disrespect me like that."

"Calm down, Thobekile. I will speak to him. He will apologise."

"He better. And did you tell him he will marry Nolwandle no matter what?"

"He will not."

Queen Thobekile stops and turns to look at him.

"What? So he is the King now? He makes decisions?"

"Enough, Thobekile. You speak about respect but you fail to respect me. Your husband! He will not marry that girl. That is final."

"Without a wife he cannot rule. Those are your ancestors' terms. How will he rule? He will wait for the chosen one till when? The kingdom needs a King and you will have to step down soon. I was just thinking of the kingdom because it's clear he won't marry anyone."

She walks out of the room, leaving the King sitting on the edge of the bed. He brushes his face with both hands.

"Women! Hayi mahn," he says to himself, shaking his head.

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Refilwe

It's Friday and I am driving home to the Free State. I have already sent the money for what is needed. Now I just have to make sure everything goes accordingly.

As I enter the Free State and get closer to home, I realise how much this place has hurt me. I never thought I would return here. Ever. Oh how my father and stepmother broke me. But look at me now. Coming back to bury him.

I drive into the yard and already there are people moving around everywhere. Everyone is busy. I park my car and get out with my bag.

Everyone stops and stares. It's probably because I have been gone for ten years.

"Oh my God, Refilwe is this you?"

I turn around and it's Dikeledi. She used to help me. Her and her mother. When my stepmother would hide food or lock me outside, they would sneak me something to eat. Help me when no one else would. I am so happy to see her. I have thought about her every day. I really wanted to thank her and her mother.

"Oh my God, Dikeledi."

I drop my bag and hug her. I feel tears threatening my eyes when I think of everything.

"I didn't think we would see you ever again. You just disappeared. They said you ran away."

I pull back and chuckle softly.

"A lot happened hey. Where's your mom?"

Her face falls. The light in her eyes dims.

"She passed away. It's been three years now."

"Oh Dikeledi, I am so sorry to hear that."

"That's okay. She always asked about you, you know. I can't believe she's not here but I know she's in a better place now. She suffered. I had to leave varsity and come look after her. It was bad. But hey, let me not burden you with my issues."

Oh my God. Her life literally stopped because she had to take care of her mother. This is so sad.

"I am sorry. We have to exchange numbers so we can reconnect."

"Of course."

She pauses and looks at me carefully.

"Are you ready to face everyone?"

I laugh softly. "Nope."

She squeezes my hand. "You'll be okay. Just breathe. I'll be around if you need me."

"Thank you."

I pick up my bag and take a deep breath. Then I walk towards the house.

The moment I step inside, the atmosphere changes. People look at me. Some whisper. Some just stare. I keep my head up and walk down the passage to the bedroom.

The door is open.

Inside, my stepmother Lentswe is sitting on a mattress on the floor. Next to her is the casket. My father's body lies inside. Tradition. There are other women there as well.

She looks up when she sees me. Her face is blank. Cold.

"Oh look who it is. REFILWE." She says it with attitude. But I won't entertain her.

"Dumelang."

They don't say anything. Not that I care.

"I am glad you finally decided to help," she says. "My husband did you a favour by taking you in after your mother passed away. Knowing you are not his. It's good you are thanking him like this."

I freeze.

This is not the first time I have heard this. Everyone said it to me growing up. But I never took it to heart. I refused to believe it.

But hearing it now, standing here in front of his casket, it hits differently.

I look at her. Then at the casket. Then back at her.

"You really couldn't help yourself could you?"

"What?"

"Even now. Even at his funeral. You still can't be decent."

"I am just stating facts. You should be grateful."

An older woman sitting next to her clicks her tongue.

"Refilwe, don't start," Aunt Disebo says. "We called you here to help. Not to cause drama."

I laugh. Actually laugh.

"Drama? I sent the money didn't I? I came all this way. What more do you want?"

"Respect," Lentswe says. "That's what we want."

"Respect?"

I drop my bag on the floor.

"You want to talk about respect? After everything you did to me? After you made my life hell in this house?"

"Your father fed you. Clothed you. Gave you a roof over your head."

"And you made sure I suffered for every single meal."

The room goes quiet.

Aunt Disebo stands up.

"Refilwe that is enough. Show some respect. Your father is lying right there."

I look at the casket. Then back at them.

"I came here to help bury him. That's it. I don't owe any of you anything beyond that."

I pick up my bag and turn to leave.

"Where do you think you are going?" Lentswe asks.

"To a guesthouse. I will sleep there. Call me when you need anything. I will see you all tomorrow. At the funeral."

"You can't leave," Aunt Disebo says. "This is your father's house."

"This was never my house."

I walk out before anyone can say anything else.

Dikeledi is waiting outside. She sees my face and doesn't ask questions. She just walks me to my car.

"You okay?"

"I will be."

I get into my car, start the engine and drive out of that yard.

I am not spending one night under that roof.

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Narrated

Lentswe is shocked that Refilwe talked to them like that. She can see that she has grown a backbone and that makes her furious. Looking at Refilwe, you can tell she is doing well financially. The car. The clothes. The confidence. And that makes Lentswe even angrier.

They wanted her to suffer. Especially after running away and stealing her husband's money. And if she had married Motaung, they could have been rich. But she ran away. And Motaung made them pay for it. He made their lives hell for failing to deliver Refilwe.

"Disebo, did you hear that bastard? Did you hear how she spoke to me?"

"She has a big mouth now."

"Nx. She thinks she's better now."

"She does look like she is doing well. She was even driving a car."

"Mxm. I am sure she sleeps with older men for money. She is selling her body. A whore just like her mother."

"I am sure. At least she helped with the funeral. Re tla reng."

"She had to vele. She owes us."

Chapter 3

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Refilwe

I arrive at the guesthouse that I booked earlier. I drop my bag on the floor and sit on the edge of the bed.

And then I cry.

I cry for everything. For the little girl I used to be. For the pain. For the fact that even after all these years, they are still evil. They still hate me.

I don't understand what I did to deserve such treatment. But one thing is for sure. I will never cry in front of them. Never will they see my tears again.

I wipe my face and go to the bathroom to freshen up. I will see them tomorrow. I will attend the funeral like every other person. Like a guest. I paid for everything. I owe them nothing.

After freshening up, my phone rings. It's Senzo.

"Senzo."

"Hey. How are you? How are things?"

"I am sleeping at a guesthouse. That should answer your question."

"Eish Ref, I'm sorry mahn. What happened?"

I tell him everything. From the moment I walked into that house to the moment I walked out.

"That family is evil," he says.

"You have no idea. They keep saying he is not my father. So why did he keep me around just to abuse me? Why didn't he throw me out or take me to my real father instead?"

"I guess we will never know, Ref. Don't stress about all that now. Listen, I am on my way neh. Tomorrow you will need support."

"No Senzo, I will be fine."

"I am already in the car. Book me a room there and send the location. I will arrive late tonight."

I exhale.

"Okay. Thanks hey."

"Don't mention it."

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My phone wakes me up from sleep. I don't even check the caller ID. I just answer.

"Mhm."

"I am outside your door. Wake up."

"Eish Senzo, okay."

I drag myself out of bed and open the door for him. He walks in carrying a bag.

"Come in. Gosh, I didn't even check the time. What time is it?"

"It's 1 am. I brought something to drink." He shows me the bottle of alcohol in his hand.

I laugh and shake my head.

We sit on the bed drinking and just having a nice conversation. It takes me back to when he used to be a good boyfriend to me. I am glad we didn't work out though. We are better as friends. He is a good friend.

"Your family is evil, Ref," he says. "You are a strong woman to have gone through all that and still be standing."

"They have hurt me enough. I shouldn't have come here. I should have just given them the money and stayed out of it."

"Take it as part of healing."

"I was okay though. I was healing my own way."

"I know. I know."

He moves closer and gives me a warm hug. I rest my head on his shoulder for a moment.

"You got this. And I'll be with you in case they try something fishy."

We break the hug and I chuckle softly.

"Thanks Senzo. I really appreciate your support."

He brushes my cheek with his thumb. His eyes soften. He gives me a look I don't understand. The look he used to give me when we were dating.

Before I know it, I feel his lips on mine.

I push him roughly.

I stand up from the bed, my heart racing.

"Senzo, what are you doing?"

He stands up as well, holding his chin where I pushed him.

"I am sorry. I don't know what made me kiss you. I just got caught up in the moment."

"Come on Senzo, let's not ruin our friendship with things like this. I love us as friends."

"I know and I am sorry. I love us as friends as well."

I breathe out. I wasn't even aware I was holding my breath. I clear my throat and look away.

"I think it's time to go to bed now. We have a long day tomorrow."

He nods and rubs his hands on his pants nervously.

"Alright. See you tomorrow."

He walks to the door and I follow right behind him. He opens it and turns back to face me.

"Ref. I am sorry about what happened. I hope it won't change things between us."

I nod, holding the door now.

"I understand. We are cool."

"Good night." He smiles.

"Night."

I close the door behind him and lean against it for a moment. Then I throw myself on the bed.

I really hope what Senzo did was a mistake. That he didn't mean it. Because honestly, I would hate to lose him as a friend.

Let me sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.

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Nqobizwe

It's 2 am. We are at my place. Me, Sizwe and my adviser Ayanda. Just chilling and having a few drinks.

"I should have listened to you when you told me to make a move on her," I say. "Look at me now. I am going crazy."

They laugh.

"Manje uzokwenzanjani? (What are you going to do now?) Still going to wait for her to show up at the restaurant?" Sizwe asks.

"I could call her, you know. Just ask her out."

"My Prince, I highly disagree," Ayanda says. "She will ask where you got her number and it will turn into a whole thing. Women don't like that."

"I wonder where she is. She hasn't been at the restaurant since I came back from home."

"But one of these days she will show up," Sizwe says. "She loves that place."

I lean back and take a sip of my drink. My mind is on her.

"My Prince, if I may ask. What is it about this woman that has you like this?"

I pause. Think about it.

"I don't know. There's just something about her. The way she carries herself. The way she looks lost in thought sometimes. I just want to know her. Talk to her. Hear her voice properly."

"Yoh. You are deep in this my guy," Sizwe says.

"Well, you just need to approach her and make it happen," Ayanda says.

"Easier said than done. What if she rejects me?"

"Then you try again. You are a prince. Women don't usually reject you."

"But I don't want her to want me because I am a prince. I want her to want me for me."

Ayanda smiles and shakes his head. "My Prince, you really have it bad."

I don't say anything. I just take another sip of my drink.

Because he's right.

I do.

I look at the time on my phone and stand up.

"Boys, it's getting late now. We need to get some sleep."

Sizwe stands up and stretches. "I should get going."

"Did you see the time? Just leave in the morning."

"I would love to, but you know how Lerato is. One crazy woman."

I chuckle and shake my head. "Why you are still with her baffles me."

"Leave me alone."

We laugh and walk him out to his car. His guards are already waiting. We do our handshake and he gets in. His car drives off into the night.

Ayanda stretches and yawns. "I'm going to sleep, my Prince. Long day tomorrow."

"Yebo. Good night."

He walks to the guest room he uses when he stays here. Ayanda doesn't live with me, but he is with me almost all the time as my adviser. He is one of the few people I am close with. He gets things done. No questions asked.

I lock up and head to my bedroom. I sit on the edge of my bed and think about her. Refilwe.

Where is she? Why hasn't she been at the restaurant?

I lie back and stare at the ceiling.

I close my eyes and try to sleep.

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Refilwe

It's morning and I am done getting ready for the funeral. I am doing small touch-ups in front of the mirror. I look myself up and down and I have to admit,

I look hot. Why shouldn't I? It's not like I am sad and miserable that he's dead. I actually don't care.

I am wearing a French vintage black lace dress and black heels. The dress reveals my cleavage a bit. I actually look like I am going on a romantic date rather than a funeral.

My phone rings and I answer. It's an unknown number.

"Hello."

Nothing.

"Hellooo?"

Still nothing. Just silence on the other end.

A knock comes at the door and I open it. It's Senzo.

"Are you ready?"

The call disconnects. I toss my phone onto the bed.

"Almost. Let me pack my bag quick."

He sits on the chair while I pack. It's not much. Just returning what I've taken out. We are not coming back here. After the funeral we are driving straight back to Pretoria. I am not staying another day in this place.

I finish packing and we leave the guesthouse in different cars. I am sure the funeral has already started. I did it on purpose. I want to arrive late. Make an entrance like a bitter, scorned woman at a wedding.

We arrive and park outside the yard. There are cars already packed inside the yard. The pastor is preaching and we walk towards the tent. Eyes turn to us immediately. I can already see people whispering.

Each row of chairs turns one after the other as we walk past. Let them look. I don't care.

We sit at the back. I listen to this pastor preach as if the man lying in that casket was a saint. Meanwhile, he was Satan's advocate.

Eventually it's time for them to go to the graveyard. I want to go. Just to make sure he is really dead. But nope. I am not going.

The wife sees me as she is walking to the car that will drive them to the graveyard. If looks could kill, I'd be dead by now.

"Is that the stepmother?" Senzo asks.

"Mmm. Still evil as ever."

"Looks like she wants to murder you."

We laugh.

"She can only wish. Let's go sit in the car."

As we are walking, Dikeledi comes to me.

"Hi again." She smiles.

I give her a hug. "Hi DK. This is my friend Senzo. And Senzo, this is DK. Remember when I told you about her mother who used to help me out?"

"Oh, you are DK. Nice to finally meet you. You and your mom are amazing human beings."

They hug.

"Thanks. You're not going to the graveyard?" she asks.

"No. We were actually going to sit by the car. You want to join us?"

"Yeah, I don't mind."

We walk to Senzo's car. It's parked close to mine. He said he has a few drinks in his boot.

"Why do you always have alcohol in your car, Senzo?"

"Life is too hard to be sober."

I laugh and shake my head. We open the boot and start drinking.

"Thanks for this," Dikeledi says. "I really need it."

I smile. "Don't mention it. Before I forget, please enter your number because we really need to catch up."

I give her my phone and she types her number in. I save it.

We are chatting and laughing when I see people returning from the graveyard. They will be served food now. We are not eating. I trust no one here.

"Are you guys gonna eat?" Dikeledi asks.

"DK girl, I still love my life."

She laughs.

"Well I'm starving. Let me go eat then."

"No problem, love."

She leaves and walks back into the yard.

"She is so kind and sweet," Senzo says.

"Right? Just like her mother. I can't believe her mother passed away. And she's going through it. I want to help her, but at the same time I don't want it to seem like I'm pitying her. Most people don't like that."

"Yeah. I also don't like it when people feel sorry for me."

"I will have a chat with her. They helped me a lot. I won't be able to sleep at night knowing I could have done something to help and I chose not to."

I see one of my aunt's kids walking towards us. She tells me my aunt is calling for me. I wonder what she wants. I could choose not to go, but I want to hear what she has to say.

"You'll be fine," Senzo says.

I nod and walk towards the house. I go to the sitting room. The stepmother and my dad's family are all sitting there.

"Dumelang, Rakgadi Disebo?"

I look at her because they said she called me.

"We didn't like how you left yesterday. There were still things we needed to discuss," she says.

"I'm here. What is it?"

"Since your father has passed away, your mother here will need financial support. And since it seems like you are doing well, you have to help her. She raised you. It's a way to thank your father for raising you."

"Continue. Raised me even though I wasn't his, right?"

"Refilwe, he treated you as his own. So we have calculated everything and the amount needed per month."

I laugh. Like really laugh.

"No. I will not help her. She can go to hell for all I care."

"Oh please, we won't beg you," Lentswe says. "We all know you get your money from sleeping with rich men and older men."

"Keep telling yourself that so you can sleep at night. And to all of you here, I owe no one nothing. The fact that no one here is admitting to how badly I was treated, and no one is even thanking me for paying for this funeral, shows that nothing will ever change."

"Refilwe, that's the least you can do," Aunt Disebo says. "You stole your father's money and refused to marry Motaung, which cost them a lot."

"Are you hearing yourself? So they sold me off and I was supposed to agree?"

"Yes. You had no one. No family. Your mother was a whore, Refilwe. Her family wants nothing to do with her or you. We did you a favour by keeping you here even after she died. And what do you do? Steal and run away. That's how you thank us?"

I can't believe they don't see anything wrong with what they did. Our voices are rising. Emotions are high.

"You should have thrown me out into the streets then. I'm sure living on the streets would have been better than staying here. You ABUSED me, Lentswe. You and your husband. You think staying here was better? YOU SHOULD HAVE THROWN ME OUT. I never did anything to you. To that husband of yours. I did nothing. Why abuse me for my mom's sins? As a woman, how does that make you feel? Or is it because you have no children of your own? Make me understand."

"Your whore of a mother thought she had it all. And bona mo, you will send money every month and anytime I need it. Or I will get you arrested."

I laugh.

"Get me arrested for what? Something that happened ten years ago? Do you even have proof? Mxm. I will pay you that ten thousand I took. When I step out

that door, it will be in your account. And after that, you will stay the fuck away from me, you pathetic people. Nx."

"Refilwe!!" Aunt Disebo shouts.

I storm out of the house, angry as hell. People are staring and gathered near the house. They were probably listening to the fight.

I am leaving. I get outside the gate and Dikeledi is following me.

"Refilwe, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Listen, I'm leaving now but I will hit you up."

"No problem. Safe travels."

We share a hug and she returns back inside the yard.

Senzo is already waiting by his car.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"A lot. I don't want to talk about it. Let's go."

"Are you sure?"

I nod. We get into our cars and drive back to Pretoria. They will never see me again.

I thought I would get closure. Instead, I got triggered. All the thoughts of the abuse I endured. What I went through to be where I am today. And now it has sunk in. Ntate Molefe was not my father.

I don't have a family at all.

Somehow I want to belong. I want to know if it's true. If he really wasn't my father. But with how he used to treat me, I believe it. He probably was taking his anger out on me.

Hours later, we are in Pretoria. Senzo has taken a different route to his place. Me as well. I am still trying to process everything.

I can't believe I am really on my own in this world. Where will I even begin to look for my father? Is he even looking for me? Does he want to be found? Does he even know about me?

I hear the sound of tires screeching.

By the time I hit the brakes, it's already too late.

I slam into a car and my airbag deploys. Everything happens so fast. I get out of the car, panicking. My hands are shaking. I see men getting out of the car I just hit.

"Hey ma'am, are you okay?"

I try to speak but I'm too shaken. My legs feel weak. One of the guys' rushes towards me and holds me before I fall. I'm holding my head. Everything is spinning.

"Refilwe. Refilwe."

I feel dizzy. How does this man know my name?

I feel myself drifting.

Everything goes black.

Chapter 4

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Nqobizwe

I was so pissed at the car that crashed into us. And the moment I saw it was Refilwe all the anger left my body. She passed out. She must have hit her head hard. What was she thinking driving so recklessly?

The royal guards are surrounding the scene now and there are too many cars. People are starting to slow down and stare.

"We need to get her to the hospital before the media arrives. I don't want this on the news. Move now."

We get her into one of the cars and drive straight to the hospital. When we arrive she is wheeled inside immediately. I stand in the corridor watching them take her away. I am worried. The last time I saw her at the restaurant she didn't look like herself either.

And this morning when I called her, I just wanted to hear if she was okay. Then I heard a man's voice in the background. I didn't say anything. Just dropped the call. I couldn't help but wonder who he was. A boyfriend? I had no right to be jealous but I was.

I step outside and call my advisor.

"Nkosana, I will be there in a few." That is the first thing Ayanda says, already rushing. The guards must have told him.

"I am outside the hospital. I'll be here until she wakes up."

"Okay. I will check if anything leaked to the media."

"You do that."

I end the call and walk back inside. I instruct the guards to remain outside. I don't want unnecessary attention.

I can't believe this. I have been going to that restaurant every day hoping to see her and talk to her, only for us to meet like this. Her driving straight into my car.

A doctor comes out after some time.

"Refilwe Molefe?"

I stand up. "How is she?"

"Are you family?"

"I brought her in."

She nods slowly.

"She took a hard knock to the head which caused her to lose consciousness. We are still running a few tests to rule out any swelling or internal bleeding. She is resting now but you may sit with her if you like."

"Thank you, doctor."

I walk to her room. She is still asleep. I pull a chair close to the bed and sit down. I look at her for a long time.

She is so beautiful.

I developed feelings for her from a distance not knowing she could be my chosen one. I still don't fully understand how. She is not royalty. Or at least not that I know of. Maybe I didn't dig deep enough.

My phone buzzes. It's Sizwe.

I move close to the window and answer quietly.

"Ayanda told me what happened. Are you good?"

"Yeah man. I'm fine."

"And Refilwe?"

"They are still running tests. She hit her head hard but they say she will be okay."

"Have you asked her out yet?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "Come on man. Not the time or place."

"There's never a right time with you."

We laugh and talk for a bit. Then I hear Refilwe stirring. I turn and see her trying to sit up.

"Sizwe let me call you back. Sharp."

I end the call and walk to the bed.

She squints and looks around the room slowly, trying to make sense of where she is.

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Refilwe

I open my eyes and the first thing I notice is the ceiling. White. Unfamiliar. There is a faint smell of disinfectant in the air and the sound of machines beeping somewhere nearby.

It clicks. The accident.

I turn my head slowly and there is a tall man standing by the window, watching me. I try to sit up and he moves closer quickly.

"Take it easy, don't try to sit up too fast."

He reaches over and gently adjusts the pillow behind me so I can sit up more comfortably. His hands are careful. Steady.

"Can I have some water please?"

He pours water from the jug on the bedside table and holds the cup for me. I drink slowly. The cold water helps.

"Thank you."

He nods and pulls a chair close and sits down. I look at him properly now. He is tall. Dark. Well built. There is something about him that feels familiar but I can't place it.

"My name is Nqobizwe," he says. "I am the one who brought you here. You crashed into my car."

His voice is deep. Very deep. There is something in it that commands the whole room without him even trying.

"I am so sorry about that. Please get me your details. My insurance will handle everything and I will cover whatever is not covered."

"Don't worry about the car right now. How are you feeling?"

"My head is a little sore but I'm okay. And thank you for bringing me here. You didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did." He says it simply. Like it was never even a question.

I glance around the room. "Did they use my medical aid? My card should be in my bag."

His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "Don't worry about that. It's taken care of."

I nod not really understanding. I look at him again. I know this man from somewhere.

"Have we met before? You look familiar."

He smiles. Just slightly. And dimples appear on both cheeks.

Oh.

"Wait. The restaurant. You are the one I walked into at the door."

"Seems like bumping into me is becoming a habit for you."

I laugh before I can stop myself. He smiles again and something happens in my stomach. I remember him now. He is not wearing umqhele. That is probably why I couldn't place him.

"Ah yes, I remember now. You look a bit different without umqhele."

He nods.

"Oh no I don't mean ugly different. Like you are hot, and with it on you are still hot, but you look like a whole King with it. You are hot either way honestly."

I press my lips together the moment I realise what I just said. He chuckles.

"I am glad you find me hot."

The door opens and the doctor walks in. I have never been so grateful for an interruption in my life.

"Miss Molefe, good to see you awake. I am Dr Khumalo. How are you feeling? Any dizziness? Nausea? Blurred vision?"

"My head is a bit sore but no dizziness. I feel okay."

"Good. You had a significant knock to the head which caused you to lose consciousness. We ran a CT scan while you were out and the results are clear. No swelling, no internal bleeding. You were very lucky."

I breathe out.

"However, we want to keep you overnight for observation. Head injuries can be unpredictable in the first 24 hours. If anything changes, headache worsens, any confusion or vomiting, you call the nurse immediately. Understood?"

"Understood."

"You are in good hands. Get some rest." She smiles and walks out.

There is a silence between us now.

"Is there anyone you would like me to call? Family? A friend?"

Something shifts in my chest. The question is simple. The answer is not.

I have no one. I have nobody in this world who would drop everything and come. No family that loves me. No one waiting at home.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure? I just want to make sure you are okay."

"I DON'T HAVE ANYONE. JUST LEAVE IT."

I raise my voice and look away immediately. My eyes are stinging.

There is a pause.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push." His voice is gentle. Then he leans forward slightly. "But don't ever raise your voice at me. Okay?"

He says it softly. No anger behind it. Just firm. He stands up, leans over and kisses my forehead. Our eyes meet for a second. He clears his throat and walks towards the door.

"I'll be right back. I'm going to get you something decent to eat. Hospital food barely counts as food."

He is gone before I can argue.

I touch my forehead where his lips were and stare at the door.

Who is this man?

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Nqobizwe

I drive to the restaurant and place her usual order myself. The staff is surprised to see me at this hour but they don't ask questions.

On the drive back I think about what she said. About having no one. I had dug into her background when I first noticed her, just basic things. But clearly there is a lot more to this woman than what's on the surface. I didn't dig deep into her life because I didn't want to invade her privacy. I want her to be the one to share her story with me. But that one sentence she said hit differently than I expected.

She has no one.

I return to the hospital and when I walk into the room, she is sitting up, staring at the wall. She startles when she sees me.

"Hey. I brought you dinner."

"You actually came back."

"I told you I would. I got your favourite meal from your favourite restaurant."

I set the food on the table and pull the chair close. She looks at the containers and then at me.

"I don't understand. This is from Ngwenya resturant."

"I know."

"How did you know that's my favourite place?"

"Because I have seen you there almost every day. Same table. Same spot by the window. Same order."

She stares at me.

"That is either very sweet or very concerning."

"Eat first. Decide after."

She laughs. A real laugh this time. She opens the container and the moment the smell hits her she closes her eyes. She takes the first bite and does this small happy movement with her feet under the blanket. Like a little dance.

I smile.

She opens her eyes and catches me smiling.

"Why are you looking at me like that? The food is nice okay."

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

We eat together and we talk. Properly this time. She is funny. Sharp. She says things with this dry confidence that makes me want to keep the conversation going just to hear what she will say next.

After a while she gets quiet and looks at me seriously.

"You don't have to feel sorry for me, you know. Just because I said I have no one. I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me."

"I don't feel sorry for you. I am just considerate. There is a difference."

She holds my gaze for a moment. Then nods slowly.

"Thank you. For all of this."

I nod.

I stay until she is almost falling asleep over the empty containers. I pack everything away quietly.

"I will come back in the morning with clothes and whatever you need."

"Nqobizwe that's too much."

"It's already decided, Fifi. Get some rest."

She opens her mouth to protest. I lean over and kiss her forehead and walk out before she can say another word.

I hear her sharp intake of breath as I close the door.

I smile to myself on the way down the corridor.

She is something else. And I am not going anywhere.

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Narrated

Deep in the village, far from the palace, there is no sound. No cars. No voices. Just the crickets and the wind moving slowly through the trees.

Queen Thobekile walks through the darkness alone. No guards, no attendants. No one who can see where she is going or what she is about to do.

She reaches a small structure at the far edge of the bush with no windows. A single low door. Above it, animal bones hang from a rusted wire, knocking quietly against each other in the wind.

She pushes the door open.

The smell hits her first. Thick and old. Like something burnt a long time ago and never fully cleared. Candles burn in every corner, their flames completely still despite the draft. The walls are covered in markings drawn in something dark. Dried herbs hang from the ceiling. The floor is stained in ways that make her look away.

Vilakazi is already there.

He sits cross-legged in the centre of the room. His eyes are open but completely white. No iris. No pupil. Just white. Like something else entirely is using his body to sit there.

Then slowly, the white recedes. His eyes return. He looks at her without blinking, without expression.

"You are late."

"Don't speak to me like that." She steps fully inside and pulls the door shut behind her. The candlelight closes around them both.

"Vilakazi, kwenzakalani? Inkosi isivele yashintsha inqondo esikhaleni. You said he would listen to my every word."

"And he did. For a time."

"That is not good enough."

"The Ngwenya ancestors are not weak, Thobekile. They fight for their own. They always have. Whatever hold I place on your husband, they push back against it. That is simply the nature of what we are dealing with."

He reaches into a clay pot beside him and pulls out a small bone. He turns it slowly between his fingers, studying it.

"But what concerns me more right now is the chosen one."

"What about her?"

"I cannot see her face. I have tried many times. Something is shielding her. She is protected and she doesn't even know it herself."

All the candles flicker at once. All of them. At the same time. For no reason.

The room goes very still.

"So that is why Ngubeni visited the palace," she says quietly. "Nqobizwe has found her."

"He has found her. But he has not yet claimed her. There is still a window. A small one."

He sets the bone down carefully on the floor in front of him.

"But if he claims her it is over for us. She becomes untouchable. And so does he. We will not be able to get through. Not to either of them."

Queen Thobekile steps closer. Her voice drops.

"Then she has to die before that happens. And Nqobizwe has to marry Nolwandle. She is weak. Easy to control. With her beside him I can pull every string from behind. Sbonga will rule. That is how it was supposed to be."

"To bring your husband fully back under the spell, a greater sacrifice is required. You know what is needed."

He smiles. The kind of smile that has no warmth anywhere inside it.

Queen Thobekile shifts where she stands. She knows exactly what he means. She has done it before. Each time the price is higher. Each time she tells herself it will be the last time.

It never is.

But she thinks about Sbonga. Her son. Her blood. The throne that was promised before Queen Liyana stole everything by suddenly falling pregnant after years of nothing. What was meant for her son was snatched away just like that.

She will not let it stay that way.

She lifts her chin.

"Find me the girl's face. I will handle everything else."

Vilakazi picks up a small animal skull from the floor and holds it over one of the candles. He begins to whisper. Low. Rhythmic. The words are not in any language that should exist. Not in any language that belongs to the living.

The flame beneath the skull changes.

From orange.

To deep, cold, unnatural blue.

Queen Thobekile stands in the middle of it all. She does not flinch. She does not look away.

She stopped flinching a long time ago.

She begins to undress.

This is the sacrifice she is making tonight. Giving herself over to Vilakazi and whatever lives inside him. Letting his spirits have their way with her so that she can carry their power back to the palace.

She will do whatever it takes.

Her son will be King.

And nothing, not the ancestors, not Nqobizwe, and not this faceless girl they are hiding from her, will stand in the way of that.

Chapter 5

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Refilwe

It's morning and I feel great. I chose to trust Nqobizwe that he will bring cosmetics and clothes. He called earlier to ask for my sizes so I trust he will come.

I don't know what it is with him but he is good company. And I really appreciate him being "considerate" as he says. I never thought about what would happen if I found myself in a hospital bed. Who would I call? It's not nice not having anyone.

I sit up in bed and stretch carefully. My head doesn't hurt anymore. That's good.

My phone rings and it's Senzo. I stare at the screen for a moment before answering on the third ring.

"Senzo, hi."

"Hey, how are you? Thought I should check up on you. I had a hectic night, I couldn't check yesterday."

"Oh don't worry about it. I'm good. Thanks for checking. How are you?"

"I'm fine. You want to grab breakfast?"

"I can't, shame. I'm at the hospital. No outdoor activities for some time."

There's a pause on the other end.

"Wait wait wait. You said hospital? What happened?"

"I got into an accident yesterday driving to my place."

"Why didn't you call me? Listen, I'll be there right now."

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"I didn't call because I'm fine. I'm getting discharged today. It's all good."

"Still, I'm coming."

Senzo is starting to confuse me. We agreed on being work friends and we've been that just fine. He has never been this caring. Him driving all the way to Free State, I was surprised but I let it be. Then he tried kissing me. And now this. He is acting strange.

I hear a woman's voice in the background.

"Baby, where are you going?"

I roll my eyes.

"Senzo, I'm good. Don't come. I'm serious. Mbali o tla reng mara aa?" (What will Mbali say?)

"Don't do that, Ref."

"Just did. Sharp."

I end the call and toss my phone on the bed. Immediately the door opens and Nqobizwe walks in. He is still in formal wear. A crisp white shirt, black pants, expensive shoes. Doesn't this guy have any casual clothes?

He is holding shopping bags. He walks closer like he owns the room, his presence filling the space. He leans down and kisses my forehead. I freeze slightly. I don't know what's up with these forehead kisses. I should stop him but somehow I just let him be.

He places the shopping bags on the table and sits down on the chair next to the bed, leaning back casually.

"Good morning. I hope I'm not late. How are you doing today?"

"Hi. You're not late at all. I'm feeling good, much better actually. I thought you were kidding."

"Kidding about what?"

"Coming this morning with all the things I need. Changing clothes and cosmetics."

He looks at me seriously. "I don't joke about such things."

"Do you even know how to joke?" I mumble to myself while playing with the edge of the blanket.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." I clear my throat and sit up straighter. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask. Where was my car taken to? I have to make an insurance claim and they will come collect it."

He chuckles and looks at me intensely. That look that makes my stomach do things.

"Changing the topic, huh? Anyway, I told you not to worry about the car."

"How can I not worry? I have to. That's my car. I need a courtesy car ASAP anyway."

"Your car is at the panel beater getting fixed. You will have it in 3 to 5 working days. Stop stressing."

I blink at him.

"Excuse me? What do you mean panel beater? I am not paying for that. Please get me my car so insurance can get it sorted out. Yours as well. I don't want problems."

He leans forward slightly, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Refilwe, would you calm down? No one said you will pay. Don't stress yourself with the cars. Can you do that?"

"No. Why should I trust you? You are a stranger, Nqobizwe."

He chuckles and shakes his head slowly.

"I've been taking care of you even though you are at fault. You bumped into my car. But I am here making sure you are fine. I think that's enough for you to trust me, Fifi."

Well, he is right. I bite my lip. I love how he says Fifi, cutting my name short. Oh, and when he says Refilwe with that deep Zulu accent it sounds very nice. I wonder why he is doing all this though.

I hope he is not expecting anything in return. You never know with men. Anything is possible. I have to make sure I always have savings to pay him back when he starts acting up. He might say he is being considerate, but now he is doing so much for a stranger. And you know what they say…stranger danger.

"But why? Why are you doing all this, Nqobizwe?"

He holds my gaze. "Because I want to."

There's a pause. The air feels thick.

We share a look for some time then I break it, looking down at my hands.

"Still though, I need a car temporarily. What will I be using? You didn't think that through, huh?" I say, smirking, feeling a little victorious.

"You don't need a car because you won't be driving for some time."

My smirk drops. I frown. "Says who?"

"The doctor will tell you once she gets here. You can't drive for now."

"Well, we don't always follow doctor's orders anyway. Let me go shower while you figure out how to get me a car."

I swing my legs off the bed and stand up. He sighs and shakes his head, muttering something under his breath.

An hour later I am done. The shower felt amazing. I walk out of the bathroom in one of the tracksuits he bought. It fits perfectly. Soft material. Good taste.

He is still sitting in the same spot, scrolling through his phone. He looks up when I walk in and his eyes sweep over me briefly before returning to my face.

"Thank you. I really love these tracksuits."

"That's good. I am glad you love them."

I pick up my bag and start packing the few things I have.

"You are going to drive me home?"

"Why would I still be here? Yes, I am driving you home."

I nod. I will just let him be. He has been helpful and I am grateful. Just a bit confused about all of this.

Dr Khumalo walks in holding papers. She smiles when she sees me.

"Good morning. You look great."

"I feel great."

"That's wonderful. Here is your discharge summary. Get some rest. Avoid screens. No strenuous activity and most importantly, no driving."

Nqobizwe looks at me, smirking. I glare at him. If I could, I would wipe that smirk off with a slap.

"Thank you, Doc."

"Don't worry, Doc," Nqobizwe says, leaning forward slightly. "I will make sure she follows your orders. Always."

He emphasises the word "always" while looking directly at me. Where did the universe get this man?

"If you experience any headaches, nausea, blurred vision or feel dizzy, please come back immediately. Here's your five-day sick note. After five days you should be good to go if none of the symptoms I mentioned occur."

"Understood."

With that, she steps out of the room.

Nqobizwe stands up, takes my bag from my hands without asking and heads towards the door.

"You heard the doctor. No driving."

I roll my eyes as I follow him. "I think we were both in the room."

He stops walking. Turns around. His eyes narrow slightly. He pulls my arm gently, stopping me from walking past him.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

I look up at him. He is so close.

"Yazi Refilwe, the day I punish you for this attitude you have, you will know me well." He says it low. Almost a warning. Then he chuckles and lets my arm go like nothing happened.

My heart is racing but I don't say anything.

We walk out of the hospital. Outside, a black SUV is parked right at the entrance. A man in a dark suit stands beside it. The moment he sees Nqobizwe, he bows slightly and opens the back door.

I stop walking and just stare.

So he has a driver? And the man just bowed?

I slide into the car and Nqobizwe follows. The door closes softly behind us. The interior is pristine. Leather seats. Tinted windows. It smells expensive.

I have so many questions right now and I know I won't be able to stop myself from asking.

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Nqobizwe

I can see Refilwe has a lot of questions. Her face says it all. She keeps glancing around the car, then at me, then at the driver in the front.

Being around her this much makes me more drawn to her. She has an interesting character. Very bold. Stubborn. Challenges me, which gets on my nerves, but funny enough, I love it. It excites me.

I have never had anyone challenge me. Being royalty, people always bow to you and do everything you ask. They never tell you when you are wrong. Everything is just right. Even in business, it's the same.

"What's on your mind?" I ask.

She looks at me and bites her lip. "A lot, trust me."

"Care to share?"

She sighs and shifts in her seat to face me properly.

"The black SUV looks like you are some secret agent or something. You have a driver who bows for you and opens doors. So I'm thinking maybe you are an agent or royalty. If not that, then you are filthy rich, lazy and have people working for you to do everything you want. The bow? You treat them like slaves. They have to worship you. So which one is it?"

She is biting her bottom lip while waiting for my answer. I find it sexy but I have to control myself. I can't believe her mind is this wild and she is not afraid to speak it.

I lean back in my seat and look at her with a small smile.

"You said a mouthful. I will just let you and your mind overthink. Keep asking yourself."

She throws her hands up. "Yoh, bhuti wam. I was just asking."

My jaw tightens slightly. "I am not your brother, Refilwe."

She frowns. "Why are you so uptight? It's just a saying, Nqobizwe."

"I am not uptight." I pause and decide to just go for it. "You will be staying at my place, right?"

She shoots me a stare with those beautiful big eyes. Wide. Shocked.

I am just testing the waters here. I know she won't agree. But if she does, I will know my ancestors are working overtime.

"And why would I do such? I am going to my place."

Her phone rings. She glances at the screen and ignores it. But it keeps ringing. I look at her and she finally answers, irritation all over her face.

"What Lentswe?"

I can't hear the exact words from the other person on the line but she is screaming.

"Oh please, give me a break. You will get your money now. Nx."

She ends the call and immediately starts typing on her phone. Her fingers are moving fast. Angry. I just watch her. She is beautiful even when angry. She realises I am staring and looks up.

"What is it?"

"You are angry."

She exhales slowly and closes her eyes for a second.

"I am sorry about that. My father's wife just knows which buttons to press to piss me off. Can you believe she's insulting me because of money I stole 10 years ago? But I just paid her back. I don't need stress in my life."

She breathes deeply and closes her eyes again, trying to calm herself.

"I am sorry for dropping my problems on you like that." She does a nervous laugh and looks out the window.

"It's okay. Sometimes it's good to offload."

"Thanks." She says it quietly.

I nod. But I just can't help it.

"But I have to ask. Why did you steal her money?"

Her face changes. Hardens. "Long story. I don't want to talk about it."

I nod, understanding. There's clearly a lot and it's heavy on her, although she is trying to be strong.

I will wait for her to tell me. I won't push.

But I will be here when she is ready.

•••

Refilwe

We are approaching my apartment and I couldn't be happier. I need to be alone and reflect on everything that has happened. I can't even believe Lentswe called to swear at me because of that R10,000. I just sent it. That's the last money she

will ever get from me. I just want to show her that a mere 10k is nothing to me. I know it's eating her up inside because she thought I would be nothing in life. Now she's trying to convince herself that I sleep with rich men. Pathetic.

The driver parks inside the complex and opens the door for me. Nqobizwe follows. He walks me all the way to my apartment door. Now tell me why I am this comfortable with this man. He knows where I stay now.

We get to the apartment and I unlock the door, then turn to face him.

I hold out my hand for the bag and he gives it to me. With a look I don't quite understand.

"Thank you so much for everything, Nqobizwe. You've been so nice and super helpful. I really appreciate that. I would invite you in but umm, we are basically strangers in a way."

He nods slowly. "It's okay. I understand. I have to get going anyway."

I nod, holding the bag with both hands.

"I will take you out sometime to thank you properly."

He smiles slightly. "Out like a date?"

"What? No. I don't mean it like that. Just a thank you outing. As friends maybe."

His jaw tightens. "Not as friends, Fifi. I don't want to be your friend."

Ouch. That stings a bit. Why would he say that? Who said I want him as my friend anyway? I was just saying.

"You could have kept that to yourself."

He steps closer. I can smell his cologne now.

"You had to hear it because you will not friend zone me. I don't want you as my friend. I want to be more than just a friend."

I swallow hard. What does he mean? I hope it's not what I'm thinking.

I don't know what to say to that statement. It scares me. He is silent, just looking at me. I look down at my hands. These kinds of talks make me uncomfortable.

He chuckles softly, then steps forward again and kisses my forehead.

"I will check up on you to make sure you are good. And call me if you need anything."

"Of course I will call. You took my car. Anything and everything I need, I am calling you. Let's see if you will manage."

He smiles. I notice he likes smiling a lot. Not full smiles. Just the type of smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"I will manage. Anything you need, let me know."

"Do you know how many times I go to the stores? I'm always in need of something or craving something. Are you sure?"

"I am sure, Fifi. Let me get going."

I decide to test him.

"Oh and Zwee, I need breakfast. Can I get that?"

I am doing this on purpose. I can just order breakfast but let's see if he will actually manage.

Nqobizwe stops and turns. His eyebrows raise slightly.

"What did you call me?"

That's what he heard? That's what he's worried about?

"Zwee. Short for Nqobizwe. I mean, you also shortened my name to Fifi."

He laughs. A deep, rumbling laugh that comes from his chest. I am shocked. I smile. I really didn't think he laughs.

"You laugh?"

He frowns slightly. "What do you mean I laugh?"

"You smile a lot. I thought you don't laugh at all. I don't know why."

He shakes his head and laughs again. A real laugh this time. Full and genuine.

"Where have you been, Refilwe?" He shakes his head, still smiling. "I do laugh when necessary."

I just nod. He keeps saying these small statements that make me feel something. But I will do my best to keep it platonic and casual.

"I love it."

I look up, not understanding. "Love what?"

"Zwee. Call me Zwee from now on."

I laugh. This guy.

"Okay, Zwee."

His phone rings. He looks at the screen and his entire demeanour changes. He becomes serious. Almost cold.

"Let me get going. Get some rest."

I nod and he turns, already answering his phone. I call out to him.

"Don't forget my breakfast, Zwee!"

He makes a thumbs up without turning around and walks towards the stairs. I go inside and close the door behind me.

Then loneliness hits.

I lean against the door for a moment. I enjoyed being around Nqobizwe. I mean Zwee.

I laugh despite myself. I hope he will change his mind about being friends. At this point in my life I am not ready for any relationship other than friendship.

I love how I can be myself around him. We've only met yesterday but I'm just comfortable being me. Yet he doesn't even say much. Always looking at me, amused. And how he is so caring without being asked. The way he is so soft but uptight at the same time. And one thing for sure, he hates being disrespected. I've noticed that's where he draws the line.

I wonder if that's his real nature. I hope it's not just because he feels sorry for me.

•••

Nqobizwe

I hear her shout not to forget her breakfast. I can see what she is trying to do. Make me regret taking her car and making sure she doesn't drive for three days per doctor's orders. I just laugh and do a thumbs up as I answer the phone.

It's the royal seer. What could be the issue?

"Baba Ngubeni."

"Nkosana yaka Ngwenya, uyaphila?" (The Ngwenya Prince, how are you?)

"Ngiyaphila baba, ngingezwa kuwe." (I am good sir, how about you?)

"I am not well. You need to come see me today!"

I stop walking. His voice is urgent.

"Today? Kukhona okwenzakalile?" (Did something happen?)

"I will tell you everything when you get here. It's the King."

I start panicking. What happened to Father? No one said anything.

"What happened?"

"Do not tell your father you are coming to see me. Your family shouldn't know. Start here first then you can go to them. It's bad, Nkosana. Really bad."

"Okay. I am coming."

If the seer is this worried, then it's big.

I get into the car quickly. "Drive to the airport."

I tell my driver and immediately call Ayanda.

"Hello."

"Hey man, listen. I need the jet prepared ASAP. As in yesterday."

"On it. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm going home. Something urgent came up. Don't tell the King, Ayanda."

"I won't. Be safe. I will cancel all your meetings for the day."

"That will be it."

I end the call and lean back in the seat, my mind racing.

•••

Two hours later I am sitting in Baba Ngubeni's rondavel. The air is thick with smoke from the herbs burning in the corner. The seer is pacing slowly.

"I am glad you could make it."

"I had to. You sounded worried."

He nods and wipes his face with his hand. He looks tired.

"The King has been blinded. Witchcraft. Someone is using witchcraft in the palace to control the King's decisions. A woman. I didn't see her face."

"That's not possible! You can't use witchcraft on a King."

"You can if he is not protected. Ancestors are allowing it because they are angry at the King. I think they are showing me now because your time is near and you might be in danger. The chosen Queen might be in danger too."

How do I begin to fight witches now? But I will get to the bottom of this.

"Why are the ancestors angry?"

He sighs heavily and sits down.

"Your father listened to the wrong people and married a second wife because your mother couldn't fall pregnant. Although the King can have as many wives as he wants, the first wife has to agree and approve of the second wife. Ancestors have to approve as well. He didn't do all that. Queen Liyana tried fighting it. She tried convincing your father but as stubborn as he is, he didn't listen and married Queen Thobekile anyway. He failed to be patient. He doubted the ancestors. Only to find out the first wife is pregnant right after marrying Queen Thobekile. If only he had been patient, he could have returned Queen Thobekile. But he had to stick with his decision. Your mother has been unhappy ever since. She is living in pain but trying to be strong as the Queen and as your mother. Worse, you know how Queen Thobekile is."

"Mother never told me all this. I was under the impression that she supported Father marrying Queen Thobekile. Do you think Queen Thobekile is the one using witchcraft?"

"I cannot comment on that. I was not shown her face. But it is a woman wanting to control the King. All will be revealed in due time."

"It's quite obvious it's her."

"I was given instructions to give to you. Listen carefully, Nqobizwe. I am going to give you something. Put it in your father's drink. This will help him and make him stronger. Once you are sure he has come back to his senses, bring him here so I can strengthen him."

He wraps up a traditional herb for me in a small cloth and places it in my hand.

"And Nqobizwe, you have to claim her soon."

I nod. I don't even know where to begin to do that. Why did it have to be like this to know if she's really the chosen Queen? And now I have to fight witches. I can protect myself, that's for sure. There's a side my family doesn't know and I want it to remain like that. But witches? Where do I even begin?

I wipe my face with my hand, take the herb and stand up. The seer walks me out.

Let me go to the palace and see how I am going to give my father this.

We drive to the palace. The moment I enter the house; I am met with my father at the door.

"Son, what brings you here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about a few things."

He smiles. Probably because I don't come home often, especially for him. This is new.

"I wanted to talk to you about something as well. Let's go to my study."

We walk down the corridor together. I have to figure out how I am going to give him this. Yah neh, the things we go through. They could just show the face of the witch and I deal with her. Simple.

We enter the study and he closes the door behind us.

"Son, listen. About Princess Nolwandle."

"What about her?" I sit down on the chair opposite his desk.

"You will marry her as I said. And it needs to be done soon. Before your time."

"Queen Thobekile got to your head again?"

"She only means well. And I understand her point. You can't rule without a Queen."

"And you heard the seer. She is close. Right under my nose."

"You can never be sure. Just marry her. There's no harm done."

"No harm done? How, when there's a chosen Queen for a reason? How do I marry someone I feel nothing for?"

"What about your chosen one? You also feel nothing."

"I feel something. I know it."

"Oh, so you have found her."

"I won't tell you. Next thing you will tell Queen Thobekile. I am sure you told her what the seer said."

He looks down and I already have my answer. And after so long I realise it. I have been so angry at my father to notice the change. This is not the King I know. He has become weak. The seer is right. He is being controlled. Because he changes so much, that's why we can't tell there's something off.

"Get to know her at least."

I nod and stand up to pour us whiskey. This is it.

"I will try to get to know her." I am lying. I just want him to not pay attention to me now as I pour this in his glass.

"That's all I am asking, son. No damage done. What if she is the chosen one and you are refusing to see?"

My back is facing him. I pour the herb into one glass carefully, then add the whiskey. I take both glasses and turn around.

I hand him his glass and sit down.

Let's see what happens after this.

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Narrated

Queen Thobekile is attending one of the youth programmes hosted in the village. She is sitting at the front, smiling and nodding at the presentations. Her phone keeps ringing non-stop. She glances at the screen. Vilakazi. Again. And again.

She ignores it the first few times but the vibrations won't stop. Finally, she excuses herself with a tight smile and steps outside into the courtyard.

She answers, her voice low and sharp.

"Vilakazi, I am busy. What's happening?"

"Go to your husband. Now. Before he drinks loyo muthi."

"What's going on, Vilakazi?"

"If he drinks it, you will never be able to control him again. And I don't see your future. It's just black, Thobekile. That means danger. Hurry. Quick. And stop him."

Queen Thobekile's heart starts beating fast. Her hand grips the phone tighter.

She turns on her heel and rushes back inside. She finds the host and grabs her arm.

"I have to return to the palace. Something came up."

The host bows quickly, understanding. Honestly, she is relieved Queen Thobekile is leaving. Everyone knows she is difficult. Evil, even. That's how people view her. They are scared of her. She always makes it hard to work when she is around. You will never be good enough in her eyes.

Queen Thobekile doesn't wait for a response. She rushes outside to her car, her guards scrambling to follow. She climbs into the back seat, breathing hard.

"Drive to the palace. Now. Fast."

The driver pulls out immediately, tires kicking up dust as they speed down the dirt road.

Queen Thobekile is sweating now. Her hands are shaking. She presses them together to stop the trembling but it doesn't work. Her mind is racing.

If he drinks that herb, everything is over. Everything she has worked for. Everything Vilakazi promised her. Gone.

The car speeds through the gates of the palace. She doesn't wait for it to stop completely. She pushes the door open and jumps out while it's still moving.

Her heels click loudly on the stone floor as she rushes through the corridors. Guards step aside quickly when they see her coming. Her face is hard. Determined. Panicked.

She reaches the study and doesn't knock. She pushes the door open.

Inside, the King and Nqobizwe are sitting across from each other. Both of them holding glasses of whiskey. Both of them mid-conversation.

They look relaxed. Calm.

They turn to look at her, startled by the sudden entrance.

"Thobekile, what why are you budging in my study without even knocking?"

She doesn't hear him. Her eyes are locked on the glasses in their hands.

Empty glasses.

They have already drunk it.

Chapter 6

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Refilwe

I have been sitting for 4 hours waiting for breakfast and Mr "Call me if you need anything" didn't deliver. I ended up making my own breakfast. I tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. I am not mad though, as I was testing him and he failed. So now I know not to count on him. Or is it too early to judge?

I throw myself on the couch, sinking into the cushions, and continue with my movie. Then I remember DK. I reach for my phone on the coffee table and decide to call her just to check up on her. It rings twice before she answers.

"Hello?"

"DK hi, ke Refilwe. Thought I should check up on you. How are you?"

"Oh Ref!" Her voice brightens immediately. "I am good, can't complain. How are you?"

"I am alive and kicking. Got into an accident yesterday but no damage done."

"Oh man, I am so sorry. I hope you are okay?"

I shift on the couch, pulling a cushion onto my lap.

"I am good. It wasn't that bad."

"Yoh, ke sola stepmother se sa hao. (I suspect your stepmother.) She behaves like a witch. Maybe she sent her things to you."

I laugh so hard, throwing my head back against the couch.

"Oh well, her things failed. I am still kicking."

We both laugh together, the sound filling my quiet apartment.

"I am sure they were so pained to see you. Because even a blind person can see that you have made it. And I am happy, shame. They are alive to see it. Too bad your father... the devil remembered him too soon."

I laugh even harder, clutching my stomach.

"DK, no man."

I wipe tears from my eyes, still laughing.

"Can you believe they said I sleep with older men for money?"

She laughs even harder on the other end.

"Whatever makes them sleep at night, shame. If only they knew you date handsome men."

I sit up straight, frowning.

"And how do you know this? Which handsome men, girl? I am single as they come."

"Bathong, I thought the guy you came with was your man. Girl, the way he was looking at you. It was giving 'I am in love.'"

I bite my lip, trying not to smile.

"No way. We are just good work friends. He was just there to support me. You were seeing things."

"Maybe I was. But girl, hmmm. Anyway, it was nice talking to you. Let me get busy with the pots."

"It was nice talking to you too. Sharp."

We end the call and I stare at my phone screen for a moment, smiling. I feel lighter. It was so nice talking to her. I have never had friends before. Female friends. I have always been on my own. And having conversations like this... the last time was in high school. I should have reached out sooner. We really need to catch up for real.

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Narrated

Dikeledi sets her phone down on the kitchen counter, a smile still on her face. She feels so happy to have talked with Refilwe. She doesn't have friends. They all turned on her when her mother died and things got tough. So laughing like this with Refilwe, knowing she is such a good person, makes her feel whole.

Her and Refilwe were close in high school and her mother was very fond of Refilwe. Every chance she got, she would help her because everyone in the community knew how Refilwe was treated but no one dared to help. She is happy she managed to get her life together.

Her brother Tumelo walks in carrying plastic bags, just as she starts pulling out the pots. She is staying with her brother. They are orphans now, trying to make ends meet.

"Sis, I got us some groceries."

He places them on top of the counter with a tired smile.

She looks up, surprised.

"Thank you. But where did you get the money?"

"Mme Tsotetsi asked me to do her garden."

She nods slowly, her chest tightening with gratitude. She is thankful for her brother. He tries every day. And they never go to bed on an empty stomach.

"That's nice. Guess who reached out? Refilwe. And it was very nice chatting with her."

Tumelo leans against the counter, crossing his arms.

"I remember you mentioned she came to the funeral. She is very strong. If it was me, I don't know what I would've done. Her father was evil."

"Even Lentswe. She is vile, man. But I am glad Refilwe made it despite everything she went through. And she is still kind, I can tell."

"She has always been kind. That's why Mama loved her. She was respectful."

Dikeledi smiles, picking up the groceries to pack them away.

"Right? I hope we will get a chance to catch up properly."

"You will."

She continues unpacking, feeling warm inside.

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Nqobizwe

My father and I are still sitting in the study, waiting for an answer from Queen Thobekile. She stands frozen in the doorway, her chest rising and falling quickly. She looks like she has just seen a ghost.

"I asked you a question," my father says again, his voice sharp and impatient.

She smooths down her dress nervously, then fixes her hair with trembling fingers before clearing her throat.

"I want to discuss something important with you."

"Couldn't it wait? For you to barge into my study like that?"

Her hands clasp together in front of her.

"No, it can't wait. Can I talk to you now, my King?"

There is something about her. Her eyes dart between me and my father. She is scared of something. But I am not letting my father out of my sight until I am sure he is fine.

I lean forward slightly.

"Father, I wanted to show you something real quick."

I know he will agree. He always gets excited when I involve him or spend time with him. But I always avoid him. He can be a difficult person at times. He is always right because he is the "King" those are his words. And I hate that Queen Thobekile gets in his head and he becomes a very different person. But now I know why. He is being controlled.

My father turns to her, his expression firm.

"Thobekile, let's talk after."

"But this is important," she insists, taking a step forward.

"Thobekile, give us a moment. I will call you when we are done."

He sounds firm now. Authoritative. She can't say anything. I sit back in my chair, watching them both. She finally nods, her jaw tight, and leaves. But not before shooting me a look filled with something dark.

The door closes behind her.

My father turns to me.

"What do you want to show me?"

I stand up and button my jacket.

"It's not here. We need to go somewhere."

He raises an eyebrow but stands as well.

"Lead the way."

We leave the study and when we step outside, I lean close to the guard standing by the car.

"Take us to the royal seer," I whisper.

He nods without question, opens the door for us and starts the engine. The drive is not that long because the royal seer doesn't stay far. I watch my father from the corner of my eye. He is looking out the window, calm.

When the car turns down the narrow dirt path leading to the seer's homestead, my father stiffens. He looks around, then at me.

"Senzani la Nqobizwe?" (What are we doing here, Nqobizwe?) he asks, frowning deeply.

I open the car door.

"Baba Ngubeni will tell you everything. Let's go inside."

I step out and he follows slowly, his confusion turning to concern.

We walk through the gate and towards the rondavel. The seer is already standing outside, his hands folded behind his back. He bows slightly when he sees us.

"My King. Welcome."

My father stops a few feet away.

"Ngubeni, what is going on? Why did my son bring me here?"

The seer looks at me, then back at my father. His face is serious.

"Come inside, my King. We need to talk."

We enter the dim rondavel. The smell of burning herbs fills the air, thick and heavy. My father sits down on the mat, his movements stiff. He looks between me and the seer, his jaw tight.

"Speak, Ngubeni. I don't have time for games."

The seer sits across from him, cross-legged. He closes his eyes for a long moment. When he opens them, his voice is low and grave.

"My King, you have been blinded."

My father stiffens, his hands curling into fists on his knees.

"Blinded? What are you talking about?"

"Witchcraft, Mntungwa. Someone has been using dark magic to control your mind. Your decisions. Your words. Everything."

My father's face hardens. He leans forward.

"That is not possible. I am the King. No one can…"

"The ancestors allowed it," the seer cuts him off, his voice firm.

Silence falls heavy in the room.

My father's jaw clenches. His breathing becomes heavier.

"What do you mean they allowed it?"

The seer leans forward, his eyes locked on my father with an intensity that fills the space.

"You disrespected them, my King. You disrespected your first wife. You disrespected the sacred laws of this throne."

"I did no such thing."

My father's voice is sharp but there is a crack in it.

"You married a second wife without the approval of the ancestors. Without the approval of Queen Liyana. She begged you. She asked you to wait. But you did not listen. You doubted them. You doubted her."

My father looks down at his hands. His fists clench tighter.

"I... I needed an heir. She couldn't…"

"She was carrying your son the entire time!"

The seer's voice rises, echoing off the walls of the rondavel. My father flinches.

"The moment you married Queen Thobekile, the ancestors revealed the truth. Queen Liyana was already pregnant. But you had already made your choice. And instead of correcting it, you kept both wives. You hurt the woman chosen for you by the ancestors themselves."

My father's hands are shaking now. I watch him closely. I have never seen him like this.

"I didn't know..."

His voice is barely a whisper.

"You didn't wait. You didn't trust. And because of that, the ancestors stepped back. They allowed the witchcraft to take root. To teach you. To humble you. To show you what happens when a King stops listening."

The room is thick with tension. My father's chest rises and falls heavily. He wipes his face with both hands.

"Who?" he asks quietly, his voice breaking. "Who has done this to me?"

The seer shakes his head slowly.

"I was not shown a face. But you know, my King. Deep down, you know."

My father's eyes close. His head drops forward, chin almost touching his chest.

"Thobekile..."

He says her name like a curse.

"I cannot confirm," the seer says carefully. "But the ancestors will reveal everything in time. For now, you must be cautious. You must protect yourself. And most importantly, you must make things right with Queen Liyana. Apologize. Honour her. Restore what was broken."

My father nods slowly, his entire body sagging with the weight of it all.

"And my son?"

His voice cracks when he says it. He looks at me.

"Your son is in danger. The chosen Queen is in danger. The witch, whoever he/she is, knows his time is near and will do anything to stop it."

My father looks at me and for the first time in years, I see something I haven't seen since I was a boy. Fear. And love. Real love.

"I will protect him."

"You must protect yourself first, my King. You are no use to him if you are still under her control."

The seer reaches behind him and pulls out another small bundle of herbs wrapped in cloth. He holds it out.

“Burn this in your chambers every night,” he says, his voice low and deliberate. “The smoke will shield you.” His eyes darken. “Speak of this to no one, my King. We still walk among shadows.”

My father receives the herbs with both hands, as one would receive a sacred offering.

But the seer is not finished.

From a small carved bowl beside him, he lifts two thin white cords, pure and unknotted. He steps forward and ties one firmly around my father's right wrist, then the other around his left.

"These are imicu emhlophe," he murmurs. "They bind you to your ancestors. No evil formed against you will prosper while they remain."

The hut feels heavier. Charged.

My father does not move as the cords are tightened. He bows his head slightly, not to the seer, but to the spirits.

We leave the rondavel in silence. The walk back to the car feels longer than it did coming in.

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Finally, we are back at the palace. The sun is setting now, casting long shadows across the courtyard. My father is still livid. His jaw has been clenched the entire ride back. He wants to capture the witch immediately but the seer told him not to say anything. The ancestors will reveal everything in due time. He has to be cautious.

I think we already know who it is. He is just in denial.

I walk with him to the main house, then branch off towards my own. I need to freshen up. I will leave in the morning. I have to check up on Refilwe. It's been a hectic day. I couldn't even check on her.

I enter my house, close the door behind me and lean against it for a moment. Then I pull out my phone and dial her number.

It rings twice. Then straight to voicemail.

I frown and call again.

This time the call connects. I can hear her breathing but she is not saying anything.

I clear my throat.

"Fifi."

She sighs deeply on the other end.

"Nqobizwe."

Her voice is flat. Unimpressed.

"Are you okay?"

She chuckles. It is not a happy sound. Somehow that chuckle tells me I did something wrong but I can't seem to think of what.

"Am I okay? Are you really asking me that?"

I sit down on the edge of my bed, rubbing my temple.

"Yes, I am asking."

"Well, I am not okay because you didn't deliver my breakfast."

Oh. Yes. Breakfast. I forgot about breakfast and I know it was just a test. Right now she probably thinks I won't be able to manage. That I am all talk.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

"I am sorry about that. I had an emergency at home. I had to leave immediately. It slipped my mind."

There is a pause. Then her voice softens just a little.

"Is everything okay?"

I smile despite myself. She is caring. If it was someone else, we would be in a serious argument right now. But she can put her emotions aside and put others first.

"Everything is good now."

"That's nice."

Another pause.

"Don't worry about the breakfast issue. I would have appreciated if you had called or left a message to let me know. Because I waited for hours."

I close my eyes, guilt settling in my chest.

"I am sorry again. It won't happen again."

"Of course it won't happen again."

Her tone shifts. Colder now.

"Do you think my car will be ready in three days? I'll need it for work."

I hear what she is doing. She is pulling away. She won't ask anything from me. She is basically pushing me out.

"Refilwe…"

"Anyway, I have to go. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

"Wait, Fifi…"

The line goes dead.

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at the screen. She just hung up on me.

I immediately call back.

It rings once.

Then: "The number you have dialled is not available."

Voicemail.

I try again, standing up now and pacing across the room.

Straight to voicemail again.

I call one more time, my jaw tight.

"The number you have dialled is not available. Please try again later."

I toss my phone onto the bed and run both hands over my face, exhaling sharply through my nose.

This woman.

She turned off her phone.

I sit down heavily on the bed, then lean back and stare at the ceiling. My chest feels tight. Frustrated. Annoyed. And something else I can't quite name.

I messed up. I know I did. I should have called or sent a message.

But I was dealing with witches and my father being controlled and…

No.

I sit up and shake my head.

That is not an excuse.

I stand and walk to the window, looking out at the dark sky. The stars are starting to appear.

Chapter 7

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Refilwe

It's Monday morning and I am up early. I should be getting ready for work but I will be stuck in this apartment the whole day. No, scratch that. The whole week. I don't know what to do with myself. I can't even go anywhere. I don't have a car. I am not allowed to drive. It’s a lot.

It's times like this I hate being on my own.

A tear escapes my eye before I can stop it. It rolls down my cheek slowly and I wipe it away quickly with the back of my hand. I realize how lonely I am. How hard it is for me to keep a relationship. The minute I get comfortable and share my story, that's the end of it. They all leave. Every single one of them.

After Senzo, I promised myself I would work and focus on myself. Stay away from relationships. But life gets lonely. So lonely sometimes that the silence in this apartment feels like it's suffocating me.

That is why I was happy to have reconnected with Dikeledi. To have someone to call and laugh with. It shows you are still in the world of the living. That you matter to someone.

I get out of bed and walk to the window. I pull the curtains open and the morning light floods in. The sun is rising. Beautiful view. Orange and pink spreading across the sky. I stand there for a moment, just watching.

Then I step into the shower to freshen up. The water is warm and it helps ease the tightness in my chest. I let it run over me for longer than usual.

When I get out, I put on lounge wear. A simple short cream white dress. Soft and comfortable. I feel like spring cleaning to get my mind off things and keep myself busy but I have to rest. Doctor's orders. No straining myself.

It's now that I decide to open my phone. I honestly didn't want to speak with Nqobizwe yesterday. I was upset that he couldn't take two minutes of his time to leave a message. I am thankful for him, I really am. But yesterday showed me I am starting to get attached and I don't want that.

I don't know where he came from but his timing seemed perfect. He went above and beyond for a complete stranger and I kind of liked it. No one has ever cared that much for me. I guess that's why it was easy for me to trust him quickly, yet I don't even know him.

But seeing myself get upset over him not delivering breakfast was a wake-up call. A wake-up call for me to step back and set boundaries before I get hurt again.

My thoughts drift when I notice the trash bin by the kitchen door. Trash collection day. I decide to take the trash out before I forget.

I grab the bag, open the door and walk down the stairs. And then I see him.

Parked outside my flat.

He is leaning against his car, one leg crossed over the other, smoking. I freeze for a second. I never would have guessed that he smokes.

What is he doing here?

And why am I excited to see him?

He sees me approaching and immediately steps on the cigarette, crushing it under his shoe. He straightens up. He looks good. Black shirt tucked in, showing his broad shoulders and the outline of his muscles. Formal pants. He looks too good. I won't lie.

I throw the trash in the bin and walk towards him slowly, my heart beating a little faster than it should.

"Hi. What are you doing here?"

I ask, stopping a few feet away from him.

He looks at me for a long moment. His eyes sweep over me once, then return to my face. There is something in his expression I can't understand.

"I came to see you. I didn't like how our conversation ended yesterday."

His voice is low and calm. But why would he come see me so early in the morning over that? And it seems like he is alone today. No driver.

"Why didn't you come up and knock though? How long have you been waiting here?"

"I was waiting for you to wake up. I arrived a few minutes ago."

I nod, clearing my throat.

"Let's go inside."

We walk back towards my flat in silence. I don't know what to think of this but this conversation was bound to happen. I was just not expecting him to show up here first thing in the morning. He is something else. I thought he wasn't even in town.

We get inside and I lead him to the lounge. The apartment suddenly feels smaller with him in it.

"You can take a seat."

He sits down on the couch, placing his hands on his lap. But there is tension in his shoulders.

"Did you eat? I can make us some breakfast."

"I am hungry. I'd love that."

He didn't even hesitate. He must be really hungry. Did he wake up and drive straight here?

I go to the kitchen and decide to make scrambled eggs on toast with orange juice. I don't know why I am feeling so nervous having him in my living room. He is so intimidating. His presence fills the entire space.

I finish cooking and take the food to him. I set the plate down carefully on the coffee table. I focus on the food because looking at him feels far more dangerous. I give him a bowl to wash his hands and a cloth to wipe. I am just being nice.

He smiles like a kid being given candy.

"Thank you."

I nod and return to the kitchen to get my food. When I come back, I sit on the opposite chair. We eat in silence. But I can feel him staring at me. Every time I glance up, his eyes are on me.

We finish eating and I take the plates back to the kitchen, then return and sit down again. It's time to address the elephant in the room.

I clear my throat.

"About what you said earlier..."

"Why did you hang up on me?" He cuts me off. His voice is calm but there is an edge to it.

I shift in my seat.

"I was wrong. I am sorry about that. You have been nothing but helpful to me. I was upset but that doesn't justify how I handled the situation."

"You were upset?"

"Yeah, I was. Not because you didn't bring breakfast, but because you forgot and didn't communicate."

He nods slowly, taking that in.

I take a breath and continue.

"It's water under the bridge now, honestly. You owe me nothing, Nqobizwe. You have done enough and I am grateful. I really am."

"Refilwe, don't do that."

His jaw tightens.

"Why are you trying to push me away?"

"I am not pushing you away, Nqobizwe. You and I are practically strangers..."

"Let's get to know each other then."

He cuts me off before I can finish.

I shake my head.

"I don't mind getting to know you, but you don't want to be friends and that's the only thing I can offer."

He looks at me like he doesn't understand what I am saying. Then he chuckles. Low. Amused.

"You will be mine, Refilwe. You just don't know it yet."

I choke on my own saliva. He just blurts that out like it's nothing.

"WHOA. That's not happening, Nqobizwe."

"Are you sure?"

He smirks and I swallow hard because why have I suddenly lost my voice?

"I am not in a space for any romantic relationship. I am single and happy. Don't have any ideas."

"You will be happier taken, Fifi. But I am a patient man. I will wait."

I sigh heavily. He smiles and stands up.

"I got you something. I'll be right back."

What the hell is going on? He got me something?

See, I am one person who always has something to say. But him? He does something to me when he gets this serious. I freeze. I forget how to speak.

He walks out the door and I sit there, my heart pounding.

He returns a moment later holding a bouquet of red roses. Big and beautiful. Wrapped perfectly.

I stand up slowly, my legs suddenly feeling weak.

"These are for you. I am sorry about not delivering your breakfast and not communicating with you. I am a man of my word, Fifi. I promise you. What happened yesterday won't happen again."

I look at him in awe. My chest tightens. My throat burns.

He hands me the flowers and I take them carefully, like they might break.

"Than... Thank you." My voice cracks. "Apology accepted. Let me put these in a vase. They are beautiful. I love them. You didn't have to but I am glad you did. I love flowers."

I smile quickly and walk to the kitchen to get the vase. I just need to get away from him for a second. I am failing to hold my tears.

I have never gotten anything from anyone. Even in relationships. Nothing. This is my first time getting flowers. I thought I would only get them at my funeral.

I don't want him seeing me cry over flowers.

But am I really crying over receiving flowers?

No.

I am crying because all of this is overwhelming me. Everything Nqobizwe has said or done feels foreign to me. He did all this without being asked. Without expecting anything in return.

I wipe my face quickly and try to fix myself. I put the roses in the vase, take a deep breath, and return to him.

He looks at me and frowns immediately.

"Were you crying?"

I guess my eyes sold me out.

"Who? Me? Not at all."

"Why are your eyes red?"

I touch my face quickly.

"They have issues. It happens from time to time."

"Refilwe, why are you lying?"

"I am not lying. Anyway, when are you leaving?"

"You are throwing me out? And here I was thinking you were enjoying having me around."

"It will be peaceful when you are not here."

He stands up and walks closer to me. Too close.

"Really?"

There's a pause. The air feels thick.

"Ye…yes, really."

He chuckles and nods slowly, his eyes locked on mine.

"I want to show you your car. You don't want to check the progress?"

I smile. Yes, of course I want to see my car.

I reply quickly.

"Yes, I want to see my car."

Wait.

Why am I agreeing to everything this man says? It's like I am under a spell or something. I am weak. And I thought I would be a spokesperson at the women's conference. I am failing. This is embarrassing.

"We can leave now."

I look down at myself. I think I look okay. No need to change.

But then I ask anyway.

"Do you think I should change and wear something else?"

Why do I care what he thinks again? But it's just an outfit. Nothing hectic.

He clears his throat, his eyes sweeping over me again.

"You look perfectly fine. Too good."

Why is he looking at me like that?

"Don't give me that look."

He chuckles.

"Can we leave, please?"

I just can't wait to see my car.

We leave and I lock the door behind me. Then I pull out my phone and start taking pictures. His car. His number plate. Everything.

He is just standing there, watching me. Amused.

Then I turn the camera on him and capture his face as well. He says nothing. Just looks at me like I am the most interesting thing he has ever seen.

"Are you done?" he asks.

I nod. He opens the door for me and I get in. He closes it gently, then walks around to his side and starts the car.

I immediately send the pictures to Dikeledi. Just in case he kidnaps me.

"Why were you taking pictures, Fifi?"

"Just in case you are a serial killer and you try to kidnap me and kill me. Already sent. If anything happens to me, your face will be all over the news."

He laughs. A real laugh. He looks at me, then back at the road.

"Don't you think it's a little too late for that?"

"Whatever."

He continues to laugh and I can't help but smile.

"Do you have any music to play?" I ask because we are quiet. No one is saying anything. Only the sound of the engine.

"I don't listen to music."

"At all? But why?"

"I don't find it interesting."

I stare at him in disbelief.

"You have been listening to the wrong music. I'll connect my phone. It's too quiet in here anyway."

I connect my phone to the Bluetooth and play my music. I play Amanda Black. I love her music. I feel like she writes for us who are broken. Her music speaks to me. Encourages me to get up and start again. It heals parts of me.

I play her song and sing along. I mean, who listens to Amanda Black and doesn't sing along? Exactly.

Nqobizwe is saying nothing. Just driving. But I catch him glancing at me every now and then.

"Where's your driver?" I ask him between songs.

"I gave him a day off."

"Why do you have a driver though?"

"I have to."

"You have to? Says who?"

"You will know why someday."

"But I want to know now. It's a simple question."

He sighs.

"When you have agreed to give me a chance, you will know why."

My phone rings before I can answer. It's DK.

I answer.

"DK."

"REFILWE MOLEFE! Girl, what in the Bridgerton is this that you sent me?! Who is this man and why does he look like he was photoshopped by the ancestors themselves?! Because you sent number plates, clearly you don't trust him. But friend, listen to me carefully, if that man told me to jump, I wouldn't even ask how high, I'd just start flying! That jawline? Those shoulders?"

She blows out a dramatic breath into the phone. And continues.

"Girl, he looks like he eats nails for breakfast and apologizes in French. Wait, wait, you think he's dangerous? Bathong, the only danger here is me volunteering to be kidnapped! I'm talking full cooperation. Where are you going with this man? Actually, don't tell me. I'm jealous. Does he have a brother? A cousin? An uncle? I'm not picky!"

I can't believe Dikeledi just said all that.

I forgot my phone is connected to the Bluetooth of the car.

He heard all that.

I am so embarrassed right now. My face is burning. I quickly disconnect it from the Bluetooth.

"Uhm... DK, listen. We will talk."

"Oh God, he is there, isn't he? He heard everything. Well, good! Tell him I meant every word! And use protection! Call me in an hour or I'm calling the police. Not to save you, just to confirm you're having a good time!"

"Okay. I will. Sharp."

I end the call and stare out the window. I can't say anything now. I am too embarrassed.

There's a long pause. Then I hear him.

"Photoshopped by the ancestors themselves?"

I refuse to look at him.

"She exaggerates."

"And I eat nails for breakfast?"

"Apparently."

"And apologize in French?"

I cover my face with both hands.

"Can we please never speak of this again?"

He laughs. A deep, genuine laugh that fills the entire car.

"I don't know. I quite liked the part where she said she'd volunteer to be kidnapped."

"Nqobizwe!"

"And full cooperation. That's commitment."

I peek at him through my fingers. He is grinning. Actually grinning.

"You are enjoying this way too much."

"I really am."

I groan and sink lower in my seat.

"I'm never telling her anything ever again."

"But you heard her. I am too hot to commit crime. Give me some credit."

I shoot him a stare.

"You are ugly, Nqobizwe. Don't flatter yourself."

"Photoshopped by the ancestors, Fifi. She said it, not me."

I can't help it. I laugh. He laughs too.

"If you say so."

I see him drive into a panel beater's workshop. We have arrived. I cannot wait to see my car, honestly. How I trusted someone that easily, I will not tell you.

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Nqobizwe

I couldn't sleep at all after the phone call I had with Fifi. Every time I closed my eyes, I heard her voice. The way it changed when she pulled away. Cold and distant.

I was wrong, I know that. But when she pushed me away like that, something in my chest tightened. Fear. Real fear. I saw and felt what she was trying to do. She hates attachments. I can tell. She was building walls before I could even get close. I had to fix this as early as possible. Before those walls became too high to climb.

I was enjoying her performance in the car. Watching her sing along to her songs. She looked so free and alive. Her voice wasn't perfect but it was hers. She gets to be herself around me and I love that. Although sometimes she gets a bit shy, it doesn't last long because Refilwe can talk for days. And I could listen for years.

I look at her now. She is excited to see her car. It's written all over her face. The kind of smile that makes my chest feel warm.

I park and get out, then walk around to open the door for her. We walk inside the workshop together.

The smell of oil and metal fills the air. Tools clang in the background. A man in overalls walks over when he sees us, wiping his hands on a rag.

"Ah, Mr. Ngwenya. Good to see you."

He greets me with a slight bow. I nod.

"This is Miss Molefe. She is here to check on her car."

"Ah yes, yes. The silver Polo. Come, come."

We follow him deeper into the workshop. Refilwe is looking around, taking everything in. Then we turn a corner and there it is. Her car. Lifted on a platform. The front bumper is off. Parts are scattered on a table nearby.

She stops and stares.

"It's coming along well," the mechanic says, smiling. "We are waiting for a few parts to arrive. Should be here tomorrow. Then we will put everything back together. You will have it by Wednesday."

"Wednesday?" Refilwe asks, her voice hopeful.

"Yes, ma'am. Wednesday afternoon. Good as new."

She smiles. A real smile.

"Thank you so much."

"No problem, ma'am. We will take good care of it."

We walk back to the car and I open the door for her again. She slides in, still smiling.

I get in and start the engine.

"Happy?" I ask.

"Very. Wednesday is not that far."

"It's not."

I pull out of the workshop and onto the main road. Then an idea comes to me.

"Want to go for some drinks?"

She looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

"Drinks? At this time?"

"Why not? It's almost midday. We can grab something light. Coffee. Juice. Whatever you want."

She considers it for a moment, then nods slowly.

"Okay. Sure. Why not."

"Good."

I drive for about twenty minutes and pull into the parking lot of a quiet upscale restaurant, the kind I know she will like. Sizwe owns this place. I always choose spaces I trust. And Sizwe… I trust him with my life.

We walk inside and the hostess greets us immediately.

"Good afternoon. Table for two?"

"Yes. By the window, please."

"Right this way."

We follow her to a table near the large windows overlooking a small garden. It's beautiful. Peaceful. She pulls out the chairs for us and hands us menus.

"Your waiter will be with you shortly."

Refilwe sits down slowly, looking around. Then she notices something.

People are staring.

Not everyone. But enough. Eyes linger on us as we settle in. Whispers and glances.

She shifts uncomfortably and leans forward.

"Why are they looking at us like that?"

I glance around casually, then back at her.

"They are looking at you."

She frowns.

"At me? Why?"

"Because you are beautiful."

She shakes her head and looks down at the menu, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"In the 28 years of my life, I don't remember people breaking their necks when I pass by."

I lean back in my chair, watching her.

"Maybe you weren't paying attention."

"Or maybe you are just used to this kind of attention and you think it's normal."

"Maybe."

The waiter arrives and we order drinks. She orders a fresh juice and I order coffee. We talk while we wait. Light conversation. Easy. She tells me about her week. About Dikeledi. About how bored she has been stuck at home.

I tell her about my work. Not everything. Just enough. She listens carefully, asking questions.

When the drinks arrive, we sip in comfortable silence for a while. Then she looks up at me, her expression thoughtful.

"This is nice."

"It is."

She takes another sip, then puts her glass down and looks at me seriously.

"Thank you. For the flowers and for bringing me here. I really needed this"

"You don't have to thank me, Fifi."

"I do though. You didn't have to do any of this."

"I wanted to."

She holds my gaze for a moment, then looks away, smiling softly.

"So is this our first date?" I ask.

She laughs immediately, shaking her head. "No. This is not a date."

"It feels like a date."

"Well, it isn’t."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

She can deny it all she wants. That is a date. And there will be many more

We finish our drinks and I pay the bill. We walk back to the car and I drive her home.

When we pull up outside her flat, she unbuckles her seatbelt and turns to me.

"Today was really nice."

"It was."

She opens the door and steps out, then leans down to look at me through the window.

"Thank you for today, Nqobizwe. Really."

"Anytime, Fifi."

She smiles, then walks towards her flat. I watch her until she disappears inside.

Then I lean back in my seat and smile to myself.

Chapter 8

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Narrated: Kingdom of Thabamoya

King Serithi Monaheng sits in the royal council chamber, his hands clasped tightly on the armrests of his throne. Beside him is his wife, Queen Mmabotle,

her face composed but her eyes watchful. Their two sons, Prince Lesole and Prince Qeto, stand to the side, their expressions unreadable.

The royal seer, Kapoko, sits cross-legged on his mat in front of them. He arrived without warning, carrying a message that has left him restless since the ancestors showed him the vision.

King Serithi leans forward, studying the seer's troubled face.

"Kapoko, o bonahala e ka o jere mathata a lefatshe. Ho etsahalang?" (Kapoko, you look like you are carrying the world's problems. What is going on?)

Kapoko exhales slowly, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them again.

"Mathata feela, Morenaka. Ke bona mathata. Empa ke mathata a ka lokisehang ha feela o ka mamela molaetsa mme wa o phethahatsa." (Problems, my King. I see problems. But they are problems that can be fixed if you listen to the message and do as it says.)

The King nods, eager to know what is going on. But deep down, he already knows. His stomach has been in knots since Kapoko arrived. He knew the ancestors would strike again. You don't abandon a Monaheng child and get to live a peaceful life without consequences.

Queen Mmabotle shifts in her seat, her patience already running thin.

"Ho etsahalang, Kapoko. Bua." (What is going on, Kapoko. Speak.)

Kapoko straightens his back and looks directly at the King.

"The princess has to come home. Badimo ba mo batla mabaleng a Thabamoya ka potlako." (The ancestors demand that she be brought to the soil of Thabamoya as soon as possible).

King Serithi shakes his head, his shoulders sagging under the weight of it all.

"I have looked everywhere. But it's like that woman disappeared into thin air. I couldn't find her anywhere. Kapoko, I spent my entire life looking for the princess and her mother."

His voice breaks slightly at the end. Defeated.

Kapoko nods slowly, his expression sympathetic but firm.

"That is the price you pay, my King. You know your ancestors."

He clears his throat.

"They say they will lead her home. Show her the way. When she arrives, you are to welcome her with warm hands."

King Serithi frowns, leaning back.

"Why now? After all this time?"

"She is the chosen Queen of a very powerful kingdom in KwaZulu-Natal. Before they can claim her, the Monaheng ancestors need her to belong here first."

The King's frown deepens.

"I don't understand, Kapoko."

Kapoko leans forward slightly, his voice low and serious.

"My King, you impregnated a married woman. The princess belongs to that woman's husband traditionally. She is recognized by his ancestors. The Monaheng ancestors tried to protect her, but they couldn't do much. She doesn't fully belong to them."

King Serithi's jaw tightens. His hands grip the armrests harder.

"That can be fixed."

"Of course it can. But that man's ancestors are probably livid. Maybe they are behind you not finding her all these years."

The King exhales sharply through his nose.

"What do I do?"

"You apologize with a cow when you go to claim your child. Another cow for her, the princess. Then a cow to thank them. If you fail, you will lose everything. The kingdom will suffer."

The King nods slowly, absorbing the weight of it.

"There's more."

Everyone in the room tenses. Queen Mmabotle's hand grips the edge of her seat.

"As the chosen Queen, that puts her in danger. She is powerful and a threat to other kingdoms. You know how royalty politics are. She needs protection from

your ancestors, her ancestors, and the one she will be married to. She has to know she is royalty. When she gets here, you are to immediately deliver those cows."

Kapoko stands up and bows.

"That is all, Morenaka."

The King nods, his mind racing. Kapoko leaves the chamber, the heavy doors closing behind him with a dull thud.

Silence fills the room.

Then Prince Lesole and Prince Qeto turn and walk out without saying a word. Their footsteps echo down the corridor. They are still angry at their father. For hurting their mother like that. For putting the kingdom at risk. And now they have to accept a sibling they never asked for.

King Serithi watches them go, his chest tight. He feels horrible. This has come back to haunt him. He wants his daughter home too, but he sees the pain it brings. His actions have caused pain to so many people. And might cause even worse.

He turns to his wife, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Ke kopa tshwarelo, Mmabotle." (Please forgive me, Mmabotle.) "I never intended to cause you this much heartbreak."

Queen Mmabotle looks at him for a long moment. Then she reaches over and places her hand on his.

"I forgave you a long time ago. You have been apologizing ever since. You hurt me, yes. But you showed how sorry you are and I chose to forgive you. Because I love you. And because of my vows."

She squeezes his hand.

"Now is not the time for this. It is time to plan how you are going to approach this woman's family. Do they even know that the girl is not theirs? Will they allow you to take her? These are all the factors we need to think of and how we are going to go about it."

The King nods, his throat tight with emotion. He thanks God every day for his wife. It took time for her to forgive him, but he spent every day showing how sorry he was. It was a once-off thing. He fell for temptation. Forgot that he is King. And now look where that put him. He missed years of his daughter's life.

He doesn't even know her. Where does he begin to build a relationship with her?

"I wonder how she looks now. She is a grown woman. 28 years old."

Queen Mabotle smiles softly, her eyes distant.

"I am happy she is coming home. Finally."

And now they wait.

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The Ngwenya Kingdom

Queen Thobekile rushes inside Vilakazi's hut, her breathing heavy. She has realized that the King has changed. Even though he hasn't said anything, she can tell. He is not the same. Now she fears that he suspects. Or worse, knows.

She wants answers. She is scared. Scared because she knows what happens to witches. Especially if you bewitch or try to bewitch THE KING.

She paces up and down, biting her nails. Her heart is racing.

"Vilakazi, what if he knows? Do you know what they will do to me? Do you?"

Her voice is higher than she intends. Panicked.

Vilakazi sits calmly on his mat, watching her with cold, calculating eyes.

"Relax, Thobekile. If he knew anything, do you think you'd still be here?"

"You don't understand, Vilakazi. You don't. Maybe he is still planning my death."

He laughs bitterly. A sound that echoes off the walls.

"You know your husband. He acts immediately."

She stops pacing and sits down heavily, wringing her hands.

"You might be right. Knowing him, he doesn't play games. He strikes same time."

She pauses, her mind racing.

"But Nqobizwe? He knows something. How did he even know what I did to his father?"

"I suspect the royal seer. But to be sure, we need to get close to Nqobizwe."

Thobekile frowns, her frustration showing.

"Get close to him how when he hates me? He doesn't even try to hide it."

Vilakazi sits quietly for a moment, thinking. His fingers tap against his knee.

Then he speaks.

"Sbonga."

Thobekile frowns deeper.

"What about my son?"

"Your son listens to you. He hates Nqobizwe. So if you convince him about the throne, he can get close to Nqobizwe. Use the 'I want to build a relationship with my brother' card. Once he is close, we will know who the chosen Queen is. Then you will do your part and I will do mine"

Thobekile's eyes widen.

"So you want him to pretend?"

"Do you have any better plan? We can't do anything to the King now. He is strengthened. But if we get close to Nqobizwe, eliminate his chosen one, you can still get what you want. Your son crowned King."

She smiles slowly as it registers. Her eyes light up.

"Oh, and he will be crowned King. I will talk to him. He will listen. Let me go."

She stands up quickly and leaves the same way she came, determination in her stride.

Little did she know that Nqobizwe has men following her every move.

These are not the royal guards. No. These are his men. Men who work for him in the shadows. He chose them for this job because he knows they are only loyal to him. And no one knows them. Less suspicion.

Even Queen Thobekile didn't suspect a thing.

One of the men steps into the shadows and pulls out his phone. He dials.

"What do you have for me?" Nqobizwe asks on the other end.

"We have the witch's location."

Nqobizwe's jaw tightens. His eyes darken.

"Nice job. Send all the details."

Within seconds, everything captured is sent.

Now it's time to deliver. The work is not done, but what they have found is concrete.

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Nqobizwe

Viper and the boys did a good job. I knew Thobekile was a witch. It was quite obvious. I wonder what her plan is now. Too bad I can't kill her. I don't want to feel my ancestors' wrath. They will deal with her. But that doesn't mean I can't make her life a living hell.

What I am more interested in is that man she was meeting with. Her supplier. He has to go. But first, I want to know what he knows. Why is Thobekile doing this?

I decide to drive to Sizwe's place. We need to discuss how we are dealing with this witch.

I pull up to his gate and security opens immediately. Lerato, his girlfriend, opens the door for me. She smiles, but I can tell its fake. She doesn't like me. Not that I care.

"Nqobizwe, nice to see you."

I nod.

"Where's Sizwe?"

"His study."

I walk straight past her and down the corridor. I knock on the study door.

"Come in," Sizwe calls out.

I push the door open and step inside.

"Hey, man."

He stands up and we shake hands, doing our usual handshake.

"I thought you'd be busy trying to win Refilwe's heart."

I laugh and sit down across from him.

"You are stupid; you know that?"

"I'm just saying. The universe brought you close. Now it's on you."

He smirks and pours us both whiskey.

"I know what I am doing."

He doesn't know she is the chosen one. I trust Sizwe. He is like a brother to me. But I can't say anything now because even I am not sure. I am just crossing fingers she is. Because my heart wants her and only her.

"How far are the boys? Did they find anything?" he asks, handing me a glass.

"That's why I am here. They found the witch's place."

Sizwe leans back in his chair, his expression serious now.

"What are you planning?"

I pause for a minute, swirling the whiskey in my glass.

"I want to burn that hut with him inside. But first, I want answers."

He nods slowly.

"So we capture him first. Torture him. Get answers. Then burn him?"

I nod.

"That's what I want. They could be planning something now."

"True. But we have to be smart about this. It's not a normal war where we fight with fists and guns or money. We are talking about witches here. Dark magic."

I chuckle. He is right. I didn't think this through.

"I didn't think about it."

He nods and chuckles.

"Because you are angry. You see why you need me in your life?"

I laugh and throw a pen at him. He dodges it easily.

"On a serious note though, I need a proper plan."

"We can do it our way. But because he is a witch, he might know before we even come near him. So I advise you talk to the royal seer first. Hear what he says. Maybe strengthen us first or give us something. I don't want to fight witches with guns. We are definitely losing that battle, my guy."

I laugh again. He is right though. I have to talk to the seer and hear what he says about this. I don't want to involve my father because this is too personal for him. He won't be able to control his anger. He is fine making assumptions and being in denial.

"I will talk to him."

"Yeah. Do that. In the meantime, I will talk to Ayanda. We will sketch a plan on how to get him."

I nod. I know we will pull it off.

I take a sip of my drink and look at him.

"I see you are taking things to the next level with Lerato. It's starting to be serious now."

He chokes on his drink, coughing.

"Me and Lerato serious? What makes you say that?"

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"She opens doors for your guests now. And how long has she been here?"

"She is just forward. Akukho nix oku serious lah." (There is nothing serious here.) "She is fun and I like that. You know how I roll."

"Mhm. If you say so."

"I do say so vele. Wena usahlulwa intombi namanje." (You still can't handle your woman.) "But you are here talking too much."

I laugh.

"Who said uyangihlula? We were on a date yesterday."

"Oh is it? Now that's what I am talking about."

"But she keeps telling herself it was not a date. She is scared of something. She built this wall. But it will crumble because she will be mine. Willingly."

He whistles.

"You think she has been hurt before?"

"Yeah. I think it has to do with her family. Something happened."

"You still have a lot of work to do. She will take time to warm up to you."

"I know. But I will work as hard as I can. Now that I have spent time with her, I am more sure than ever that she is meant for me. She is going to be mine."

"You think she is your chosen one?"

I pause. Stare into my glass.

"I don't know. But I hope she is."

He nods slowly.

"What if she is not? What will you do?"

I never thought of it like that. After what the seer said, I became sure she is the chosen one. But I can be wrong. That thought gave me motivation to try things out with her.

"She is. She has to be."

"Eish, man. Now I understand what you meant when you said you can't do anything about how you feel about her. Because now it looks like you are into her full force."

I lean back and sigh.

"The way she's making me feel makes me scared, Sizwe. I have loved before. But this? This is a different form of love."

I don't want to have these thoughts that maybe she is not the chosen one. I don't see myself staying away from her. She has to be the one.

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Refilwe

I am on a video call with Dikeledi, my laptop propped up on the coffee table. I love how quick we were to be close again. You would swear we never lost contact for ten years.

She is telling me about how her brother Tumelo is a blessing and how hard he works. I really admire their relationship. They have each other and it's beautiful.

"Anyways, enough about Tumelo." She leans closer to the camera, grinning. "So about Mr. Handsome. Where did you find him? Actually, he is much more handsome than the one you came with here. Where do you get these men, Refilwe?"

I laugh so hard, throwing my head back.

"Ke tsebile." (I knew it.) "Mr. Handsome is the guy I got into an accident with. He was just taking me to see my car. Nothing hectic."

She doesn't look like she believes me. Her eyebrows raise.

"Why is he the one taking you to your car? He is the one who crashed your car?"

I smile, thinking of how crazy I am going to sound now.

"It's actually the other way around. I was at fault. I crashed his car. And he has been helping me ever since."

"That smile, girl. Why is he helping you? You trust him?"

She sounds worried now.

She is asking a valid question. I bite my lip.

"I think I am starting to trust him. I know it's quick and all, but he has been nothing but kind and helpful to me."

"Hopefully he won't want something in return. Did he ask for anything?"

"No. But..." I sigh. "He is asking me out and I told him I can only offer friendship. And he refuses. Said I will not friendzone him. He wants to be more than that."

"So from the accident he was hooked? Mhm that's... well, I don’t know what to think of this. Now the question is, why are you not trying things out and see where it goes? You are single and he is hot. What's stopping you?"

I swallow, my throat suddenly tight.

"Apparently he has seen me at my favourite restaurant several times. He even knows my favourite meal. I guess he is always there too."

"Oh my God, could it be fate? How you met, maybe? His ancestors must be working overtime. It's clear he is interested in you. To even remember you and what you always order."

I smile, thinking about him.

"Oh DK, he is not just hot. He is easy to be around. I can be myself and he seems to like that, which makes me comfortable. The way he does things for me without being asked. You know he came early in the morning today so we could talk? Yesterday we didn't end our call on good terms and first thing in the morning, he is here."

"Refilwe, he sounds genuine."

"He really does. But DK, I have this fear. I promised myself to stay single. I have been hurt so much and now I just don't want to try again."

My voice cracks slightly.

"But babe, you can't blame every man for your exes' mistakes. They messed up. It doesn't mean every man will."

Tears start streaming down my face. I wipe them quickly but they keep coming.

"It's just... the minute I share my story, they look at me differently and start distancing themselves. Senzo was the only one who was honest with me. He said he can't be in a relationship with someone who has so many burdens. He doesn't want to always be consoling me. Always watching what he says so I don't get triggered. And if he wants to marry me, then what? It will be a whole issue because I ran away from home. He said he is not ready for all that. He wants a peaceful relationship. I am broken and unfortunately he can't heal me."

I am a crying mess now. When those words start playing in my head again, I remember how hurt I was. How small I felt.

Dikeledi wipes her own tears, her face filled with anger and sadness.

"Oh my God, Ref. I am so sorry he said that. And how are you friends with such a person, Refilwe? He has no heart."

I shake my head, wiping my face with the back of my hand.

"Ah, he apologized and I just got over it. So after he said that, I realized it's probably what people think of me. So I don't want to give Nqobizwe and I a chance only for him to leave me and I'll be left hurt again."

"I understand where you are coming from. It makes sense. My advice? If you are also interested in him, tell him your fears. Tell him your story. Then he will decide whether he wants to stay or not. That way you are not too attached."

"I don't know, DK. And he looks like a man who doesn't give up."

"Face your fears, my love. What's there to lose?"

I just sigh heavily.

"Let's stop talking about me. Wena, who's your man?"

She laughs.

"I wish I had a man. That's why I am asking where you get these handsome men."

I laugh through my tears.

"Well, maybe you should visit me. You will see these handsome men. Maybe you might get yourself some."

She screams, covering her mouth.

"No, actually maybe you are right!"

Now that I have said it, I love the idea of her visiting me. We would have so much fun. She is one person who knows my upbringing and has never treated me differently.

"I am serious, DK. We have to plan it. I would really enjoy having you here. You don't know how happy I am to have reconnected with you."

I wipe my tears. I cry a lot. But I look at the screen and she is wiping hers. We are two broken souls in our own way.

"Me too, Ref. I am so happy. You know what? Let's plan it. I need some fresh air as well. Come to think of it..." She laughs. "Oh, look at us. Why are we crying?"

I laugh, sniffling.

"We are a mess."

We talk a bit more, laugh through our tears, and by the time we hang up, I feel lighter.

Broken. But not alone.

Chapter 9

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Refilwe

I am woken up by a call. I slept really late last night. Dikeledi and I ended up venting and became a crying mess. I let it ring, pulling the pillow over my head. Whoever is calling at this time will have to try again later.

I try to sleep but the damn phone rings again. Persistent.

I groan and reach for it blindly, picking up without looking at who's calling.

"What? What?" I say harshly, my voice thick with sleep.

"What, what to me, Refilwe?"

My eyes fly open. I lose all my sleep at the same time. Why does he make me so nervous?

I clear my throat quickly, sitting up in bed.

"Oh my God, Zwee. I'm sorry about that. You woke me up from my sleep. I didn't check who was calling."

"Did you see the time? Are you okay?"

His voice is soft now. Concerned.

I look at the time on my phone. Ten AM. Gosh, did I really sleep for that long?

"I am fine. I slept really late. I was on a call and next thing I know it's three AM."

"On a call?" His voice drops slightly.

"Yes, with Dikeledi, my childhood friend. We just reconnected. There was a lot to catch up on."

He is quiet for some time. Then he speaks.

"Oh, that's wonderful. Remember to rest enough, Fifi."

"Of course."

Silence settles between us. Then he clears his throat.

"I wanted to check on you. And ask if you need anything."

See. I am melting now. It's these gestures he does that make it hard for me not to feel anything. Did I say feel? Am I feeling something for him?

I bite my lip.

"Uhm... that's very nice of you, Zwee. For now, I am fine. I don't need anything. But I will definitely call."

" Any headaches? Nausea? Dizziness?"

"I am fine, Zwee. I promise I will call if there's anything."

"Please do. I am at the office today. There's a lot of work but I will make time and check up on you in the afternoon. Is that okay?"

My heart does a little flip.

"That's okay."

"We will talk later then. Oh, and Fifi?"

"Yes?"

"Remember what I said yesterday."

I frown slightly.

"What did you say?"

"You will be mine. You just don't know it yet."

I press my lips together. My cheeks are already turning red. I am fighting for my life here not to blush but this man, this man knows exactly what he is doing.

He continues before I can respond.

"You don't have to say anything. Enjoy your day."

He ends the call.

I sit there, staring at my phone. I lost my voice. I didn't know what to say.

I throw myself back on the bed, holding the pillow against my chest. I think I should take DK's advice. Maybe tell him about myself before I get attached. Before he gets attached too.

We will see how it goes.

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Nqobizwe

"Sir, there's a man here asking to see you." That's my PA.

I don't look up from my laptop. "Does he have an appointment? If no, then don't let him in."

"He says he is your brother. Prince Sibongakonke Ngwenya."

I hiss under my breath. Of course he had to say his whole name and title. I wonder what he is doing here.

I lean back in my chair, already annoyed. "Let him in."

My mood is already ruined. I was having such a good morning after hearing Refilwe's voice. Now my brother is here to piss me off. I already know.

The door opens and Sbonga walks in, scanning my office slowly. Taking in the view. The furniture. The size of it all.

"Living large, huh?" That's the first thing that comes out of his mouth.

I don't even look at him.

"What are you doing here?" You cannot miss the annoyance in my voice.

He sits down across from me without being invited.

"I would never understand why you hate me this much. I have never even done anything to you."

He's got it wrong. I don't hate my brother. I just want him far from me because he lets Queen Thobekile control his life. He is your typical mama's boy who has no backbone. I don't trust Thobekile, so why should I trust Sbonga?

"I don't hate you and you know that. You just annoy me. How did you know I was here?"

He shrugs, leaning back casually. "It was easy. You are famous. I searched your name and found that you own a few companies, this being the major one. I called your PA, confirmed you were here. Easy."

I narrow my eyes. "Whatever you want must be important."

He looks around again, then back at me. "Why are you hiding that you are filthy rich? Richer than your father even. You hid it very well. You have done well for yourself, brother. I must say."

I sigh heavily. "Who said I hid anything? If it's up there for everyone to see, how is it a secret?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"You have never said anything at home."

"Because I don't have to. I don't go around telling people my business."

"We are not people. We are your family."

I chuckle bitterly.

"When it suits you?"

He looks down, his jaw tightening.

I lean forward slightly.

"What are you doing here, Sbonga?"

"Is it wrong to visit my brother?"

The words sound forced. Rehearsed.

"It's not wrong, but it's suspicious. What are you up to?" My voice is cold now.

"Come on, man. I just want us to bury whatever is happening between us. Try to get along for the sake of peace."

I shake my head slowly.

"Whatever you are trying to do, Sbonga, stop it. It won't end well. Trust me."

"I am serious, Nqobizwe. I am being the bigger person here."

I shift in my chair. Look at him briefly, then bring my hands together on the table. I stare. His eyes can't stay in one place. He swallows and I can see his breathing changes.

I smirk.

"So you are finally not under your mom's control? Phela she has an upper hand in your life even though you are an adult. You can't make your own decisions."

"No, she does not."

He is defensive now. Exactly what I expected.

"She does. Name one thing you have of your own, Sbonga. Just one. Not what Father provided. What you built yourself?"

I look at him, waiting for an answer.

Nothing.

As expected.

"So you think you are better than me?"

His voice is sharp now. Bitter.

"I don't think, brother. I know."

I lean forward.

"You listen to your mother too much. Make something of yourself. Stop relying on the fact that you are a prince. Is that the only thing you want to be known for the rest of your life?"

He swallows hard. I continue.

"You have resources. Money. But your lazy mind doesn't work. Even Father worked like a man and built his own businesses instead of relying on the crown, Sbonga.."

"You don't know anything about my life."

His voice rises. Why is he angry? I am only advising as an older brother.

I nod slowly.

"Mhm. You are right. But think about it."

The door opens and Ayanda and Sizwe walk in. I was expecting them.

"Sbonga my Prince, how are you?" That's Sizwe extending his hand to Sbonga, and they shake hands. I just chuckle.

Him saying "My Prince" is on purpose. I know it. Because Sbonga never misses a chance to mention that he is THE PRINCE.

Ayanda greets respectfully. "Prince Sbonga, how are you?"

Sbonga just nods stiffly.

I stand up. "Sbonga, if you would excuse us. We have important things to discuss."

He stands up slowly, clearing his throat.

"I will be on my way out."

I lock eyes with him.

"Think about what I said. And Sbonga, if you have an agenda, drop it. Because you don't want to go against me."

That's a warning. He better stay in his lane.

He walks out without saying anything. The door closes behind him.

Ayanda sits down, smirking.

"I thought he is not allowed to leave the palace."

He is being sarcastic.

Sizwe leans against the desk. "What does he want?"

"He wants us to try to get along."

They both laugh.

"He must think you are stupid. I wonder what he is planning." Sizwe says.

I grab my jacket from the back of my chair.

"I will find out. But he is not my worry now. Let's go to Ngwenya. I want us to discuss the mission. I also have something to take care of there."

We stand and leave the office.

•••

Narrated

Sbonga is very angry. He is shaking as he walks to his car in the parking lot. According to him, Nqobizwe thinks he is better. Because he has businesses and he is an heir to the throne, he speaks to him like he is nothing.

He slams the car door and grips the steering wheel tightly.

He drives to the hotel he is staying at. Once inside his room, he paces back and forth, then pulls out his phone and calls his mother.

She answers immediately. "Mfana wami, kuhamba kanjani?" (My son, how is it going?)

"Mama, I am going to kill Nqobizwe. I don't think I can do this pretending. I hate him."

He is fuming and it's clear in his voice.

Queen Thobekile panics. Sbonga can't walk out now. He has to do this.

"Sbonga, what happened? What did he do?"

"He thinks he is better. He says you control me and I have nothing. He says I have nothing other than being A PRINCE. HE CALLED ME LAZY. I have never been disrespected like this in my life. I hate him."

Queen Thobekile's breathing changes. She is fuming now too.

"That piece of shit. He doesn't know me. I will show him who I am. Listen, mfana wami, try to calm down. We will get him. Him and his mother think they are better than us. Nx. I will show them."

She hangs up abruptly.

She is angry. The plan needs to work fast.

If only Sbonga finds that girl.

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Refilwe

I am in my living room trying to find something to watch on Netflix. Nothing is catching my attention. Then a knock comes at my door.

Who could it be? I am thinking Zwee. I feel the excitement rise inside. I rush to open the door and my face falls immediately.

I quickly mask it and smile. It's Senzo.

"Senzo, hi. What are you doing here?"

I move aside so he can pass.

"I came to check up on you and take you out. You need to get out."

I chuckle softly. "I was out yesterday." I smile "But I won't say no to going out. I am bored anyway."

He smiles. "I want you to tell me about this accident. It wasn't that bad, mos? You look perfectly fine."

"I just hit my head. Nothing hectic. I am thankful for Nqobizwe as well. He really helped me."

He frowns. "Who is that?"

I laugh. "Oh my, of course you don't know him. He is the man I crashed into. And wena, why are you not at work?"

He nods.

"I took a half day."

I frown. "Half day for taking me out?"

He smiles. "Yes. Haw, I wanted to make sure you are okay."

"Aww, shame. You take this friendship seriously, neh?"

He laughs."Yazi, I will leave. You are too forward."

I laugh too.

"Let me go change before you change your mind. You can have a seat."

I rush to my bedroom and change quickly into simple blue jean shorts, not too short, and a white top with sandals. I grab my bag and walk out.

"I am ready. Let's go."

"Ngwenya, right?"

"Definitely."

We walk out. I lock the door and we get into his car.

"I don't see your car. Was it that bad?"

"Not really. Nqobizwe took it to get fixed. I didn't see how bad it was but I am getting it tomorrow. I went to see it yesterday."

"Now I want to meet this Nqobizwe guy. Seems you guys are close now."

I smile and don't answer.

Because I am not sure.

Are we close?

Chapter 10

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Nqobizwe

I am behind the counter with the restaurant manager, Thulani. We are going through the ledger; he is explaining profit margins or inventory costs.

Then I hear it. That laugh.

My head snaps up like I've been struck. No matter how loud the restaurant gets, or how many voices fill this space, my ears will always find hers.

And there she is. My jaw clenches immediately when I see that she is not alone.

My chest tightens. Then drops.

A man walks beside her. And she is laughing at something he just said. That bright, unguarded laugh I have only heard a handful of times. The laugh I thought was mine.

My jaw locks. My fingers curl into fists on the counter.

Who the hell is that? Ngiyalingwa la! (I am being tested here)

Her favourite table by the window is occupied. I watch as they scan the room and choose another table near the back. She glances around, looking for me, maybe? And her eyes find mine.

She spots me and raises her hand, smiling

I don't wave back.

Thulani is still talking. His mouth is moving. Words are coming out. But all I can hear is the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

I stare at her. At him. At the way he pulls out her chair. At the way she sits down, still smiling.

She says something to him. Then she stands again and starts walking toward me.

Toward the counter.

She stops in front of me, her smile still in place. Soft and a little uncertain now.

"Hi."

I nod. That's all I give her.

Her smile falters. Confusion flickers across her face. Then something else. Hurt.

Good. Join the club.

She clears her throat.

"Uhm... why didn't you tell me you work here?"

"You never asked."

My voice is cold. I don't even recognize it.

Her eyes widen. She is shocked.

"Haiboh, yoh. Let me leave you to it then."

She turns to leave. And for a split second, I want to reach out. Pull her back and apologize.

"Refilwe."

She stops. Turns back slowly.

"Yeah?"

I step out from behind the counter. Close the distance between us until I am standing right in front of her. Close enough to smell her perfume.

"Why didn't you tell me you were seeing someone?"

Her eyes dart to the table where the man is sitting. Then back to me.

"You never asked."

She throws my words right back at me. With attitude.

It stings worse than I expected.

She doesn't wait for a response. She turns and walks away. And I stand there like an idiot, watching her go.

Then I turn on my heel and walk straight to the office.

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Ayanda and Sizwe are already inside, sitting on the couch, laptops open. They look up when I walk in and immediately freeze.

I pace back and forth. My jaw is tight enough to crack teeth.

"What happened to you?"

Sizwe asks carefully.

"Ngiyobulala umuntu namhlanje." (I am killing someone today)

They both stare at me.

Sizwe closes his laptop slowly.

"Who? And why? What happened?"

"Tell us what happened before you make drastic decisions."

Ayanda, always the voice of reason.

I finally stop pacing and drop onto the couch, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees.

"Refilwe is here."

Sizwe blinks.

"That's who you're killing?"

"No."

I grit my teeth.

"I would never. It's the person she's with. She's seeing someone. And she didn't think to tell me."

Ayanda clears his throat.

"Well, before you kill him, remember, he didn't do anything wrong. Uwena omudle ithende. (Technically, you're the one going after his girl)

I shoot him a look that could burn through steel.

"It's true, my Prince. Raw as it is."

He doesn't flinch.

Sizwe leans back, arms crossed.

"So what happened? You just saw them walk in and assumed?"

"She waved at me. I didn't wave back. I was too angry. Then she came over and asked why I didn't tell her I work here. I said she never asked. I was cold. I know I was."

"So you jumped to conclusions and got angry over probably nothing."

"I asked her why she didn't tell me she's seeing someone. She said I never asked. Then she walked off."

Silence.

Then they both burst out laughing.

I stare at them.

"Care to explain what's so funny?"

Sizwe wipes his eyes.

"Oh, I like her. She doesn't play."

"She threw your words right back at you. What a comeback."

Ayanda is grinning now too.

"Her saying you never asked doesn't mean she's dating him. She was probably just making you feel how she felt when you said the same thing to her."

I drag my hands down my face.

"I always tell you to control your anger. You could have just talked to her nicely."

Sizwe shakes his head.

I stand.

"I need to talk to her."

•••

Refilwe

"Ref, are you okay?"

Senzo's voice pulls me back.

"Yeah. You were saying?"

"I lost you there for a minute. What's going on?"

I was lost in thought. We are still sitting here, food in front of us, but I can't focus. All I can think about is Nqobizwe.

The way he looked at me. So cold and distant.

It hurt more than I want to admit.

I hate that he has this effect on me. This is exactly why I don't want to get attached. But I think I already am.

And he thinks Senzo is my boyfriend. Serves him right for jumping to conclusions. He could have asked. But no. He got angry instead.

"Fifi."

I look up.

Nqobizwe is standing at our table.

Staring at me.

Senzo looks confused, glancing between us.

I don't say anything. I just stare back.

Nqobizwe clears his throat.

"Can I have a word with you?"

I sigh.

"Senzo, this is Nqobizwe. The guy I told you about."

Senzo extends his hand with a polite smile.

"Oh, this is Nqobizwe. Hey man, I heard about the accident. How are you?"

Nqobizwe looks at the hand. Then at Senzo. For a second, I think he's not going to shake it.

But he does. Briefly.

"Can I steal her for a minute?"

His tone is calm.

"Sure, man."

I know Senzo well enough to see he doesn't like Nqobizwe. He's faking the friendliness.

I stand and follow Nqobizwe to the back office.

The room is filled with paperwork. Whiskey glasses sit on the desk. Does he own this place?

"Don't mind the mess. I was in a meeting. Come."

He leads me to the couch. We both sit.

He clears his throat.

"How are you?"

"What is it, Nqobizwe? What do you want to talk about?"

He chuckles.

He pauses, his eyes softening.

"You look beautiful."

I stand.

"I'm leaving."

His hand shoots out, gently wrapping around my wrist.

"Why are you so angry?"

I look down at his hand on mine. Then at his face.

"It's okay when you're the one who's angry? You were angry at me for no reason."

"Please. Sit."

I sigh and sit back down.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a boyfriend?" He asks.

"Because I don't have a boyfriend, Nqobizwe."

He smiles. Relief washes over his face. He takes both my hands in his.

"Who is that man you're with?"

"He's my friend. We're work buddies."

"Then why is he here with you if you're work buddies?"

"I was in an accident, Nqobizwe. He came to check up on me."

Why am I explaining myself? I hate how much power he has over me.

"Why are you saying my name like that?"

"Isn't Nqobizwe your name?"

He smiles.

"I'm sorry "

I sigh.

"Why were you angry?"

"I hated seeing you with another man. I thought he was your boyfriend. And it killed me."

His voice is low.

"Why get angry though? I can have a boyfriend if I want one."

"Not when you told me you're not ready for a relationship."

I laugh.

"I can change my mind anytime."

He chuckles, leaning closer.

"The only time you'll change your mind is when you finally decide to be mine, Fifi."

"You're too sure of yourself."

"I have to be. You need a confident man by your side."

I laugh, throwing my head back and stand.

"Ayi Zwee, let me go."

"Ngicela ungahambi mama?" (Please don’t go, mama)

I shake my head, moving toward the door.

"Senzo is probably worried by now."

His jaw clenches at the name.

I reach for the door handle. Before I can turn it, his hand slams against the door above my head, blocking it.

I freeze.

I can feel him behind me. The heat of his body. His breath near my ear.

"I will take you home."

I swallow hard. My voice comes out barely a whisper.

"I came with Senzo. It would be mean."

"He's a man. He'll understand."

"Would you understand if it was you?"

"Come on, Fifi. I'm going to be bored all by myself here."

laugh despite myself.

"Don't lie. Ask nicely. There’s no need to lie."

He gently brushes my cheek with his thumb, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Kodwa udlala ngami nkosazana. I've been asking nicely."

I blush, looking down.

"Uhm…Okay. Let me go tell him."

He smiles. Leans down and kisses my forehead.

"Good."

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I walk back to the table, my heart still racing.

Senzo already has his keys in his hand.

"That was long."

"I'm sorry. And uhm... “I clear my throat “I won't be going home right now. Nqobizwe will take me. Thank you so much for lunch."

His face hardens.

"What do you mean?"

“What I am saying is, you can leave. I’m not going yet. I’ll stay behind and Zwee will drop me off later.”

"Really, Refilwe? You even call him Zwee?"

His tone is sharp, edged with irritation.

"What's wrong?" I frown "Our lunch is over. And we were leaving mos. Bothata keng?" (What's the problem?)

"You trust him?" He studies me for a moment, his jaw tightening. "You like him, don't you?"

Do I?

Maybe. I'm not sure. But I can't stop thinking about spending the rest of the evening with him.

The thought alone sends a quiet thrill through me.

"Senzo, I don't understand why you're getting worked up."

"You came here with me, Fifi. Unless you forgot."

"Don't piss me off, Senzo. How old am I? Five? If I want to stay behind I will."

My voice rises.

"Are you serious right now?"

"Fifi are you okay?"

I look up and Nqobizwe is at the table now.

Senzo grabs his keys roughly. He stands, bumping Nqobizwe's shoulder hard as he walks past.

Two men erupt from the corner table wearing all black. I notice Nqobizwe shake his head like a signal. They both return to their seats.

I watch, mortified, as Nqobizwe's eyes follow Senzo all the way to the door. The look on his face is dark and dangerous.

Then he turns to me. His face softens instantly.

"You okay?"

I nod.

But honestly, I'm shocked. I don't know what just happened.

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Narrated

Dikeledi is walking from the tuck shop, a small plastic bag swinging at her side. Bread and milk.

As she passes Lentswe's yard, a sharp voice cuts through the air.

"Hey Wena!"

Dikeledi stops and turns.

Lentswe is standing at her gate, arms crossed, face twisted in irritation.

Dikeledi frowns.

"Are you talking to me?"

" Tloho kwano" (Come here).

The tone is demanding and rude.

Dikeledi walks slowly toward the gate, already annoyed.

"What is it, Mme Lentswe?"

"Where does Refilwe stay?"

Lentswe asks it like Dikeledi owes her the answer.

Dikeledi's frown deepens.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Don't ask me questions. Just tell me where she stays."

Lentswe's voice rises.

Dikeledi shifts the plastic bag to her other hand. Straightens her back.

"With all due respect, Mme, I don't know, but even if I did, I was not gonna tell you anything. If Refilwe wanted you to know, she would have told you herself."

Lentswe's face hardens. She steps closer.

"You think you're clever? I'm talking to you nicely and you have the audacity to refuse me?"

Dikeledi laughs. Bitter.

"Nicely? You called me like I'm a dog."

Lentswe points a finger at her.

"Watch your mouth, wena. I am older than you."

"Being older doesn't give you the right to be disrespectful. You want respect? Show it first."

Lentswe's eyes narrow.

"You're just like your mother. Always thinking you're better."

Dikeledi's chest tightens. The anger rises but she keeps her voice steady.

"Don't talk about my mother. You didn't know her."

"I knew her well enough. Always running around helping that useless girl."

Dikeledi steps forward. Her voice drops.

"That useless girl has done more with her life than you ever will. Refilwe made something of herself despite everything you and your husband put her through."

She pauses. Looks Lentswe up and down.

"And you? You're still here. Bitter, angry and begging for scraps."

Lentswe's face flushes red.

"How dare you…"

"I dare because it's the truth. You treated Refilwe like trash. You abused her. And now you want her address so you can what? Harass her?

Lentswe is shaking now.

"Get away from my gate before I…"

"Before you what?"

Dikeledi doesn't move.

"You have no power over me, Mme. And you have no power over Refilwe anymore. She's free from you. And if you think I'm going to help you drag her back into your mess, you're mistaken."

Lentswe stands frozen. Mouth open. Unable to respond.

Dikeledi walks away. Her hands shaking.

But she doesn't look back.

Chapter 11

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Nqobizwe

"Zwee, I am so sorry. I don't know what just happened." Refilwe says, voice small and apologetic.

"It's okay. Let's go back to the office."

It is not okay. I am boiling inside. My hands clench into fists at my sides. I am only controlling myself because of her. And because we are in public. But that boy will know me. He will KNOW who I am. I should pay him a visit. Nx.

Refilwe looks back at the table in the corner where my guards are seated. They are tense. I stopped them because I didn't want to cause chaos. Especially with Refilwe here. I don't want to scare her.

We walk through the restaurant toward the back. I place my hand on the small of her back, guiding her. She doesn't pull away.

We get to the office. I close the door behind us and lean against it for a moment, taking a breath. I have paperwork to go through. The idea was to have her here with me while I work. I don't know if I'll be able to focus now, but I'll try.

I walk to my desk, rolling up my sleeves.

"I have some paperwork to go through. I'll try to be quick."

She throws herself on the couch with a dramatic sigh, kicking off her sandals.

"Take your time. I will just look cute here. You won't even notice I'm here. I'm not in a rush."

I smile, pulling out my chair.

"Make yourself comfortable then."

I sit at my desk and start working, flipping open the ledger.

"So you own Ngwenya?"

I chuckle, not looking up. I thought she said I won't notice she's here. It hasn't even been a minute. I knew she wouldn't be quiet.

"Yes, it's mine."

I say, finally looking at her.

She's stretched out on the couch, her head propped up on her hand.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't told you a lot of things, Fifi. We haven't gotten the time to sit and talk about our lives. I own a couple of businesses. But anything you want to know, you can ask."

She nods, swinging her legs up and placing her feet on the couch, laying on her back.

"Why name the restaurant Ngwenya though?"

"That's my surname."

"Oh, makes sense. You're doing a good job though. Your food slaps."

I glance at her, amused. "Thank you."

I write something down, then glance at her again.

"I saw you also have bodyguards. I get why. Being a businessman, you have to be safe. I saw they were ready to kickbox Senzo. They don't play, neh?"

I laugh, leaning back in my chair and looking at her fully now.

"Fifi, I'm trying to work here, mama."

"I'm sorry. I'll be quiet."

She makes a zipping motion across her lips with her fingers, then throws away the imaginary key.

I smile and force myself back to the paperwork.

Her being quiet means standing up and walking around my office, running her fingers along the bookshelf. Picking up a picture frame. Putting it down. Inspecting the certificates on the wall.

I find myself staring. Watching her move. She is a goddess.

She turns suddenly and catches me.

"I thought you were working, Mr. Ngwenya."

I smile and drop my eyes back to the ledger.

"I want to take a quick nap. I just feel so sleepy all of a sudden."

She yawns, stretching her arms above her head as she heads back to the couch.

"Are you okay? We can leave, so you can sleep comfortably."

"I'm fine. Wena, do your work and wake me up when you're done."

She curls up on the couch, tucking her hands under her cheek.

"Are you sure?"

Nothing.

"Fifi, are you sure?"

She doesn't respond. Is she asleep already?

I stand up from my chair, pushing it back quietly. I walk over to the couch and crouch down beside her.

She is sleeping. Her chest rises and falls steadily. She's snoring lightly.

She was humming just a few minutes ago. How can she fall asleep in seconds? It's like she passed out.

"Fifi?"

She mumbles something I can't hear. Her brow furrows slightly.

I lean down and kiss her forehead gently, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

She must be tired.

I stand and walk back to my desk, leaving her to rest.

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Refilwe

I look around and I don't recognize the place I'm in. I turn in a circle, searching. I look for Nqobizwe. He's not here. The last thing I remember is lying on the couch to sleep.

This place is so beautiful. It looks like heaven. The grass is impossibly green. The trees are tall and lush, swaying gently. I see a river in the distance. The water looks crystal clear. Even the atmosphere feels pure.

"Khosatsana Refilwe." (Princess Refilwe)

I let out a scream, my hand flying to my chest. Who is that?

I spin around sharply.

A woman stands there, smiling warmly. Mid-seventies maybe. She is wearing traditional Basotho attire. A large Basotho blanket draped over her shoulders and body like a cloak. The blanket is tan and cream with traditional geometric and symbolic patterns in white and brown.

On her head is a beige headband that holds her hair back, complementing the earthy tones of the blanket. She is barefoot, her feet planted naturally on the ground.

"Hi. Where am I? Where is Nqobizwe?" I ask, my voice shaking slightly.

"Come. I want to show you something." She says, turning and beginning to walk.

I hesitate, then follow her. It's not like I have a choice. And why isn't she answering my questions? And why did she call me Princess?

I jog a few steps to catch up.

"Why did you call me Khosatsana Refilwe?"

There is something about her that is warm and safe. I don't know this woman, but somehow she feels like home.

"That's who you are, Khosatsana." She says without looking at me, her pace steady.

"But I'm not a princess. I'm just Refilwe."

She stops walking and turns to look at me. She studies my face for a long time. Then she smiles gently.

"Let's hurry before they take you."

Say what now?

"Take me? Who will take me? Where is Nqobizwe?"

I grab her arm, panic rising in my chest.

"Your husband is fine, Khosatsana."

"Oh no, he is not my husband. Please tell me what I'm doing here and who you are."

Why isn't she telling me anything?

She places her hand over mine, warm and reassuring.

"I am your grandmother, Mofumahadi Mapule."

I stare at her, my mouth open. So she is a queen. How is she my grandmother?

"Are you sure? Last time I checked, both my grandmothers weren't queens."

She doesn't say anything. She just starts walking again, pulling me gently along.

Then we reach a place that looks like a palace. But we are standing outside the gate. There are so many people gathered, speaking to each other, but the language they're speaking, I don't know it. I'm trying to understand them, straining to hear, but nothing makes sense.

They start singing. I lean forward, trying to catch the words. But I can't even hear the song clearly. It's like it's underwater.

An old man with white hair and a white beard appears, wearing a white blanket with black designs. He walks toward me slowly, a staff in his hand.

He stops in front of me, smiling.

"Setloholo saka, Khosatsana Refilwe." (My grandchild, Princess Refilwe.)

I take a step back.

"I think you're mistaking me for someone else."

He shakes his head slowly, his eyes kind.

"I want you to listen to me. Don't forget, Refilwe. They are coming to take you, but your husband will bring you back."

"Wha…"

He raises his hand and I shut up immediately, my heart pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears.

He continues, his voice deep and steady.

"O na," he says, sweeping his hand across the land in a wide arc, "ke muso wa Thabamoya." (This is the kingdom of Thabamoya.)

"E na," he points at the palace with his staff, "ke ntlo ya borena ya Thabamoya." (And this is the royal homestead of Thabamoya).

He reaches out and holds my hand. His grip is firm. Grounding.

"O Khosatsana ya Monaheng." (You are the Monaheng princess.) "This is your home. Remember that."

I see a man walk out of the palace gates. He walks toward us quickly, his eyes locked on me. When he gets closer, his face lights up. His hand goes to his chest.

"Ntate." He looks at the old man, then shifts his eyes to the old lady. "Mme."

"Serithi, yona ke morali wa hao. O seke wa molebela." (Serithi, this is your daughter. Don't forget her.)

The old man says, squeezing my hand once before releasing it.

He is my father? What's going on here? I have never been this confused in my whole life.

The old man turns to me.

"Refilwe, ke ntatao enoa. Mo shebele hore o mo tsebe." (Refilwe, this is your father. Look at him carefully so you can recognize him.)

He says, gesturing to the man.

I look at him. Really look at him. And I see tears streaming down his face. He takes a step toward me, his hand reaching out.

"REFILWE!"

A loud, angry voice shouts behind me and everything disappears. The palace. The people. The singing. Everything and everyone gone in an instant.

I am plunged into darkness.

I spin around, my breath catching in my throat.

I see the man I know as my father. Ntate Molefe. He stands there, glaring at me with that familiar hatred in his eyes.

I stumble backward, my hands shaking.

He says nothing. Just stares. Then he disappears too, dissolving into the black.

I am left alone.

I try to move but I can't. I am stuck. Frozen in place. I see nothing around me. Just endless, suffocating darkness.

I sink down to the ground, pulling my knees to my chest. Shaking from fear.

"Mofumahadi Mapule?"

I call out, my voice cracking.

Nothing.

Silence.

"Anybody there?"

Still nothing. Tears stream down my face, hot and fast. I am so scared. All the warmth I felt when I was with those people is gone, replaced by this bone-deep coldness. The energy is dark now. Oppressive.

I cry, rocking myself back and forth. There's nothing else to do.

"Nqobizwe, please help me."

I whisper into the void.

I hope he hears me.

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Narrated: Kingdom of Thabamoya

King Serithi jolts awake, gasping for air. His body is drenched in sweat. He sits up quickly, the blankets tangled around his legs.

Two hours earlier, he had felt an overwhelming sleepiness and decided to take a short nap, the kind of sleep that could not be fought, as if he had been drugged.

Daylight fills the room. The silence tells him immediately that he is alone.

He runs both hands over his face, breathing heavily.

“Queen Mmabotle!” he calls out, his voice hoarse.

The door opens moments later, and she steps inside, concern written across her face. She moves toward the bed.

“Monaheng, ho etsahalang?” (Monaheng, what is going on?) she asks, placing a hand on his back.

“I saw her, Mmabotle,” he says, still trying to steady his breathing.

“Saw who?”

"My daughter. The princess. Her name is Refilwe."

Mmabotle frowns, confused. She shifts to face him fully.

"I don't understand, were you dreaming?"

The King nods, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"Yes, in a dream. My father visited the homestead. He told me he has someone to show me outside the yard. He said that someone can't enter the yard and that time is ticking. I rushed to get my blanket and when I got outside the yard, I saw my mother with a young woman that looks like her. My father was with them. There were people singing but I couldn't hear the words."

He stands and paces, his hands on his hips.

"So that woman is the lost princess?"

He stops and turns to her.

"My father introduced us. He said her name is Refilwe. My daughter. He said I shouldn't forget her. Then she disappeared. I screamed her name and then I woke up."

Queen Mmabotle's tears stream down her face. She covers her mouth with her hand.

"Knowing her name and how she looks has to be the best thing ever. At least you will know who you're looking for. I think you should go back to Matswalleng to look for her."

She stands and walks to him, placing her hands on his arms.

The King shakes his head, his shoulders sagging.

"It is a dead end, Mmabotle. I only have a name."

He sounds defeated.

"You saw how she looks. We can call the royal painter. Can you describe how she looked? Her face?"

"Every detail. She looks like my mother."

"Perfect. We can also use Queen Mapule's picture. We will find her. This is what the ancestors meant when they said they will guide her home."

She wipes her tears and squeezes his arms.

He sighs heavily, pulling her into his arms. Having hope again scares him. He is scared to look only to not find anything. But he has to. He has to bring his daughter home.

And having a wife like Mmabotle makes him feel confident and at ease. He knows Refilwe will be welcomed with warm hands. What worries him are his sons. They've made it clear they don't want anything to do with this.

What King Serithi wants is for everyone to try and build a relationship with her. That's his only daughter. The first princess.

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Nqobizwe

I am done with paperwork now. It's been two hours. I close the ledger and set down my pen, stretching my arms above my head.

Refilwe is still sleeping.

I stand and walk to the couch, my footsteps quiet on the carpet. I crouch down beside her and shake her shoulder lightly.

"Fifi."

She doesn't move.

I shake her again, a little harder this time.

"Refilwe."

She is still. Too still. I press two fingers to her neck, feeling for her pulse. It's there. Faint but steady. She is still breathing, but it's shallow.

I shake her roughly, gripping both her shoulders.

"Refilwe, wake up."

Nothing.

My chest tightens. Panic starts to creep in.

"Refilwe, wake up."

I pat her cheek gently. Then harder. Her head lolls to the side but her eyes stay closed.

What the hell is going on?

My phone rings, vibrating in my pocket. I pull it out without looking away from her. It’s the royal seer.

"Baba Ngubeni"

"Nkosana, you need to listen to me carefully." His voice is urgent.

"What is it baba?"

I stand, rubbing the back of my head

"Where is the chosen Queen?"

My heart stops. Does he mean Refilwe?

" Who Refilwe?... She's with me. Why?"

"Is she sleeping?"

I look down at Refilwe. Her face is pale. Too pale. Her lips are losing color.

"Yes. She fell asleep and now I can't wake her up."

"Take her out of there. NOW Nqobizwe. Get her somewhere quite. Take her to your house.

His voice is sharp and commanding.

"What's going on?"

"Her spirit is wandering. She went too deep into the dream. The Molefe ancestors have captured her spirit. You need to bring her back before they take her completely."

My blood runs cold. I crouch down again, touching her face. She's cold.

"How do I bring her back?"

"Unayo impepho indlini?" (Do you have wild sage at your house?)

I think quickly. My mother always insists I keep it. I do have it.

"Yes."

"Good. Muthathe umuphuthumise endlini. Ufike ushise impepho, bese uphephetha intuthu phezu komzimba wakhe. Qiniseka ukuthi iyafika emkhaleni akhe. Uthathe umlotha waleyo mpepho uwugcobe esiphongweni sakhe. emva kwalokho, hlanganisa usawoti namanzi bese ufafaza umzimba wakhe ngakho. Futhi ngesikhathi wenza konke lokhu, biza igama lakhe. Ngokuphindaphindiwe. Asithembe kuyezwakala mntwana we Nkosi" (Take her to your house. Burn the wile sage and wave the smoke over her body. Make sure it reaches her nose. Then take the sage ashes and rub a small amount on her forehead. After that, mix salt and water and sprinkle her body with it. And while you do all of this, call her name. Over and over. I hope you understand my Prince)

" Ngiyezwa" (I understand).

"Go now, Nkosana. Time is running out."

He hangs up.

I shove my phone into my pocket and scoop Refilwe into my arms. She is limp. Her head falls back against my shoulder, her arms hanging loose.

"Fifi, I'm going to bring you back. I promise."

I adjust her weight, holding her tighter against my chest. I turn and kick the office door open with my foot.

Ayanda and one of the guards stood in the passage outside the restaurant's back office, speaking quietly over an open laptop. They both looked up, startled

"What happened?"

"I need to go. Now. Clear the way."

My voice is hard. Final.

Ayanda doesn't ask questions. He grabs his phone and starts barking orders into it, already moving toward the corridor.

"Move everyone out of the corridor. Clear the parking lot. Now!"

I walk quickly through the restaurant, holding Refilwe tightly against my chest. Her body bounces slightly with each step. People turn to stare. I don't care.

"Refilwe, can you hear me? Fifi, come back to me."

I say it low, near her ear, as I walk.

Nothing. Her head stays limp against my shoulder.

The guards are already at the back exit, holding the doors open wide. I walk through without breaking stride, my shoes hitting the pavement hard.

The parking lot is clear. My car is waiting, engine already running and the door open. Ayanda must have called ahead.

I slide into the back seat carefully, still holding her. I adjust her so she's cradled in my lap, her head resting against my chest. One of the guards reaches in and closes the door firmly.

"Drive to my place. Fast."

The driver doesn't hesitate. The car peels out of the lot, tires screeching slightly.

I look down at Refilwe in my arms. Her breathing is too shallow. I press my hand against her chest, feeling the faint rise and fall. Her lips are losing more color by the second.

I press my forehead against hers, my hand cradling the back of her head.

"Fifi, I'm here. I'm bringing you back. Just hold on."

I tighten my arms around her, rocking her slightly as the car speeds through the streets.

Chapter 12

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Nqobizwe

I have never been this scared in my whole entire life. Why would they do this to her? They want to take her away from me? That's what they're trying to do. I knew her falling asleep instantly was strange, but I brushed it off. I shouldn't have. Maybe I could have saved her sooner.

I am sitting on the cold floor in my living room. One knee drawn up, my head resting heavily against it. My other leg stretched out. I feel defeated. Powerless.

Refilwe is lying on the floor in front of me. Still not waking up.

I did everything. Everything Baba Ngubeni said I should do. I burned the impepho. Waved the smoke over her body. Rubbed the ashes on her forehead. Sprinkled the salt water. Called her name over and over until my voice went hoarse.

But she is not waking up.

I rub a hand over my head, jaw tight. My chest feels like it’s being crushed.

"Mmmmmm."

She mumbles something I can't hear.

I snap out of it immediately. My head jerks up.

I jump from the floor and crouch close to her, my hands hovering over her body.

"Refilwe, can you hear me? Please come back, mama. Please."

I shake her gently, cupping her face.

"Refilwe, mama ngiyakucela, just open your eyes."

I carefully lift her head and place it on my lap, cradling it with both hands.

"Please come back to me, Nkosazana. They can't take you away from me, mama. Fight to come back. You still owe me a date. Remember? The thank you date you said you'll take me on?"

I chuckle softly, though there's no humor in it.

"There's so much I want to tell you, Refilwe. I want you to know how I feel about you. How madly in love I am with you. I know you would think I'm crazy. Sometimes I think I am too. You're driving me crazy, mama. You own my heart and you don't even know it."

I laugh softly, wiping the tear that escapes from my eye with the back of my hand.

"I'm done playing this mouse and cat game, Fifi. You are my chosen one. The ancestors didn't make a mistake. Baba Ngubeni even confirmed it. There is no running away from me. You are mine, Fifi. MINE."

I rock her back and forth gently, my arms wrapped around her.

Then.

She coughs.

"Refilwe! Refilwe!"

I shake her gently, leaning closer.

Her eyes move beneath her eyelids.

"Yes, mama. Open your eyes."

She opens her eyes slowly. They focus on my face. I see relief flood into them.

"Nqobizwe."

She says it almost as a whisper.

I smile through my tears and pull her into my arms, hugging her tight. Tears stream down my face freely now. I almost lost her. Before I even had her. I am never letting her go.

"Zwee, I can't breathe."

I must be holding her too tight. I release her immediately and pull back to look at her face, scanning every feature.

"I'm sorry. I thought I lost you, Fifi. Don't ever scare me like that."

She is crying too. Tears rolling down her cheeks.

What the fuck just happened? Here I thought I would be dealing with witches, not knowing the woman I love has her own spiritual battles too. I think we have a long way to go before our happy ever after.

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Refilwe

Have you ever been stuck in one place and couldn't move? Couldn't go forward or back. Not even sideways?

I was surrounded by nothing but darkness. Not the kind you see when you close your eyes. This one felt thick and endless. Swallowing everything. I tried to move, but I couldn't tell if I was actually moving. There was no ground beneath me. No walls. No sound.

Just me.

Until I heard Nqobizwe's voice calling me.

I tried following his voice, but I was still trapped in the dark. Then I heard him speak again.

I heard everything. Everything he said.

Which makes me scared.

He said he is madly in love with me. That alone terrifies me. It scares me because I know how broken I will be when he decides he wants nothing to do with me. When he finds out that I have no one. No family.

"Hey, I brought you something to eat."

The door opens, Nqobizwe walks in carrying a tray of food. Steam rises from the bowl.

I smile and sit up on the bed, adjusting the pillows behind me.

I have just taken a shower and I am now in Nqobizwe's bed. Wearing his shirt. Under his covers. He insisted I sleep here tonight and I couldn't agree more. I am scared to be on my own tonight.

"I don't think I will be able to stomach anything."

I say honestly, looking at the food.

"You don't have to eat much. Just enough to get your energy back."

He sets the tray down on the bed in front of me.

I nod, picking up the spoon. We haven't talked about what happened yet. He only told me I slept and couldn't wake up and he had to bring me back. There is a lot we still have to unpack. Because what happened in that dream has to mean something. And why was Zwee called my "husband"?

"The doctor will be here in..." He glances at his watch. "Thirty minutes. To check if you're okay."

"Is that necessary though? I feel fine."

"I'm not taking chances. You hit your head days ago. I have to make sure you're okay."

I look at him. Really look at him. This man has been making sure I am okay since the accident. And he is still taking his time to make sure I am fine.

A tear slides down my cheek before I can stop it.

I feel his thumb on my cheek, gently wiping it away.

"What's wrong, Fifi?"

He asks, concerned. His brow furrows as he leans closer.

"Thank you. So much. You have gone above and beyond for me. I feel like you coming into my life was on purpose. If you were not there, Nqobizwe, what was gonna happen to me?"

I am now a crying mess. My breathing is shaky. Emotions everywhere. My hands shake as I set down the spoon.

Nqobizwe moves the tray aside and pulls me into his arms, hugging me tight. His hand brushes up and down my back in soothing strokes.

"Please don't cry. You're breaking my heart."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry. It's just... I just couldn't hold it together anymore. I have been strong for so long. On my own. And I thought I would never be vulnerable. But I called to you. I hoped you would come and save me."

He reaches over to the nightstand and hands me a tissue. I wipe my face. He looks so worried. Shattered even.

"Nqobizwe, I trusted you. Someone I met three days ago. To help me. To take me out of that hell I was in. And you did. I... I..."

I can't speak now. I am gasping for air from all the crying.

Nqobizwe kicks off his shoes and climbs into the bed, getting under the covers with me.

"Come here."

I shift and lay my head on his chest. His arms wrap around me securely.

"I did-"

"Shhh, don't say anything. Try to rest."

He cuts me off before I finish. He kisses my forehead, his lips lingering there.

We are quiet and I am listening to his heartbeat. His heart is beating fast. Somehow, a part of me feels like this is where I should be. This is my safe space. And I will always be protected here.

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Narrated

Senzo walks inside his apartment, fumbling with his keys. Mbali has been waiting for hours. She has been calling, but her calls went straight to voicemail. And he is only showing up now? At 10 PM?

He walks inside the house and passes Mbali like he doesn't see her. His shoulder bumps the doorframe as he walks.

"Senzo!"

She rushes behind him, her slippers slapping against the floor.

"Senzo, where the hell have you been? I have been so worried about you."

"Can you let me be? Please."

He gets inside the bedroom and yanks off his shirt, tossing it on the floor.

"Senzo, are you drunk?!"

Mbali's voice rises, shrill with disbelief.

"Mbali awungiyeke tu!?" (Mbali, just leave me alone!)

"What the hell is going on, Senzo? Since when do you drink like this? On a Tuesday?"

"Do you really want to know?"

He turns to face her, swaying slightly.

"Yes."

She sits on the bed, watching him with wide eyes.

"Well, the woman I love chose another man over me. She literally said thanks for lunch but fuck you. She threw all my efforts right in my face."

Mbali blinks rapidly, not believing what she is hearing. Her mouth opens and closes.

"Uthini Senzo?" (What are you saying, Senzo?)

"You wanted to know. I'm just being honest."

He is failing to keep his balance. After what happened at Ngwenya, he went and got drunk. His ego was bruised.

"YOU LOVE SOMEONE ELSE?! Is that what you're telling me?"

She stands now, her voice breaking.

He nods, running his hand over his face.

"I messed up. I shouldn't have broken up with her. And now she's interested in that fucker. I saw it in her eyes. I fucking supported her and drove all the way to Free State. For what? FOR WHAT, HUH?"

Mbali's eyes shoot open. Shocked. Her hand goes to her chest.

"Are you talking about Refilwe?"

"Yeah... I love her, Mbali. And I don't know how I'm going to get her back. I had her and I let my fears get the better of me. And now she's finally moving on. No. She can't. She can't."

Mbali's lips are shaking. She is angry and hurt. She is trying to hold back tears and failing miserably. Her heart is shattered.

"Senzo, you told me you two are colleagues only. You get along at work. I had my doubts but I chose to trust you. You two dated?... And you're telling me you love her? You're fucking telling me you want her back?"

She takes a step toward him, her fists clenched.

"Listen, Mbali. Don't take this the wrong way. I'm just being honest with you. You're a great woman. I like you."

"Six months. Six fucking months together, you've been playing me. When did you end things with her?"

"It's a year now. I thought I would forget her. But you can't just wake up and forget a woman like Ref. She is everything."

Mbali stands up furiously, grabbing her bag from the chair. She starts packing her little things. Her hands shake as she throws items into the bag. She wants to make sure she leaves nothing.

"Where are you going?"

Senzo asks, confused, leaning against the dresser.

"We are done, yezwa, Senzo. Done. You are a piece of shit. Nx."

She zips the bag violently and slings it over her shoulder.

She walks out and slams the bedroom door so hard a picture frame rattles on the wall.

Senzo couldn't care less. He doesn't even try to stop her. He slides down to sit on the floor, his back against the bed.

He is done pretending. He wants to fight for Refilwe. Because Refilwe was his first.

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Nqobizwe

Fifi has just fallen asleep. Her breathing is even now. Soft.

I have been trying to control myself, but seeing her cry does something to me. It makes me feel... something. Something deep and primal. I just want to take all her pains and burdens and carry them for her.

She should know by now I am not going anywhere. Three days or not, she is not a stranger to me. I have seen, watched, and loved this woman for six months straight. Just watching her. I saw myself get drawn to her. Catch feelings. And she didn't even know I existed.

She made me nervous without even trying. I fell in love with her and she didn't even do anything. She just existed. The minute I saw her, I knew.

And now I cannot be happier. She is my chosen one.

That's what scared me. What made me not make a move on her. I didn't want to fall in love with her only to have to marry someone else. I didn't want that because I knew how she made me feel. How I wouldn't be able to let her go.

I carefully slide out of the bed, moving slowly so I don't wake her. I lean down and kiss her forehead gently.

When she wakes up, we will talk. We have a lot to talk about.

Her phone vibrates on the nightstand. I glance at the screen.

I clench my jaw when I see who it is.

Senzo.

I caught his name when Fifi was talking about how my guards almost kicked his ass. They were going to rough him up so badly, but that's nothing compared to what I have in mind.

I don't know what his story is, but the way he acted today can only mean one thing. He wants her. There's no friendship here. He is into her.

I take her phone and walk out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind me.

He calls again.

I decide to answer it.

"Senzo."

"Who is this? Give Ref the phone."

Ref. Interesting.

"Refilwe is sleeping. What do you want?"

"YOU! You bastard. What are you doing with her phone?"

His voice is slurred. Drunk.

"She is my woman. I can do whatever I want with her phone."

"You're lying. I know her. She would never date you. Your kind. You think you own the world. She doesn't like that."

"Well, she is. And I'm going to say this once and never again. Fifi is mine. Whatever stupid ideas you have in your head about her, you better stop now."

"She's not yours. She was mine first. I will make sure I get her back. Nx."

He ends the call.

I am shaking. I am fuming. My grip tightens on the phone.

She said they are work buddies, but this man, in his head, they are more than that. Saying Fifi is mine was just to push his buttons. But she is mine. Me and her know that. She should just stop fighting it. Fighting us.

I hear the front door open.

Ayanda and Sizwe walk in, their faces serious. Looking at their expressions, they want answers.

"This barging into my house without knocking has to stop."

I say to them, setting Refilwe's phone down on the counter.

Sizwe chuckles, dropping onto the couch.

"I know why. Don't tell us."

"Refilwe?"

Ayanda asks, and Sizwe nods. They laugh.

"Finally, you've made it official."

Sizwe says, settling deeper into the couch.

"Are you official?"

Ayanda asks, not convinced.

"I'm not answering that."

They laugh at me again. I won't entertain them.

"Let's go talk in the study."

I say, already walking toward the hallway. They follow behind me.

We get inside the study and settle down. I sit behind my desk. Ayanda takes the chair across from me. Sizwe leans against the bookshelf.

"I know you have thousands of questions."

"She's the chosen one, right? I mean, it's quite obvious."

Sizwe says.

I nod.

"I couldn't tell you guys until it was confirmed."

They nod, understanding.

"What happened?"

Ayanda asks, leaning forward.

"I wish I knew, man. She just fell asleep and couldn't wake up. Then the seer called and told me what to do to bring her back. I thought I lost her, man. I thought she was gone and I failed her."

I wipe my face with my hand, exhaling heavily.

"Ey, man. Did he mention why she couldn't wake up?"

I shake my head.

"Just that the Molefe ancestors captured her spirit."

They shake their heads, exchanging glances.

Sizwe clears his throat.

"Have you asked her anything?"

"I will. She's emotional now. I thought I had issues. Queen Thobekile being a witch. I didn't know the love of my life would be fighting ancestors."

I sigh, leaning back in my chair.

"I get you. This is more frustrating. How do you begin protecting her from dead people?"

"There's always a way. I will protect her no matter what. She needs to just open up to me. Then everything we will face head-on. Together."

Ayanda whistles.

"Our prince has fallen in love, madoda. And I'm afraid there is no saving him."

We laugh.

Then Sizwe becomes serious.

"Your brother?"

I frown.

"What about him?"

"I don't think you should take it lightly, him being here. I see trouble."

"We should have him followed. His phone is tapped already. But eyes have to be on him at all times."

Ayanda adds, crossing his arms.

I nod.

"He's up to something. Him and his mother. The plan has to be in motion. I will speak to the royal seer tomorrow. There's been so much happening in such a short period of time."

"It's a preparation for being King. You'll be dealing with far worse things than this."

Ayanda says.

I chuckle.

"At least Fifi will be by my side."

"You're finished, Nqobi."

Sizwe says, grinning.

We laugh.

"Wena uthini ngo Lerato wakho?" (Wena, what about your Lerato?)

He frowns.

"Usuqalile." (You've started.)

He points a finger at me and we laugh.

My phone rings. It's the guard.

"Yah."

"My Prince, the doctor has arrived."

"Let him in."

I end the call and stand.

Chapter 13

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Refilwe

The doctor just did a check-up on me and I am all good. Clean bill of health. I told Zwee that it was unnecessary, but I appreciate him not taking chances.

It's midnight now. We are sitting outside on the bedroom balcony, side by side on the outdoor couch. I am holding a mug of hot chocolate, steam rising into the cool air. A throw blanket is wrapped around my feet, which are resting on his

lap. The balcony is quiet, lit by the soft light coming from the bedroom behind us.

I take a sip, letting the warmth settle in my chest.

"You should try to get some rest too."

I say softly, looking at him.

"I can't sleep when I'm stressed and worried."

I frown and take another sip of my hot chocolate.

"Why are you stressed?"

"You are stressing me, Fifi. I'm worried about you."

Our eyes meet and he looks at me for a long moment. His gaze is intense. Searching.

"What happened in the dream?"

I sigh heavily. I guess today I will have to tell him everything. My fears and all.

"It was very strange and confusing. I still am confused. Thing is, I saw myself at a place I don't know, but I was aware that I'd just slept. The last thing I remembered was lying on the couch to sleep. Next thing, I'm in a place I can't recognize and you're not there. It was like I teleported to that place."

He shifts slightly, his hand moving to rest on my ankle.

"Were you alone?"

I remove my legs from his lap and turn to sit facing him. I shake my head.

"A woman appeared behind me and called me Princess Refilwe. I didn't understand why she called me that. I still don't. She was an old woman but still physically fit, you know?"

He nods, leaning forward slightly. Listening intently.

"Then she said we should hurry before they take me. She said her name is Queen Mapule. I guess she is a queen of that place I follow her and I asked if she knows where you are. She said, 'Your husband is fine.'"

He smiles. Just a small smile, but it reaches his eyes.

"She referred to me as your husband. Well, I think I love her already."

I chuckle, swatting his arm lightly.

"Stop it, mahn."

"I'm sorry. Continue."

He takes my hand in his, his thumb brushing across my knuckles.

"We get to this place that looks like a royal homestead. Like a palace or something. There were people there, singing and talking, but I couldn't understand what they were saying or singing."

"Maybe they're dead. You know what they say, you can't understand the language of the dead."

I pause, thinking.

"Really? But I've dreamt of my mom before and I could hear and understand her."

"I don't know. Maybe because she had a message for you. That's probably the only time you'll hear them. When they have a message."

He leans back slightly, still holding my hand.

"You're probably right."

I take a breath.

"Anyways, an old man comes to me and calls me his granddaughter. He tells me that land is the kingdom of Thabamoya and the palace is the royal homestead of Thabamoya."

Nqobizwe's grip on my hand tightens slightly. He's fully focused now.

"While still confused, another man comes out of the gates of this homestead. He seemed shocked to see these people, or was he shocked to see me, I am not sure. He then says Mme, Ntate to them. Meaning mom and dad. So they're his parents, I figured."

I place the mug on the table with a soft clink and rub my thighs nervously.

Nqobizwe is still looking at me, his eyes never leaving my face. Waiting for me to continue.

"The old man tells me that man is my father. His name is Serithi. And he tells him that I'm his daughter. I look at him and he has tears in his eyes. And the

minute he reached out his hand to me, an angry voice called out my name. REFILWE."

I pause, my throat tightening.

"When I turn, it's the man I know as my father. Ntate Molefe. He is angry. Fuming. Then he disappeared and I was surrounded by darkness."

I swallow hard. Tears form in my eyes.

Nqobizwe sits closer, taking both my hands in his. His warmth grounds me.

"That darkness was the most terrifying thing, Zwee. All the warmth I felt when I was with those people was replaced by this chilling coldness. I tried moving. I tried calling out to Queen Mapule. I called out to you. But nothing. I was stuck. And after what felt like eternity, I heard your voice."

He looks at me, his brow furrowing.

"You heard my voice?"

I nod.

"I heard everything."

He stands up abruptly and walks to the protective fence of the balcony. He leans against it, then turns to face me. He crosses his arms, then uncrosses them and puts his hands in his pockets.

"I'm glad you heard everything. I meant every word."

I look down, fidgeting with my hands. My heart is racing.

"I'm not letting you go, Refilwe. You better understand that. When I say you're mine, I mean it. But now, I want us to understand the dream. Or vision. I think everything was quite clear."

"To me, it's definitely not clear, Zwee. I don't believe in dreams or visions and all that."

He walks back toward me and crouches down in front of me, his hands on my knees.

"Not believing in something doesn't mean it isn't real, or that you should simply brush it off. Sometimes you have to look at what's in front of you. Use logic, not emotion. Analyze it. Try to understand it. Solve it. Then make your conclusion."

"I hear you. You think I'm a princess?"

I laugh, the sound almost bitter. Thinking of me as a princess. I don't believe any of this.

"You were shown your father and your home. The message was clear. He is your father. You are the Monaheng Princess. Then you saw the person you know as your father, a Molefe, right? They captured your spirit. I don't know why, but it could only mean they were angry at you. Or at what was happening."

"You're really good at interpreting and I think you're right. He was so angry when I looked at him. It reminded me of the times he would beat me up. That's the look he had."

I see his face change instantly. His jaw clenches. His hands tighten on my knees. He stands and walks toward me with a slight frown.

"What do you mean, beat you?"

That slipped. This is not how I wanted to tell him.

I sigh.

"Please sit."

I pat the couch beside me.

He sits down slowly, his body tense. His eyes are locked on me.

I take a deep breath.

"I want to tell you about Refilwe."

I pause, gathering my thoughts. My hands shake slightly.

"My mom passed away when I was 7 years old. It was like she knew her time was near. She threw me a big birthday celebration that same year. September. Then December, she passed away."

Nqobizwe reaches over and takes my hand again. I squeeze it.

"I don't remember much, but I remember earlier that year my mom, her father, and sister were having an argument. I don't know what it was about, but after that day they left and I never saw them again."

I swallow.

"My father has always been a bad father and husband. He used to abuse my mom. He would beat her up and carry on the next day like nothing happened. But me? He treated me like a princess. I was father's daughter. Until one day."

I pause. My voice cracks.

Nqobizwe shifts closer, his arm coming around my shoulders.

"I saw Lentswe, my stepmother, who was my mom's friend at that time, talking with my father outside the gate. And when he came inside the yard, the look he gave me... It was like I was the most disgusting thing he had ever seen."

Tears slide down my cheeks now.

"That day, him and my mother had the biggest fight. My mother fought back. She didn't hold back. Unfortunately, that day was the day I also became a victim. He didn't spare me. I was beaten up. With punches."

Nqobizwe's hand tightens on my shoulder. I feel his breathing change.

"That's why my mother fought back. But she was beaten to a pulp. I don't know what happened. She was admitted to the hospital. Lentswe was the one busy at home. Making sure I go to school. Cooking. Her and my father were close. Used the same bedroom. I was a child. I didn't understand. I thought she was nice. I really liked her."

I wipe my face with the back of my hand.

"My mother came back days later. She told me to pray for her so she doesn't die. And I did pray because she said that. But those words haunt me till this day. Maybe I should have prayed harder."

Nqobizwe pulls me closer against his side. His other hand comes up to wipe my tears.

"My father, well, he was still the same. He hardly came home. But when he did, we were left with bruises. My mom fell sick. She couldn't eat anything. She didn't want to go to the hospital because she didn't want to leave me by myself."

My voice breaks completely now.

"One day she didn’t wake up. I was supposed to go to school but she didn’t wake up. I tried to wake her up but nothing. My father barged in from wherever he was. Touched her and made calls. That's how I knew she was gone. My mother was gone."

I'm sobbing now. Nqobizwe pulls me fully into his arms.

"After her funeral, it didn't last long. Lentswe moved in. Married my father. And became my stepmonster. My father and Lentswe abused me. Every chance they got. All the years I was under their roof. Physical or emotional."

I pull back slightly to look at him. His eyes are red. His jaw is clenched so tight I can see the muscle twitching.

"Every little thing I did, I paid by getting beaten. Sometimes I would miss school. They didn't care. I think the only reason they allowed me to go to school is because one day my class teacher came to check up on me. And told them if I miss school again, she will have to report. And I never missed school after that."

I wipe my nose with my sleeve.

"School was my escape. I was not allowed to go play. Watch TV. Sometimes I would go for days without eating. I would sleep outside."

Nqobizwe stands suddenly. He walks to the railing, gripping it with both hands. His back is to me. His shoulders are shaking.

I continue anyway.

"Thank God Dikeledi's mom was there. That woman saved me so many times. She was even threatened by my father. After he threatened her, she then helped me secretly. She would sneak in food for me. Give Dikeledi clothes and food to give me at school. It was bad."

Nqobizwe turns around. There are tears on his face.

I keep going.

"Then when I turned 18, waiting for matric results, I was ready for varsity. Our school sent people to help us apply using the school's computer lab. Oh, I was so happy. I knew my father would never allow me to apply. I didn't even have a phone or laptop. They didn't care about me."

I stand up now too, wrapping the blanket around my shoulders.

"He then told me I have to marry a man his age. He said they were coming the following day and if I don't want to, I should leave. And that's what I did. I left. I ran away. Same night. I stole his money. And ran. I didn't even look back."

Nqobizwe walks back to me quickly, cupping my face in both hands.

"I'm sorry, Fifi. No child deserves to go through all that. So you've been on your own since?"

I nod.

"Yeah. I got the last taxi to Joburg. I didn't plan anything. I don't know what I was doing. But I took a risk. Went to a city I knew nothing of. A city I knew was dangerous."

He holds my hand, brushing it gently with his thumb.

"It was late when we got to Joburg. I had money but I didn't know where to go. I didn't trust anyone. I chose to trust the taxi driver. I asked him where the police station is. My plan?"

I wipe my falling tears.

"I was going to ask them to help me. Stay there till morning, then I would find a place in the morning. I was taking chances. But the police station was my safest option. The taxi driver was kind enough to drive me to the police station from the rank. I told the cops I was lost, I don't have a phone, and asked if I can leave in the morning. They told me to sit on the benches. I mean, it was better than being outside in a city I don't know. As a girl."

He kisses both my knuckles, his hands shaking.

"That was brave of you. I admire the woman you are, Refilwe. Smart and strong."

More tears are falling now. But his words make me feel seen.

"In the morning I asked where I can find a place to rent. A cheaper place. They drove me to Soweto, Mofolo South in the morning and I got a room for R600. The taxi driver was God-sent. And the police… were also kind enough to drive me there."

"So Pretoria, how did that happen?"

I smile through my tears.

"Well, the money I stole was R10,000. The R10,000 Lentswe called asking for on Sunday. Yeah, she was asking for money I stole ten years ago."

I laugh bitterly.

"I paid rent. Bought a cheap smartphone. I had to access my emails to know which university would accept my application. I knew I would be accepted

somewhere. I knew my potential. I gave it my all at school because I wanted to leave the hellhole I was in. I made sure. I was always in the top 10. An A student."

Nqobizwe sits down and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me.

"Bit by bit, I got things I would need. As I got familiar with the place, I begged myself a job at the grocery store. I got accepted at university. Got a bursary. Worked while studying. And yeah, today I am Head of Development at a software company. I have my own things. I worked my way to the top. It was hard, but I made it."

He is staring, which makes me uncomfortable. I feel so small right now. I am afraid to look him in the face. He is probably thinking about how to distance himself. I know that's what will follow after this. I hope not, though.

"You are remarkable, Fifi."

His voice is low. Thick with emotion.

"Listening to your story... It made me angry, sad, and proud. I'm angry at your mother for staying with an abuser. For letting you witness all of that and later be the victim. It’s sad that you went through that. But I'm proud of the woman you've become. Your strength just made me ten times more attracted to you. I see why they chose you for me. You are everything."

He lifts my chin so I'm looking at him.

"I want you to not worry about anything. Let me carry your burdens. Let me love you, mama. Let me take care of you. And I promise you, you will not regret it."

He is pleading.

"You still want to be with me?"

"Fifi, I don't think there is anything in this world that would make me not want to be with you. I spent six months dreaming of having you this close. I know what I want and it's you. All of you."

I take a shaky breath.

"I told you all my story because I feel something for you. Something real. Deep. And my friend Dikeledi advised I tell you so that you know what you sign up for. And leave while it's early if it's not for you. But I don't want you to leave. I'm relieved you still want me and... you still feel the same."

"So we're doing this? You're giving me a chance?"

I nod, smiling through my tears.

"I want to hear you say it, Fifi."

"Yes. Yes, yes. I'm giving you, us, a chance."

I smile, feeling like this is the best decision I've made in my life.

He smiles too, revealing his dimples. Gosh, he is so handsome.

I look at him.

He's already looking at me.

His eyes drop to my lips, and my breath stutters before I can stop it. The movement is small, but it changes the air between us completely. Suddenly, I'm aware of how little space there is between our faces.

I swallow.

Why does it feel like time just slowed down?

He leans closer, slowly, carefully. Like he's giving me a chance to pull away.

I don't.

My gaze flickers to his mouth and back to his eyes. My chest rises with a shaky breath as I feel his breath against my skin, warm and soft.

Everything else fades.

The balcony. The cool air. The city sounds in the distance. Even my thoughts.

All I can focus on is the space between us growing smaller.

His hand shifts, his fingers brushing mine lightly. The touch sends a quiet shiver up my arm.

He pauses.

So close now that if either of us moves even slightly, our lips will meet.

My heart beats louder.

I don't know who moves first.

One second there's space between us... and the next, his lips are on mine.

Soft.

Careful.

Like he's afraid I might disappear if he moves too fast.

My breath catches against his mouth, and for a moment I forget how to think. Everything inside me goes quiet, the memories, the fear, the noise in my head, all of it fading beneath the warmth of the kiss.

He pauses slightly, giving me time to pull away.

I don't.

Instead, I lean closer, my eyes slipping shut as I melt into it. His lips move gently against mine, slow and unhurried, as if he's trying to memorize the moment rather than rush it.

His hand comes up hesitantly, resting against my cheek. The touch is warm. Grounding. And something in my chest softens in a way I didn't know it could.

The world feels distant.

All I can feel is him. The steady rhythm of his breathing. The softness of his lips. The quiet reassurance in the way he holds me.

The kiss deepens just slightly, still tender, still careful, and my fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt without me realizing.

For the first time in a long time... I feel safe.

When we finally pull apart, it's slow. Reluctant. Our foreheads almost touch, breaths mingling as neither of us moves away completely.

And I realize my heart isn't racing from fear anymore.

It's racing because of him.

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Nqobizwe

I am scared to move away from her only to find out it's a dream. She is really here. In my house. And she has agreed to give us a chance.

The kiss was magical. I really cannot believe this.

She chose to trust me and tell me her story. Hearing everything, she has been through made me fall in love with her even more. She is really my chosen one. I see why she was made for me. My strong Fifi.

I will protect her with everything in me. No one, and I mean NO ONE, will harm her while I am still alive.

I hold her tight in a hug, then kiss her forehead.

"Thank you. You don't know how happy I am to hear you say those words. You giving me a chance."

Then it clicks. The Senzo guy.

My face hardens. I clench my jaw.

"What's wrong?"

She asks, probably confused by my look.

"Tell me about Senzo. I know you two have history. What's his story?"

She looks down at her hands, then back at me.

"Senzo is an ex. We dated, then broke things off a year ago. He said I'm too broken for him. We then became work friends because we work together. Agreed to only be friends at work."

"He wants you."

She laughs.

"No, he doesn't. He has a girlfriend. Yes, he's been acting strange lately, but I don't think he wants me. I mean, he knows I would never get back with him. I made it clear. I have no feelings for him whatsoever. Done and buried."

I nod. Of course she won't get back with him. She is mine now. Soon she will know she is the chosen Queen. She is going nowhere. I don't want to push. I choose to trust her. She thinks they are friends, but he will show himself soon.

"I don't like him. I know he wants you. But since you say he is your friend, I won't say much."

"You really think he wants me? That would be odd."

"I would say stay away from him, but I don't want to be controlling. Enough about Senzo."

I take her hand.

"We need to find your father."

She frowns.

"He's dead."

"Not that bastard. I'm talking about your real father. Do you know where Thabamoya is?"

"No, I don't."

"We will search for it. You know his name. His kingdom. It won't be hard to find your family."

"Zwee, please, let's not... He's probably not looking for me. Why wasn't he in my life all this time? If he is my father, I suffered and he wasn't there. So I don't think I'm ready."

"Mama, those are all questions to ask him. Maybe he is looking for you. Who knows?"

"I'm just scared to have my hopes high only to be disappointed."

I squeeze her hand.

"I'm here. I will be by your side through it all."

She takes a breath.

"Okay. We will search. But not now. I just want to take this all in."

I nod. I am already going to search for him. I want to know if he is real. But I know he is. My Fifi is a princess and she didn't even know it. I wonder what happened. How her mother ended up with a king.

"Let's go inside. It's getting cold."

I stand and hold her hand. We walk inside the bedroom together.

"We need to get some sleep."

"Let me take a shower, then I will join you."

She clears her throat nervously.

"We will sleep on the same bed?"

I smile.

"Why not? You're mine now."

She nods, looking nervous, and I just chuckle.

"Relax, Fifi. We won't do anything. It's just sleeping."

"I didn't say anything, mos."

She says defensively, and I laugh.

As much as I would love to claim her today, I will choose not to. I am too stressed and worried. And I know she is not ready. And I still want to speak with Baba Ngubeni first.

Because once I claim her, there's no turning back. She will belong to the Ngwenya. Marrying her and sending cows will just be for tradition. Just to bring the two families together.

So since she still has to know her real family, and get introduced to her real ancestors, I need to know first. I don't want anything going wrong. I don't want to mess up anything for us.

Chapter 14

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Refilwe

Morning light filters through the curtains as I slowly wake up.

I stretch my arms above my head, yawning. Then I turn slightly, expecting to find him beside me, but the other side of the bed is empty. The sheets are already cold.

I sit up, rubbing my eyes.

I get out of bed, my feet touching the cold floor, and notice a set of neatly folded clothes at the foot of the bed with shoes beside them. Are they for me?

I walk over and run my fingers over the fabric. Nice and expensive.

I make the bed, smoothing out the covers, then head into the bathroom. The shower is hot and perfect. I let the water run over me for longer than necessary, thinking about everything that happened last night.

I walk out with a towel wrapped around me.

I get startled when I see him sitting at the edge of the bed.

"Gosh, Zwee!"

I place my hand on my chest, my heart racing.

He stands up immediately and walks close to where I'm standing. The way he is looking at me... His eyes move over me with quiet hunger, desire, sending a wave of heat up my neck.

"Did I scare you? I'm sorry. I'm glad you're up. Breakfast is ready."

His voice is low. Rough.

I nod, suddenly feeling shy.

"Are those clothes for me?"

He looks at them, then back at me.

"Yes. I sent my assistant to buy them for you. You don't like them? We can change them."

He sounds worried now. I smile.

"No, I was just asking. They're fine."

Well, they're formal. I would have loved something simple. Comfortable clothes. But looking at how he's always in formal wear, I'm not surprised.

"You don't like them, do you?"

I laugh.

"I do. It's just I only wear formal clothes when I go to work. Not on a random day like you. You're always in formal. Even now, look at you."

He looks down at himself, then laughs.

"I guess I'm used to it. I'll tell her to get you comfortable clothes then."

"No, please don't. I'll just get my clothes from my place."

He smiles and pulls me closer by my waist. One mistake and this towel will fall. And with the way he's already looking at me, I don't know what would happen.

"So you're spending another night here? Just move in. I don't mind."

I shake my head.

"You already know the answer. It's a no."

He studies me for a second, amusement flickering in his eyes before his hand tightens slightly on my waist and he pulls me closer.

I feel it.

His cock pressing against me. He is hard.

My breath catches.

His lips find mine before I can react.

The kiss is slow at first, then deepens, warm and consuming. I hold onto his shoulders as he presses me closer, the heat between us rising quickly. My breath falters as I become suddenly aware of how much he wants me, the realization sending a nervous rush through me.

He breaks the kiss abruptly, exhaling hard as if forcing himself to stop.

"Get dressed."

He says softly, stepping back. His chest is rising and falling heavily.

I nod, still trying to steady my breathing.

"I'll wait downstairs."

He turns and walks out, closing the door behind him. Leaving me alone to get ready.

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I walk downstairs and it's only now I'm really seeing the house. Yesterday I didn't see it well. It looks very beautiful. A whole mansion. How rich is this man? I see why the assistant got me these clothes. It's giving rich and classy.

My heels click softly on the marble floor as I walk through the hallway.

He is already seated in the kitchen dining area. The table is set beautifully. He stands up when he sees me approaching.

He smiles and kisses my cheek, then opens the chair for me.

"Thanks."

I sit down, smoothing my skirt.

He sits on his chair opposite me.

"You look beautiful."

He says, his eyes sweeping over me appreciatively.

"Thank you."

A chef walks in moments later, dressed in a crisp white uniform, carrying a tray of breakfast. He places each dish carefully on the table before stepping back once everything is arranged. Then he bows slightly and leaves.

I blink.

"You have a chef? Looks like I bagged myself a rich man. You have a driver, bodyguards, what else?"

I look around the house. I don't see any other helpers, surprisingly.

"You don't have helpers? That's a shock."

He chuckles, picking up his fork.

"I do have. Two maidens. My mom insisted I have them to help me around the house. I agreed to avoid arguing with her."

I frown.

"Maidens? And where are they?"

"I gave them a day off. I wanted you to be comfortable."

"They're here all the time?"

He shakes his head.

"No. They come in the morning once I've left for work. Clean and do my laundry, then leave. I love my space. I don't love having people here."

I nod, taking a sip of orange juice.

"Soon you'll be throwing me out, mos."

"When I say people, I don't mean you, my love. I want you 24/7 by my side. I just want to always be looking at your pretty face. Listening to you talk and laugh. I love that."

I blush, looking down at my plate.

I clear my throat.

"So when are you telling me about yourself? I don't know anything about you, come to think of it. I just found out yesterday that you own Ngwenya and other businesses. And I'm getting a glimpse of your life. Rich and unapologetic."

He laughs, then touches his chin thoughtfully.

"Mhm. Rich and unapologetic."

I nod.

"Yeah, look around you… But I am not rushing you, take your time. Whenever you're ready. Don't take too long though."

"What is it you want to know?"

"Who are you? Your childhood. Where you're from?"

He leans back in his chair, his expression becoming more serious.

"Well, I'm from KwaZulu-Natal. I have two siblings. My father has two wives. The second wife and her two kids hate my mother and I. I grew up all my life being groomed. I didn't even enjoy my childhood. I went to varsity overseas. Came back and built everything that I have. I hated being under my father's orders."

He's from a typical traditional home.

"Oh, why does she hate you? And what do you mean groomed?"

He sighs, setting down his fork.

"My mother couldn't fall pregnant. He got a second wife, not knowing my mom was already pregnant."

"Oh, it must've been hard for your mom. Yoh, I would've divorced his ass, shame. I don't tolerate nonsense."

I cover my mouth with my hand.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean your father per se. I mean men like him. Oh God, never mind."

He laughs low, then looks at me, smiling and shaking his head.

"And for why was I groomed, I'll tell you. Just not now."

"Why? You think it will change how I feel about you?"

"No. But it will scare you and you'd maybe have second thoughts."

"Hayi, it's big, mos."

"I'm surprised you haven't searched about me on the internet by now."

I shake my head firmly.

"And I won't, shame. I enjoy the suspense. Wondering who you might be. Besides, I wanted to hear everything from you. Not what people say about you. You deserve to share your story yourself if we're going to get to know each other. It wouldn't be fair if I already knew parts of you that you never chose to share with me."

He is looking at me intensely, like he's studying my face. Reading every expression. Then he reaches across the table, takes my hand, and kisses the back of it.

"You are amazing."

"I know, baby. And just know, if you're married, following your father's footsteps, I'm gone, shame. I'm not gonna lie."

He chuckles.

"I know. I promise you, you're the only woman for me. And you will be my only wife."

"Music to my ears."

He laughs and we continue eating. The breakfast is very delicious.

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We are done with breakfast now. I am outside enjoying the view of the garden. This house is amazing. The lawn is perfectly manicured. There's a pool. A gazebo in the distance. Trees everywhere.

I breathe in the fresh air.

My phone rings and it's DK.

"My friend."

"Hi, my love. How are you?"

"I have never been better."

I giggle when I think of why I'm feeling this way. It can only be one man. Mr. Ngwenya, of course.

"It must be nice to be you. And I'm here thinking of ways to get away with murder."

"Dikeledi, you want to commit murder?"

"And I'm sure God would praise me if I do that."

"Girl, who made you this angry?"

"Your ugly stepmother. Wa bona Lentswe, neh? Yoh, yoh."

"What did that devil do now?"

I sit down on one of the outdoor chairs.

"I was from the store yesterday. She sees me and calls me to come to her gate like a dog. I still hate myself for going near her. Nx, jeez. She then asks me for your address. Imagine the audacity."

"Oh my goodness. Please send me how far you are with the murder plan. I'm joining you."

She laughs and I join her.

"I told her where to get off. She was shocked that I talked back. Serves her right. Nx. She had the nerve to involve my mother. Imagine."

"Bathong, that woman is a witch, yoh."

"But after yesterday's encounter, she knows I don't play."

"Oh, my friend, thank you so much, mahn."

"Don't worry about it."

I smile, leaning back in the chair.

"I have good news. I finally talked to Zwee."

"Oh God, you told him? Everything?"

"Yes, I did. And we made things official in the a.m.'s."

She screams so loud I have to pull the phone away from my ear.

"You are going to make such beautiful babies!"

"Hayi wena, when did we get to babies now?"

She laughs.

"I'm just saying. So how was he after you told him?"

"He said everything I went through just made him want me even more. And he's been the same. Still the same Nqobizwe who looks at me with affection in his eyes. Like I'm the only woman he sees."

"Yeah, now that's a real man."

"I hope he won't change in the long run, you know. Or use my problems against me."

"I will kill him if he dares."

I laugh, then I get startled when I feel hands on my waist. Nqobizwe kisses my neck softly.

Goosebumps rise on my skin.

"DK, let's talk later. Sharp. I love you."

"I love you. Sharp. Protection, don't forget."

I laugh and end the call.

I turn to fully face him.

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Nqobizwe

I don't know what it will take for Fifi to understand and believe I'm here to stay. And I'm going to treat her like the queen she is. I wish I could be able to open my heart so she can see how genuine I am.

"I won't change, Fifi. Your life story doesn't change how I see you. Or how I feel about you. Get rid of those doubts, please. I am a man of my words. I love you. So much that sometimes I think I'm losing my mind."

"It's just…"

"Shhh."

I place my finger gently against her lips.

"Let me speak... I told you, you will be mine. You doubted me."

I smirk, and she looks down, blushing.

"Are you not mine now? Believe me when I say I'm not going anywhere. And you, my love... you were made for me. You will understand one day."

I pull her closer and kiss her deeply.

She gasps softly as the kiss intensifies. My hand slides lower, gripping her hungrily and pulling her closer. The need between us is suddenly undeniable.

The moment turns heated quickly. Breathless and consuming.

Then I stop.

I pull back, forcing space between us. My breathing is uneven.

"Not yet."

I murmur quietly before stepping away.

I clear my throat, adjusting myself. I am hard as a rock. I swear if Baba Ngubeni tells me I can't claim her yet; my balls are going to explode. I can't keep avoiding her like this.

"Let me go finish up some work. An hour or two, I'll be done. I'll be in my study."

She looks at me. At my hard shaft. Then she clears her throat.

"I don't know what it is you're running from and choosing to suffer like this, but I won't ask questions."

"What do you mean?"

I know what she's saying. I just want her to elaborate.

"You keep avoiding taking things to the next level with me. You will have to at some point, you know. Go and work. But you owe me an explanation."

This woman.

I pull her close and kiss her again before pulling away.

"I will explain everything. I promise."

She nods, and I walk to the study. I close the door behind me and immediately call the royal seer.

He answers on the first ring.

"Mntwana we Nkosi."

"Baba Ngubeni, how are you?"

"I am good. How are you and your queen?"

I smile, sitting down at my desk.

"We are fine. That's why I'm calling."

"Kwenzenjani?" (What's going on?)

"I know I have to claim her as soon as possible to tighten the bond and to make us stronger. But I cannot help but wonder, since her father's ancestors are

looking for her, shouldn't I wait for them to find her? Then once they welcome her and do what's needed, then I can claim her?"

"Mhm. I hear your concern. We are running out of time. Witches are busy and they are looking for her. We need oNgwenya to protect her so they cannot do anything. She is powerful. Her father's ancestors are trying, and they have been trying to protect her. But they are not strong enough. You cannot risk it. She is our next queen. We need her."

I sigh, running my hand over my face.

"There won't be any problems with her ancestors?"

"Not at all. I am sure they want her to belong to them before she is a Ngwenya. Well, their time is up. Sekufike oNgwenya manje. We will apologize with a cow. Sishweleze." (Apologize.) "Wena, do what you have to do. I will connect with the Ngwenya ancestors and ask them to plead for us. They will understand. Don't stress yourself. But they will charge you an arm and a leg once you ask for her hand in marriage. Be ready."

"Well, that's not an issue. Oh, again about the witch. I found him and Queen Thobekile is involved, as I suspected."

"Nqobizwe, don't touch the Queen. Your ancestors will deal with her. You don't want the Queen's blood on your hands. You know your ancestors. You don't want to feel their wrath."

"I know that. I won't kill her. But it doesn't mean I can't make her suffer a bit. But I'm asking about her supplier. The wizard."

He laughs. Very rare to hear the royal seer laugh. He is always tense, bearing not-so-good news most times.

"What do you want with him?"

"I want him dead."

"Well, you will need to come see me first. Come with those friends of yours. That man is a powerful witch. He is trying to get to me. He's forgetting I am the royal seer. He is taking chances. Qalani lah kimi, ngizoniqinisa bese ningamenza nomayini enifunayo." (You should all come to me first. I'll strengthen you, and then you can do whatever you want to him.)

"Ngiyezwa, Baba. What about my father? Is he safe in all this?"

"Don't worry about your father. He is safe. They cannot touch him now. You are the one who is vulnerable. Claim your chosen one, then you will be untouchable."

I sigh heavily.

"Ngiyabonga." (Thank you.)

We end the call.

Refilwe's ancestors, you will have to forgive me.

•••

Narrated

Senzo pulls up at Refilwe's apartment. He grips the steering wheel tightly for a moment before getting out.

He wants to apologize for how he acted yesterday. And most importantly, he wants to warn her about that man. And tell her how he really feels. Tell her that he wants her back.

He walks to her door and knocks.

Nothing.

He knocks again. Louder this time.

Still nothing.

He keeps knocking, his frustration rising.

"Refilwe!"

He shouts.

"Ref, I just want to talk, man."

He didn't call her before coming, he knows she would have told him not to come. Because he knows Refilwe hates being put in awkward situations or disrespected.

He takes out his phone and calls her.

"Hello."

He smiles hearing her voice.

"Ref, hey, man. I'm at your place. Where are you?"

"What are you doing at my place, Senzo, without telling me?"

Her voice is sharp. Annoyed.

"I came to check up on you and apologize about yesterday."

"We will talk at work on Monday. I won't be home for the next coming days."

He clenches his jaw. His forehead starts to sweat. His hand tightens on the p

hone.

"Where are you?"

"Senzo, why are you acting so weird? What's going on? It's none of your business where I am, yoh."

She ends the call.

He stares at the phone, breathing hard.

He already knows where she is.

Which makes him angrier.

Chapter 15

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Refilwe

I am sitting at the bedroom balcony. The view is beautiful. More beautiful than at night. The garden stretches out before me, perfectly manicured. I think this is going to be my favorite place. I am just alone with my thoughts.

Senzo is starting to be a nuisance. I hope Nqobizwe is wrong and he doesn't want me back. I have to set boundaries, especially now that I am in a relationship. He doesn't respect his relationship; it doesn't mean I shouldn't respect mine. And the man I am with seems to be very possessive. I will talk to him on Monday and make it clear.

Another issue is Nqobizwe. Whatever he is hiding, he will have to come clean. I am not upset about him always pulling back and avoiding taking it to the next level. I know it's not because he doesn't want to have sex with me. He gets hard just by looking at me. I see the lust in his eyes. I wonder what's stopping him. I pray he is not married back in KZN.

He keeps saying I am chosen for him. Made for him. It's not just a statement. That has to mean something. I mean, even in the dream he was called my husband. Was our destiny written in the stars? It has to be. Here I am, head over heels with a man I just met. But it's like I've known him for years.

"S'thandwa sami." (My love.)

He brings me back with that deep voice. I smile and look over my shoulder at him. I think I am gone, gone, gone.

He is leaning against the sliding door, arms crossed. Watching me with those intense eyes that make my heart skip.

"You're done?"

He nods, pushing off the doorframe.

"I have something to show you. Come."

"Mhm, I wonder what it is."

I stand, stretching slightly. He walks over and takes my hand, lacing our fingers together.

We walk outside into the yard.

Then I see it.

My car!

A scream bursts out of me. My hand flies to my mouth as I jump up and down in excitement.

II almost forgot about it. It looks as good as new.

There is a bow on it and a bouquet of tulips. It's like I just got a new car as a gift.

He is just standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at me. I love how he looks at me when I'm being myself. Always amused.

I take my flowers, then walk towards him.

"You are so dramatic; you know that?"

He smiles, pulling me towards him with one hand.

"What did I do now?"

"The bow? Flowers? It's like you got me a new car."

"You were worried about your car. I just wanted it to be special. As for flowers, you said you love flowers. And you cried when I got you those roses."

I pout.

"Who said I cried? I didn't cry."

"If you say so. But I know you cried. Don't worry. Every chance I get; I'm getting you flowers."

I blush. My heart is melting. But I quickly try to mask it. I'm trying to win this argument.

"But still, the bow is unnecessary."

"Why though? I thought it's cute. Like you."

I giggle. God, it's like I'm a teenager in love.

"It is cute, but it's like the car is a gift and it's new."

"I can get you a new one then."

I laugh and kiss him quickly.

"I love it, baby. The bow and flowers. Thank you, my love."

I stand on my toes and plant a peck on his nose.

He smiles, then looks down, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Oh my God, Zwee, are you blushing?"

"Let's go. I want us to go somewhere."

He says, dismissing me.

"You were blushing. I saw you."

He laughs, then pulls me by my hand towards the house.

Did I mention that this house has guards at every corner? This big yard is surrounded by guards. I can't believe I am falling for a man I don't fully know. I am risking it all. It's not a crime though.

We get inside the house and I look for a vase for my flowers. I finally find it in one of the kitchen cabinets. I pour water and put my flowers in. Place them on the kitchen counter.

He walks downstairs and plants a kiss on my cheek.

"Are you ready?"

He asks.

"You were serious? Where are we going?"

"To see Sizwe. He is a good friend of mine. There's something I want to discuss with him. Business."

"Hah, and what will I be doing in the meantime when you two discuss business?"

"He has a girlfriend. She will keep you company."

"I don't like people."

"Fifi, come on now. You'll be fine. And I'll only be an hour. Two, tops."

I sigh dramatically.

"Fine. Let's go then. And we should pass by my place. I need some clothes."

He nods, kissing my forehead.

"Whatever you need, baby."

We get outside. We have a driver today. The guard opens the door for us and I slide in. Nqobizwe follows, immediately pulling me close to his side.

•••

Narrated

Sbonga is still in the hotel room. The place is a mess. Empty alcohol bottles everywhere. Clothes scattered across the floor. The air smells stale.

The memories from last night slowly come back to him. He had met a woman at the club, and one thing led to another. What was supposed to be just a few drinks turned into a one-night stand.

His phone rings. It's his mother. He groans, sitting up. The room spins slightly.

He gets out of bed, pulls on sweatpants, then steps onto the balcony, closing the sliding door behind him.

"Ma."

He answers, his voice rough.

"How far are you with getting close to your brother?"

That's the first thing his mother says.

"Eish Ma, please hold a bit."

He places her on mute. Returns inside and walks to the bed. He shakes the woman's shoulder roughly.

"Yeii, vuka." (Hey, wake up.)

She wakes up, yawning and stretching.

"Leave. Now. Shesha." (Hurry.)

He doesn't care. It was a one-night stand. But it's not like he cares about anyone. He is very arrogant. He knows that and he loves it.

"What the…"

"Phuma, phuma." (Get out, get out.)

He removes the covers. The woman realizes he is serious. They had a great time last night. She didn't think he would be an asshole. She gets out of bed quickly, grabs her clothes, gets dressed, gathers her stuff, and walks out.

He watches her go, then closes the door and locks it. He sits on the edge of the bed and unmutes his mother.

"Ma, I'm back. Sorry, I was taking care of something."

"Have you found something? If you are not taking this seriously, it's on you. This is all for you, Sbonga. You have to fight for what's yours. You are the rightful heir. It was stolen from you. Remember that?"

He nods, then sighs.

"I know, Ma. I was thinking… Nqobizwe already knows I hate him, so he'll be suspicious of anything involving me. We should use someone he'd never suspect if we want control him. We hit when he least expects it."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"That princess. What's her name? The one you arranged for him to marry?"

"Oh, that stupid girl. Nolwandle. I love how you think. So what should she do?"

He stands and walks to the window, looking out at the city.

"Simple. She just has to come this side. Seduce the dearest Prince. He is a man. He won't be able to resist. That princess is beautiful. Gives us time to stop him

meeting the chosen one and claiming her. She falls pregnant, then he will be forced to marry her. He becomes weak. Then boom, we strike. I take over. Nolwandle becomes mine as the brother. I then rule."

"Why can't we kill him now? I can give that girl something to use on him. I will lie and say it's a love potion. You can still take over."

"When he suddenly dies, she will know it's what you gave her. We don't want loose ends. When they're married, it's easy. You give her the poison, tell her it's a love potion. He dies. She will be forced to marry me and keep her mouth shut because we will threaten to expose that she bewitched the King. That's a serious offense."

Queen Thobekile laughs on the other end. That evil laugh of hers. She can already see her son on that throne.

"Okay, my son. I will arrange a meeting with that Princess. Still, don't stop looking. If you see him with any woman, send those pictures. I have to know who the chosen one is so I can end her."

"Don't worry. I am on it."

They end the call. He smiles, pacing the room. He feels sure that his plan will work out smoothly. And Nqobizwe will be dead, watching him take over his life. His wife. And those businesses he owns that make him think he is better than everyone.

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The Ngwenya Kingdom

Queen Thobekile is busy humming. She's happy and excited after the call with her son. She can see that her son is smart and takes after her well. Now she just has to talk and convince Nolwandle and everything will fall into place. So she thinks.

She was outside in the garden, far from the house. She cannot risk anyone hearing her on the phone.

As she is walking towards the house, she sees something that makes her blood boil.

Her upper lip twitches from anger. She is fuming and hurt at the same time.

Queen Liyana is having a meal with the King. They are laughing, and it's a beautiful sight to see. But not for her. This is what she worked for years trying to destroy.

She stops walking and calls Vilakazi immediately. Her hands shake as she dials.

He answers on the third ring.

"Thobekile."

"Vilakazi, unjani?" (Vilakazi, how are you?)

"Khuluma, Thobekile. Ufunani?" (Speak, Thobekile. What do you want?)

She sighs. She can never get used to how Vilakazi is always cold and rude.

"Uqinisile ayikho into esingayenza kwi Nkosi?" (Are you sure there is nothing we can do to the King?)

"Yes, I am sure, Thobekile. He is strong now."

"What about Liyana? I am sure we can do something."

Vilakazi stands up, panicking on his end.

"Yeii, yeii Thobekile. Do not touch Indlovukazi, uyangizwa? She is the chosen one for a reason. Do not touch even the strand of her hair, Thobekile. Unless you want to know who the Ngwenya are."

Thobekile is confused. She frowns.

"What's so special about her? I did worse to the King, nje."

Vilakazi laughs. A cold, mocking sound.

"You are married to a family yet you know nothing about them. Do you even know why the King cannot rule without a queen? Why there's a chosen one for the rightful heir? Have you ever asked yourself?"

She doesn't say anything.

"Well, let me tell you. You see that Kingdom? How beautiful and powerful it is? It's all thanks to a woman. The first woman to rule without a King. The first woman to deny marrying the brother of the King after the King died. And stood her ground. Queen Nomusa. Have you heard of her?"

"I have heard about her, yes. Everyone knows Queen Nomusa."

"Then you should know why the chosen ones are not to be touched. She was able to overpower men by just using her mind. She manipulated them. Got them bowing for her. The power of an intelligent mind. She worked smart and not hard. That is why Ngwenya is the most powerful kingdom."

"So she is the one protecting the chosen one's?"

"The entire Ngwenya clan. You touch Queen Liyana, you will suffer a painful death, Thobekile. And I do not want to be part of it. Liyana is powerful, strong, and intelligent. The reason she was chosen for the kingdom."

"So I am not intelligent? Is that what you are saying to me?"

He sighs heavily.

"Listen. I can still help you get the prince. But it will require a big sacrifice."

"Anything. Name it."

"Your daughter. The last born."

Thobekile's face goes pale. She grips the phone tighter.

"No. No. There has to be another way, not my child. I can't harm the princess."

"You lie too much, Thobekile. You are now starting to believe your own lies. You and I both know that child is no princess."

"What... you don't know that."

"Do you want us to argue about her paternity? You want me to tell you who her father is?"

"Yeii, I hear you. Awume!?" (Stop!?)

Vilakazi smiles on the end. The smile that gives you chills.

"You want the prince to fall on your knees? Bring me your daughter. You better decide quick before he claims the chosen one. Because if he does, you won't be able to do anything. o'Ngwenya will shield him and the chosen queen."

He ends the call.

Thobekile stands there, deep in thought. She walks over to the pool area, staring at the water. She doesn't understand what's so special about Queen Liyana.

"I will show these pathetic ancestors who I am. Powerful, my foot."

She says to herself while she walks to the house, her anger simmering.

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Nqobizwe

We arrive at Sizwe's house. The gate opens automatically and we drive through. I want us to talk about Refilwe's biological father and search for him. I want to find him soon. And I hope and pray he is a good man. My Fifi has been through a lot. She doesn't deserve any more heartache.

The driver parks and I help Refilwe out of the car.

Sizwe is the one who opens the door for us, grinning.

"Power couple. Come in."

I smile, shaking my head, and Fifi laughs softly beside me.

"Sure, how are you?"

I ask, and we fist bump.

"I'm good. Nice to finally see you, Refilwe. This close, even."

She frowns slightly, tilting her head.

"What do you mean, this close?"

She asks, clearly confused.

"Don't mind him, baby."

I try to cut in, but she holds up her hand.

"No, I mind. Uhm, Sizwe, right? What do you mean? Please enlighten me."

Sizwe looks at me with a mischievous grin, then laughs, shaking his head.

"Well, didn't he tell you he used to sit in the same spot at The Ngwenya for months, waiting for you to show up? He would sit there just watching you. Well, sometimes, actually, most of the time, I was with him. I thought he would never ask you out."

Sizwe talks too much and he's clearly enjoying this.

Refilwe's eyes widen. She turns to me slowly.

I rub the back of my neck.

"I wouldn't call it watching. I was... observing."

She laughs, the sound bright and beautiful.

"That's literally the same thing, Zwee."

Sizwe grins.

Refilwe looks at me, her eyes soft.

"Well, nice to know you too, Sizwe."

She extends her hand for a handshake, but Sizwe pulls her into a quick hug instead.

"Welcome to the family, please follow me."

Sizwe says, gesturing toward the living room.

We follow him to the lounge and sit.

"Lerato is getting ready. She'll be down in a minute."

And just at that moment, Lerato walks down the stairs, all dolled up. Hair perfect and her makeup flawless. Heels clicking against the marble.

"Hi, Nqobizwe."

She says with a smile. Then she looks at Refilwe and extends her hand.

"Hi, I'm Lerato. The woman of the house."

Sizwe chokes on air and starts coughing. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

Refilwe shakes her hand with the most genuine smile.

"I'm Refilwe. Nice to meet you."

"We'll just be in the study. Please keep her company."

Sizwe says to Lerato, recovering from his coughing fit.

"Don't worry, my love."

Lerato says sweetly.

"Refilwe, let's go outside. I need the sun."

Fifi stands up. I stand with her and pull her aside gently.

"Will youokay?"

I whisper, my hand on her lower back.

"Yeah. Don't worry."

She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling.

I smile, then lean down and kiss her forehead softly.

"Call me if you need me."

"I will."

They walk outside toward the pool.

Sizwe laughs and pats my shoulder.

"I wonder what's happening in that head of yours. You think Lerato will harm her?"

"Mxm, just let me be."

"I don't wish to be you. It's like being in love is stressful."

I laugh as we walk toward the study.

"It's because everything you do comes naturally. You don't plan it."

We get to the study. I close the door behind us and the atmosphere shifts. Business mode.

"Ayanda will be here in no time."

I nod, settling into one of the leather chairs.

"Fifi told me about the dream."

He nods, sitting across from me.

"Is it bad?"

I shake my head, leaning back.

"No. Her father, real father is looking for her. She's royalty."

"That's great, man. You were worried."

"I know. She doesn't want to look for him yet, but I'm not wasting time. Soon she'll be my wife."

Sizwe's eyebrows shoot up.

"Have you told her?"

"Not yet. But I will tell her tonight."

He nods just as Ayanda walks in. He fists bumps us both, then sits next to me.

"I saw you came with the Queen. She's very beautiful, hey. Close range, phela. We only knew her from a distance."

I laugh, unable to help the smile that spreads across my face.

"She is beautiful. Too beautiful."

"You talked to the seer?"

Ayanda asks, pulling out his notebook.

"Yeah, I did. We'll have to see him first before capturing the witch. Apparently, he's a powerful witch."

"Damn. When do you want to do this?"

"After tonight, we can strike."

They both nod.

"Ayanda, I want you to find me Refilwe's father and the kingdom. I think it's in Free State."

He nods, already making notes.

"You got the names?"

"Yeah. King Serithi Monaheng. Kingdom of Thabamoya."

"Then it will be easy. I'll get to it immediately."

He takes out his phone and pulls up a recording.

"I have something I think you should hear."

He plays Sbonga's phone recording. The conversation with his mother fills the room.

I listen to everything. Them planning to send Nolwandle here to seduce me. My jaw clenches. I'm angry. I'm angry because they undermine me. Because they think I'm that stupid.

"Is Sbonga stupid or what?"

I ask seriously, because I'm genuinely concerned about his intelligence.

We all laugh, though there's no humor in it.

"Are you sure he's a Ngwenya though? He doesn't act like one."

Sizwe asks, shaking his head.

"I've always had doubts."

We laugh again. I shake my head. I really wouldn't be surprised if he's not my father's child. With Thobekile, anything is possible.

There's a long pause. I lean forward, my elbows on my knees.

"I want him hijacked and beaten. I want him roughed up."

I say quietly, but the words carry weight.

"I'll organize that."

Sizwe says without hesitation.

I nod.

"What about Princess Nolwandle?"

Ayanda asks.

I lean back, my expression hardening.

"I'll give her a warning. If she persists, she's dead. I don't care."

They nod, understanding.

The room falls silent for a moment. Then I stand, walking to the window overlooking the pool.

I can see Refilwe out there. Laughing. The sun catching her hair. She looks free and happy.

"She doesn't know yet, does she?"

Ayanda asks quietly.

"No. But she will tonight."

I plan on claiming her tonight. And after tonight everything changes.

Chapter 16

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Refilwe

The person I was told will keep me company has done nothing other than complain about Nqobizwe for the past two hours. She has told me about how he's not a good man. How he uses girls. And how he left her friend miserable and broken.

I haven't even said much. I fake laugh here and there. Nod when it seems appropriate.

Can Nqobizwe return already?

"When I look at you, you're pretty, but Nqobizwe's type? I'm not sure."

She says, sipping her drink and looking me up and down.

She talks without a filter, yet her mind works like that of an eight-year-old. Her reasoning capacity is practically non-existent. Even worse than that.

I set my glass down carefully.

"Oh, is it? And what's his type?"

Her eyes light up instantly, like she's been waiting for this exact question. She leans forward in her seat.

"Well, obviously girls that don't look like you."

She points at herself with a manicured finger.

"Girls that look like Lerato."

I chuckle, picking up my glass again.

"That's interesting."

"You know what? I'm inviting you to the braai on Saturday. I want you to meet Phumi. You'll see what I'm talking about."

I shake my head.

"Uhh... I don't…"

She cuts me off, waving her hand dismissively.

"It will be fun, I'm telling you."

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea to have me and Zwee's ex together."

"Why? You're insecure? Don't be... Phumi hates him, so nothing to worry about."

I sip on my drink, biting my tongue. This girl is unbelievable.

Then I see Nqobizwe coming out through the sliding door, walking toward us. Thank God. I need to be saved.

He sits next to me and plants a kiss on my cheek. I lean into him slightly.

"Meeting done?"

He nods.

I stand up immediately, smoothing down my skirt.

"Well, Lerato, it was nice meeting you. We have to get going."

Nqobizwe looks at me with a questioning expression, but he stands as well, catching on.

Ayanda and Sizwe walk out the door behind him.

"Leaving already?"

That's Ayanda. I met him a few minutes ago. He said he's Nqobizwe's advisor. Nqobizwe has an advisor! I feel like I'm going to keep being shocked when he finally opens up about his life.

I nod, reaching for Nqobizwe's hand.

"Yes. We would like to stay longer, but we have so many things to do today."

I look at Nqobizwe.

"Right, baby?"

He raises his eyebrow slightly, then clears his throat.

"Yeah. We'd stay longer but time is of the essence."

Lerato stands up and grabs Sizwe's arm possessively.

"Don't forget. Braai. Saturday."

Sizwe turns to her, confused.

"Braai?"

"Yeah. We're hosting a braai Saturday. I told you and you agreed."

Sizwe looks completely lost, like this is the first time he's hearing about it.

"I'm sure Refilwe has things to do. Right, Refilwe?"

Before I can say anything, Lerato jumps in.

"She already agreed, baby. Don't worry."

There is no winning with this girl. It's just a braai. What more can go wrong?

I force a smile.

"Can I bring a friend over? Just to be more comfortable?"

"Yes, of course."

I nod, still smiling. The fakest smile I can manage.

•••

We're in the car now. The driver pulls away from Sizwe's house. Nqobizwe is holding my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles.

I let out a long sigh.

"Next time, I'm not accompanying you to any business meetings. Especially at Sizwe's house."

He laughs, moving his hand to my thigh.

"I'm sorry, mama. I know Lerato is... well, she's a lot."

"A lot? She talked about you the entire two hours."

He frowns, turning slightly to look at me.

"About me? What did she say?"

I shift in my seat to face him better.

"I was so uncomfortable. She told me you use woman. That after you're done with them, you toss them aside like they're nothing. She said you dated her friend Phumi and left her broken and miserable. And apparently, I'm not your type. You only date girls that look like her."

He laughs, shaking his head. His hand squeezes my thigh gently.

"You, my love, are exactly my type. That's why I was so scared to approach you. I knew you were too perfect for me."

He pauses, looking directly at me.

"Don't listen to Lerato. You saw for yourself. She's a bit... slow."

I sigh, leaning back against the seat.

"I need to call Dikeledi and ask if she can come on Friday. I'm taking her with me to that braai. I can already tell Lerato's friends are just like her. I won't survive alone."

He chuckles.

"I'll be there, nje, mama."

"But you'll be with the guys. You all know each other. Me? I don't know anyone there. If DK agrees to come, I'll have to fetch her on Friday."

"She's in Free State?"

I nod.

"Yeah."

"So you'll drive all the way to Free State and then back here? That's a long trip."

"I don't mind. Or maybe I should leave Thursday, book a guesthouse to sleep over, then drive back Friday."

He shakes his head firmly.

"No. I'll send someone to fetch her."

"But baby, I really don't mind driving."

"I do mind. I have drivers, Fifi. Let me use them."

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"Okay, fine. I hope DK won't mind."

I frown when I notice we're taking a different route. I thought we were going to my place so I could get my clothes.

"Where are we going?"

He glances at me with a small smile.

"We have a flight to catch."

My eyes widen.

"A flight? To where?"

"You'll see."

I smile, leaning against him. Curiosity is eating me up inside, but I don't push.

We arrive at the airport, but instead of stopping where everyone else gets dropped off, the car keeps going. We drive past the main terminal completely.

I sit up straight.

"Wait. Did we just pass the airport?"

He just smiles, saying nothing.

The car drives to a quieter section of the airport. There are fewer people here. A smaller, more private-looking building. The driver stops outside.

A man in a suit opens the door for us. We step out and walk inside.

I look around. It doesn't look like the normal airport. There are no long queues. No crowds pushing luggage carts. Just a few people sitting quietly in leather chairs.

"What is this place?"

"Private terminal."

He says casually, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

A few minutes later, someone approaches us.

"Mr. Ngwenya, the jet is ready."

I blink. The jet?

We walk outside toward the runway. That's when I see it.

A small white private jet parked a short distance away. The stairs are already lowered.

I slow down, staring at it.

"Wait... that's our plane?"

He nods.

"Yes."

I look at him, then back at the jet.

"You own a private jet?"

"I use it when I need to."

I've only ever seen jets like this in movies.

We walk toward it and climb the stairs. A flight attendant in a crisp uniform greets us at the door with a warm smile.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Ngwenya. Ma'am."

I step inside.

The inside doesn't look like a normal airplane. There are large cream leather seats facing each other with a polished wooden table between them. Soft lighting. Everything looks expensive. Like a small luxury lounge in the air.

I sit down slowly, still taking it all in. I run my hand over the smooth leather armrest.

"This is really nice."

He sits next to me, watching my reaction with clear amusement.

I lean back in the seat and turn to him.

"So... where are we going?"

He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it.

"Cape Town."

"CAPE TOWN!"

My voice comes out louder than I meant. I'm too excited to care. I clap my hands together.

He looks at me, and I see a flicker of worry cross his face.

"You don't like Cape Town?"

"No! I love Cape Town! I'm just excited."

Then I pause, frowning.

"Wait. Are we coming back today? We didn't pack anything."

"Don't worry. It's all sorted. We're coming back Friday."

My face lights up.

"Oh my God. I love this. You're the best. I really needed a break. And Cape Town? Perfect."

I lean over and kiss him on the cheek.

The flight attendant brings us drinks. A few minutes later, she returns with our meals, plated beautifully like we're in a five-star restaurant.

I look around again, shaking my head.

"This is another level of rich. What do you do again?"

He just smiles.

•••

Two hours later, we land in Cape Town.

We're driven to a luxurious hotel. The lobby is massive. Staff members greet Nqobizwe by name and bow slightly. He's treated like someone very important.

And I think he is.

I'm starting to realize I have no idea who this man really is.

We check into our suite. The bellhop opens the door for us.

I step inside and gasp.

The suite is huge. Glass windows cover the wall, opening up to an ocean view. A king-size bed with white linens. A sitting area with a couch and chairs. Everything is pristine, white, gold, and glass.

I run and throw myself onto the bed, laughing.

"This is amazing!"

He stands near the door, watching me with a smile.

Then I notice them. Shopping bags. Several of them, lined up on the couch.

I sit up.

I get up and walk over. I start going through the bags. Clothes. Casual. Dressy. Everything in my size.

"Zwee, when did you even…"

"I had someone handle it."

Then I see a separate box. Larger than the others. Elegant packaging with a silk ribbon.

I pick it up carefully and untie the ribbon. I open the box.

Inside is a dress.

I pull it out slowly.

It's a floor-length evening gown. Deep emerald green. The fabric is smooth and flows like water when I move it. The neckline is a sweetheart cut, elegant without being too revealing. The bodice is fitted with delicate beading along the waist and neckline that catches the light. The skirt flows out from the waist in soft, graceful layers.

I hold it up against myself and look in the mirror.

"Zwee..."

I can barely get the word out.

He walks up behind me. His hands settle on my waist as we both look at my reflection in the mirror.

"Would you do me the honor of joining me for dinner tonight?"

I feel butterflies explode in my stomach.

I used to hate rich men. I thought they were all arrogant. That they thought they owned the world.

But this man? He's different.

The way he tries so hard just to make me smile. I've wanted to be appreciated like this my whole life. And now that I have it, I don't want to let it go.

I turn in his arms. I wrap my hands around his neck and stand on my toes to kiss him.

"Yes. I'd love to."

He spins me around, kissing my face, my cheeks, my forehead, my nose. I giggle.

"I booked a hair and nail appointment for you. They'll be here in an hour."

I pull back and look at him.

"What's going on, Zwee?"

"Nothing, mama. I just want to make today memorable."

When he says "memorable," I feel a flutter low in my stomach.

"So you're going all out for our first date?"

"Second date. I told you on Monday, deny it all you want, but that lunch was a date. I don't know why you kept fighting it."

I laugh.

"Don't blame me. I had my reasons."

He holds me by the waist, pulling me closer.

"And they were all valid. I understood completely. But staying away from you was never an option for me."

"You made that very clear. Now I know not to take anything you say lightly."

He laughs.

"You're learning quickly. I like that."

•••

Narrated

Queen Thobekile paces up and down in her chambers. She wrings her hands. Bites her nails. Stops. Starts pacing again.

She's trying to find a solution. She doesn't want to sacrifice her daughter. But the thoughts keep coming back. Maybe if she does this, everything will work out. Sbonga will get the throne. Nqobizwe will be out of the way. Everything will fall into place.

She stops pacing.

She's made her decision.

Buhle will be sacrificed. This is all for Sbonga. Surely Buhle will understand.

She takes a deep breath and walks to Buhle's bedroom. She knocks softly before entering.

Buhle is on her bed, reading a book. One of her favorite things to do, just staying in her room, reading quietly.

"Hey, baby."

Queen Thobekile says, sitting on the edge of the bed beside her. She forces a smile.

Buhle looks up from her book.

"Ma, do you need anything?"

Queen Thobekile clears her throat.

"Yes. I want us to go somewhere tonight. Once everyone is asleep."

Buhle frowns, closing her book.

"Where? And why, Mother?"

"We need to help Sbonga. He's the one who's supposed to sit on that throne, not Nqobizwe. Remember I told you how I was deceived by this family?"

Buhle nods.

"Yes, I remember, Ma. So how do we help him?"

"We have to go support him. He's meeting with the elders tonight. They need to know who the real heir to the throne is. Sbonga needs us there to vouch for him. He needs our support."

Buhle nods eagerly, sitting up straighter.

"I don't mind helping. Is Nkanyezi coming too?"

"No. You know how Nkanyezi is. She hates getting involved in these things. And don't tell her or anyone else. They'll try to stop us. Or they'll try to stop the meeting from happening."

Buhle nods seriously.

"Don't worry, Mother. I won't say anything. I'm sure after tonight, bhuti Sbonga will get what's his."

Queen Thobekile swallows hard. Guilt twists in her stomach. But she won't back down now. She's come too far to stop.

She leans over and kisses Buhle's cheek.

"Good girl."

She stands and walks out of the bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

She exhales. At least Buhle bought it.

•••

Refilwe

The salon team has arrived. I just finished my shower. Now I'm sitting in a chair while one woman works on my nails and another preps my hair.

My man went all out. I love this. I love everything about today.

He's not here right now. He said he had something to take care of. I don't mind. I mean, the whole salon is here. I'm having the time of my life.

I decide to call DK. I need to tell her about Friday and the Saturday braai. I need her here because I can't deal with Lerato and her friends alone. Especially when one of them is Zwee's ex.

The phone rings. She answers on the third ring.

"Lover doll!"

I chuckle. DK is always hyper. But she knows how to read the room. At the funeral, she was calm and empathetic. But now? She's back to her usual self.

"DK, please tell me you're not busy this weekend. I need you."

"What's going on?"

I tell her everything about Lerato. How she spent two hours talking badly about Nqobizwe. How she's invited me to a braai where his ex will be. How I feel like it's all a setup.

DK laughs.

"You should've said no. But don't worry, I'm coming. I can see what Lerato is trying to do. It's definitely a plot."

"Right? I think this is all about Nqobizwe. She probably wants the ex to see me so they can both roast me."

"Exactly. But I'm not busy this weekend. I don't really have much to do anyway."

I pause. The nail technician finishes one hand and moves to the other.

"DK, have you thought about going back to varsity?"

There's a pause on her end.

"I have. But funding is the problem. I don't have the money."

"We have bursaries where I work. I can apply on your behalf. Please say yes."

"Ref, don't stress yourself over this. Everything will work out."

"It will work out because I'm going to make sure it does. You're not going to stop me, DK. I'm applying for you. And on Friday, someone will fetch you."

She laughs.

"Okay, babe. Fine. I'll see you Friday."

I scream into the phone.

"I can't wait!"

She laughs and ends the call.

•••

My hair, makeup, and nails are done. I slip into the dress.

I walk to the mirror and look at myself.

I look beautiful. Elegant.

Something tells me tonight is going to be special. Our first real night together. And he made sure everything is perfect.

The salon team has left. My phone rings. It's Nqobizwe. He sent a message earlier telling me to get ready.

"Baby."

"Are you done?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"I'm waiting for you. The guard will bring you to me. Woza, mama."

He ends the call. I'm blushing. I can't help it. My heart is racing.

Immediately, there's a knock on the door.

I open the door. A guard is standing there in a formal suit.

I grab my small purse, just my lip gloss and phone inside, and follow him.

We get into the elevator. He presses the button for the rooftop.

The doors open.

I step out and stop.

The rooftop has been transformed. String lights hang across the entire space, glowing softly. Candles are placed everywhere, on tables, along the edges, creating a warm glow. Rose petals are scattered across the floor, leading to a table in the center.

The table is set with white linen, fine china, and crystal glasses. A bottle of champagne sits chilling in an ice bucket. Beyond the table, the ocean stretches out under the moonlight. The city lights twinkle in the distance.

Off to the side, a string quartet is playing. The sound of violins fills the air.

Then I see him.

He's standing near the table in a black tuxedo. Hands in his pockets. Watching me.

He walks toward me, meeting me halfway.

His eyes move over me slowly.

"You look incredible."

I can't speak. I just smile.

He takes my hand and leads me to the table.

•••

Narrated

Queen Thobekile waits until the palace is completely quiet. The King has gone to his chambers. Queen Liyana is in hers. The guards have finished their rounds.

She slips out of her room quietly. She knows which floorboards creak. Which hallways to avoid. She's done this before.

She reaches Buhle's room and knocks softly.

Buhle opens the door. She's already dressed in dark clothing.

"Ready?"

Queen Thobekile whispers.

Buhle nods nervously.

They move through the palace like shadows. Out through the servant's entrance. Across the back courtyard. Through the garden gate that Thobekile always leaves unlocked.

The night air is cool. The moon is hidden behind thick clouds.

They walk in silence. Following the path Thobekile has walked many times before. Away from the palace. Away from the lights. Into the bush.

The trees grow thicker. The sounds of the night grow louder.

Buhle starts to slow down.

"Ma, where exactly are we going?"

Her voice is small. Scared.

"Not far, baby. Just a bit further."

"Why are we meeting in the bush? Why not at the palace?"

Queen Thobekile stops. She turns and places her hands on Buhle's shoulders.

"Because the elders want privacy. They don't want the King to know yet. Once Sbonga is confirmed as the rightful heir, then we can tell everyone. But for now, it has to be secret. You understand?"

Buhle nods slowly. Her eyes are wide.

"Okay, Ma."

They keep walking.

The path gets narrower. Overgrown. Thobekile pushes branches aside. Buhle follows close behind, her breathing getting faster.

Then Buhle sees it.

A faint glow ahead. Flickering. Like fire.

She stops.

"Ma..."

Her voice shakes.

"It's okay, baby. That's just where the meeting is. Come."

"It looks scary."

"Don't be scared. I'm here. Nothing will happen to you. I promise."

Thobekile's voice is calm. Reassuring. She takes Buhle's hand and squeezes it.

They walk closer.

The structure comes into view. The small hut.

The air feels thick here.

Buhle's hand tightens in her mother's.

"Ma, I don't like this place."

"Shh. It's fine. The elders are traditional. This is how they do things. Come."

Queen Thobekile pulls her forward.

They reach the entrance. A tattered curtain hangs over the doorway.

A voice comes from inside. Low and cold.

"Ngenani." (Enter.)

Queen Thobekile pushes the curtain aside.

And they step inside.

Nqobizwe

I had this all planned out. I wanted tonight to be special. Because after tonight, there's no turning back. She will be a Ngwenya. Powerful and mine.

I'm suddenly nervous. I want tonight to be perfect.

We're eating, having nice conversations. She keeps thanking me. Telling me how beautiful everything is. And I'm happy. That's what I wanted, for her to love everything.

I want to tell her everything now. That I'm a prince. That she's my chosen one. That tonight is the claiming. But knowing Refilwe, if I do that, tonight might go sideways. She'll get nervous. Ask too many questions. End up having second thoughts.

All her questions will be answered tomorrow.

"Baby, are you even listening?"

"I am, mama."

I didn't hear a word she said. I'm too nervous.

"So I want to apply for her. She deserves to rewrite her life and start again. I hope they'll accept her."

I'm confused. I didn't hear anything.

"Apply for who?"

"See? You weren't listening. I'm talking about DK. I want to try and get her one of the bursaries at work."

"She needs funding?"

She nods, sipping her wine.

"Yeah. I really want to help her."

"She's really that important to you?"

"Very important. That girl had my back growing up. She still does."

I nod.

"Then I'll offer her a bursary from one of my companies."

Her eyes light up. Excitement spreads across her face.

"You'd do that?"

"Anything for you. If she means a lot to you, then she deserves it."

She stands up excitedly and sits on my lap.

"Thank you so much, Ngwenya. She's going to be so happy."

I smile and hold her close.

"I think we should go inside. It's starting to get cold."

I'm lying. I can't wait any longer. I want her so badly. I can't sit here with these thoughts running through my head anymore. Or else I'll end up taking her right here, and I don't want that. This has to be special. Not rushed.

"Really? It's cold? I don't feel it."

"I'm cold, mama. Let's go."

She stands from my lap and we walk to the elevator. We ride down to our floor in silence. My hand is on her lower back.

We enter the room. Everything has been cleaned. The room is set perfectly, romantic lighting, soft music playing low.

We walk into the bedroom. Rose petals are scattered on the floor, leading to the bed.

They did a good job. Exactly as I ordered.

She turns to me, smiling. She's been so happy today. I love it. I'd do anything to keep her happy.

"Oh, Zwee. This is beautiful. I feel so seen for the first time in my life."

Tears fill her eyes.

"Don't cry, Fifi. Tonight is all about being happy and having a nice time. Okay?"

She nods as I wipe a tear from her cheek with my thumb.

She sits on the edge of the bed. I kneel down and help her take off her heels, one at a time. I stand and take off my tuxedo jacket, letting it fall to the side. I roll my shoulders. Now it's just me in my shirt and pants.

"Can you help me with the dress?"

I step behind her and find the zipper. I pull it down slowly. The dress loosens. I plant soft kisses on her back and neck as it slides down her shoulders.

"Thank you."

Her voice is low. Almost a whisper.

She steps out of it fully, holding the dress. She drapes it carefully over the chair.

I look at her standing there in a black bra and matching thong.

I pull her to me by the waist. I'm already hard. My cock strains painfully against my pants. And she feels it pressing against her.

I try to adjust myself. It doesn't help. My dick is throbbing and she looks so sexy it's making everything worse. Her body is doing something to me.

She turns in my arms and looks up at me. Her breathing is shallow and fast.

I cup her face and pull her into a kiss, slow at first, then deepening, growing harder. My hands move down her body, feeling every curve.

She pulls at my shirt. I help her take it off, lifting it over my head. She runs her hands over my chest. My shoulders. Like she's memorizing every part of me.

I unhook her bra and let it fall to the floor. I kiss down her neck over her collarbone then lower.

She gasps when my mouth finds her breast. I take my time. Kissing and sucking. Listening to the sounds she makes.

"Zwee..."

She breathes my name and it drives me crazy.

I pick her up and lay her on the bed gently. I take off my pants and boxers. Her eyes widen slightly when she sees how hard I am.

I hook my fingers into the sides of her thong and pull it down slowly. She lifts her hips to help me.

And then she's completely bare in front of me.

I look at her. All of her. And I've never seen anything more beautiful.

I kiss her again, then trail my kisses down her body, over her stomach, along her hips, moving lower.

I settle between her legs and look up at her.

"Tell me if you want me to stop."

She shakes her head.

"Don't stop."

I lower my mouth to her.

She gasps. Her hands fly to my head, fingers sliding over my brush cut.

I take my time. Tasting her. Learning what makes her moan. What makes her hips lift off the bed.

She's so wet and so responsive. Every sound she makes goes straight to my cock.

"Zwee... oh my God..."

Her thighs tremble. Her breathing gets faster. I can feel her getting close.

I don't stop. I keep going. My tongue working her until she breaks.

She cries out, her back arching off the bed. Her hands press against my head. Her whole body shakes.

I keep going until she's gasping, her hands gripping me, pulling me closer, like everything is becoming too much.

I kiss my way back up her body. She's still trembling. Still trying to catch her breath.

When I reach her mouth, I kiss her deeply. She tastes herself on my lips and moans.

"I need you."

She whispers against my mouth.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please, Zwee. I need you."

•••

Narrated

Vilakazi has put Buhle into a deep sleep. The minute they entered the hut and sat down, Buhle was trembling. Her eyes were wide as she looked around at the bones, the skulls, the dark symbols painted on the walls.

He blew white powder onto her face. She fell asleep immediately, slumping forward.

"What are you going to do to her?"

Queen Thobekile asks, her voice shaking slightly.

"I won't kill her, if that's what you're worried about. I'm not stupid. I wouldn't put myself at risk like that."

"So what's the sacrifice?"

"She's still a virgin. I want her womb. She'll never fall pregnant. Her babies belong to me now."

Queen Thobekile breathes in relief. Sacrificing Buhle's future babies seems far better than killing her. Though moments ago, she'd already accepted that she was sending her daughter to her death.

"So how will her womb help bring Nqobizwe to his knees?"

"I'll give you something mixed with her blood. Every morning, you take a tiny drop."

She nods.

"When she wakes up, she won't remember anything that happened tonight."

"But how will I get her back to the palace?"

"I'll help you. But once you're inside the palace, you're on your own."

She nods and watches as Vilakazi gathers herbs and makes small cuts on her daughter's body. Buhle doesn't move or flinch. Just sleeps.

Vilakazi hums as he prepares Buhle for his dark spirits to have their way with her. He looks at Queen Thobekile and shakes his head. She doesn't catch it.

He feels sorry for her. For being so stupid. What he didn't tell her is that Buhle will die. Just not immediately. In a month or two, she'll be gone. Depending on how strong she is.

He doesn't care. He only cares about power.

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Refilwe

I pull him down to me. I need him closer. I need all of him.

He positions himself between my legs. I feel him there. Hard, hot and pressing against me.

"Are you sure, Fifi? We can stop if you want."

"Don't you dare stop."

He smiles. Then he pushes inside. Slow and careful.

I gasp. It's a lot. He's too big. And it's been so long.

He stops, giving me time to adjust.

"You okay?"

I nod, breathing hard.

"Keep going."

He moves deeper. Inch by inch. Until he's fully inside me.

We both freeze. Just feeling it. The connection and the fullness.

He lowers his forehead to mine.

"Fuck, Fifi. You feel perfect."

Then he starts to move. Slow at first. Long, deep strokes that make me feel every inch of him.

I wrap my legs around him, pulling him deeper.

"Zwee..."

"I know, baby. I feel it too."

And I do feel it. Something more than just physical. Like our souls are connecting. Like we're becoming one person.

He picks up the pace. Harder and faster. The bed creaks beneath us.

I dig my nails into his back. He groans, the sound vibrating through me.

"I love you."

He says it against my neck. His voice is rough.

My heart stops. Then races.

"I love you too."

The words come out before I can think. But they're true. I feel it in every part of me.

He captures my mouth in a kiss. Deep and consuming. Like he's trying to pour everything he feels into it.

His thrusts get harder and more urgent. I can feel myself getting close again.

"Come for me, Fifi. I want to feel you."

His hand slides between us, finding that spot. Rubbing circles.

I shatter. Crying out his name. My whole body tightening around him.

"Fuck... Fifi..."

He thrusts a few more times. Then he groans, deep and guttural. I feel him release inside me.

He collapses on top of me. Both of us are breathing hard, sweating and trembling.

He rolls to the side, pulling me with him so I'm tucked against his chest.

"Thank you" He says still breathing hard.

•••

Narrated

As Vilakazi's dark spirits are busy with Buhle inside the hut, he and Queen Thobekile are outside waiting for the sacrifice to be completed.

He hears the sound of thunder. Rumbling.

And he knows. Whatever they're doing won't work in Thobekile's favor. But for him? He's already gained what he needed.

He knows the chosen Queen has been claimed. He can feel it. The thunder outside is confirmation. The rain is coming.

He should tell Thobekile that the chosen one has been claimed. That her plan is already over. But he chooses not to. The sacrifice needs to be completed. Vilakazi has already seen Queen Thobekile's future. It's over for her after this. The Ngwenya ancestors don't play.

He knows this. But Queen Thobekile is stupid. He tried explaining years ago. Tried to get her to stop. But she was adamant and stubborn. And he's a witch. Of course he wouldn't refuse when she agreed to offer herself for his gain. For power.

But now Queen Thobekile is on her own. In two months, when Buhle dies, he'll be long gone from this village.

A few minutes later, the sacrifice is done.

They enter the hut. Buhle is lying there naked, covered in blood from losing her virginity. The spirits have taken what they wanted.

He takes some of her blood and mixes it with his herbs in a small bottle.

Vilakazi then gives Queen Thobekile a bucket of water to wipe Buhle clean. They dress her again, putting her clothes back on.

He hands Queen Thobekile the bottle with the mixture.

She's smiling.

"Bazongazi kahle ke manje." (They'll know me now.)

She says, tucking the bottle into her bra.

Vilakazi just shakes his head.

"Let's go before anyone notices you're gone."

Queen Thobekile stands up quickly, fixing her dress. Vilakazi lifts Buhle onto his shoulder and they leave.

When they get close to the palace, Vilakazi stops.

"She's all yours now."

"Put her on my back."

Vilakazi helps place Buhle on Thobekile's back. She carries her daughter like a baby and walks back the same way she left.

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Nqobizwe

I can't get enough of her. We're on round two now and I still want more.

She's on top of me this time, moving slowly. Her hands are on my chest. Her head is thrown back. She's beautiful.

I grip her hips, guiding her. Watching the way her body moves. The way she bites her lip when I hit that spot.

"Zwee..."

"I'm right here, mama. Take what you need."

She moves faster. Chasing her release. I sit up and wrap my arms around her, pulling her close.

Our foreheads touch and our breathing syncs. We move together like we've done this a thousand times.

I feel it again, that connection. It's stronger now. Like we're not two separate people anymore. Like we're becoming one.

"I love you."

I say it again because I need her to know. I need her to feel it.

"I love you too."

She kisses me. Deep and slow. And I feel her tighten around me.

We finish together. Both crying out and holding each other tight.

She collapses against my chest exhausted.

I hold her. Stroking her back. Feeling her heartbeat against mine.

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Refilwe is passed out now. Her breathing is deep and even. She's completely exhausted.

She'll only wake up after the whole process is done. And I won't sleep. It's already midnight. I'm not sleeping tonight.

I want to be awake when everything happens. I want to see when she becomes officially mine. When the Ngwenya mark appears on her back. Then I'll know it's done and she is mine, forever.

I sit in the chair by the window, watching her. She looks so peaceful. So beautiful.

If you'd told me a month ago that she'd be here next to me like this, I would have laughed.

My phone rings. It's the guys following Queen Thobekile.

I stand and walk to the bathroom, closing the door quietly.

"What do you have?"

"Boss, this woman. She went with the princess, the younger one. They went to the witch's hut. A few minutes ago, they left. But the Queen was with the witch

when they came out. The witch was carrying the princess on his shoulder. She looked passed out. Her head was hanging."

I clench my jaw. I wonder what they did to her. This can only mean one thing, she's not a Ngwenya princess. If she was harmed, then she's not ours. You don't touch Ngwenya blood unless the ancestors allow it. And I doubt they'd allow it. Buhle is a child. She doesn't know any better.

"Thanks, man. Keep watching. If anything else happens, let me know."

"Mmmhmmm."

That's Refilwe. It's begun.

"Stay on watch. We'll talk later."

I end the call and walk back to the bedroom.

She's tossing and turning. Moaning softly. Her body is moving restlessly.

There's nothing I can do now. Just watch.

And wait for the rain and the royal mark.

Chapter 18

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Narrated: Kingdom of Thabamoya

It's early morning and the rain is pouring heavily. The streets are wet. Thunder rumbles in the distance.

King Serithi Monaheng stands in the royal council chamber, dressed in his formal traditional attire. His blanket is draped over his shoulders. Around him stand the royal elders, five of them, also dressed in their traditional regalia. They are the most trusted advisors of the kingdom. Men who have served the Monaheng family for generations.

On the large wooden table in the center of the room lies a painting. The royal painter was able to paint her, Refilwe, using the King's descriptions and the old photographs of Queen Mapule as reference.

King Serithi stares at the painting, his chest tight with emotion. This is his daughter. The daughter he has never held or spoken to. The daughter he never watched grow up.

"Morenaka, the cars are ready."

One of the elders, Ntate Moshe, says quietly.

The King nods, tearing his eyes away from the painting.

"Good. Let us go."

Another elder, Ntate Thabo, carefully rolls up the painting and places it in a protective tube. They cannot risk damaging it. This painting is their only hope of finding her.

Queen Mmabotle enters the chamber, her expression a mixture of hope and worry. She walks to her husband and places her hand on his arm.

"Bring her home, Serithi."

She says softly.

He covers her hand with his, squeezing gently.

The King turns to the elders.

"Let us go."

They walk out of the council chamber in a procession. The palace staff bow as they pass. The King's sons, Prince Lesole and Prince Qeto, watch from the corridor. Their faces are unreadable. They say nothing as their father walks past.

Outside, three royal cars are waiting. Black and sleek. Bearing the Thabamoya royal crest on the doors. The drivers stand at attention, dressed in formal suits, umbrellas in hand.

The King gets into the lead car. Ntate Moshe and Ntate Thabo join him. The other elders get into the remaining cars.

The gates of the palace open and the convoy begins its journey.

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Three hours later, the royal convoy pulls into Matswalleng. It's a simple village with simple houses. Dirt roads. The rain is still pouring, creating muddy puddles everywhere. This will make things very difficult for them. No one is outside when the weather is like this. Who will they ask now?

The King stares out the window, his heart heavy. He hopes they'll find his daughter. If not, then at least a lead.

"Where do we start, Morenaka?"

Ntate Moshe asks.

"We ask anyone we meet on the road and go from house to house. Someone must know her."

The convoy drives slowly through the streets. Water splashes under the tires. They stop at the local tuck shop. There's a young man who just bought bread. He's wearing a raincoat, holding his purchase under his arm. That young man is Tumelo. Dikeledi's brother.

The King's driver gets out, opening an umbrella, and approaches him.

"Dumela, monna."

The driver greets respectfully.

Tumelo looks at him and greets back.

"Dumela, Ntate."

"I'm looking for someone. I'm hoping you can help."

He nods.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Her name is Refilwe. We're looking for her and her mother."

Tumelo frowns.

"There are so many Refilwes here, Ntate. I wouldn't know which one. Do you have a surname?"

"We have a painting. Can we please go near the car? I don't want it to get damaged in the rain."

He nods and they step closer to the car. The driver carefully unrolls the picture and holds it under the umbrella.

Tumelo steps closer, squinting at the painting. His eyes widen. Recognition flashes across his face.

"Refilwe."

He says immediately.

The driver's heart jumps.

"You know her?"

"Yes. You said you're looking for her mother?"

The driver nods.

The King, who has been listening from inside the car, steps out. He doesn't care about the rain. The driver quickly puts the painting back and holds the umbrella over the King.

Tumelo's eyes widen when he sees him. The traditional attire. The blanket. The authority. The convoy. These are not ordinary men.

"Dumela, ngwanaka." (Hello, my child.)

The King greets gently.

Tumelo bows slightly, unsure of who this person is but knowing he's important.

"Dumela, Ntate."

"You say you know this woman, Refilwe. Do you know where we can find her family? Her father and mother?"

Tumelo hesitates, then nods.

"Her mother passed away. A long time ago. Her father... the man she called her father... lives here. Well, his wife does. Lentswe. You can try there. Refilwe used to live there before she left."

"Can you show us where?"

Tumelo nods, pointing down the street.

"It's not far. Just down that road. The house with the green gate. You can't miss it."

The King places his hand on Tumelo's shoulder.

"Kea leboha, ngwanaka." (Thank you, my child.)

Tumelo nods, still confused, but sensing this is something bigger than he understands.

The King and the elders return to the cars. The convoy starts moving again, slowly, following Tumelo's directions.

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They turn down the road and spot the house. The green gate. Rusted. Peeling paint. The yard is unkempt. Overgrown grass. Puddles of water.

The royal cars pull up outside the gate and stop. The engines idle, windshield wipers moving steadily.

Inside the house, Lentswe is sitting in the living room, watching TV. She hears the sound of cars. Multiple cars. She frowns.

No one in this neighborhood has cars like that.

She stands and walks to the window, peeking through the curtain.

Her eyes widen.

Three black cars. Expensive and gleaming even in the rain. Parked right outside her gate.

She rushes to the door, grabs an umbrella, and steps outside. Her heart is pounding.

Who is this?

She walks toward the gate slowly, her eyes scanning the cars. The crests on the doors and tinted windows.

Then the door of the lead car opens.

A man steps out. Dressed in traditional attire that screams royalty. Behind him, more men step out. Elders. All dressed the same.

Lentswe's breath catches.

She grips the gate, her mind racing.

What is happening?

The King walks toward the gate slowly, his eyes locked on her. His expression is unreadable. Rain falls around him but he doesn't seem to notice.

He stops just a few feet away from the gate.

"Dumela, Mme."

He greets her, his voice deep and authoritative.

Lentswe swallows hard.

"Dumela, Ntate."

She responds, her voice shaking slightly.

The King studies her for a moment. Then he speaks.

"We are looking for someone. A woman named Refilwe. We were told she used to live here."

Lentswe's face goes pale.

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They are now sitting inside the house in the living room. Lentswe let them in and even offered them tea. She sits on the couch opposite them, her hands fidgeting.

"So you say you're looking for Refilwe?"

The King nods.

"Yes. Where is she?"

She chuckles bitterly.

"I wonder what that bastard has done. She stole from you, neh? After sleeping with you?"

The King looks shocked. He glances at the elders. They are all just as shocked.

Lentswe continues, her voice dripping with venom.

"Ngwana eo. Don't be shocked, shame. I knew she sleeps with older men for money. She comes here thinking she has it all."

She laughs out loud.

Then King Serithi sees it. He knows this woman. He's been trying to understand where he knows her from. Now he knows.

"Do you remember me?"

Lentswe looks at him and frowns.

"No, I don't."

"Let me remind you. Years ago, when I came here to inspect the land, the Chief welcomed us. You worked for him. Making traditional beer. I stayed longer than I anticipated. You introduced me to a woman."

Lentswe swallows hard as the memory comes back. She hooked up Nthabiseng, Refilwe's mother, with a man who visited the chief's home. She wanted Nthabiseng to "live a little." She was still young but married. Married to a man she wanted. A man she had a crush on. But Nthabiseng took him.

So when Nthabiseng was busy with the chief's guest, she was busy with Nthabiseng's husband, Molefe. But when she later found out the guest was a king, jealousy crept in. Worse when Nthabiseng told her she was pregnant. Her being pregnant for a king was going to change her life. So Lentswe advised her to keep quiet.

She didn't want Nthabiseng living better than her. But when she saw Molefe loving the child, she got angrier and spilled the beans. Nthabiseng was willing to find the king. She came clean to her family, but they wanted nothing to do with her. A whore of a wife who gave birth to a princess? They didn't want problems. Royalty politics. Dying for things they knew nothing of.

"Remember I came back looking for that woman. You told me she moved and you don't know where. You said she didn't give birth to any girl child?"

Lentswe shifts uncomfortably.

"Yeii, it was then. Things change."

She says, defending herself.

"Why did you lie? I was only looking for my child. You knew the woman because you introduced us. You gave me a false name and I looked everywhere. Why?"

Lentswe stands, her voice rising.

"You're here to ask me why? I raised that daughter of yours. You owe me, wena. Nthabiseng thought she was all that. Now her brat also thinks she's all that. And wena, you're busy interrogating me. You slept with a married woman, in case you forgot. That child you're looking for belongs here."

The King's jaw clenches. But he tries to control his anger.

"Theola moya." (Calm down.) "That's why we're here, to do things right. Where is she and her mother?"

"Nthabiseng is dead. I'm the woman of this house now. My husband is also dead. That girl you're looking for ran away ten years ago and stole our money because she didn't want to get married. We were only doing her a favour. She ran."

The King clenches his fists on his knees.

"She never came back?"

"Last week Friday, she was here. She wanted to be praised for helping with burying my husband, her father! She owes us for taking care of her. And now she blocked my number because she doesn't want to send me money monthly. That child is ungrateful."

"Do you still have her number?"

"No. I deleted it."

She's lying. They can all tell.

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The Ngwenya Kingdom

The royal seer enters the yard of the palace, reciting the Ngwenya clan praises. He is not alone. The royal elders are with him. They are out in the rain. They don't care about getting wet. They are happy.

"Ngwenya! Mashobane! Wena wakwaMashobane, owawela ngodaka kwasala izinyawo. Mamba kaPhunga noMageba. S'thole saseMbo. Sidlova esingadlovi muntu. Mnguni omnyama!"

The King walks out, hearing the commotion outside. And he already knows. The rain and the seer with the elders. Nqobizwe has claimed his chosen one. This is a big thing in the kingdom.

Everyone moves to the royal council. Maidens are instructed to serve them tea.

Inside the royal council, Queen Liyana and Queen Thobekile sit beside the King. The royal seer kneels on one knee in front of them.

"It's done, my King. The chosen one has been claimed. The Prince is strong and untouchable. The Kingdom grows powerful."

The King smiles. Very proud of his son. That he finally found his chosen one. Everyone was starting to get worried.

"This is the best news. Now we prepare for the wedding."

The seer clears his throat.

"Not yet, my King."

The King frowns.

"What do you mean, not yet? She has to be married as soon as possible. My son has to be crowned."

Queen Thobekile clears her throat. She wants to laugh in their faces. Because Nqobizwe will not be crowned. She'll make sure of it. The claiming was useless because she did the sacrifice. So she thinks.

What she doesn't know is that the claiming was done last night while she was also doing the sacrifice. She thinks because it rained heavily in the early morning, that's when Nqobizwe claimed the chosen queen.

"I understand, my King. But her family is still looking for her. She needs to be introduced to her ancestors before we can ask for her hand in marriage."

"She's already a Ngwenya, nje. What difference does it make?"

"Yes, she is. But following tradition, we can't pay lobola to where she currently belongs. Her father is looking for her. He will find her. After he has done what's needed, then we can do things the right way."

"Angikuzwa mina, Ngubeni." (I don't understand you, Ngubeni.)

"The Prince will explain."

Queen Thobekile sits forward.

"How sure are we that she is the chosen one?" She asks with attitude.

"You will know soon enough." Ngubeni says not looking at her.

She laughs bitterly. She now undermines Ngubeni. If he doesn't see that the claiming was not a success, then he's a weak seer.

She stands up clearing her throat.

"My elders, I still think Nqobizwe should marry Princess Nolwandle. I don't think this chosen one is the right one. Look, now we can't even ask for her hand in marriage yet. The Prince has to be crowned. We are running out of time"

The King is fuming. He doesn't want to lose control in front of the elders. His hand grips the armrest of his chair tightly.

Queen Liyana stands too, her voice calm but firm.

"My elders, I apologize on behalf of the Queen. She doesn't know what she's saying. We, as the royal house, believe and trust the royal seer. And it's clear our chosen Queen has been claimed. The rain…and I'm sure all of you can feel the change in the atmosphere. I say let us trust the process. Let the chosen one's family fix whatever they have to fix. If oNgwenya do not have an issue with waiting a bit, who are we to rush?"

She bows and sits down. She couldn't sit there listening to Thobekile disrespect the seer and ancestors like that. In front of people. They'll think the royal house is weak. That it can be a playground.

The elders nod, agreeing. The look Thobekile gives Queen Liyana could kill. If she could, she would make her disappear. The hate is visible on her face.

The King clears his throat and stands.

"I will speak to my son. Ngubeni, ngiyabonga. You may all be excused."

He says that, then walks out of the royal council. He is very angry at what Thobekile did. And he will address it with her.

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Nqobizwe

Fifi is still sleeping. It's raining heavily outside. I just want to stay in bed holding her.

I ended up falling asleep after I saw the mark appearing bit by bit on her back. Now I'm holding her from behind, looking at the mark.

It's still red. Probably sore. I'll send someone to get a numbing cream.

I feel something different about me. I feel this powerful aura emerging inside me.

She turns and faces me, still sleeping. I look at her. She's so beautiful.

She opens her eyes slowly, still sleepy. I kiss her nose, then down to her lips. Just a peck. I'm already hard, but I know her body is exhausted and in pain.

"Hi."

I say, looking at her. I love this woman so much. And it scares me sometimes.

She gives me a tired smile.

"Hi."

Her voice is still sleepy.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel like I've been hit by a bus. Gosh, was it that intense last night?"

She yawns. Good thing there are bath salts to soothe her body from pain.

"You want me to run you a bath?"

She shakes her head.

"No. I want to sleep... Oh God, the dream I had."

I already know what she dreamed. Although it wasn't a dream. It was real.

"Want to talk about it?"

She sits up slowly. I place the pillows behind her for support as I sit facing her. She rubs her eyes and yawns again.

She's really tired. I just smile, looking at how cute she is.

Then fear strikes.

I have to tell her everything. I've dug my own grave. I should have told her beforehand. Now it seems like I deceived her by not informing her. Which I'll take. I just wanted to protect her. Protect us. Because I know if I told her, we wouldn't be here today. And that would have given Thobekile and other witches time to strike.

Her eyes shift toward the window.

"It's raining. How are we going to enjoy Cape Town now with this weather?"

I chuckle.

"It will pass. Tell me what you dreamt."

She looks down at the blanket, tracing the fabric with her fingers.

"I was at a palace again. What's with these royalty dreams? Maybe I'm losing my mind."

"You're not losing your mind. Dreams have meanings. Not all of them, but remember what I said. Before concluding, use logic and analyze."

She nods.

"This time around, it was a different homestead. There were so many people bowing to me. An old woman said her name is Queen Nomusa. She then put a leopard skin shawl over my shoulders and told me, 'Siyakwamukela kwa Ngwenya.'" (We welcome you to the Ngwenya family.)

I hold both her hands.

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. I think my mind is working overtime. You are Ngwenya, so it doesn't make sense why I would dream of Ngwenya people, right? Do you know anyone by the name of Queen Nomusa?"

I clear my throat. I feel my forehead sweating. Her eyelids look heavy. She's still sleepy.

"Get some rest, mama. When you wake up, we'll talk about the dream. Okay?"

She yawns, already laying back down.

"Yeah, I feel so sleepy. If I sleep long, wake me up."

I nod, but I won't do that. She needs to sleep as much as she can.

Chapter 19

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Narrated

Tumelo walks inside with the items he just bought from the store. He places them on the table and goes to the living room where Dikeledi is sitting, sipping on her tea.

"Heh, Dikeledi. Is Refilwe royalty?"

She looks at him, frowning.

"Last time I checked, no, she's not. Unless Ntate Molefe was not her father. There were rumors. Why?"

"Hayi, I got stopped by some men. They had a portrait that looks like Refilwe. They said they're looking for Refilwe and her parents. They looked like royalty. I think they are."

Dikeledi stands up from the couch and looks outside into the yard. She doesn't see anyone.

"So where are they? I don't see them anywhere outside the yard. Were they on foot? Did you lock them outside?"

She walks to the kitchen, opens the door, and scans outside. Still no one.

Tumelo looks at her, confused.

"Where are they, Tumelo? I don't see them."

"Was I supposed to come with them here?"

"YES!! We're the ones who know Refilwe. The ones who would've assisted if that's her father looking for her. I don't want to be angry, but I feel like I already know the answer. Where did you send them?"

Tumelo sits down on the couch.

"I sent them to Lentswe. I mean, she knows more than us, mos."

"TUMELO!!"

She paces up and down, her hands on her head.

"Why in the hell would you do that? Have you forgotten what those people did to Refilwe? Especially LENTSWE?"

She stops in front of her brother, breathing heavily.

"Do you think Lentswe will help with anything regarding Refilwe? Do you think she'll help them find her? Just know, if she does, then those people are not good people. Because if they mean well, Lentswe would rather die than see anything good happen to Refilwe."

"I didn't think of it like that."

"OF COURSE YOU DIDN'T THINK! This is a chance for Refilwe to have a family. To belong. And you, my dearest brother, just blew it."

She storms to her bedroom, changes into warm clothes, puts on a raincoat, and grabs an umbrella. She opens the kitchen door.

Tumelo stands up, following her.

"Jwale o ya kae?" (Where are you going?)

"To fix your mess. To find out who those people are and what they want."

"DIKELEDI!"

Tumelo calls out to her, but she's already out the door, ignoring him.

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She's walking at a fast pace, hoping to find them still at Lentswe's house. She doesn't even know what she'll do when she gets there. She'll figure it out on the spot.

When she gets near Lentswe's yard, she sees the cars. A male figure with an umbrella is standing near them. She gets closer.

"Dumela."

Nothing. The man just looks at her.

She clears her throat.

"I heard you're looking for Refilwe."

He looks at her. For a moment, she thinks he might speak, but he says nothing and turns back to whatever had held his attention before.

She gets frustrated by this man. Then notices men walking out of Lentswe's house, heading toward the gate. They look defeated, disappointment written across their faces.

The moment they step outside, Dikeledi runs toward them. They stop, staring at her in confusion as she closes her umbrella.

The guard rushes after her, trying to pull her away.

"Whoa...can I speak to you? This is about Refilwe."

The King nods and the guard moves away. Still on guard for anything suspicious.

"BAYEDE!"

Dikeledi says loudly, bowing and raising her hands. Then she remembers that the cars have "Thabamoya" written on them. So he's probably the Basotho King.

"I mean, MORENAKA. Apologies."

She raises her hands again, doing a little bow. She doesn't need to be told. She can see these people are royalty. And the man standing in front of her is THE KING.

The King chuckles.

"How can we help you, young lady?"

He asks.

She clears her throat.

"Well, I heard you're looking for Refilwe. See, my br..."

"You know where she is?" The King cuts her off.

"My King, can I please finish, then you can ask questions after?"

The King is amused by such a character. He nods.

"As I was saying, my brother is a bit slow. The man you met earlier and asked if he knows Refilwe shouldn't have sent you to this house. You should've come to me. Refilwe is my friend, so I want to know, why are you looking for her?"

"She is my long-lost daughter."

Dikeledi smiles widely.

"Next time, come to me, not this house. The woman you just met in there...I'm sure you already saw how vile she is."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Not really, but I'm visiting her Friday. I can give you her number. Then you'll take it from there. BUT if you're lying to me and you want to harm her, I will kill you."

The elders' eyes widen. They're shocked. The King is amused and glad that Refilwe has someone who has her back like this.

"I'm sorry, my King, for saying that. But I mean it."

The King nods smiling.

"I hear you, young lady. Now, can I have her phone number, please?"

She nods and takes out her phone. The King hands her his phone and she types in the number.

"Don't rush her. She's been through a lot. Be patient with her."

The King nods.

"Thank you. What's your name again?"

"Dikeledi. DK for short. But you, my King, can call me Gorgeous."

The King chokes and clear his throat while the elders chuckle when they see what DK is doing. Flirting with the King.

She winks and steps aside while they walk to the cars.

Lentswe peeks out the window when she sees the cars are still there. She sees Dikeledi and rushes out, leaving her umbrella behind.

"Yeii wena, Satan!"

The cars move and drive away.

"Ey, tswa ho nna, mme towe!" (Ey, leave me alone, woman!) Dikeledi says as she walks away.

She leaves Lentswe screaming at her from the gate.

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Refilwe

I'm woken up by my phone on the nightstand ringing. I sit up, yawning. Whatever Nqobizwe did to me yesterday fucked me up. My head feels so heavy.

My phone rings again. It's Dikeledi. I answer.

"Refilwe, wa bona Tumelo, neh? Tumelo is the dumbest person on earth. He's my brother, but right now I want to chokeslam him. Nx."

I shake my head. I didn't even have a chance to ask how she is.

"What did he do?"

My voice sounds low. I don't feel okay. I need to bathe. Maybe I'll feel better.

"Are you okay? You sound off."

She asks, sounding worried.

"I'm fine, love. Just tired. I respect Zwee's dick, shame. I feel so tired. This man did something to me. I'm telling you."

She laughs.

"I want to see you. Let me get inside the house, then I'll call you on video call. Sharp."

Five minutes later, she video calls me.

"Girl, you look tired as hell."

I chuckle. I want to laugh, but I'm really too tired to even laugh.

"I think he used voodoo on me, DK. Something happened last night. I'm telling you."

"You have nice problems, shame. O phela ha monate, yong. Imagine complaining about getting serviced well."

I laugh softly.

"Anyways, what did your brother do?"

Her face changes on the screen and I chuckle. She's so dramatic.

"Important people, and I mean very important people, were looking for you. This fool sends them to Lentswe. Why he did that, only he knows."

Important people looking for me? Who could they be?

"Looking for me? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. They're royalty. The King said you're his daughter."

My eyes are now wide open. My breathing changes. The dream. It was true. I'm a princess. And my father is looking for me?

All these thoughts start running through my head.

"Are you sure, Dikeledi?"

"Yes. I was with them a few minutes ago. I'm so happy you'll be reunited with your real father. We did suspect that Molefe is not your father though."

"I don't know what to say."

"You see your father, neh? He is so hot. He doesn't even look old. Maybe I might be your stepmother. Who knows?"

I laugh so loud, forgetting I'm in pain.

"Are you hitting on a King, Dikeledi?"

She laughs.

"He looks yummy, mos. Ah. They asked for your number..."

"Tell me you said no."

I cut her off before she finishes.

She looks down.

"Well... I... Bona, mahn. I thought you'd be happy I gave him your number. You don't want to hear what he wants?"

I sigh.

"I don't think I'm ready. I'm too angry right now. I went through so much while he was living comfortably."

"Talk to him. Hear him out. And ask all the questions you have. You don't know, maybe he didn't even know you existed till now."

She might be right. I nod.

"I'll wait for his call."

"Yeah. I can already see myself as the Queen of Thabamoya."

Oh my God, it really is him.

"How do you know Thabamoya?"

"I saw the cars. They had 'Thabamoya' written on them. Do you know it?"

I shake my head. "I dreamt of it."

"Hey, wabo. It's a sign. Talk to him and give him a chance to explain."

"I will, my love and... I hope you won't mind. I told Nqobizwe that you need funding, and he said he'll use one of his company bursaries to fund your education."

I press my lips together, hoping and crossing my fingers she won't be offended.

"Really? Is he that rich?"

"Well, he owns some businesses."

"Do you trust him? Because honestly, I don't mind. If he has money, why not let him pay? But I don't want to be a burden to people, Ref. I don't want to have problems."

I nod.

"I trust him. But if he acts up, girl, I'll definitely take a loan for you. I won't let you down."

She laughs and I join her. But I really mean it.

"Hayi, loan girl. Sharp."

"Sharp."

We end the call.

Nqobizwe is not here. I wonder where he is. I step out of bed and walk to the bathroom. I brush my teeth then feel something stinging on my back. On my left shoulder. I touch myself and feel something raised. I scream.

What the hell is that?

I grab my phone and take a picture so I can see.

I scream my lungs out when I see a crocodile tattoo.

A tattoo? How? When? I wasn't drunk. I remember everything that happened last night...

Nqobizwe rushes inside, worry written on his face.

"What? What's wrong, Fifi? Why are you screaming?"

He's holding me now. Inspecting me. I turn and show him.

"Look at that tattoo. How on earth did I get that? When even?"

He sits on the edge of the bed.

"That's why you were screaming?"

"Yeah. I got the shock of my life."

He sighs. "You scared me. I thought..."

He shakes his head.

"I got you a numbing cream for it. Let me run you a bath so you can soothe your body."

"You know how I got it?"

He nods, walking toward the bathroom. He opens the tap, filling the bathtub with water.

I follow him to the bathroom.

"Nqobizwe, you didn't use voodoo on me, did you?"

He chuckles.

"No, I didn't, Fifi."

"So why do I have a crocodile tattoo on my back? And why am I so tired?"

He sighs.

"Please bathe. I'll explain everything after."

I put my hands on my hips, still naked.

"No. I want to know now, Nqobizwe. How did I get a tattoo without consenting to it?"

He smiles, looking at me.

"I love you so much. You know that?"

"Nqobizwe, I'm serious right now. Start explaining."

He closes the tap and steps toward me. I look below his belt. He's semi-hard. He pulls me by my waist. I can feel his bulge growing.

"You feel that? That's how much effect you have on me."

His voice is hoarse.

I swallow and clear my throat.

"Don't do that, Zwee. Please."

He smiles, making me weaker.

"Do what, mama?"

"You're seducing me."

My voice is low.

He laughs.

"I'm not doing anything."

"Stop avoiding my question. How did I get the tattoo?"

"Promise you won't leave me."

"Nqobizwe, what's going on?"

My heart is pounding hard right now. What did Nqobizwe do?

"There's something you need to know. Something I should have told you. I know you'll be angry. But please don't end things, Fifi."

"You can't do that. You can't hide things from me and make me promise not to leave you when I don't even know what the hell is going on."

I'm getting worked up now. He's frustrating me.

He leans against the bathroom sink and pulls me to stand between his legs.

"I'm sorry for not telling you earlier. I promise I was just trying to make sure you and I are safe and protected. I know you'll be angry at me. I'm ready to face that. But you leaving me, Fifi? I won't be able to live with that. You're my life, Fifi. Life without you doesn't make sense."

"You're speaking in riddles, Nqobizwe. Just tell me and get it over and done with."

He takes a deep breath.

"I'm a Prince from the Ngwenya Kingdom in KwaZulu-Natal, the most powerful kingdom. Soon I'll be crowned King."

I suspected he was royalty, but I was hoping he wasn't. Being royalty means our relationship is just for show. And somewhere, his family is arranging for him to marry a princess.

"You're married? Or arranged to?"

He smiles, then shakes his head.

"I'm not married. You, Refilwe, will be my only wife. I told you."

I breathe out, relief washing over me. But I know being royalty comes with a lot.

"Your family doesn't want you to marry a commoner?"

He tightens his hands on my waist.

"No. But even if they didn't, you're not a commoner. You are royalty, remember?"

I almost forgot about the possibility of me being a princess

He continues.

"My family is a bit different. The next in line, an heir to the throne, has a chosen one. Chosen by the ancestors themselves. I don't know why or how they choose, but for me, I'm happy they chose you."

I step back. He holds both my hands.

"What do you mean chose me?"

"The crocodile mark on your back, you got it from my ancestors."

I laugh. How is that even possible?

"Come on, baby. How can they possibly do that?"

"The dream you had was real. You were being crowned. You now belong to the Ngwenya Kingdom. You asked if I know Queen Nomusa."

He nods, his eyes not leaving mine. Fear is visible in them.

"I know her. She's the reason there are chosen queens for the kingdom. She made sure Ngwenya is the most powerful kingdom. So a suitable queen who can keep it the same is chosen to lead alongside the King."

I blink rapidly. I hear him, but I'm not hearing him.

"The rain and the mark are confirmation that you're indeed my chosen one. The chosen Queen. And it also means that claiming you was a success. You now belong to Ngwenya."

My head is spinning. I remove my hands from his and walk back to the bedroom. I take the robe from the hanger and sit on the bed, taking everything in.

He sits next to me. My hands are shaking. I wasn't even aware.

"Sleeping with me was you claiming me?"

He nods.

"Where does this put me? Since I wasn't given an option to choose whether I want this or not, can I still choose not to belong to oNgwenya? Can I choose to walk out and not be Queen?"

He shakes his head.

"You can't. You have to be Queen."

"So you took it upon yourself to change my life without informing me?"

He holds my hands.

"I wanted to protect you, Fifi. To protect us. Witches and other kingdoms knew of your existence. They were going to hurt you. Worse, kill you. I tried telling you, but every time, I got scared."

"Why would they want to kill me?"

"You're powerful. And you belonging to our kingdom makes it more powerful. Our ancestors reward us greatly for following their terms."

"Reward you?"

"Our people never go hungry. Plants bloom. Livestock multiplies. Us, as the royals, our businesses grow too. You bring a lot of change to our kingdom. My mother is a chosen one too. My father's business did well after marrying her, and the kingdom remained powerful and feared."

I nod, tears streaming down my face. I stand in front of him.

"So you basically used me so your kingdom can gain. Is that what you're saying?"

He stands too and holds my hands.

"No. No, Fifi, I didn't use you. I love you. I love you so much. I loved you seeing for the first time at Ngwenya. I didn't even know you were my chosen one. I only found out recently. It's only now the ancestors revealed it. I have to be King soon, and I think they took time revealing who you are to give your father time to find you. But he took his time."

He squeezes my hands tighter.

"But everything had to be rushed now. Witches are after you. I just wanted you protected, mama. Now you're untouchable. oNgwenya protect you with everything they have."

I yank my hands from his grip.

"Can I be alone? I just need time alone."

"Fifi, please don't leave me. I'll do anything."

"Can I be alone? Am I allowed?"

"Refilwe!"

"I'm asking. Maybe I'm not allowed. I can't make my own choices, right? So I'm asking you. Can I?"

He runs his hand over his face.

"I'm sorry. I'll give you space."

"Thank you."

He walks to the door. I'm angry and hurt. I don't want to see his face right now.

He opens the door and stands there, looking at me.

"Please get someone to buy me the morning-after pill." I say after it hits me that we didn't even use protection.

He opens his mouth but decides to close it, then nods.

"I love you, Fifi."

He walks out and closes the door.

How can you do such a thing to someone you claim to love? Change someone's future like this without them knowing? Without them agreeing?

Chapter 20

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Nqobizwe

It has been over an hour since Refilwe locked herself in the bedroom. I've gone through every emotion imaginable. I hope she'll understand why I couldn't tell her.

Somehow, a part of me is glad I didn't. This claiming had to happen. Queen Thobekile is always busy, even last night she was out witching. I couldn't waste any more time.

I walk to the door and knock.

"Fifi, please come eat. You haven't eaten all morning."

No response.

I try the handle. Still locked.

"Refilwe, come eat or else I'm breaking this door down. I'm not joking. You can be angry, but don't starve yourself, mama. Ngiyakucela."

Silence.

I walk back to the couch and sit down, dragging my hands over my face. The rain continues pouring outside.

A few minutes later, the bedroom door opens.

She steps out looking fresh and beautiful. She’s wearing a sky-blue off-shoulder dress that hugs her in all the right places. She looks breathtaking.

She says nothing to me. Doesn’t even glance in my direction. Her eyes are puffy. She takes what she wants from the breakfast trolley, then sits at the table by the window, watching the rain, lost deep in thought.

I watch her intensely, at how broken she looks. All because of me.

She finishes eating and finally looks at me.

“Were you able to get the pill?” Her voice is low. Hollow.

Another problem. The pill.

My ancestors, if I have ever needed you, it is now. Please make this woman forgive me. Don’t let her leave me.

I did get the pill. But the problem is… it won’t work. She’s going to fall pregnant, and I don’t know how I’m going to tell her. She’ll never forgive me for this.

Part of me wants to tell her the truth, but I’m terrified of what will happen. Another part wants to stay silent and let her find out on her own, but I can’t do that to her.

I walk toward her and sit opposite her at the table.

“I got the pills… but there’s something you need to know.”

She looks at me with those big eyes, now puffy and red from crying. I reach across the table and take her hand. She lets me.

That has to mean something… right?

“The morning-after pill won’t work.”

She stares at me, her eyes widening.

"So I'm going to be pregnant?"

Her voice breaks. A tear falls down her cheek.

I nod. I honestly don't know what to say. She removes her hand from mine.

"Where's the pill?"

"Fifi, I think..."

"Just give me the damn pill. Please."

I nod, standing up to get the pill from the coffee table. I hand it to her with a glass of water, then sit down again. The tension between us is so thick it almost feels suffocating. Just a few hours ago she was happy. And now… everything has changed.

She takes the pill, swallowing it down with water. Then looks at me. Really looks at me.

"Do you really hate me that much, Nqobizwe?"

There are tears in her eyes.

I move my chair closer to her.

"Baby, I don't hate you. I love you so much."

She wipes a falling tear with the back of her hand.

"I don't think you understand, Nqobizwe. I really don't. And that makes me think you do hate me."

She takes a shaky breath.

"You came into my life when I least expected you. Something in me felt that we were supposed to meet. Like we were meant for each other. Falling for you wasn't hard. The first forehead kiss you gave me? I was already drawn to you. I didn't want to be too attached because I was scared of being hurt."

Her voice trembles.

“I chose to tell you about myself, my life. Do you know why?” She shakes her head slightly, her voice unsteady. “Because I wanted you to decide early. I didn’t want you finding things out later, when I’m already invested… already attached, and then deciding to leave. I wanted you to have a choice.”

She swallows hard. “DK told me I should be honest with you, so you’d know exactly what you were walking into. The kind of person you were choosing to be with… and everything that comes with it.”

She wipes another tear from her cheek.

“And she was right. I almost didn’t give you, or us, a chance because I was scared, Nqobizwe. Scared of falling in love only to end up disappointed.” Her voice breaks slightly. “And guess what? The very thing I was afraid of happened. Only… a thousand times worse.”

I reach for her hand again. She pulls back.

“I was fine with you keeping things from me because I believed it was your truth to carry. I thought it was about who you are, everything that makes Nqobizwe who he is. Not something that would end up affecting me this deeply.”

“I’m sorry, Fifi. Please understand my reasons.”

“You were protecting me from people who want to hurt me, right?”

I nod.

She exhales slowly. “You being a prince and me being your chosen one...I can accept that. The danger, the responsibility, even you needing to protect me… I can accept all of that.”

Her eyes harden as she looks at me.

“But what I can’t accept is you letting me sleep with you without telling me what it meant. Without telling me what would happen to me afterward.”

Her voice trembles. “You took away my choice, Nqobizwe. I didn’t know what I was agreeing to because you never trusted me enough to explain.”

She stands up and begins pacing the room.

“First, I just found out I’m not a Molefe. I’m a Monaheng.” She lets out a shaky breath. “And then suddenly I’m a Ngwenya too… marked and tied to you. I wasn’t prepared for any of that.”

She starts counting on her fingers, her voice rising with every word.

“Second, I’m supposed to be a queen to an entire kingdom, and I was never groomed for that. I know nothing about being a queen.”

She raises another finger.

“Third, I can’t even walk away from this, even if I decide I don’t want to be queen.”

She stops and faces me, tears streaming down her face.

“So my entire life changes overnight, and you didn’t think I needed to know? You let me walk into all of this without the truth.”

She lets out a bitter laugh.

“I deserved a choice, Nqobizwe. Instead, you made the decision for me. And now everything crashes down at once, and I’m expected to what? Just accept it and move on like it’s nothing?”

Her hands are shaking.

"You lived all your life knowing what's waiting for you. Knowing you have a chosen one… Knowing what was expected of you. What about me? WHAT ABOUT ME, NQOBIZWE?"

She’s crying harder now, her voice beginning to rise. I clench my jaw. “I didn’t even know I was royalty. What do I know about that life?” She looks at me through her tears. “I told you how I grew up. You know my story. And somehow you still thought it was a good idea to keep something this big from me?”

She wipes her face with both hands.

"I went through so much. Spent years trying to build this person you see in front of you today. I worked hard and tirelessly. On my own. You didn't have to do me like that. I loved you and trusted you so much. You really broke me."

Why is she saying "loved"? She doesn't love me anymore?

I stand up.

"Please, Fifi. We can fix this. I'm sorry."

"I get it. I'm your chosen one. There was no running away from that. What's hurtful is that you knew and chose not to say anything so you can claim me and boom…surprise."

"I tried so many times, but I thought you would want nothing to do with me or take too long to accept all of this. Time was running out, Fifi. I didn't want anything to happen to you."

She nods, wrapping her arms around herself.

“It’s like not telling your partner you have a deadly virus, knowing that if they sleep with you, they’ll get it too…and only telling them afterward because you were afraid they’d leave if they knew.”

She shakes her head, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“Why not give them the choice? The chance to decide for themselves whether they’re willing to take that risk. It should’ve been their decision.” Her voice softens, hurt replacing anger.

“And maybe… you would’ve been surprised. Maybe they would’ve chosen it anyway, because they loved you enough.”

She looks at me steadily.

“I know, Fifi. I know. In my mind, I thought I was doing the right thing.”

She sighs, sitting back down. She looks exhausted.

"So you're saying I'm forced to be with you and be Queen?"

"You can choose to leave me, but you cannot choose not to be Queen."

"So how does it work? Leading together but not in a relationship?"

I pause. My chest tightens.

"I don't know."

She nods, and I'm hoping she doesn't want to leave me.

"Can you please take me back to my place? I just want to be on my own and digest everything."

"Mama, ngiyakucela, let's digest everything together."

She shakes her head, more tears falling.

"There is no together anymore, Nqobizwe. This is the end of us."

"No, Refilwe. We can fix this. Don't do that."

My voice breaks.

"I can't, Nqobizwe. I don't want to spend the rest of my life blaming you and being bitter that you ruined my life but also saved it at the same time. And I cannot help but think if I wasn't your chosen one…if I wasn't the one chosen, would I need saving? I don't know."

I can't stop my own tears now. They fall freely.

"Refilwe, I love you. Don't do this to me, mama."

She shakes her head, crying.

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Refilwe

Do I want to break up with him? No. Of course not. But my heart is shattered. The trust is broken and I have to deal with this new reality. One I was not prepared for. I just have to suck it up and be Queen. What do I even know about being a Queen?

I look at him. He's broken. But not as broken as me.

"Can I leave?"

"NO! If you want to be alone and have space, I will leave and book another room."

"I don't think you understand what I'm saying..."

He cuts me off. "We are not breaking up, Refilwe. If you want time to digest, I will give you time. But you are not leaving me. You are mine, Refilwe."

He walks out, leaving me dumbfounded.

Is he forcing me to be with him? What did I get myself into?

I go back to the bedroom and throw myself on the bed. I cannot even stop these stupid tears.

My phone rings, and honestly, I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone right now. I can't believe Nqobizwe and I made things official yesterday, and today it's already over. Just like that.

It rings again. An unsaved number.

I hesitate before answering. "Hello?"

The person on the other end is silent. I can hear faint breathing.

"Hello?" I repeat.

He clears his throat. "Hi… is this Refilwe?"

"Who's asking?"

"This is King Serithi Monaheng. Your friend Dikeledi gave me your number."

My heart stutters. He's real.

"Yes… you're speaking to Refilwe," I say slowly. "I can't believe you're real."

There's a pause on the line. Then he exhales.

"What do you mean… by real?"

"I dreamt about you," I say. "You, your father, and Mofumahadi Mapule. Your father told me you're my dad, from the Thabamoya Kingdom. Apparently, I'm a princess." I swallow. "So… I saw you in the dream."

His breathing grows heavier.

"I saw you too, Refilwe," he says quietly. "We were having the same dream. For the first time in twenty-eight years, I knew your name… and what you looked like."

I frown, trying to process his words.

"So… you didn't know anything about me?"

"Listen, ngwana waka, can we meet? I want to see you, Refilwe… and explain everything."

"We can meet," I say softly. "I'd really like that. I have so many questions. But… I don't even know where Thabamoya is."

"Don't worry about that. I will come to you. Where are you?"

"I live in Pretoria, but I'm in Cape Town right now. I'll be leaving tomorrow, so maybe we can meet next week. I think… I think I'm okay with that."

"Perfect. I'll be there. Just send me the address. You have no idea how happy I am, my Princess, to have found you."

Something shifts inside my chest when he says *my Princess*. For a moment, I feel like a little girl again, like everything will somehow be okay because I have a father.

But I don't even know this man. I don't know why he wasn't in my life. I don't know how he even met my mother.

"Okay… bye."

I end the call before the emotions swallowing me can spill over. Everything feels like too much for one person to carry. I need to talk to someone before I lose it.

There's only one person I can call.

Dikeledi.

She answers almost immediately.

"My love, how are you feeling now? Still tired?"

I sniff quietly.

"Refilwe… are you crying?"

"He called," I whisper. "My father."

"Oh, hle. Is that why you're crying? What did he say?"

"He wants us to meet. I just… I feel so many things right now. Everything is overwhelming. I'm happy that I have a father who was looking for me, but at the same time, I have so many questions… and I'm scared of the answers."

"I hear you," she says gently. "You went through so much as a child. You had to grow up too fast. Now suddenly knowing you might have a father brings up everything…you start asking yourself, *why now? Where was he all these years?*"

I nod even though she can't see me.

"You're allowed to feel everything you're feeling right now."

"Nqobizwe and I broke up."

"WHAT?!" she gasps. "Why? You literally started dating yesterday!"

Where do I even begin?

I tell her everything.

"Yoh… yoh, yoh. This is a whole movie, mos."

"My life changed overnight, DK. I'm not living just for myself anymore. I have to serve an entire kingdom."

“Yeah, but there was no running away from it. It’s your destiny,” she says carefully. “Still… you should’ve been prepared for something this big. And Nqobizwe should have told you.”

“Exactly. I deserved to know. Now everything is dumped on me at once and I’m just expected to move on.”

“I understand his reasons,” she says. “He was trying to protect you while protecting the kingdom, that’s his duty. But he handled it wrong. That’s not how things should be done.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “And part of me understands him too. He didn’t want to delay things. And honestly, I would’ve needed time to process all of it. But I’m hurt right now. I won’t lie.”

“Just sleep,” she says softly. “Cry if you need to. I am coming tomorrow and we’ll cry together. But I’m going to be honest with you, friend…Nqobizwe is not going to let you go. You’re stuck with him, whether you like it or not. His ancestors made sure of that. *Kethile, kethile.*”

I let out a tired breath.

“Yeah… let me sleep. Maybe I’ll wake up feeling better.”

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Narrated

Princess Nolwandle has just arrived in Pretoria. Sbonga arranged a room for her at the same hotel where he is staying. His guards escort her through the lobby, their presence drawing curious glances from passing guests.

She checks into her room without incident.

Not long after, Sbonga makes his way upstairs. He needs to know whether they are truly aligned, whether she understands the plan.

He knocks.

The door opens.

Nolwandle stands before him, breathtaking in her elegance. For a moment, Sbonga forgets why he came. His throat tightens as he takes her in.

If things were different, he would have claimed her for himself without hesitation.

But the throne is worth more than desire.

And once everything falls into place, she will be his anyway.

For now, he must be patient and controlled.

“Please, come in,” she says, opening the door wider.

He steps inside.

“You can take a seat.”

Sbonga settles onto the couch while she moves gracefully toward the minibar. She pours a drink for him and another for herself before joining him.

“So,” he says, accepting the glass, “my mother filled you in?”

She nods, taking a slow sip.

“Mmh. She did. And I must admit, she helped me see things clearly. I have to fight for what belongs to me. Being arranged to marry Nqobizwe must be fate. Maybe I am his chosen one.”

Sbonga leans back slightly.

“But he already claimed the chosen one. Haven’t you heard?”

She scoffs softly.

“The one he can’t even marry yet? Please. Your mother is right, that chosen one is not it. The ancestors must have made a mistake. She needs to be investigated.” Her eyes narrow. “I believe she’s an impostor.”

He studies her carefully.

“So you think you’re the chosen one?”

She smiles faintly. “I’m not saying that. But… who knows?”

The smile does something unexpected to him. A warmth stirs in his chest, distracting and dangerous. He forces himself to chuckle instead.

“Well then,” he says lightly, raising his glass, “how exactly are you planning to win your man?”

Her smile grows.

“I’ll go to him. Your mother gave me something to bathe with, something that will make it impossible for him to resist me.” She lifts her chin confidently. “Soon, he’ll be mine.”

Sbonga laughs, masking the flicker of jealousy he doesn’t want to examine.

“Cheers to getting your man.”

She laughs with him, clinking her glass against his.

The sound rings softly between them.

“Let me take you out,” he says. “I know a place. We should celebrate a little.”

Nolwandle’s eyes light up. She wants to enjoy her stay, and distraction sounds perfect.

“Please,” she says, smiling brightly. “I’d love that.”

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Hours later, Nolwandle and Sbonga return to the hotel, both a little drunk from the night out. The club had been loud, wild, and exactly the distraction they both needed.

Sbonga walks her to her room and helps her inside.

“Oh, Sbonga,” she says with a soft laugh. “Thank you for tonight. I had the time of my life.”

She kicks off her heels and stretches, her relief obvious.

“Anytime, beautiful.”

“Let me order more drinks. Stay a bit. I’m not ready for bed yet.”

That sounds very good to Sbonga.

She orders a bottle of champagne from room service. Soon they’re sitting on the couch.

She pours them both glasses.

They toast, drink and laugh.

Nolwandle begins leaning closer, her hand resting casually on his thigh.

“You’re fun, you know that?” she murmurs.

Sbonga glances at her…her eyes, her lips.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

She bites her lip playfully. “Your brother doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

Sbonga’s jaw tightens at the mention of Nqobizwe, but he forces the tension away.

“Forget about him,” he says quietly. “He’s not here.”

She leans in closer, their faces only inches apart now.

“You’re right,” she whispers. “He’s not.”

Then she kisses him.

He freezes for a split second before responding, pulling her closer as he kisses her back. The alcohol, the tension of the night, it all blurs together.

His hands slide to her waist, pulling her onto his lap. She straddles him, her dress riding higher as she moves.

They break apart for air, breathing heavily.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, voice rough. “Pity you want my brother.”

She laughs softly, shifting against him.

“Then stop talking,” she whispers. “And do something about it.”

That’s all the encouragement he needs.

He stands, lifting her easily. She wraps her legs around his waist as he carries her toward the bed and lowers her onto the mattress.

Their kisses grow deeper.

Clothes are quickly forgotten as the moment pulls them in.

His hand slides between her legs. She gasps. She's already wet.

"Sbonga..."

He pulls her panties aside and slides a finger inside. She moans, arching her back.

He adds another finger. Moving slowly. Watching her face.

She's biting her lip. Eyes closed. Lost in it.

"Please."

She whispers.

He pulls his hand away. She whimpers at the loss.

He unbuckles his belt. Takes off his pants and boxers.

She watches, her eyes dark with want.

He positions himself between her legs. Pushes inside.

They both groan.

She's gripping the sheets. Moaning his name.

"Sbonga... yes... don't stop..."

He doesn't. He keeps going. Losing himself in her. In this moment.

For a while, the world outside that room disappears. There's no plan. No throne. No Nqobizwe.

Just her. And it feels too good to stop.

Chapter 21

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Nqobizwe

I’m sitting at the hotel bar, drowning my sorrows in whiskey. The glass sweats in my hand as I stare at nothing in particular. I don’t understand why Refilwe can’t see why I did what I did. I love her so damn much. My chest feels tight, like I can’t breathe properly.

I never knew falling in love could feel like this. The fear of losing the person you love is suffocating.

My head rests heavily on my hand while I swirl the whiskey in my glass. The noise of the bar fades into the background. Suddenly, someone pats my shoulder.

I lift my head slowly.

Ayanda and Sizwe stand behind me.

I blink, confused. When did they even fly here?

“Asambe, ndoda,” Sizwe says firmly.

“Let me finish my drink,” I mumble, lifting the glass again.

Before I can take another sip, Ayanda gently takes it from my hand and places it on the counter.

“Asambe.”

He’s already pulling me up from the chair.

I look between them. Their faces are serious, no jokes, no smiles. I decide not to argue. I’m drunk anyway, and honestly, I don’t care anymore.

If Refilwe doesn’t want me, then what’s the point? What’s the use of anything? How do I carry on without her love? She completes me. She is my life.

They guide me out of the bar and into the elevator. Neither of them speaks during the ride up.

We reach one of the rooms they’ve booked. Ayanda hands me a bottle of water the moment we walk in.

“Drink.”

I gulp it down without stopping, water spilling slightly down my chin. My throat burns from the whiskey.

I walk straight to the bathroom and turn on the tap, splashing cold water onto my face. When I look up at the mirror, I barely recognize myself. My eyes are bloodshot, my expression tired and hollow.

I exhale slowly and dry my face before joining them on the balcony.

The rain has stopped. I light a cigarette, inhaling deeply as I lean against the railing, staring at the city lights below.

I’m stressed. Completely wrecked.

“What happened, man?” Ayanda asks quietly. “Your guards called me. They said you’ve been sitting in the bar since morning.”

I take another drag before answering.

“Refilwe is leaving me.”

“Ini?” Sizwe gasps.

“Uyagula yini uRefilwe? What happened?” he asks, stepping closer.

I rub my forehead, trying to steady my thoughts.

“I claimed her yesterday… and I didn’t tell her what happens after sleeping with me. She saw the mark this morning, and that’s when I explained everything.” My voice drops. “She was shattered. I saw how much I hurt her. I messed up.”

They exchange a glance.

“Did you tell her why?” Ayanda asks.

“I did. Maybe I explained it badly. Maybe it doesn’t even matter why.” I shake my head. “It was wrong…I know that. But can’t I get credit for doing what I thought was best? I WAS TRYING TO SAVE US.”

My voice rises without me meaning it to.

Ayanda lifts a hand. “Calm down. You know how women are, they feel things deeply. She just needs time to process. She’ll understand.”

I laugh bitterly and flick ash over the railing.

“She said we’re over. She broke up with me. Kahle kahle, I was alone in this relationship… I was the only one in love. How can it be so easy for her to walk away?”

“Refilwe loves you,” Sizwe says firmly. “You know this. She faced her fears and told you about her past so she could be with you. Right now both of you are emotional. Talk tomorrow.”

I shake my head slowly, staring into the darkness.

“She doesn’t have another choice. She has to learn to accept it. She can’t leave now.”

The words hang heavily in the air.

Sizwe sighs. “I hope she will come back to her senses. I’d hate for you to turn into someone you’re not.”

I take one last drag of my cigarette.

“Ngiyamthanda uFifi, mfethu,” I say quietly.

I drop the cigarette and crush it under my shoe.

Ayanda nods slowly. “I know. Eish.”

The three of us stand there in silence, listening to the distant sounds of the city, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

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We talk for a while on the balcony, but nothing really settles the storm inside me. My chest still feels tight.

As for booking another room? I didn’t do that. I’m not sleeping alone tonight. Refilwe will just have to deal with it.

I make my way back to our room. The hallway is quiet. When I open the door, darkness greets me.

She’s sleeping.

I walk slowly into the bedroom and stop by the bed. She’s fast asleep, curled slightly under the covers. For a moment, I just stand there and look at her.

She’s beautiful. I’ve said it a hundred times, and it still isn’t enough. Her beauty always pulls me in, always leaves me staring longer than I mean to.

I miss her laugh. I miss the way she talks endlessly, leaving me amused. I miss her just being herself.

She’s crazy if she thinks I’ll let her leave me. She’s going nowhere.

Unless she wants to see how crazy I can get.

I force the thought away and head to the bathroom. I brush my teeth, staring at my reflection again, then step into the shower. The water runs hot over my shoulders, washing away the smell of whiskey and smoke. I keep it quick.

When I come back, the room is still quiet except for her soft breathing.

I slide into bed beside her and pull her gently closer.

That’s when I realize she’s naked.

A small smile pulls at my lips. I lean forward and press soft kisses along her back, stopping at the mark.

“I love you,” I whisper into her ear.

“Zwee,” she murmurs sleepily.

I smile wider. Zwee? Does that mean she has calmed down?.

“Shh… sleep, my love,” I whisper, brushing my hand over her arm.

She relaxes again, her breathing evening out as she drifts deeper into sleep.

It doesn’t take long before I also drift off.

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Narrated

It’s early in the morning when Nolwandle wakes up. The memories of yesterday rush back all at once, hitting her before she can even fully open her eyes.

She turns her head.

Sbonga is still in the bed, fast asleep beside her.

Her stomach tightens.

She reaches over and shakes him roughly.

“Sbonga! Vuka.”

He groans but doesn’t move.

“Sbonga, mahn. Vuka,” she says louder, panic creeping into her voice.

He finally stirs, blinking slowly as he sits up.

“Yini? Why are you waking me up so early?” he asks, his voice thick with sleep.

“You need to leave,” she says quickly, pulling the blanket closer around herself. “Please go to your room.”

Sbonga frowns, now fully awake.

“Why?”

She hesitates, struggling to find the right words.

“What happened… was a mistake. It shouldn’t have happened.”

His expression hardens slightly.

“How was it a mistake if you wanted it as badly as I did?”

She exhales shakily. “I know. I know. You don’t have to remind me. I’m here for Nqobizwe. I shouldn’t have…”

Sbonga clenches his jaw at the name.

“Nqobizwe, Nqobizwe, Nqobizwe,” he mutters, frustration rising. “Everything is about Nqobizwe. Where is he? Do you see him anywhere?”

She looks away.

“No one has to know about this, Nolwandle,” he continues, his tone softer now. “And no one will. You’ll still get my brother. That doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves.”

“No, Sbonga…” she says weakly, though her voice lacks conviction.

“Don’t overthink it,” he says, moving closer. “It’ll be our little secret.”

He smiles and gently pulls her toward him. His lips brush against her neck. She inhales sharply, her body betraying her hesitation as she tilts her head slightly.

His kisses trail lower, slow and deliberate. Her hands find his shoulders without thinking.

“Sbonga…” she whispers.

“Shh,” he murmurs.

The room grows quiet except for their breathing as he draws her closer, and she wraps her arms around him, caught between resistance and desire.

He positions himself on top of her. She wraps her legs around him. He pushes inside, and moves.

"Fuck, Nolwandle..."

"Don't stop..."

He doesn't.

He keeps going.

She comes first, crying out. He follows seconds later, collapsing on top of her.

They're both breathing hard.

He rolls off her. She stares at the ceiling.

"This can't happen again."

She says quietly.

Sbonga just smiles.

•••

The Kingdom of Thabamoya

King Serithi woke up very early in the morning. The sky is clear, and the rain has finally stopped. He stands by the window, holding a warm cup of tea, watching the quiet morning settle over the kingdom.

He looks forward to meeting his daughter.

He has made a promise to himself, he will be there for her now. He has missed years of her life, years he can never reclaim, but that does not mean he cannot still be her father. It is never too late. Everyone, no matter their age, still needs a mother or a father.

The door opens softly behind him.

The royal seer walks in and bows respectfully.

“Morenaka.”

“Kapoko, dumela,” the King replies, turning toward him. “What brings you here so early this morning?”

A small knot of worry forms in his chest. As far as he knows, everything is finally falling into place.

Kapoko lifts his head slowly.

“The Princess has been claimed,” he says. “She belongs to them now.”

The King's mouth twitches. His breathing changes. He sets his teacup down and stands, beginning to pace across the room.

"They couldn't even wait?" he asks, frustration creeping into his voice. "Surely they knew I was searching for her."

"They care only for their own kingdom," the seer answers calmly. "That kingdom is selfish."

The King stops pacing and turns toward him.

"What do the ancestors say?"

"They are angry," Kapoko replies. "But they will not punish you or the kingdom. I do not know why. They do not explain. Perhaps they see your efforts. This was beyond your control."

The King nods slowly and sits down again, though tension still lingers in his posture.

"Yerrr. My morning is ruined." he mutters, rubbing his forehead

Kapoko pauses before adding, "You may also be expecting a grandchild."

King Serithi sighs deeply and leans back in his chair.

"That kingdom is sly," he says. "But at least I will be present to see my first grandchild. Perhaps I will correct my past mistakes through him… or her."

The seer nods.

"When will you bring her here?" he asks.

"I must meet her first," the King says thoughtfully. "I do not want to overwhelm her. And I worry about my sons. I pray they will welcome her."

"They must. The ancestors ask that she be received with warmth." Kapoko says firmly

The King nods, then frowns slightly.

"And the Molefes? It seems the woman we found there will not be of any assistance."

Kapoko's expression becomes unreadable.

"Your son-in-law will help you with that."

The King straightens in his chair. “What do you mean, Kapoko?”

“That is all I am told, my King,” the seer replies, bowing again. “Permit me to leave. My message is complete.”

He turns and walks out quietly, leaving the room heavy with unanswered questions.

King Serithi shakes his head and leans back into his chair, staring ahead as the weight of the morning settles over him.

•••

Refilwe

I wake up feeling arms wrapped around me from behind.

For a moment, I think I’m still dreaming. Last night feels distant, almost unreal, but the warmth pressed against my back tells me otherwise. Nqobizwe really came back. He really slept here.

I try to wiggle myself out of his hold, careful not to wake him, but his arms tighten around me instead.

“Mmm… where are you going, mama?” he murmurs, his voice deep and heavy with sleep.

Before I can answer, he presses kisses along my neck, moving slowly down to my shoulder and over the mark. A sharp sting makes me flinch slightly.

He pauses.

“It’s still painful?”

I nod. “Yeah… a bit. I want to go to the bathroom.”

He unwraps his arms reluctantly.

“Are you coming back?”

I nod and slide out of bed. Only when my feet touch the floor do I realize I’ve been holding my breath. I exhale slowly and walk into the bathroom.

I pee, wipe myself, then wash my hands. I splash cold water onto my face and brush my teeth, staring at my reflection longer than necessary.

I think about taking a shower. I feel nervous, though I don’t know why. He came back last night, something I wasn’t sure he would do. I was so worried.

I’m glad he did.

“Are you okay?”

His voice startles me.

I turn toward the doorway, my heart jumping slightly at the sound of him so close.

He’s leaning against the bathroom doorway, completely naked. I suddenly become aware that I’m not wearing anything either. My gaze lifts to him, and I swallow hard, my breath catching at the sight of him watching me so intently, his cock standing firm.

I clear my throat.

"I'm fine."

He nods.

Without breaking eye contact he walks behind me, his hands firm on my hips. I feel it poking me from behind.

"How is your body feeling today?" His voice is hoarse.

"I... I feel fine."

He caresses my bum and I feel myself getting wet. I hate the effect he has on me.

"Are you sure?"

I nod slowly.

he pushes me forward gently toward the sink, bending me over until I brace myself against it.. Before I can prepare myself, he pushes all of him inside. A scream escapes my mouth. He gasps.

His strokes are deeper and harder. A bit rough.

It feels so good and painful at the same time. Our moans fill the bathroom.

His hands tighten on my hips.

"You are mine, Refilwe. Yezwa?"

He spanks me.

"Uyezwa, Refilwe?"

I nod, trying to catch my breath.

"I want to hear you say it, mama."

"Ye... oh my God... Yes!"

"I love you so much, Refilwe."

"I love you too. God, Zwee!"

I grip the edge of the sink as the tension finally snaps. A sharp breath leaves me, and he holds me tighter as we both reach the same breaking point.

We stay there for a moment afterward, breathing heavily, neither of us saying a word.

•••

We took a shower together. No one said anything. The silence wasn't awkward, just heavy with everything that happened between us.

Now we're on the balcony having breakfast. The sun is out today.

Nqobizwe keeps staring at me.

It makes me uncomfortable. Memories of our heated morning replay in my mind, and I instinctively close my legs together, trying to focus on my food. It was too good.

His eyes never leave mine, making it hard for me to eat.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that?" I ask.

He exhales slowly. "I want to apologize. I'm sorry. I can say it a thousand times. I mean it. Ngiyaxolisa. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. I really love you, Refilwe. I love you so much."

I soften.

"I love you too, Nqobizwe. I'm sorry for ending things. I was angry… and overwhelmed."

His posture straightens immediately. "So we're not breaking up?"

I shake my head.

“No. I’m tied to you forever. I should just accept it.” I pause, choosing my words carefully. “I did a lot of thinking yesterday when I was alone. You didn’t choose this any more than I did. Your ancestors are to blame, not you. You were doing what was expected of you.”

He listens quietly.

“Do I support how you did things? No. I’m still angry about that. But I understand now. The Ngwenyas chose me for a reason. I don’t know why, but they do. And that put me in danger. You were trying to protect me, yourself, and the kingdom. That’s what a true leader does. So… thank you.”

He looks at me, confused. “What’s happening, Fifi?”

“Nothing,” I say gently. “I just thought a lot yesterday. I’m sorry for being hard on you. You didn’t deserve that. I just wish we had talked before you claimed me.”

He nods slowly and stands, reaching for my hand. I take it and stand with him.

“What made you change your mind?” he asks.

“Nothing specific. I just tried to see things from your side too.”

He pulls me closer, his hands settling on my waist.

“Are you sure it’s not the morning glory we just had?”

I laugh, and relief flashes across his face. He smiles and kisses me deeply before pulling back.

“I really did think everything through yesterday…I tried calling you, but it went straight to voicemail. I waited until I passed out. I wanted us to talk.” I grin slightly. “But the morning… was mind-blowing. I can’t lie.”

He chuckles, pulling me closer. “Was it?”

“Mmm. A little painful though. You were rough.”

“I’m sorry, I was stressed.”

“I’m sorry too. I was emotional.” I gesture toward the couch. “Can we sit? I have a few questions.”

We sit on the outdoor couch.

“So… I might really be pregnant?”

He nods.

“When are you being crowned?”

“I’m not sure yet. Probably after you fix things with your father. I’ll confirm with mine.”

I nod slowly, processing everything.

“What does a Queen actually do? What’s expected of me?”

“You lead, But don’t worry. My mother will guide you. She’ll teach you everything.”

I hesitate before asking the next question.

“So… who wants me dead?”

His expression hardens.

“My father’s second wife. I recently found out she’s a witch. She’s been bewitching my father to control him. I don’t know what she’s planning, but I don’t trust her. The royal seer said I had to claim you immediately. Witches are after us.”

My stomach drops. “Oh my God. Is she that evil?”

He nods.

“And there may be other royals who want to harm you. You’ll never really know.”

“So now they can’t hurt us?”

“They can try. But you’ll be protected.”

I nod slowly, letting everything sink in.

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Narrated

The Ngwenya Kingdom

The King, Queen Liyana, Queen Thobekile, and Nkanyezi sit together having breakfast. Buhle is noticeably absent. Even yesterday, she never joined them, spending the entire day asleep.

Just as they finish serving themselves, Buhle walks into the dining hall. All eyes turn toward her.

Queen Thobekile smiles warmly.

“Oh, my baby. I’m glad you’re joining us today.”

The King studies her carefully. “Are you sick, Buhle?”

She shakes her head as she takes a seat. “No, Baba. I wasn’t feeling well, but I’m fine now.”

“Tell me if you need to go for a checkup,”

“I will, Baba.”

They continue breakfast peacefully. After eating, Buhle excuses herself and walks back toward her bedroom. Queen Thobekile quietly follows behind.

Once inside, Buhle closes the door. Her mother turns to face her, concern written across her face.

“Are you okay, mntanami?” she asks gently.

“I’m fine, Ma. Really.”

Thobekile hesitates before speaking again. “Do you remember what happened?”

Buhle frowns slightly. “What do you mean? When we were going to meet the elders?”

Thobekile nods, nervous about her answer.

“I only remember us entering the bush… and then nothing, What happened? I actually wanted to ask you.”

Thobekile exhales in relief.

“You fainted, baby. I had to bring you back to the palace.”

“Oh my,” Buhle says, surprised. “I wonder what caused that. But did bhuti Sbonga manage to win over the elders?”

A proud smile spreads across Thobekile’s face.

“Yes. Soon your brother will rule. He will be King.”

Buhle smiles, seeing the certainty in her mother’s eyes. She feels relieved that her collapse didn’t ruin things for her brother.

Still, a small part of her remains unsettled, because she cannot remember what truly happened that day.

Chapter 22

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Narrated

Queen Thobekile is sitting at her usual secluded spot, the place where she makes phone calls that are never meant to be overheard. The palace is quiet, allowing her voice to carry without interruption. She takes out her phone and dials her son.

Sbonga answers after a brief moment, clearing his throat. “Ma.”

“Ma yani?!” she snaps immediately. “Did that stupid princess do what I told her to do? Is she there with you?”

On the other end, Sbonga clenches his jaw

“Ma, Nolwandle is not stupid. Please stop calling her that. And yes, she is here. She will do as planned.”

Queen Thobekile lets out a loud laugh, momentarily forgetting she is supposed to be discreet.

“Yeii wena, do not forget why you are there in the first place. What did that stupid girl do to you?”

“Ma, she didn’t do anything. I was just saying.”

“I will call her stupid because she is,” she says coldly. “If you want the throne, you know what to do. Don’t mess this up, Sbonga, uzongazi kahle. I have worked hard and sacrificed so much for this. Don’t you dare chicken out now.”

“I am not chickening out, Ma, Nolwandle will do as planned. Nqobizwe is not at the office right now. His PA said he is unavailable and will only return on Monday.”

There is a short pause before she speaks again. “He has an office? What does he do there?”

“I was surprised too,” Sbonga admits. “He is very rich, Ma. He owns several businesses.”

“He has money… hee, hee,” she laughs bitterly. “So he has money. That’s why he thinks he is important. Worry not, my child. If that girl does exactly as I instructed, everything will be hers. And once it is hers, you will take it all. Everything will belong to you, just like that.”

Her smile lingers long after the call continues, sharp and satisfied, as though the future she imagines is already within reach.

Sbonga exhales on the other end.

“Yes, Ma.”

“Good. Do not disappoint me.”

“I won’t.”

She hums in satisfaction before ending the call. The line goes dead.

•••

Sbonga lowers his phone, his expression tense. For a moment, he just sits in the driver’s seat, staring ahead. The weight of the conversation lingers heavily on him.

He hates Nqobizwe… hates everything about him: the power, the respect, the effortless way he seems to command the world. If given the chance, he would take everything he has without hesitation.

Nolwandle is only a distraction. A necessary one, but still a distraction.

He reminds himself to stay focused. This is bigger than feelings, bigger than sympathy. There is a plan in motion, and he cannot afford to lose sight of it now.

He starts the car and pulls onto the quiet road leading away from the city.

A vehicle suddenly swerves in front of him.

He slams on the brakes.

Before he can reverse, another car blocks him from behind.

His heartbeat quickens.

“What the…”

His door is ripped open.

Rough hands grab him, dragging him out of the car. Sbonga struggles immediately, throwing a punch that connects with one man’s face, but another hits him hard in the ribs.

Air leaves his lungs.

A fist crashes into his jaw. Then another.

He stumbles, trying to regain balance, but a kick sends him crashing onto the gravel. Pain shoots through his body as boots rain down on him mercilessly.

He groans, curling slightly, trying to shield himself.

“Please…” he starts, but a blow to his stomach cuts him off.

Blood spills from his lip and his vision blurs.

The men don’t stop.

Punch after punch lands until his resistance weakens, his body growing heavy and unresponsive. One final strike to his head sends everything spinning into darkness.

He collapses fully onto the road, motionless, his breathing shallow.

One of the attackers wipes his hands and looks down at him.

“That’s enough,” he says coldly.

They return to their vehicles and drive off, leaving dust and silence behind.

Sbonga lies there, beaten to a pulp, alone on the empty road.

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Nqobizwe

We are still on the balcony. Refilwe sits facing me on the couch, her legs resting on either side of my hips while I lean back against the cushions. Our bodies are close, her weight settled comfortably on my lap as she plants soft kisses on my face.

I’m just happy we are fine. Better than fine, even. She almost killed me yesterday. I never want to feel like that again.

“What time are we leaving?” she asks.

“In the evening. Why?”

“I want us to go enjoy Cape Town a bit. See people.”

I chuckle, squeezing her gently. “Anything you want.”

“I forgot to tell you…King Serithi called.”

That makes me straighten slightly. I was already planning to go to him. Good news.

“Where did he get your number?”

“Dikeledi gave it to him. He went looking for me and Dikeledi’s brother sent him to my stepmother. Can you imagine?”

“Why would he do that?”

She shrugs, playing with the button on my shirt.

“Dk eventually gave them my number. Lentswe didn’t help them though. I can imagine the lies she told about me.”

I nod, holding her thighs lightly. “What did he say?”

“He asked for a meet-up. I said next week.”

I nod thoughtfully “That’s good, mama. Do you want me to be there?”

She shakes her head. “No, baby. I have to do this on my own.”

“Come to Ngwenya then, meet up there.”

“Zwee, I’ll be fine.”

“Please. You won’t even notice I’m there, but I’ll know you’re safe.”

She smiles warmly, tapping my chest. “My overprotective man. I thought nothing could happen to me now. I’m untouchable.”

I laugh softly. “You want me to take chances? That’s not how I roll.”

She sighs happily. “I’m happy you’re mine, Zwe. I wouldn’t trade you for anything.”

“Really?” I raise a brow “But dumped me yesterday.”

She pouts, trying to get off my lap, but I hold her in place.

“Will you ever let it go?”

“No. You broke my heart badly. Imagine a grown man crying. Hayi, I respect you, Fifi.”

She bursts into laughter, leaning forward until her forehead rests against mine.

“I’m sorry, Nqobizwe. I didn’t mean to.”

“I know, mama.” I glance at my watch” Your friend should be getting ready. The driver is on the way.”

“I’ll call her. Can you believe she said King Serithi is hot and she might become my stepmother?”

I laugh. “That friend of yours has no filter. I like her though. She has your back.”

“I love her so much.”

“More than me?”

She grins and kisses the tip of my nose. “Are you jealous, Mr. Ngwenya?”

“I am a very jealous man, Fifi. Anyone who threatens our relationship, I deal with them.”

“Bathong, no one is threatening us.” She says laughing.

“I’m just giving you a heads-up.”

She looks happy, and it’s a sight I love to see, not the crying Fifi from yesterday.

My tone turns serious.

“Fifi, you need to learn to handle your emotions. Avoid making decisions when you’re angry. You’re going to be a Queen now. Learn to compose yourself.”

She nods. “I promise. I’ll work on that.”

“It’s not easy. I’m still learning to control my anger.” I admit, looking away briefly toward the ocean.

“Uyabona izolo…” I shake my head and chuckle “You did a number on me. I almost lost my mind.”

She laughs. “Yoh, Nqobizwe, I’ll never hear the end of this.”

I stand up suddenly, lifting her with me. She squeals softly, arms wrapping around my shoulders as I kiss her neck until she giggles. I gently place her back on her feet.

“Mama, I need to take care of something. I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Then we’ll go out like you wanted.”

She smiles, smoothing my shirt. “Okay, baby.”

I kiss her cheek and head out.

•••

I sit with Ayanda and Sizwe, leaning back in my chair while Sbonga’s recorded phone call plays through the speaker. Ayanda taps ash from his cigarette into the tray while Sizwe watches my reaction carefully.

My man already confirmed Nolwandle spent the night in Sbonga’s room. Wonders never end. They suit each other, if only they stayed in their lane.

I rub my jaw slowly, irritation building.

Queen Thobekile is becoming a problem. The fact that I cannot act against her directly frustrates me. The ancestors are taking too long, and desperation makes people dangerous.

“The job is done,” Sizwe says, folding his arms. “He’s probably lying in a hospital bed right now.”

The hijacking was successful.

“And here I thought he always moved with guards,” Ayanda says.

I smirk. “He does. But when I speak, they listen.”

“You told them not to intervene?”

I nod. “Told them to watch only when it happens.”

Sizwe chuckles, shaking his head. “My guys were ready for a fight. They were disappointed he was alone.”

A quiet laugh leaves me.

Sbonga will learn to stay far away from me.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. “I’m thinking of sending Thobekile to jail. Frame her. Let my people handle the rest inside.”

They both laugh.

“Your father would bail her out,” Ayanda says.

“Not if I make sure she can’t be bailed out,” I reply calmly.

Sizwe nods slowly. “Now that’s an idea. But first, we deal with her wizard.”

I stand, adjusting my watch. “We fly tomorrow night after the braai your girl is hosting.”

“Ey, uyambona uLerato,” He sighs. “Headache.”

“Women are stressful,” Ayanda laughs.

“I’m just happy things are good with mine,” I say.

Sizwe scoffs. “You love her too much. Mine annoys me.”

“Then leave her,” I say plainly. “Stop wasting her time.”

He shrugs. “She’s fun sometimes.”

Ayanda and I exchange looks, both shaking our heads.

•••

Narrated

The King is in the royal council chamber with the elders, discussing preparations for Nqobizwe's coronation, when one of his guards’ rushes in, breathing heavily.

"My King."

The guard bows quickly, panic written all over his face.

"What is it?"

The King asks, already sensing bad news.

"It's Prince Sbonga, my King. He was hijacked in Pretoria. He's in the hospital. Critical condition."

The King's face goes pale. He stands abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor.

"What? When did this happen?"

"A few hours ago, my King. They say he was badly beaten. They're still assessing his injuries."

The King runs his hand over his face.

"Prepare the jet. We leave immediately."

He turns to the elders.

"We'll continue this when I return."

The elders nod and disperse quickly.

•••

The King walks briskly through the palace corridors toward the queens' chambers. His heart is heavy.

He reaches Queen Thobekile's chambers first and knocks firmly.

"Ngena."

He opens the door. Queen Thobekile is sitting at her vanity, applying lotion to her arms. She looks up, surprised to see the King.

She stands, smoothing down her dress.

The King takes a breath.

"It's Sbonga. He was hijacked in Pretoria. He's in the hospital."

For a moment, there's silence.

Then Queen Thobekile's face contorts. Her mouth opens wide.

"AHHHHH! AHHHHH!"

She screams, clutching her chest dramatically.

"MY SON! MY SON! THEY KILLED MY SON!"

She starts pacing, waving her hands in the air.

"SBONGA! SBONGA! NKOSI YAMI! THEY TOOK MY BABY! AHHHH!"

The King steps back slightly, startled by the theatrics.

"Thobekile, he's not dead. He's…"

"MY SON IS DEAD! THEY KILLED HIM! WHO DID THIS? WHO?!"

She grabs the King's arm, shaking him.

"TELL ME WHO DID THIS, NKOSI! I WILL KILL THEM MYSELF! AHHHH!"

She collapses dramatically onto the floor, rolling side to side.

"MY FIRSTBORN! MY ONLY SON! GONE! GONE!"

The King looks down at her, completely bewildered.

"Thobekile, get up. He's alive. We need to…"

"ALIVE?! HOW CAN HE BE ALIVE WHEN MY HEART IS BREAKING LIKE THIS?!"

She pounds the floor with her fists.

Just then, Queen Liyana walks in, having heard the commotion. She stops in the doorway, looking at Thobekile on the floor, then at the King.

"What's happening?"

"It's Sbonga. He was hijacked. He's in the hospital."

Queen Liyana's hand flies to her mouth.

"Oh no. Is he okay?"

"He's alive. Critical, but alive."

Queen Thobekile sits up suddenly, glaring at Queen Liyana.

"ALIVE?! THEY SAY ALIVE LIKE IT'S NOTHING! MY SON IS FIGHTING FOR HIS LIFE!"

She stands up, wobbling dramatically.

"AHHH, SBONGA! MY BABY!"

Queen Liyana walks over calmly and places a hand on Thobekile's shoulder.

"Hayi, Thobekile. Yehlisa umoya. He's still alive.

Thobekile whips around, eyes blazing.

"YEHLISA UMOYA?! YEHLISA UMOYA?!"

She pushes Liyana's hand off.

"Ohh, is it because it's not yours lying in a hospital bed?! Is that it?! If it was Nqobizwe, you'd be screaming too!"

Queen Liyana's face hardens. She steps back, her jaw clenched.

"Thobekile, I have a son too. I understand your pain. But screaming like this won't help Sbonga. We need to get to him."

"HELP?! WHERE WERE YOU WHEN THEY WERE BEATING MY SON?! WHERE?!"

The King steps between them.

"Enough! Both of you! We're leaving. Now. Get ready."

Queen Thobekile wipes her face dramatically, even though there are no tears.

"Yes. Yes, we must go. My son needs me. SBONGA! MAMA IS COMING, BABY!"

She rushes out of the room, wailing loudly down the hallway.

Queen Liyana looks at the King and shakes her head.

The King sighs.

"Get ready. We leave in ten minutes."

•••

Ten minutes later, the royal convoy is ready. The King, Queen Liyana, and Queen Thobekile are heading to the airstrip.

Queen Thobekile is still crying loudly in the car, dabbing at her dry eyes with a handkerchief.

"MY SON! MY POOR SON! WHO WOULD DO THIS?!"

Queen Liyana sits quietly, looking out the window, clearly irritated.

The King rubs his temples.

They arrive at the airstrip and board the private jet.

Once seated, Queen Thobekile continues her performance.

"I won't rest until I find out who did this! I WILL FIND THEM! AND THEY WILL PAY!"

She pounds the armrest.

Queen Liyana finally turns to her.

"Thobekile, if you keep screaming like this, you'll collapse before we even get there. Breathe and pray. Be calm."

Thobekile glares at her.

"EASY FOR YOU TO SAY! YOUR SON IS SAFE SOMEWHERE ENJOYING HIMSELF WHILE MINE IS DYING!"

Queen Liyana's eyes flash with anger.

"Hayi, Thobekile. Don't do that. Don't turn this into something else. We're all concerned about Sbonga."

The King intervenes quickly.

"Thobekile, that's enough."

Queen Thobekile huffs and turns away, muttering under her breath.

"Everyone is against me. Even when my son is dying. No one cares about my Sbonga."

She dabs at her eyes again dramatically.

Queen Liyana leans back in her seat and closes her eyes, shaking her head.

The King looks between the two women and sighs heavily.

This is going to be a long flight.

•••

As the jet takes off, Queen Thobekile stares out the window. The dramatics slowly fade from her face. Her expression becomes cold.

Her mind is racing.

A hijacking? In Pretoria? Right when Sbonga is there working on the plan?

This is too convenient. She thinks about Nqobizwe.

Could he have done this? Would he go this far?

She doesn't know for sure. But she suspects.

And if he did... if Nqobizwe had anything to do with this...

She'll make him pay.

She'll use this. Play the grieving mother. Gain sympathy. Turn the King's heart.

And if she finds proof that Nqobizwe orchestrated this?

She'll destroy him.

She dabs at her eyes one more time, glancing at the King.

"My King, do you think... whoever did this... do you think they knew he was a prince?"

The King frowns.

"I don't know. We'll find out when we get there."

Queen Thobekile nods, her face the picture of maternal concern.

"I just pray my son survives this. I can't lose him, I can't."

The King reaches over and pats her hand.

"He'll be fine. Sbonga is strong."

She nods, looking down at her lap.

But inside, her mind is working.

Plotting.

If Nqobizwe did this, he just made his biggest mistake.

Refilwe

We're on the plane now, heading back to Pretoria. We didn't really do much in Cape Town. Nqobizwe only planned the trip for the claiming. I find myself smiling when I think about it. He really went all out, and now I understand why.

He knew things would change afterward. He wanted the moment to be special. Something we would never forget. And honestly... we won't. So much happened.

I feel so sleepy right now. I can't keep my eyes open. I keep yawning and rubbing my face.

"Are you okay?" Nqobizwe asks, his hand brushing my thigh.

I nod slowly, but something feels wrong.

This isn't normal tiredness. It feels exactly like the sleep that pulled me into that dream before, the one where my spirit got trapped.

Fear creeps into my chest.

I don't want to sleep. What if I get stuck again? But I can't fight it. It's like something is forcing me to shut my eyes.

"I feel sleepy," I whisper. "Like last time... when I got stuck in a dream."

Nqobizwe's expression changes immediately.

"Water! Please bring water!" he calls urgently to the flight attendant.

He turns back to me, holding my face gently. "Don't close your eyes, Fifi. Please try to stay awake."

I can hear the fear in his voice. But my body feels too heavy. My eyes close before I can fight it.

Everything goes dark.

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"Sawubona."

I get startled and turn. It's Queen Nomusa.

Relief hits me instantly, followed by panic.

"Oh my God, Queen Nomusa, please take me back. I don't want to get stuck again. Please."

The words rush out of me. Last time this happened, my spirit was captured. I don't want to go through that again.

She smiles calmly.

"Do not worry. They cannot reach you here. Come. I want to show you something."

Her voice is steady, and somehow I believe her.

I follow her.

We walk through thick bush. The trees are tall and twisted, blocking most of the light. The path is narrow, covered with dry leaves and roots that make it hard to walk.

As we go deeper, I start noticing strange things. Animal bones hanging from branches. Pieces of white cloth tied to trees. Small piles of stones placed carefully on the ground.

The air feels heavy. It smells like wet earth and burnt herbs.

Then I see the hut. It stands alone in a clearing.

Bones are scattered everywhere. Skulls sit on wooden sticks around the hut like guards. Clay pots near the entrance release thin trails of smoke.

"Ngena," Queen Nomusa says.

I shake my head quickly. "Umm... Queen Nomusa, I think I'll just wait outside."

I'm not going in there. This place is horrifying. What are we even doing here?

She chuckles. "What you are about to see has already happened. Nothing here can harm you"

She gestures with her hand for me to go in. I take a deep breath, sliding the curtain aside and walking inside. She follows right after.

There are three people in the hut, but they don't seem to notice us. A man who looks very scary, is standing in front of two women. No one has to tell me. I can tell he's a witch. It's written all over him. The two women are sitting down. One older and the other young. The young girl looks scared.

The man blows white powder on her face. She collapses instantly.

My eyes go wide. The shock.

"That is Queen Thobekile, the second wife of the King. Your father-in-law. That girl you see is her daughter, Buhle." Queen Nomusa says quietly.

I cover my mouth with my hand.

The witch begins his ritual. He's chanting in a language I don't understand. The words sound ancient. They make my skin crawl.

He sprinkles something over Buhle's unconscious body. Herbs and powders. Liquids that smell like death.

Then I see them.

Shadows, moving in the corners of the hut. Not human. Something that shouldn't exist.

My stomach turns.

"No... no, no, no..." I whisper, backing away.

But Queen Nomusa holds my arm. "Watch."

The things move toward Buhle. Circling her like predators.

I see everything those terrifying things do to Buhle. Things no one should ever have to witness. Even though she is unconscious, her body reacts like her spirit knows what is happening.

I can't look for long. I turn my head away, crying, but the sounds stay with me, painful sounds I know I will never forget.

I feel helpless standing there, knowing something sacred is being taken from her while her own mother allows it.

"What type of mother does this to their child?!"

She sacrificed her own daughter's womb. Her daughter's future. Her daughter's virginity.

I can't stop crying. My whole body is shaking. The images are burned into my mind. The sounds and the horror.

I'm wiping my own tears, shaking.

•••

We're now walking to the palace. I'm still in disbelief. My heart is beating so fast it feels like it might burst out of my chest. I hold onto myself tightly, trying to steady my breathing.

Why is Queen Thobekile so evil? All this just to fight for a crown that doesn't belong to her. To feel so entitled to something that was never hers.

Her poor child. She doesn't even know what was done to her.

It's the cruelest thing I have ever seen.

I can't stop crying.

"Why didn't you protect the child?" I ask, my voice breaking. "You could have done something. How could you let your own blood go through that? She's just a child. She doesn't know anything."

Queen Nomusa's face hardens.

"We only protect our own. Everyone knows that," she says calmly. "That child is not ours. We do not plant seeds in rotten wombs. uLanga, the King, knows this. But he chose to marry a second wife when we had already chosen a Queen for him."

My stomach drops.

Is she saying Queen Thobekile's womb is rotten?

"But to let a child..."

She raises her hand, stopping me. "We could not interfere. She is not ours. Her ancestors were meant to protect her. But how can they protect a child who was never introduced to them? Angithi uThobekile wazi kakhulu. That is what she gets."

I shake my head, still struggling to understand.

"So what happens now? Are they going to harm Nqobizwe?"

She smiles slightly.

"No. He claimed you at the right time. He did well."

Oh, Nqobizwe.

Guilt settles heavily in my chest. He carries so much responsibility, and I was so hard on him. Not understanding the weight that comes with the crown.

"Why am I being shown all this, Queen Nomusa?" I ask quietly. "You can't just scare me like this for no reason."

"You must know the family you are marrying into," she says. "You are one of us now, Nkosazana. We protect you. And now that you are claimed, you are more powerful. Nqobizwe followed our instructions. He is untouchable."

She walks slowly beside me as she continues.

"oNgwenya are stubborn and strict. If you do not listen, we let you be, but you will feel our wrath. We listen. We may want things done our way, but we hear your pleas, and we deliver. We are kind... but we can also be cruel."

I swallow hard.

"We care for our own," she adds. "But if you disobey our rules, you will learn. No one plays with us and gets away with it."

She smiles again, then speaks firmly.

"Tshela umyeni wakho no Langa ukuthi bahambise leyo ngane kubo. Ingafeli ecekeni lakwa Ngwenya. Lezo lwane abamufake zona ahambe nazo aziyise kubo, afe nazo." (Tell your husband and the Langa to send that child back to her people. She must not die in the Ngwenya kraal. Those spirits placed inside her must return with her. Let her die with them.)

My breath catches. "She is going to die?" I ask, my voice shaking.

Queen Nomusa nods. "Maybe her father's family will know what to do. Kodwa thina... we cannot help her."

"Oh my God," I whisper, wiping my tears.

She looks at me carefully.

"You cannot work with a witch and expect loyalty," she says. "Nkosazana, you are meant to be Queen. You are kind...but you must have limits. Not everyone deserves your kindness."

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Nqobizwe

"Fifi! Fifi, baby, wake up!"

She's lying on the seat, completely still. The plane is still in the air.

I shake her gently. She's not responding. Her breathing is steady, but she won't wake up.

Panic floods through me. "FIFI!"

The flight attendant rushes over. "Sir, is everything okay?"

"Bring me water and mix it with salt. Now!"

That's the first thing that comes to my mind. Last time it helped. But there's no mpepho on this plane. My thoughts are spinning.

She runs to the back. I'm holding Refilwe's face, tapping her cheeks lightly.

I grab my phone with shaking hands and call Baba Ngubeni.

He answers on the second ring. "Nqobizwe."

"Baba...Fifi is... She won't wake up. She said she felt sleepy like last time when she got trapped. Now she's passed out. I don't know what to do."

There's a pause.

"Calm down, Nqobizwe. She's fine. She's with Queen Nomusa. She's being shown things she needs to see. Let her be. She'll wake up when they're done."

I exhale, my hand running over my face. "Are you sure, Baba?"

"Yes. She's protected now. Nothing can harm her. Just wait."

Why show her? You are the royal seer"

He chuckles softly. "Do not question your ancestors. Even I do not know. Maybe this is not part of my role... or my capability."

"Do you know what she's being shown?"

"I was not told," he says calmly.

I sigh. "Okay."

I end the call and look back at Refilwe. She looks peaceful, like she's only sleeping.

But the fear doesn't leave me.

I hold her hand tightly.

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The plane lands. I carry Refilwe in my arms as we get off. The driver is already waiting outside.

"My house," I tell him.

He nods and starts driving. I keep looking down at her. Still asleep.

When we arrive, I carry her inside and take her straight to my room. I lay her gently on the bed and sit beside her, holding her hand.

A few minutes later, her eyes flutter open. She gasps and sits up suddenly, tears already running down her face.

"Fifi, what's wrong? What happened?"

She's shaking, crying uncontrollably.

I pull her into my arms. "Baby, talk to me. What did you see?"

She sobs against my chest. "The things... the things those things did to her."

•••

Narrated

Dikeledi has arrived in Pretoria. Nqobizwe asks Ayanda to keep her at his place for a while since Refilwe isn't well. They'll pick her up later.

Ayanda is with Sizwe when the doorbell rings.

Ayanda walks over and opens the door. Dikeledi steps inside. The moment she enters, she stops walking.

Her eyes move slowly around the house.

"Dikeledi, nice to meet you. How was your trip?" Ayanda asks, closing the door behind her.

She doesn't answer.

She just stands there, turning in a slow circle, staring at the décor, the high ceilings, the furniture.

"Dikeledi...?" Ayanda calls again, tilting his head.

She blinks and snaps out of it.

"Oh! I'm sorry," she says, laughing softly. "This house is too beautiful to ignore. You were saying?"

Sizwe watches from the couch, one arm resting along the backrest, eyes fixed on her.

She's beautiful. Naturally so. No makeup, no weave, no dramatic lashes or nails. Completely different from the women he usually meets. Different from Lerato.

"I asked how your trip was," Ayanda repeats, gesturing for her to sit.

"Oh, very nice and comfy. I mean, did you see the car I arrived in? First class, sweetie. I can't complain."

Ayanda chuckles.

"This is Sizwe," he says, pointing toward the couch. "I'm Ayanda. We're Nqobizwe's trusted friends. Refilwe isn't feeling well, but they'll pick you up once she's better."

Dikeledi's smile fades slightly.

"What happened to Refilwe?" she asks, clutching her handbag closer.

"She's fine. The dreams happened again. I'm sure you know about that."

She nods slowly, exhaling.

"I hope she's okay."

"She will be. Do you want something to drink? Eat?"

Dikeledi drops onto the couch opposite Sizwe and crosses her legs.

"I'm hungry. And please...I need wine. You can't sit in a house like this and not drink expensive wine. I need to feel rich."

Ayanda laughs and heads toward the kitchen.

Dikeledi turns her head and catches Sizwe staring.

She raises an eyebrow. "Abuti,is there something wrong? You've been staring since I got here."

Sizwe straightens slightly and clears his throat. "I'm sorry. You look like someone I know."

She waves a dismissive hand. "Oh, definitely not me. I have never been around such hot, sexy, rich men in my life. So I'm not that person."

Ayanda nearly drops the glasses as he walks back in.

Sizwe blinks, surprised, then smirks faintly. Ayanda sets the wine bottle and glasses down.

"What would you like to eat? We'll have to order. There's no food here."

"Anything is fine," she says, already reaching for the bottle. "I'm not picky."

She pours herself a generous glass, lifts it to the light, then takes a slow sip.

Her eyes close briefly. "Mmmm. Now this is what I'm talking about. This is expensive, neh?"

Ayanda nods proudly. "From my private collection."

She points at him with her glass. "Private collection? I love that for you."

Ayanda grins.

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Thirty minutes later, food covers the dining table. Dikeledi leans forward eagerly and takes a bite. Her shoulders relax instantly.

"This is so good. Oh my God," she says, humming in satisfaction.

Sizwe shifts in his chair, adjusting his posture awkwardly.

Ayanda smiles. "So, Dikeledi, what do you do?"

She wipes her mouth with a napkin. "Nothing right now. I'm waiting to go back to varsity. Refilwe is helping me with funding, so soon I'll be a student again."

"What are you studying?"

"Teaching, I want to be a teacher."

Sizwe raises an eyebrow while taking a sip of his drink. "Teaching? That's... nice."

She slowly lowers her fork and squints at him. "Nice? You said that like it's boring."

"I didn't say that," he replies, lifting his hands slightly.

"You didn't have to. Your face said it."

"I don't have a face."

She gestures dramatically toward him. "Everyone has a face. And yours just said 'teaching is boring.'"

Ayanda presses his lips together, trying not to laugh. "I think teaching is great," he says quickly.

"Thank you," she says, nodding firmly. "At least someone appreciates educators."

She shoots Sizwe a pointed look.

"I never said I don't appreciate teachers."

"But you implied it."

"I didn't imply anything."

"You did. With your judgy face."

"I don't have a judgy face."

"You literally have one right now."

Ayanda bursts into laughter, leaning back in his chair.

Sizwe glares at him. "What's funny?"

"You two," Ayanda says between laughs. "You've known each other for thirty minutes and you're already arguing."

Dikeledi shrugs, sipping her wine. "I don't argue. I just state facts."

Sizwe scoffs. "Facts? You've been putting words in my mouth since you got here."

She points her fork at him. "Because you don't know how to use your mouth properly."

Sizwe freezes. Ayanda chokes on his wine. Dikeledi's eyes widen instantly.

"I MEAN...communicate!" she blurts, waving her hands. "You don't communicate properly. Not... not that. Oh my God." She covers her face, groaning.

Sizwe leans back, smirking now.

"You two are perfect for each other," Ayanda says.

They both snap their heads toward him. "WHAT?"

Ayanda raises both hands defensively. "I'm just saying. The chemistry is there."

Dikeledi pushes her chair back and stands. "Chemistry? With him? Please. I have standards."

Sizwe stands too. "Standards? You literally called me hot when you walked in."

"I was being polite!"

"You said hot and sexy."

"I was describing the general energy of the room!"

"The room?"

She throws her hands in the air. "Whatever. You're clearly delusional."

He sits back down, amused. "You're the one who can't keep your story straight."

"My story is perfectly straight."

"Just like how you don't find me attractive?"

"Exactly. Wait...no. I didn't say...ugh!"

Ayanda sighs dramatically. "Should I leave you two alone?"

They both turn instantly. "NO!"

Ayanda pulls out his phone, shaking his head while typing. He sends a text to Nqobizwe.

"Bro. Your boy is in trouble. He just met his match. This is hilarious."

Chapter 24

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Nqobizwe

Refilwe has calmed down now. We are still in bed, her body resting on my chest while my arm lies around her shoulders. The room is quiet again.

My phone buzzes on the bedside table. Ayanda's text comes through and I can't help but laugh.

"Your friend is showing Sizwe flames."

Refilwe lifts her head slightly. "Why are you saying that?"

I turn the phone and show her the message.

"Dikeledi mara," she says, shaking her head. "I wonder what Sizwe did to her."

She laughs softly and settles back against me.

My smile fades as I remember everything she went through earlier. My expression hardens.

"How are you feeling now?"

She exhales slowly. "I'm still shaken, but I'll be fine. I don't think what I saw was meant for naked eyes."

I rub her arm gently. "Ready to tell me?"

She nods and starts explaining everything Queen Nomusa showed her.

As she speaks, my jaw tightens. I knew it. Once people become desperate, they can do anything.

“So we have to take Buhle to her father,” I say quietly.

She nods.

I shake my head, staring at the ceiling.

“Buhle is dying for her mother’s doings,” she says softly.

“I really didn’t want my father knowing yet,” I reply. “He might kill Thobekile. Right now he only suspects. This will break him.”

My father can be brutal, and I don’t want Thobekile’s blood on his hands. And just like I suspected…Buhle is not my father’s child.

Is any of her children his?

“Did she say anything about the other kids’ paternity?” I ask.

“No. Only Buhle. But she said they don’t plant seeds in rotten wombs.”

I nod slowly. That explains why Baba Ngubeni never warned me about hurting Sbonga… why Sbonga was never protected. All Thobekiles kids are not my fathers’.

Refilwe sighs heavily. “Your father brought this to your doorstep. He sees everything but chooses to ignore the signs.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think he lived all these years with Thobekile without suspecting something.”

“He was bewitched,” I say firmly.

“Who does he suspect?”

“Thobekile. But he still doubts.”

She shifts beside me. “That’s what I’m saying. He has seen shady things she does but keeps giving her the benefit of the doubt. Now look…she bewitched him. Queen Nomusa said if you don’t follow their rules, you feel their wrath.

They allowed everything to happen and just watched. Now he'll be broken and won't be able to do anything about it."

I sigh. "Thobekile has to return to her parents."

"I feel sorry for her kids," she says, wiping away tears. "But there's nothing we can do. Buhle is going to die."

Silence fills the room. "Why did Queen Nomusa show you all this?" I ask.

"She didn't say. She just told me about the family ancestors and what they do when people disobey."

I nod slowly.

She looks up at me. "Do you think I have a spiritual gift?"

I chuckle softly and kiss her forehead. "I don't think so. Maybe Queen Nomusa was preparing you for what you'll face in the royal house, who to trust and how to protect the kingdom."

She nods thoughtfully.

"I have to take this seriously. Maybe your royal seer can help. I don't like how they deliver messages. I just fall asleep instantly. Imagine falling asleep in public and no one can wake you." She says

"I'll organise a meeting. You, my father, and the royal seer. Then you can tell him everything yourself."

Right then my phone rings. My father.

I answer. "Baba."

"Nqobizwe, your brother is admitted at the hospital. Your mothers and I have arrived in Pretoria. You have to come."

I sit up slightly. "I'm busy, Baba. You'll update me."

"Nqobizwe, I know you don't see eye to eye, but he is your brother."

If only he knew. I clear my throat. "I'll see if I can make it."

"Ngiyabonga."

I end the call and shake my head.

"Sbonga, my supposed brother is admitted. Father wants me to come."

Refilwe sits up quickly. “Oh no. What happened?”

“I don’t know, And I don’t care.”

“Do you think it’s the ancestors doing?”

Well It’s my doing. I don’t know if that counts.

I just shrug. “I don’t know, love. I’ll hear when I get there.”

“You are going? I don’t want my father on my case.”

She nods ‘We have to go get Dk before she drives the guys crazy”

"I was thinking we delay a bit."

I say, already trailing kisses on her back.

She clears her throat. "Baby, DK has been waiting. We have..."

I move on top of her and shut her up with a kiss. I pull back and look at her, smirking. "DK will understand, mama. Trust me."

She giggles. "Two minutes."

I laugh. "I'm not promising anything."

I lean down, my lips finding hers again. Slower this time. She kisses me back deeply, like she's been hungry for me.

Within seconds, our clothes are flying. We're both naked. I pull her to the edge of the bed. Her legs spread open and my mind goes crazy when I look at her. Wet and ready for me.

"Mhm mmm, Fifi. Fuck." I stroke myself up and down, then slide in slowly. Feeling the warmth. Her walls fitting me perfectly.

"Ahh!" She gasps, her back arching.

I start moving. Slow at first. Then faster. She's moaning my name and that drives me insane.

"Oh, Zwee... yes... right there. Fuck... fuck..."

She's gripping the sheets. Her eyes are closed. Her mouth open.

I'm losing my mind. She feels so good. "Mhm, fuck. I love you, Fifi. Shit..."

I go faster. Harder. I can feel myself getting close.

"I'm close baby… I'm…" She breathes out.

"Me too. Come for me, mama."

A few more thrusts and we both come at the same time. Her crying out my name. Me groaning hers. I collapse beside her, both of us breathing hard.

She turns her head to look at me, a lazy smile on her face. "That was hot…I love you"

"I love you more than I ever thought possible." I say holding her closer.

We rush into the shower and wash quickly.

"I hate rushing and its all your fault" she says, giving me an accusing look.

"Let's agree to disagree, baby. It's both our fault."

She pouts, clearly unconvinced.

We get dressed in a hurry. She stands in front of the mirror fixing her hair, focused, while I lean against the wall watching her.

"What?" She asks, catching me.

"You're beautiful."

She blushes. "Stop. We need to go."

I walk up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist.

"I mean it. I'm the luckiest man alive."

She turns in my arms and kisses me softly.

"And I'm the luckiest woman. Now let's go before I change my mind and we stay here all day."

I groan. "Don't tempt me."

She laughs, pulling me toward the door.

…

Refilwe

We are in the car heading to Ayanda's place. Gosh, we made Dk wait. I hope she won't mind. The sex really helped me relax, but I still can't stop thinking about what I saw in that hut, and the fact that I can't do anything about it.

I hate Thobekile with a passion. She reminds me of Lentswe. Same person, just different fonts.

The driver opens the door for us when we arrive, and we walk up to the house. Ayanda opens before we even knock, already smiling and shaking his head.

We can hear voices arguing inside.

"Welcome," Ayanda says, stepping aside.

We walk into the living room. Dikeledi is on the couch, arguing with Sizwe about something. They both stop the moment they see us.

"REFILWE!"

Dikeledi jumps up and runs toward me. We hug tightly, bouncing a little with excitement.

"Oh my God, you're really here! Please don't leave," I say.

We laugh and hug again. She pulls back, scanning my face with concern.

"Are you okay? Ayanda said you weren't well."

"I'm fine. Ancestors and dreams, you know."

"Yoh, o se o le sangoma nou?" (So you're a sangoma now?)

I laugh, shaking my head. "No."

The guys just stand there watching us. My eyes drift to Sizwe. He's staring at Dikeledi with a strange look on his face.

I raise an eyebrow at him. He quickly looks away, clearing his throat.

Ayanda is grinning like he knows something.

"So, how was babysitting?" I ask.

Ayanda laughs. "Entertaining. Very entertaining."

Sizwe glares at him. Dikeledi suddenly turns to Nqobizwe and bows dramatically, raising her hands. “BAYEDE!”

I frown, laughing, while Nqobizwe chuckles.

“Why are you saying *Bayede*?” I ask.

“He’s a prince, mos.”

“Aren’t you supposed to say that to a king or something?”

“Same thing.” She faces Nqobizwe again. “My Prince, I finally see you. You’re even better face-to-face, jealous down. I hope you’re treating my friend well.”

“I am,” Nqobizwe says, smiling.

“Good. Because if you’re not, I will…”

“DK,” I cut in, laughing.

“What? I’m just saying.”

Nqobizwe smiles. “Noted.”

Dikeledi turns to Sizwe. “What are you looking at?” she asks with attitude.

Sizwe scoffs. “I’m not looking at you.”

“You’ve been looking at me since they walked in.”

“Maybe you’re just in my line of sight.”

“Then move.”

“You move.”

“This isn’t even your house!”

Ayanda is practically dying with laughter.

I look at him, confused. He shrugs. “This is what I’ve been dealing with for the past hour.” Ayanda says.

“Ey, Dikeledi, let me be,” Sizwe says, turning to us. “Let me talk to sane people. How are you guys?”

Before I can answer, Dk snaps back, “Are you saying *ke a hlanya*? (I’m crazy?)”

“Your words, not mine,” Sizwe replies calmly.

She sighs dramatically and turns to me. “Can we leave?”

I nod. “Baby, are you dropping us off?”

Nqobizwe nods. “Yeah. I’ll drop you off, then head to the hospital.”

Dikeledi grabs her bag. “Hospital? What happened?”

“I’ll explain in the car,” I say.

We head toward the door. Dikeledi waves at Ayanda.

“Thank you for having me. Your house is beautiful.”

“Anytime,” he replies.

Then she looks at Sizwe. “Bye, Sizwe. Try not to miss me too much.”

Sizwe rolls his eyes. “Trust me, I won’t.”

“Liar.” She says

“Delusional.”

“Annoying.”

“Stubborn.”

I grab her arm and pull her toward the door. “Okay, let’s go before you two start round five.”

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Narrated

The King is standing by the window. Queen Liyana is sitting in a chair near the bed. And Queen Thobekile is standing beside Sbonga, holding his hand. Her face is tear-stained. Dramatic as always.

Sbonga is lying in the bed. His face is bruised. Swollen. Bandages around his head and arm. He's awake but looks weak.

Nqobizwe enteres. Queen Thobekile looks up when he enters. Her eyes widen.

"Nqobizwe! Oh, thank God you came!" She rushes toward him, arms open like she's about to hug him.

He steps back. "Queen Thobekile." He greets coldly.

She stops, her arms dropping. "Your brother... he's in so much pain. The doctors say he was badly beaten. Who would do such a thing?"

The King turns from the window. "Nqobizwe. Thank you for coming."

Nqobizwe nods respectfully. "Baba."

Queen Liyana stands and smiles warmly at him. "Nqobi."

"Ma." He greets her properly, his face softening slightly. They share a hug.

Queen Thobekile clears her throat loudly, drawing attention back to her.

" I need to use the restroom. Please sit with your brother while I'm gone."

She says, her voice shaky.

Nqobizwe doesn't respond. Just stands there, hands in his pockets.

Queen Thobekile waits for a moment, then huffs and walks out of the room.

She rushes down the hallway to the nearest bathroom. She locks herself in a stall. Her hands are shaking as she pulls the small bottle from her bra.

The mixture Vilakazi gave her.

She unscrews the cap and carefully tilts it. One tiny drop falls onto her finger. She rubs it on her tongue.

It tastes bitter. But she doesn't care.

She closes her eyes and waits. Feels the warmth spreading through her chest.

She smiles.

“This will work. It has to.’ She says to herself.

She tucks the bottle back into her bra, flushes the toilet for show, and washes her hands. She checks herself in the mirror. Fixes her face. Wipes away the fake tears.

Then she walks back to the room.

When she enters, Nqobizwe is still standing in the same spot. He hasn't moved. Hasn't even looked at Sbonga.

Queen Thobekile's smile falters.

The muti should be working by now. He should be listening. Agreeable and soft.

She walks closer to him. "Nqobizwe, my son. Come. Sit with your brother. He needs you."

Nqobizwe looks at her. His expression is hard. Cold. "I'm fine standing."

She blinks. "But... you should sit. You've been standing for too long. You must be tired."

He just ignores her. Hatred visible in his face.

Her eye twitches. This doesn't make sense. The muti should be working.

She tries again, her voice softer. More pleading. "Nqobizwe, please. Just sit for a moment. For me."

"I said I'm fine." His tone is sharp. Final.

Queen Thobekile's hands clench into fists at her sides.

"Excuse me. I need to use the restroom again." She rushes out of the room.

The King frowns, watching her go. "What's wrong with her?"

Queen Liyana just shakes her head.

Back in the bathroom, Queen Thobekile takes another drop. Then another.

"Why isn't it working?!" She hisses to herself, staring at the bottle.

She shakes it. Holds it up to the light. Vilakazi said it would work. He said one drop would make Nqobizwe weak. Controllable and obedient.

But he's not listening. He's not changing. She takes a deep breath, her mind racing. Maybe she just needs to be more direct. More forceful.

She tucks the bottle back and walks out. When she enters the room this time, Nqobizwe is talking quietly with his father near the window. Queen Liyana is still sitting, watching Sbonga sleep.

Queen Thobekile walks straight to Nqobizwe and places her hand on his arm.

"Nqobizwe, my dear. I've been thinking. You need to reconsider this... this chosen one situation."

Nqobizwe looks down at Queen Thobekile's hand on his arm. Then at her face.

His expression darkens. "What are you talking about?"

"Your Chosen one. That girl not suitable for you. Look now we still have to wait to ask her hand in marriage. She was rvealed late and looks like she has a lot on her plate regards to her fathers family still looking for her. You need someone royal. Someone like Princess Nolwandle."

The room goes silent. The King turns sharply.

"Thobekile, what are you…"

She cuts him off, her voice rising. "No, let me speak! Nqobizwe, listen to me. Take my advice. Marry Nolwandle. That chosen one of yours is useless. Just like your mother. That's why your father had to get a second wife!"

Queen Liyana stands abruptly, her face hard. "Thobekile!"

But before anyone can react, Nqobizwe moves.

His hand shoots out and grabs Queen Thobekile by the throat. Not hard enough to choke her completely. But firm. Threatening. His fingers pressing into her skin.

Her eyes go wide. She gasps, clawing at his hand.

"What did you just say?"

His voice is low. Deadly. A whisper that feels like thunder.

"Nqobizwe!"

The King shouts, rushing over.

But Nqobizwe doesn't let go. His eyes are locked on hers. Dark and furious.

"You will NEVER speak about my mother or my chosen one like that again. Do you hear me?"

Queen Thobekile is gasping, her face turning red. Tears streaming down.

"Nqobizwe!"

The King grabs his arm, pulling.

Nqobizwe finally releases her. She stumbles back, coughing and holding her throat. Gasping for air.

He steps forward, pointing at her. His hand shaking with rage.

"You are nothing. NOTHING. You will never be half the woman my mother is. And if you ever disrespect her again, I will forget you're married to my father."

Queen Thobekile's eyes are filled with tears. Real ones this time. But also pure rage.

"You... you ungrateful…"

"Enough!"

The King roars.

Nqobizwe turns to his father, his chest heaving.

"I came here out of respect for you, Baba. Not for him." He gestures to Sbonga without even looking at him.

"And definitely not for her." He looks at Queen Thobekile with pure disgust.

Then he turns and storms toward the door. "Nqobizwe!"

The King calls after him. But he's already gone.

The door slams behind him.

Queen Thobekile is still holding her throat, gasping. Crying.

The King looks at her, his face a mixture of anger and disappointment.

"What is wrong with you, Thobekile?"

She doesn't answer. Just sobs dramatically. But inside, she's seething.

The muti didn't work. Vilakazi lied to her. She touches her throat where his fingers pressed. She can still feel the pressure. The warning.

And for the first time, she feels something she's not used to.

Fear.

Chapter 25

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Narrated

Queen Thobekile is pacing up and down in the parking lot of the hospital. She left the King and Queen Liyana inside. She's sweating. Her mind is telling her that she's been played by Vilakazi. But she doesn't want to believe it.

Her heart beats faster when she thinks that she sacrificed her child's womb. She sacrificed it for nothing.

She stops pacing and leans against a car, her hand on her chest. She can feel her heart pounding. Her breathing is uneven.

"No. No, no, no..." She whispers to herself.

She takes out her phone, fuming. Her hands are shaking so badly she almost drops it.

She dials Vilakazi's number. It rings and goes straight to voicemail.

She screams in frustration. She dials again. It rings.

He answers.

"Thobekile, ngi busy kabi. Ufunani?" His voice is cold. Dismissive.

"Lo muti wakho awusebenzi, Vilakazi." She says, trying to stay calm and not make a scene.

"Muphi wona?" He says, sounding not interested at all.

Her eye twitches.

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't make me angry, Vilakazi. I'm still waiting for Nqobizwe to fall to his knees. I did as you instructed. A drop on the tongue. But it seems he hates me more now."

Vilakazi laughs. He really laughs out loud.

Thobekile frowns, her mouth falling open. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, Thobe... Thobe. You are so stupid." Vilakazi says, still laughing.

She stops pacing. Her mouth twitches. Her whole body goes rigid.

"Vilakazi, wenzeni!?"

"Ngenzeni? More like wena wenzeni." (What did I do? More like what did YOU do.) He says, mocking her.

"I warned you, but you love power too much. How can you be so determined to make your son, who is not even a Ngwenya, a king? You think the crown is a playground?"

He laughs more. Like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

Queen Thobekile screams. "AHHHHH!"

People passing by stop and stare. It doesn't help that it's night and her voice is the loudest thing in the parking lot.

She's breathing heavily, her chest heaving.

"Vilakazi. You took my daughter's womb!!!"

Her voice cracks. "Yes, I did."

He says it so casually. Like he's talking about the weather.

"But to be honest, I was really on your side at first. The sacrifice and that muti would have worked. The Prince was just ahead of you. He claimed his chosen one on time. The only crime I committed was not telling you. But I also wanted that womb. I'm sure you understand."

Thobekile's knees buckle. She grabs onto the car to steady herself.

"ARE. YOU. TELLING. ME. I SACRIFICED MY DAUGHTER'S WOMB FOR NOTHING!?"

She's screaming now. Full volume. Her voice rises into a full scream now, loud and uncontrolled, completely forgetting that this conversation isn't meant to be heard.

"Kuzolunga, Thobe. Just accept that your son will never rule, mahn. And make peace. Futhi, why not take him to his father? He can rule there."

Vilakazi says calmly.

"Thula! Stop talking nonsense!" She hisses.

"Why?" Vilakazi asks, unfazed. "Isn't he the rightful heir there? Those are the people you should be fighting… not Nqobizwe."

She's crying now. Tears streaming down her face.

"Listen here, you ugly peasant with uneven eyes. I will teach you what I do to people who cross me. You are dead, Vilakazi. DEAD."

Vilakazi laughs on the other end. That cold, cruel laugh.

"By the time you find me, your daughter will already be dead. If I were you, I'd spend whatever time she has left with her… wisely."

He laughs again. Then ends the call.

"Vilakazi, uthini?" Silence.

"VILAKAZI!?"

She looks at the phone and sees the call ended. She tries calling again. Voicemail. She tries again. Voicemail. It no longer rings. He blocked her.

She screams, ripping the scarf off her head and throwing it on the ground.

"NO! NO! NO!"

She's sobbing now. Fully breaking down in the middle of the parking lot.

She holds her dress and rushes back inside the hospital. Her heels clicking frantically on the pavement.

She finds the King and Queen Liyana still in Sbonga's room. They're by the window. Laughing. Being cozy. The King's hand is on Liyana's waist.

Thobekile stops in the doorway. Disgust washes over her face.

She clears her throat loudly.

"Mhm, kumnandi. No shame to play lovey-dovey while my son is lying right here fighting for his life. Sies."

The King's face hardens immediately. He steps toward her.

"Sies? Are you saying sies to us, Thobekile?"

"Ayi, suka. Trying to bring back the spark?"

She laughs bitterly. "Disgusting."

Before she knows it, she feels a hot slap across her face.

The sound echoes in the room. She stumbles back, her hand flying to her cheek. Her eyes wide with shock.

"Langa, you hit me." She whispers.

"And I will do it again." The King steps closer, his voice low and dangerous.

"You frequently disrespect me, the King. You disrespect Liyana. I am tired of you, Thobekile. It's clear you don't know me well."

He's pointing a finger at her. She steps back, eyes wide.

She's never seen him like this. Never.

Queen Liyana holds the King's shoulder and rubs it gently.

"Calm down, my King. Please."

Queen Thobekile's tears stream down. She's in disbelief.

The King slapped her.

He slapped her.

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Refilwe

Dikeledi and I are in bed, about to sleep. The lights are off except for the bedside lamp, and I've been laughing nonstop. She's honestly something else. She's lying on her stomach beside me, kicking her legs in the air while ranting about Sizwe.

I still don't understand how this whole fight even started.

"So where did this whole thing start?" I ask, turning onto my side to face her.

She groans dramatically, burying her face in the pillow.

"When I said I want to be a teacher and he said being a teacher is boring."

My eyes widen. "He really said that?"

"Not literally," she says quickly, sitting up and fixing her hair. "He said, *'that's… nice.'*"

She deepens her voice, mimicking him with an exaggerated serious face.

I burst out laughing. "And here I thought you'd find him and Ayanda attractive."

"Oh please," she says, waving her hand dismissively. "They *are* attractive. Very good-looking men. But I regret complimenting Sizwe. Even though he is so fine."

She pauses, squinting. "Too bad he annoys me. That makes him ugly in my eyes. Minus ten points."

I laugh harder, pulling the blanket closer around me. I can't believe they're fighting over something so small.

"Tomorrow we're going to his house. How are you going to cope? He's dating Lerato."

I say *Lerato* with exaggerated air quotes.

She shoots upright. "WHAT!? He's the one dating that girl you told me about?"

I nod. "Yep."

She lets out a loud laugh and falls back onto the pillows.

“They will know me. With that girlfriend of his. They better not try me.”

I shake my head, smiling.

“Can tomorrow just end already? I feel like it’s going to be a long day. But trust me… the moment you see Lerato, you’ll understand.”

“Girl, no one intimidates me. Putting people in their place is my middle name.” she says confidently, pointing at herself

“Oh, that I know,” I say, laughing.

She laughs too, then her expression softens.

“Were you able to speak with your dad?”

I nod, tracing small circles on the blanket.

“We’re meeting next week. I haven’t set the date yet.”

“Are you ready? I can come with you. I really don’t mind.”

I smile at her. A month ago, I had no one. No support. Now Nqobizwe and Dikeledi feel like home.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. This is something I need to do on my own.”

She nods slowly.

“Although, I would’ve loved seeing him. Very handsome man, he is.”

I throw my head back laughing.

“Dikeledi, that’s a whole King. Someone’s husband.”

“That’s what makes him even better.”

I gasp, nudging her arm.

“You’re not scared of being bewitched, wena? Hee…speaking of bewitching… The things I saw today, DK… I am traumatized.”

She immediately sits up straighter.

“What happened?”

I take a deep breath.

“Zwee’s second mother is a witch. Like… high-level witch.”

I tell her everything, the bush, the hut, Buhle, the sacrifice. My voice gets quieter the more I speak.

Her mouth slowly falls open.

“R.E.F.I.L.W.E,” she says, spelling my name out. “That’s what you saw!?”

“Mmm,” I hum, nodding.

She throws her hands in the air.

“Oh my God, girl, take your father. I don’t want him anymore if that’s what I must go through to be Queen. Pass!”

I laugh despite myself.

“Now I have to tell the King that Buhle is not his. He’ll probably think I’m crazy. But it has to be done.”

“Yoh. That woman is the devil. Haibo.”

“I’m telling you.”

She studies my face carefully. “And why are you so calm about it? Are you okay?”

I think for a moment.

“I am. It still plays in my head… but I feel this power inside me. Like nothing can happen to me.”

“Of course nothing can happen to you. You have the underground gang. But I mean emotionally, are you okay seeing those spiritual things?”

I laugh softly.

“Of course not. But what can I do?”

She sighs dramatically and pulls the blanket over herself.

“Get admitted to a psych ward. If it was me, I’d have taken myself there immediately. Ebile, let’s stop talking about witches. I want peaceful dreams.”

I shake my head, smiling. “Let’s sleep vele. We have a long day tomorrow.”

We switch off the lamp and slide under the covers, the room finally going quiet.

•••

Narrated

Sizwe arrives at his house. Lerato is not in sight, which makes him sigh in relief. She must be asleep, he thinks to himself.

How he got himself in this Lerato situation, he doesn't know. One thing, they were having fun. Next thing, she doesn't leave. Always at his house. Which annoys him.

He's addressed this with her several times. But she always plays the guilt card. Cries. Makes excuses. He knows she's playing him. But he chooses not to entertain her drama. He just avoids her.

He walks to his study and pours himself a glass of whisky.

He sits in his chair, staring at the ceiling. Thinking about what happened earlier.

Dikeledi.

He tried, but she's not leaving his mind. He laughs, thinking of her.

He always avoids fights with Lerato because he cares less about what she says or feels or even thinks. But Dikeledi? He enjoyed those small arguments they had. Yes, she's annoying. But he likes it.

He thinks of how beautiful she is. How real. Something he never thought would really attract him. He's always gone for women like Lerato. Polished. High-maintenance and predictable.

But Dikeledi? She's different.

He wants to get to know her. Understand what this feeling is. She interests him. A lot. Her personality is top-tier, he thinks.

The study door opens.

Lerato stands there in her short silk nightrobe. Her hair is in a bonnet. Her face is bare.

Sizwe is annoyed because he was still enjoying being alone with his thoughts. If he could, he would just disappear right at that moment.

She yawns.

"Pookie, when did you get here? I was waiting for hours."

'Pookie.' A pet name he hates so much. He sighs. Suddenly Lerato is even more annoying. He's been able to tolerate her. But now he wants her gone.

"I just got here. Go back to sleep. I'm still working."

"I don't see any working here. Come to bed, pookie."

"I'm coming. Can I have a moment, please?"

She walks in fully, moving closer to the desk. She leans against it, her robe falling open slightly.

"But you haven't been home since yesterday."

He doesn't even look at her.

"Lerato, am I missing something? Are we dating?"

Lerato straightens up. "I know you said you don't owe me any explanation because we're not an item. But we are something, right? I mean, we even stay together." She says

"Because you refuse to leave!? You refuse to hear what I say and you stay by force."

Her face falls. "Okay, you're just tired. Let me leave you to do whatever you were doing. I'm going to bed. Mcwaa."

She blows him a kiss and walks out in a hurry.

This is what she does. Every time Sizwe tries bringing this up, she avoids the topic or runs.

He sighs and shakes his head.

He takes out his phone and dials Nqobizwe's number.

"Sure, man."

Nqobizwe sounds down.

"Are you okay, Prince man?"

"I will be once I have my woman in my arms."

"What happened?"

"That witch Thobekile is testing me. I fear I will kill her if I ever find myself in the same room with her."

"Try to calm down, man. Go to your woman and release the steam."

"That's another problem. She has a guest. I'm sleeping alone tonight."

Sizwe laughs.

"That's why I was calling. Refilwe's guest, man."

"What about her?"

"Please send me her number."

He clears his throat.

"What for?"

"Nqobizwe, man, just send her number."

Nqobizwe laughs.

"Ayanda has it. He was the one organizing the transport."

"Okay, thanks. Bye."

Nqobizwe continues to laugh.

"Wait, man…"

Sizwe cuts the call. He knows Nqobizwe will make fun of him. He'll never hear the end of it.

He calls Ayanda, and he answers on the third ring.

"Ndoda."

"Ey, man, lalela. Please send DK's number."

"Refilwe's friend? Why?"

"Send the number, ndoda, and stop asking questions."

Ayanda laughs.

"Okay, but don't terrorize ingani yabantu."

"Hayi, sharp."

Sizwe ends the call. A minute later, Ayanda's message pops up with DK's number.

He stares at it for a long moment.

He's asking himself if he should call. And what will he even say if he calls?

He finally decides to call her. It rings. Three times.

Then it goes straight to voicemail. He sighs, feeling disappointed.

But he smiles when he thinks about seeing her tomorrow.

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Nqobizwe

I'm outside on my bedroom balcony, having a smoke. I'm still angry. That witch touched me. I wanted to squeeze the life out of her. If given a chance, I would put a bullet through her skull. That woman makes my skin crawl.

I take a long drag, watching the smoke disappear into the night air. My hand is still shaking. Not from fear. From rage.

The way she spoke about my mother. About my Refilwe. Like they're nothing. Like they're replaceable.

I clench my fist around the railing.

I just need to hear Refilwe's voice. Maybe then I'll be able to sleep. Maybe then this rage will settle.

I pull out my phone and call her. It rings for some time until she answers.

"Zwee." She says, sounding sleepy. She was sleeping.

"Did I wake you?"

"Mhmm. Is everything okay?"

Her voice is soft. Groggy. I can picture her now, hair messy, eyes half-closed, curled up under the blankets.

I close my eyes and just listen to her breathe. "I just wanted to hear your voice, mama."

I hear shuffling on her end. Then she clears her throat.

"How did it go at the hospital?"

I clench my jaw, my grip tightening on the phone.

"Thobekile happened. I'm so angry. I... I want to end her."

There's a pause. Then her voice comes through, calm.

"Please calm down, baby. You don't want to do something you'll regret later."

"I don't think I'd regret doing something to Thobekile." I say it flatly. And I mean it.

"Nqobizwe, your ancestors know what's waiting for her. She'll get what's coming to her. And soon, sthandwa sami. She can't do anything now."

I know she's right. Logically, I know. But logic doesn't stop the anger.

"I know, my love. But today she really pissed me off."

"I'm sorry. Try to get some sleep."

I laugh bitterly. "How? When you're not here, mama?"

She chuckles softly. "The same way you used to before me."

"I don't remember how. I want to hold you in my arms."

I mean it. I need her here. Her warmth. The way she fits perfectly against me.

"I can't leave DK alone here, my love.

“I need your warmth, Fifi."

She laughs. "Zwee, you're being a big baby right now. My friend is here."

"I'll take you back in the morning before she even wakes up."

"No, my love."

"Fifi, are you really doing this to me?"

She laughs again. That sweet, light laugh that makes my chest feel warm.

"I'm sorry, baby. I love you. Bye."

She ends the call. I stare at my phone. She doesn't understand. I'm being serious here. I need her in my arms.

I call her again.

“Nqobizwe,” she says, trying to sound stern, but I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I wasn’t done talking,” I say, leaning my elbows against the balcony railing.

“Baby, go to sleep.”

“I’m coming to pick you up,” I say, already turning toward the balcony door like I might actually leave.

“Nqobizwe!”

“I need you.”

“You’ll survive one night.”

I sigh, running a hand over my face. “I don’t want to survive. I want to sleep next to you.”

There’s a long pause. I hear her breathing through the phone.

“Zwee, I can’t just leave my friend. It’s rude.”

“She’s asleep. She won’t even notice,” I say, tapping my fingers lightly against the railing.

“She *will* notice when she wakes up and I’m gone.”

“Leave her a note.”

“A note?”

“Yeah.” I shrug even though she can’t see me. “‘DK, went to see my man. Be back in the morning.’ Simple.”

She laughs softly. “Okay, how about this? We stay on the phone. I’ll talk to you until you fall asleep.”

I exhale, tilting my head back to look at the sky.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah. Fine. Talk to me.”

She laughs softly.

“About what?”

“Anything. Everything. Just talk.”

So she does. I slide down into the balcony chair, stretching my legs out as I listen. She tells me about DK and Sizwe arguing, and I find myself smiling.

“You think there might be something between them?” I ask.

She giggles. “I don’t know, but hey, Sizwe is taken anyway.”

I sit up slightly. I don’t remember Sizwe being taken.

“Taken by who?”

“Lerato, mos.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “They’re not really dating. Well… it’s complicated. Even I don’t understand it.”

“I was under the impression that they were. Yoh.”

“I think he’s intrigued by DK. He called asking for her number.”

“Oh my God,” she laughs. “He *is* interested. I wonder what DK will say.”

We talk some more. She tells me about how scared she is about meeting my father to tell him about Buhle. But it has to be done. She's excited to go to work Monday.

And me, on the other hand? I don't like that one bit. She'll see that Senzo guy. I hope he's not up to anything. When it comes to Refilwe, I don't play.

"Fifi, are you still there?"

She's gone quiet now. I hear a soft snore. She's sleeping. She must have been too tired.

"I love you. Sleep tight." I say, although I know she doesn't hear me.

I end the call.

I actually feel better now, but I don’t know about sleeping alone. It will be hard for me tonight.

Chapter 26

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Refilwe

Dikeledi and I have woken up. The apartment is loud today. We're playing music on full blast, singing our souls out. I'm sure the neighbors are concerned because our voices... are not so good to listen to. We keep laughing in between songs because we're screaming and just enjoying ourselves.

I spin around, using my hairbrush as a microphone. DK is jumping on the couch, belting out lyrics completely off-key.

"No, it's enough! We can't sing to save our lives!"

DK says, throwing herself dramatically onto the couch.

I turn down the volume, breathing heavily, and throw myself onto the couch too. My chest is heaving from all the jumping and screaming.

"What are we gonna eat?"

We woke up and chose music over our stomachs. We haven't eaten, and I feel hungry right now. My stomach actually growls.

"Let's order breakfast. I'm too tired."

DK says, sprawled out like a starfish.

Then an idea pops into my head. I sit up excitedly.

"Actually, let's go out for breakfast. We need some fresh air and some relaxation."

"Yesss, now that's what I'm talking about!"

She says, getting excited and standing up already, moving toward the bathroom. She turns.

"But you're paying, my dearest friend."

I laugh, standing up to go make the bed.

"Well, I thought we should go fifty-fifty."

She screams and laughs out loud from the bathroom.

"Unless you haven't noticed, I am a hobo, my sister. Don't make fun of me!"

"I'm kidding, my love. Of course I'm paying. Let me spoil you. You have to enjoy your stay here. And don't call yourself a hobo. It's not a nice thing to say about yourself."

I smooth the sheets and fluff the pillows.

She laughs.

"I was only joking, man. The uptightness of being a Queen has already started."

She says from the bathroom.

I walk to the bathroom door, leaning against the frame, laughing.

"I am not uptight. I am a very fun person."

"Mang? You? My love, you are not fun. You are the strictest person I know. You've been strict growing up, especially when it came to your studies. And I can tell you're still strict. I see why you fit to be Queen."

She's in the shower now. I'm still standing by the door, arms crossed.

"Am I really strict?"

She closes the tap.

"Girl, you always wanted things to be communicated. You needed explanations. You hated it when people made excuses to justify their bad behavior. You believed rules were meant to be followed. You were even scared to break Molefe's stupid rules. And look at you now…Head of Development. And now a Queen?"

She laughs softly.

"You were born to lead. I feel like you're going to be a very strict Queen who takes no nonsense."

I lean my head against the doorframe, thinking about it.

"Maybe I am strict. But it's because I care. I expect more from people I believe in... including myself."

I say.

"And that is okay. You can never go wrong by being yourself and standing for what you believe in. That's what makes us unique as humans. We all carry different things within us."

She says.

She opens the water again, the sound hitting the tile.

"True. And you, my friend, are the same. You don't pretend to be someone else just to fit in. That's what makes you you. It helps you see who is genuinely meant for you and who isn't... instead of changing yourself just to accommodate others."

I pause, thinking about it.

"I never really understood why people do that."

I add quietly.

She hums from the shower, thoughtful.

"Because fitting in feels safer than standing alone."

I lean my head against the wall, absorbing her words.

"But standing alone is usually where you find yourself."

She continues.

A small smile pulls at my lips.

"And maybe where the right people find you too."

"Exactly. The ones who stay don't need a different version of you."

The water keeps running, steady and calming, filling the silence between us. Not empty, just understood.

"So, should I start bowing now, Your Majesty?"

She says, and knowing her, she might actually start bowing to me. DK is very dramatic.

I laugh, pushing myself off the doorframe.

"Don't push your luck."

Her laughter follows me as I walk away from the door.

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We're both done dressing up now. I'm in a simple floral sundress with sandals. DK is in ripped jeans and a cute crop top. We look cute and relaxed.

I'm dying of hunger. My stomach growls again.

"Let's go before I collapse."

I say, already grabbing my car keys. Nqobizwe got my car delivered this morning. I miss driving. I can't believe it's almost a week now since the accident, but a lot has happened. It feels like a year.

Dikeledi is right. Maybe I need to be admitted to a psych ward because what normal person goes through all that in just a week?

It was the devil's funeral. Lentswe and her minions tested my peace. Then the accident. Meeting the love of my life who happens to be a Prince. And now I'm to be Queen and belong to them. Oh, and knowing who my real father is and being a Princess.

All in one week? Where are we rushing to exactly?

As we're about to leave, there's a knock at the door.

As we're about to leave, there's a knock at the door.

I open it, and there he is. My man, looking handsome as always, dressed in formal wear. Well… semi-formal today, at least.

Now I understand why he's always dressed like that. It's what he's used to as a Prince. He always has to look presentable. Soon, that will be my life too…always elegant, always composed.

I smile, surprised. I wasn't expecting him, but seeing him makes my heart instantly lighter.

"Baby, what are you doing here?"

He barely has time to answer before I throw myself into his arms. He laughs softly and spins me around, and I giggle, holding onto him. He keeps me close a little longer, inhaling my scent before planting a gentle kiss on my cheek.

Dikeledi clears her throat loudly.

I freeze. I had completely forgotten she was there.

"DK…how rude of me. Good morning," he says, smiling at her over my shoulder.

She folds her arms, raising an eyebrow. "I wonder what both of you would say if you found out you were siblings."

I shoot her a wide-eyed look. Nqobizwe clears his throat.

"Hayi, DK, why would you even say such a thing?"

"You're being all cute in front of me while I'm single," she replies dramatically. "But this city is big. I'll find my missing rib."

I laugh, turning toward her, shaking my head.

"DK, you are dramatic, watseba." (you know)

She laughs, grabbing her purse.

"Of course I am. If you were me, you would know. Anyways, Bayede, how are you? To what do we owe this pleasant surprise?"

I look down, holding my forehead, laughing softly.

“I came to check up on you guys and see if you needed anything,” he says.

“You are such a gentleman,” DK replies “My royal couple, I’ll wait in the car. Let me give you some space. Your romance is suffocating me. And please… don’t make babies while I am gone.” She pauses, grinning. “Oops… too late.”

“DIKELEDI!” I shout.

She laughs, taking the keys from my hand as she walks out, closing the door behind her.

“DK is… something,” Nqobizwe says, shaking his head.

I laugh. “She’s my spirit animal.”

He pulls me closer by the waist, his hands settling gently on my hips.

"I missed you."

I stand on my toes and kiss him, then pull back.

"I missed you too."

I say, melting in his hold.

"You look beautiful. Niyaphi?" (Where are you going?)

He asks, his voice low.

"We're going out to have breakfast. We thought we should have some fresh air and not be cooped up in the house."

He nods, his thumb brushing my waist.

"Do you need anything?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm just hungry. We need to get going."

He plants a kiss on my lips, then another on my forehead. And I feel it already pressing against me.

I chuckle softly. “Baby… are you hard? Like, really?”

He groans, dropping his head slightly. “Don’t blame me. I can’t help it. You made me addicted to you, and then you ditch me.”

I laugh harder. “I didn’t ditch you, baby.”

He smiles and pulls out his card holder, sliding out a sleek black card.

“I know you don’t need it,” he says, handing it to me, “but please take it. Enjoy yourself. Buy whatever you want.”

I smile, taking the card and running my thumb over its smooth surface.

“Are you serious?”

He nods. “I thought you’d give me a hard time about it.”

“Hard time? With money?” I grin. “No, baby. What’s the limit?”

Ideas are already racing through my mind.

“None.”

I gasp, doing a small jump and clapping my hands together. “Can I go shopping?”

He chuckles at my excitement. “Anything you want. Go enjoy yourself with your friend. I’ll see you at four p.m.”

I lean in and kiss him again, unable to hide my excitement.

“I wonder what I did to deserve this,” I say, smiling mischievously. "Let's go before I decide to thank you with a steamy round."

He chuckles and we walk out, his hand on my lower back.

•••

Narrated

Lentswe is sitting with Disebo. They're having tea with biscuits at the small kitchen table. Lentswe is still in disbelief that Refilwe's father came back looking for her. And by the way he looks, he's a well-off King. Still looking good, just like years ago when he visited the village.

"You don't say, Lentswe. They were here in the house?"

Disebo asks, dunking her biscuit in her tea.

"Mhm. The nerve they have to come looking for that brat."

Lentswe says, shaking her head.

"I thought you said he'd never find her."

"I thought he wouldn't come back when I sent him away and said Nthabiseng didn't give birth to any girl child."

"He's bound to come back, though. I mean, he is royalty."

Lentswe nods, sipping on her tea, deep in thought. She sighs, setting her cup down.

"Motaung is also on my case, watseba. Ke a hlollwa, I am being tested." (I'm struggling)

She says, sighing heavily.

"He still wants his money. How long have you been paying this man? It's been years."

"I thought he would leave me alone now that Molefe is dead. The man is still demanding his money."

She rubs her temples.

"How much, kanthe?" (anyway)

"I don't know. The numbers keep going up every year. Molefe took money from him in exchange for Refilwe. Akere he was going to pay off the debt using her. That brat decided to run away. I don't know how much Molefe took, but we've been paying ever since."

She clenches her fists on the table.

"Yoh, he left you in a lot of trouble. Do you think he still wants Refilwe?"

She chuckles bitterly.

"Even if he does, how will he get her now? He is old and expired. I don't know why he's still alive."

"Just don't pay him. What's the worst he can do?"

"I don't want to find out. I have been stalling him. That useless brat only sent R10,000. Akere she refused to send money every month. She grew some balls, ke a bona." (I see)

She takes another sip.

Disebo smiles, leaning forward.

"Well, her father is looking for her."

Lentswe looks at her, confused. Then she smiles slowly.

"Plus, he is such a catch. I see where Refilwe got her looks."

Disebo looks at her, then catches on. Her eyes widen.

"Hayi wena, tlohela bofebe. You're still mourning my brother, in case you forgot. I'm talking about making them pay damages for Refilwe." (No you, stop being promiscuous)

She says, frowning.

Lentswe clears her throat, sitting back.

"Oh, I thought... That's a good idea, watseba. I can use that money to pay Motaung. I will have to ask him how much I owe him."

"But you threw them out, mos. How are you going to find him? Do you think he'll come back?"

"He will come back. If he's a traditional man, when he finds her, he will have to come back. But he gives me the money. I will not perform any ritual or do any ceremony for that stupid girl."

Disebo laughs, slapping the table.

"Bathong, they will ask us if you refuse, mos."

"You will also refuse. Simple."

"Why do you hate her so much?"

Lentswe's face hardens. She leans forward.

"Same reason as you. Nthabiseng. I hated her so much. So her daughter falls victim. I want her mother to feel it even from the grave, and she can't even do anything about it. Nx."

Disebo laughs as they continue drinking their tea. Lentswe will just have to stall Motaung until that King comes back. Unless she can find him quicker and convince him.

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Nqobizwe

I'm on my way to Ngwenya. I'm meeting up with my parents. They said it's important, and I'm glad Thobekile won't be there.

My phone keeps beeping. Refilwe is spending and not holding back. I check the notifications, jewelry, shoes, bags, clothes. I smile. I'm happy. It's her man's money. Let her spend it. I hope she's having fun.

I'm not looking forward to Lerato's braai. If it was up to me, I wouldn't go. But my woman is going, and I have to be there.

I arrive at Ngwenya. My parents are seated already at a private table. I join them, greeting them respectfully.

"Baba. Ma." I bow slightly before sitting.

They've already placed their orders. I just order a drink. I have to leave space for the meat today.

"Yazi, Nqobizwe, I thought you'd show up with the chosen Queen."

My dad says, cutting into his food.

I just chuckle. "You'll meet her soon. That's something I also wanted to talk to you about."

My mom leans forward. "What's her name? We don't even know our future Queen's name."

I smile. "Refilwe. Her name is Refilwe."

"Beautiful name." My mom adds, smiling warmly.

I nod.

“You say that’s something you also wanted to talk to me about. What is it you wanted to discuss?”

My dad says, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Queen Nomusa visited Refilwe. She has a message for you." I say.

His expression goes blank. He sets down his fork.

My mom sighs. "It has begun already?"

I frown. "What do you mean it has begun, Mom?"

"The visions. She will be given tasks to prepare her for running the kingdom."

"You also had visions?" I ask surprised.

She nods, sipping on her drink.

"I saw things one shouldn't have to see. Remember the Vilakazi story?"

I nod. The Vilakazis were banned from ever entering the Kingdom. Their Chief was hanged and burned to ashes. The rest were kicked out of the kingdom.

She continues.

"After your father claimed me, I saw everything and everyone who tried to harm the kingdom. And I would do as instructed by Queen Nomusa. Chief Vilakazi was a master at witchcraft. Things I saw that they were doing to people. They also tried to destroy the our Kingdom. To hurt your grandfather.

I nod. "So they stopped? The visions"

"They stop when a new Queen is claimed." My father says quietly.

"But for me, it was different. Queen Nomusa stopped showing me when your father married Thobekile. The last time she visited was to tell me the heir would be hidden until the kingdom was safe."

"Is that why you only showed late that you were pregnant?"

She nods, her eyes distant.

“We spent years at war with the Vilakazis. And when victory finally came, I bore your father an heir…you, my precious boy. That is why we named you Nqobizwe… the conqueror of the nation.”

She reaches out and cups my cheek gently, her thumb brushing against my skin.

I still under her touch, caught between pride and the weight of her words, unsure whether to smile or lower my eyes.

"So the Vilakazis were behind you not falling pregnant?" I ask

She shakes her head. "Ancestors felt it was not yet time. A lot was happening."

I nod, clenching my jaw. My father is just quiet, clenching his jaw too.

"So why did you marry Thobekile, Dad?"

He sighs heavily and looks at my mom.

"The royal elders felt like an heir was needed, and it had been years of waiting. They said maybe Liyana was barren."

I swallow hard.

"But she was chosen for the Kingdom. If she was barren, wouldn't that mean the ancestors knew?"

"The Kingdom needed the next in line."He says, sounding defensive. "I thought I was doing the right thing."

"You could have been patient. Or at least consulted with the ancestors?"

"You don't think I did? They kept saying one thing. ‘It's not yet time’." He gulps his drink. "I panicked. I wanted an heir. I wanted my son to be next in line and continue the lineage."

I just keep quiet, clenching my jaw. The silence is heavy.

"Why did you call me here, Baba?"

I change the topic, I don’t want us to fight about the past.

He clears his throat, setting down his glass.

"Can you please help Sbonga? He is your brother, Nqobizwe."

I'm already annoyed. "Help him with what?" I ask my voice turning cold.

"Help find the people who did this to him. They have to be arrested."

I just chuckle, leaning back.

"How was it possible, though? Why wasn't he protected by oNgwenya?" I raise an eyebrow.

"I think they are punishing him for my doings. For marrying his mother."

My mother just shakes her head, looking defeated.

Oh well. The day he hears none of Thobekile's kids are his, all hell will break loose.

"Where is your other wife?" I ask.

"She left. She said Buhle needs her. She was going crazy about Buhle. I think she's slowly losing it. Her behavior since yesterday is questionable."

My mom says quietly.

A message pops up on my phone. Refilwe says they're heading back to her place to get ready. I look at the time. I also need to get going.

I stand up, smoothing my shirt.

"Parents, I have to love and leave. I have somewhere to be. Baba, I'm not promising anything. I'll see what I can do. And please don't go back to KZN without meeting Fifi."

My mom smiles. "Fifi, huh?"

I smile, picking up my keys.

"Yeah. Fifi."

I kiss her cheek and leave.

Chapter 27

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Narrated

Queen Thobekile arrives at the Ngwenya Kingdom having left Pretoria very early that morning. The flight back felt like an eternity. Her mind raced the entire time, Vilakazi's words echoing relentlessly in her head.

"By the time you find me, your daughter will be long dead."

The royal car pulls up to the palace. She doesn't wait for the driver to open her door. She flings it open herself and jumps out, her heels clicking frantically against the stone pathway.

The guards bow as she rushes past. She doesn't acknowledge them. Doesn't even look at them.

She runs through the corridors, her breathing heavy, her chest tight.

"Buhle! BUHLE!"

She's screaming her daughter's name before she even reaches the room.

She bursts through Buhle's bedroom door without bothering to knock.

Buhle is lying in bed, asleep. The curtains are drawn. The room is dim.

Thobekile rushes to the bedside, her hands shaking. She grabs Buhle's shoulder and shakes her.

"Buhle! Buhle. Nganiyami."

Buhle stirs slowly, her eyes fluttering open. She looks confused, disoriented.

"Ma…you are back?" Her voice is groggy.

Relief flashes across Thobekile's face, but it doesn't fully settle.

"Are you okay?"

Her hands move frantically over Buhle, checking her face, her arms, her forehead for a fever, searching for something she cannot name.

"I'm fine, Ma. I was just sleeping." Buhle sits up slowly, rubbing her eyes.

"Are you sure? Do you feel pain anywhere? Your stomach? Your chest? Anywhere?"

"No, Ma. I'm fine. Just tired."

"How tired? Why are you so tired? You've been sleeping for days!"

Thobekile's voice rises despite her effort to control it, panic slipping through the cracks.

Buhle frowns. "I don't know. I just feel tired all the time. But I'm okay, Ma. Really."

Thobekile stares at her, studying every breath, every blink, searching for proof that Vilakazi was lying.

But Buhle looks fine. Pale, maybe. A little thinner. But fine.

"Are you eating?" she asks quietly.

"Yes, Ma."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Have you felt sick? Nauseous? Dizzy?"

"No, Ma." Buhle looks at her carefully now. "What's going on? Why are you asking me all this?"

Thobekile swallows hard and forces a smile, though the worry doesn't quite leave her eyes.

"Nothing, my baby. I was just worried about you. You've been sleeping so much."

She strokes Buhle's hair gently, slower now, comforting herself as much as her daughter.

"I'm fine, Mama," Buhle says softly.

Thobekile nods. "Okay. Okay, good. Get some more rest, my baby."

She kisses Buhle's forehead and stands, lingering a second longer than usual before turning toward the door.

As she walks out, she glances back. Buhle has already lain back down, her eyes closing almost immediately.

Thobekile steps out of the room and pulls the door shut softly behind her.

The moment it clicks closed, her strength falters.

She leans against the wall, one hand pressed flat against her chest, her breathing uneven as the fear slowly turns into something harder. Something colder.

She wants Vilakazi alive. And she will find him…and kill him herself.

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An hour later, Queen Thobekile stands in the front courtyard. Four guards line up before her, waiting.

"We're going into the bush. Now. Asambeni."

Her voice is sharp, leaving no room for hesitation.

The guards exchange glances. One of them steps forward. "My Queen, which part of the bush?"

"I'll show you. Just follow me."

She turns and starts walking. The guards fall in immediately behind her.

They leave the palace grounds and head into the thick forest behind the kingdom. Thobekile moves quickly, jaw clenched, hands balled into fists at her sides. The guards struggle to keep pace.

After about twenty minutes, they reach the clearing. Thobekile stops abruptly.

The guards stop behind her, and they all stare.

The hut is still there. But it's different.

The bones are gone. The skulls. The feathers. The clay pots. The beads. The hut looks like just a hut… old, abandoned, empty.

Thobekile's mouth falls open.

"No… no, no, no. Lenja!" She walks forward slowly, eyes wide with disbelief.

She reaches the entrance and yanks the curtain aside.

Inside, it is completely bare. The fire pit is cold. The ashes have been swept away. The shelves that once held jars, bones, and powders are gone. Only dirt remains on the floor.

There is nothing. It is as if Vilakazi never existed.

Thobekile steps inside, turning slowly in a circle. Her breathing quickens.

"WHERE IS HE?! UKUPHI WENA NJA?!"

Her scream echoes against the empty walls. The guards remain outside, watching cautiously.

She rushes to the back of the hut. Nothing. Checks the corners. Nothing.

She drops to her knees and begins clawing at the dirt floor with her bare hands, as if something must be buried beneath it.

"He was here! He was RIGHT HERE!"

She is sobbing now, dirt collecting beneath her nails, her hands trembling violently.

One guard steps inside carefully. "My Queen, there's no one here."

"I KNOW THERE'S NO ONE HERE! WHERE DID HE GO?!"

He instinctively steps back.

She rises slowly, chest heaving, tears and dirt streaking her face.

"Search the area. All of it. Ngifuna wonke umuntu ahlole yonke indawo. He can't be far."

"Who are we looking for, my Queen?" the guard asks.

"Vilakazi." She turns to face them, her eyes wild. "Niyamazi?"

"No, my Queen. We don't know him."

"Niyamazi, dammit. Find him and bring him to me ALIVE. Niyangizwa?"

"Yes, my Queen." They are confused, but they don't question her. They spread into the surrounding bush without another word.

Thobekile stands alone in the centre of the empty hut, staring into nothing. Her body trembles. Then she releases a scream that cuts through the trees and disappears into the bush.

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Refilwe

Dikeledi and I freshened up and decided to keep it simple and relaxed..it's just a braai, nothing major. I'm in a halter pleated backless white dress with sandals, and DK is in a sexy blue floral print dress. We look good, no lie.

The shopping we did today with Zwee's money deserves its own moment. I even took DK to a spa. We had a beautiful morning, I must say.

"Mhm, I feel rejuvenated. Refilwe, you are a star, shame." Dikeledi pulls me into a hug, doing a little tippy-toe dance with her feet.

I smile. "I'm happy you loved it, babe."

Zwe has been calling every five minutes asking how far we are. We're a little late, but honestly, it's fine…they can wait. After a few final touch-ups, we're done.

We walk out to find the driver already waiting. Zwe insisted on sending a car and I'm not complaining.

He opens the door for us. We climb in and he closes it gently behind us as the car pulls away.

"Ready to see Sizwe again?" I ask.

DK laughs. "More like to meet his girl. She's hosting a braai with Bayede's ex present." She shakes her head. "I smell trouble."

I just shrug. "Let's wait and see."

Wait, did she just call my man Bayede? I chuckle shaking my head.

•••

A few minutes later, the car turns into Sizwe's yard. Dikeledi's eyes go wide the moment she sees the house. Even the neighbourhood quietly announces money. That's exactly how I felt the first time I came here.

It's clear that Zwee and his friends have done well for themselves. And I love that even though Zwee is a prince, he built something of his own… he didn't just coast on a title. It says a lot about who he is.

The driver opens the door for us and we walk to the front door and knock. A few seconds later, Lerato opens it. Fully dolled up. I'm starting to think that's just her default setting. She's in a tight short pink dress and stilettos.

"Oh my god, you made it… come in!" She's smiling, but it doesn't reach her eyes. She's not very good at pretending.

"The girls and I are sitting by the pool, come." She turns and leads us through.

We follow her outside. "Guys, they're here," she announces, moving toward two women who are already sipping cocktails by the pool.

They look just like Lerato… full faces of makeup, and outfits that feel more nightclub than backyard braai. The heels, though. I'm judging. Who braaies in heels?

"Meet…" Lerato pauses, looking at me. "What's your name again?"

I smile pleasantly. "Refilwe. This is my friend Dikeledi."

I glance at DK. She already looks bored. I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

"Yes, Refilwe," Lerato says. "This is Phumi… Nqobizwe's ex, and this is Precious. You may sit."

We sit down on the chairs outside. I look around. Where are the guys? This is already awkward.

"I see what you were talking about, Lerato," Phumi says, looking me up and down. "He really downgraded."

Lerato laughs softly. "See Refilwe, what did I tell you? I did tell you that you're beautiful, but not really his type. Even Phumi can see it."

I smile. "Funny… if you're exactly his type, I wonder why he's not with you."

I say, my gaze shifting from Phumi to Lerato.

Dikeledi bursts out laughing and I join her.

"I'm sorry…I just want to know," DK says, tilting her head and looking directly at Lerato. "Are you hosting a braai?"

"Yeah, the guys will braai. We can't get our hands dirty," Lerato says, glancing at her nails.

"I almost told Ref we should turn back… thought we were at the wrong house," DK says, looking at them with that particular smile that means she's about to go somewhere.

"Why?" Lerato asks, confused.

"Well, when you opened the door, I thought… this is not a braai. And then I saw your friends, and how everyone looks…" She gestures vaguely.

Lerato smiles confidently. "Mhm, I get you. Well, you've always got to look good."

"Exactly, babe," Precious adds. "But I don't think you two would understand." They laugh together.

"Of course we wouldn't," DK says evenly. "And we'd prefer not to, because we wouldn't want to look like prostitutes at a random Saturday braai."

I choke. My mouth hangs open.

The Barbie dolls go very still.

"Are you saying we look like prostitutes?" Lerato asks, her voice sharpening.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," DK says calmly. "When you opened the door, I genuinely thought we'd walked into some kind of escort party. And when I saw the other versions of you, I was even more convinced we were at the wrong place. That's why I was asking."

"Lerato, are you going to sit there and let this plain Jane disrespect us like this?" Precious snaps.

"Yeyi wena chopsticks don't start with me. I was actually being nice. Relax." DK says not blinking.

They go quiet, throwing sharp looks in our direction.

"Lerato, can we get something to drink?" I ask, keeping my face pleasant.

"Get it yourself," she mutters.

"Haw, Barbie Lite, what's wrong? We are your guests, mos, bathong." I laugh and Dikeledi joins me.

I pull out my phone and text Nqobizwe to bring us something to drink. The Barbies are fuming.

•••

Nqobizwe

We've been in Sizwe's study since Lerato's friends arrived, drinking whiskey. You cannot spend five minutes with those women without losing your mind, it's just better to keep your distance.

"Sizwe, waze wasifaka enkingeni, ndoda," I say, looking between him and Ayanda. "Let's go get this over and done with."

Sizwe looks thoroughly irritated. Ayanda just chuckles.

"You need to set Lerato straight after today, Sizwe. You have to be firm with her, bro." Ayanda says.

Sizwe nods, rubbing the back of his neck. "She's leaving tonight. Ngikhathele yabo manje."

I laugh. "I hate to say I told you so."

"Awume, nx," he says flatly.

Ayanda and I laugh. We get up and head out, and right there in the corridor, Refilwe's text comes in.

"Sizwe… Fifi's asking for drinks. Where's Lerato?"

He just shrugs.

"Ayanda, what wine was Dikeledi drinking yesterday? She seemed to like it," Sizwe asks.

"Château Margaux. That's what I gave her," Ayanda says.

Sizwe nods, already moving toward the kitchen. "I'll bring the wine. Does your madam drink?" he asks me.

"Bring her juice."

He nods and goes to sort it out. I don't think Fifi should be drinking right now, not until we know for sure whether she's pregnant or not. I know It's still early, and she might not even be, but I'd rather play it safe.

Ayanda and I head outside to the pool. The moment we step out, the tension between the girls hits me before anyone says a word. Something happened.

I walk around behind Fifi's chair and lean down to kiss her. She looks up and accepts it easily.

"Are you guys okay?" I ask, looking between her and Dikeledi.

"Well, Nqobi, since you're asking, these two ruined our mood for the whole day!" Phumi cuts in.

I look at her slowly. "I wasn't asking you, Phumi. Why would I care how you are?" I straighten up and rest my hand lightly on Fifi's shoulder. "Mama."

The three of them gasp.

"We're fine, baby. Just a little dry," Fifi says, smiling up at me.

"Sizwe's coming with your drinks," I tell her. She nods.

"Come join us by the braai area," I say to Fifi and DK.

"We'd love to join you, but you know, the smoke and all," Lerato says.

I don't even look at her. It was fairly obvious I wasn't speaking to her. I turn and walk with Fifi and DK toward the built-in designer braai that forms part of the outdoor kitchen, a lounge seating area nearby. Ayanda grabs beers for both of us.

Fifi and DK settle onto the couch.

"Are you both okay? Did they give you a hard time?" I ask.

"Small peasants," DK says cheerfully. "I am going to enjoy wiping the floor with their muddy faces."

I turn to Fifi. "Did they say anything? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, baby. There's nothing Lerato and her little devotees can say that'll knock me."

"Yes, girl!" DK holds her hand up and Fifi high-fives her. They both crack up.

I just shake my head.

•••

Narrated

Sizwe makes his way toward the outdoor lounge, carrying the wine bottle, two glasses, and a fruit juice. He walks straight past Lerato and her friends as though he doesn't see them at all.

Dikeledi spots him coming and immediately gets up. "Oh, Sizwe… let me help you with that." She says it just loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. "A handsome man like you shouldn't be working this hard."

Sizwe pauses, slightly thrown. Last time they crossed paths, she barely had a civil word for him. He can't quite figure out what's shifted, but he lets it go and doesn't argue.

Lerato, however, notices everything. She goes still, her jaw tightening.

But DK isn't done.

"Look at her throwing herself at my man," Lerato mutters to her friends.

"Both of them. Bloody farm Julias," Precious says under her breath.

"I know Nqobizwe," Phumi says, a slow smirk forming. "This day won't end with him anywhere but back in my bed. You'll see." She's already running the plan through her head.

Meanwhile, at the outdoor lounge, Dikeledi is being all warmth and easy smiles with Sizwe. Everyone looks confused… everyone except Refilwe, who has already figured out exactly what's happening. She sits back and lets it play out, quietly laughing to herself.

"Dk… yesterday I was your least favourite person. What happened?" Sizwe asks.

She laughs, touching his arm lightly. "Ah, Sizwe, you're so funny. It's a new day. What happened yesterday is history."

"Are you okay?" he asks, still not quite sure what to make of her.

"Trust me, she's perfectly fine," Refilwe says, still grinning.

"Tell her, Ref. I'm great." DK turns back to Sizwe. "Where's the meat?"

"Inside, already marinated and in the fridge," he says.

"We need to start now. Come, let's go get it." She pauses, tilting her head. "Maybe I'll let you marinate me while we're at it." She laughs and tugs him toward the house by his hand.

Sizwe swallows. Dikeledi doesn't realise what she's doing to him. He was already drawn to her, and having her this close, smiling like that, in a dress that fits her perfectly, is not making anything easier.

They walk past Lerato and her friends, their eyes following them.

"Stop saying things like that, Dikeledi. I'll take it seriously," Sizwe says, his voice low and level. Her arm is still looped through his.

She laughs softly, a little flirtatiously. "You're so funny, Sizwe, honestly."

He glances back toward where Lerato and her friends are sitting. They look furious. Lerato is tapping her foot rhythmically against the floor. It clicks for him; he understands exactly what Dikeledi is doing.

A slow smile crosses his face. This girl is something else. Beautiful, a little bit mad, and now running a whole operation to get under Lerato's skin.

He finds it genuinely amusing…and more than that, he finds her fascinating.

And if he's being honest… this little performance might actually solve one of his problems.

Maybe Lerato will finally stay away from him.

The thought lingers longer than it should.

They step into the kitchen. The moment the door closes, Dikeledi's arm drops from his. Her expression flattens almost instantly.

"Where's the meat?" she asks, all business.

Sizwe leans against the kitchen counter, hands in his pockets, and looks at her. Actually looks at her. She catches it and her composure slips, just barely, but she pulls herself back together quickly.

After a long pause

"It's in the fridge," he says.

She crosses to the fridge, opens it, and spots the meat in a glass bowl covered in plastic wrap. She takes it out and turns around, and nearly walks straight into him. He's moved closer without her noticing.

She startles slightly.

"Let me help you with that," he says.

She hands him the bowl. "Thanks."

He puts it aside and steps closer. She steps back until her shoulders meet the fridge door.

"What game are you playing, Dikeledi?" he asks quietly, close enough that she can feel the shift in the air between them.

"There's no game. Stop daydreaming," she says, holding his gaze.

"The Dikeledi I met yesterday and the one standing in front of me right now are very different from the one who walked in here a few seconds ago."

Her breathing shifts. She's nervous, and she's starting to regret using Sizwe to wind up Lerato.

"In case you didn't know, I have multiple personality disorder." she says, keeping her voice steady

Sizwe raises an eyebrow. "Oh really. What triggers it?" he asks, clearly not buying it.

"Walking cosmetic counters," she says, completely serious.

He blinks. "What?"

"Lerato and her friends. They look like an entire makeup store on legs. Did you see those lashes? I could literally sweep the floor with them." She pauses. "It triggers my disorder."

Sizwe drops his head and laughs… a real one, quiet and genuine. He shakes his head.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he catches Lerato coming in from outside. Without thinking twice, he closes the small distance between them and kisses Dikeledi.

She freezes for half a second. Then she kisses him back.

Lerato stops dead in the doorway.

They don't stop. If anything, it deepens.

"SIZZWWEEEE!"

The scream rips through the kitchen. Dikeledi startles, finally realising Lerato is there, she didn’t hear her walk in. She tries to pull back, but Sizwe keeps his hand at her waist, holding her close. Their faces remain inches apart, eyes locked.

Lerato's friends come rushing in behind her, drawn by the noise.

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The Ngwenya Kingdom

The guards and Queen Thobekile return from the bush empty-handed.

They searched and searched but found nothing. No trail. No proof that there was ever someone in that hut. They all think the Queen has lost it, but who will dare say it out loud?

They arrive at the palace. Queen Thobekile has been quiet. Her mind racing. Anger brewing inside her. And fear. She is scared of what might happen to her if people find out what she has done. All the things she has done.

She steps inside the yard and stands still. She is hearing a lot of voices in her head.

Her guards try to shake her gently. She snaps. "WENZANI, UKUPHI UVILAKAZI?" she shouts.

One of the guards moves forward and bows. "My Queen, we looked every…"

He doesn't finish what he is saying. She walks away at a fast pace. Then she starts running around the yard screaming. The maidens walk out hearing the noise.

The guards are just puzzled.

She is barefoot now, her feet hitting the ground hard as she tears across the yard. Her wrapper is coming loose. Her hair is undone. She looks nothing like a queen right now and everything like a woman who is falling apart.

"VILAKAZI! VILAKAZI UYINJA!!"

She runs to one end of the yard then turns and runs back. Going nowhere. Just running and screaming.

The maidens huddle near the palace doors, watching with wide eyes. One of them has both hands pressed over her mouth. Another one grips the doorframe like she needs something to hold onto.

"HAWU VILAKAZI!! THOLANI UVILAKAZI! NGICELA!”

She stops suddenly in the middle of the yard. Breathing hard. Chest heaving.

She drops to her knees in the dirt. Both hands flat on the ground. Her head hanging between her shoulders.

"Uyinja," she says quietly. "Uyinja Vilakazi. Hawu"

She rolls onto her side right there in the yard. In the dirt. Knees pulled to her chest. Sobbing and screaming at the same time, her voice raw and broken.

The guards do not move. They stand exactly where they are, stiff and silent, staring straight ahead like men who have decided that whatever is happening in front of them is something they did not witness.

The maidens are frozen at the door. The youngest one has tears running down her face. Nobody told her this job would look like this.

One of the older maiden's leans close to the girl beside her and whispers. "Go inside. Find the princesses."

The girl turns and disappears through the door without a word.

"We need to inform the King" One of the guards says.

Chapter 28

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Refilwe

We hear screaming from outside. Ayanda, Zwee and I rush inside to see what's happening.

Dikeledi is standing there holding Sizwe's arm, smiling like nothing is wrong. Lerato looks completely devastated. Phumi and Precious hover around her, trying to calm her down.

What happened in here?

I walk straight to DK. "What happened?" I whisper.

"She found us kissing," she whispers back casually.

I stare at her, blinking. I didn't think she would actually take it that far. Lerato is really going through it right now.

"He kissed me, don't get it twisted," DK adds quickly, clearly reading my face.

Now I'm even more confused.

Sizwe clears his throat and rubs the back of his neck. "Okay, guys, let's get back to braaing. Are we going to have fun or what?"

Doesn't he see the trembling skinny lady in the pink dress? Lerato looks like she might burn this entire house down with all of us still inside.

"You are cheating on me, Sizwe?" Lerato's voice shakes. "With… that?"

By that, does she mean DK? The nerve of this woman. I press my lips together, fighting the urge to say something I might regret.

Sizwe exhales slowly. "I don't know if it counts as cheating. You and I are not in a relationship, Lerato."

Dikeledi turns to look at him, eyes wide. Yeah…I also thought they were together.

“Okay… uhm, let’s go braai, guys,” Lerato says, her voice wobbling. She lets out a strange little giggle that doesn’t sound real at all, then turns and walks outside.

We are left standing in the kitchen, stunned. Even her own friends look shocked.

What just happened?

Lerato's friends glance at each other and follow her outside without a word.

"Can someone please explain what just happened?" I ask, because I genuinely need answers.

"Well, that's Lerato for you." Sizwe sighs heavily.

Dikeledi drops her hand from his arm and folds her arms across her chest. "I want to know why I was kissed."

"You asked for it," Sizwe says simply, he picks up the meat bowl and walks outside.

Ayanda is laughing quietly to himself, clearly entertained by every bit of this. I look over at Nqobizwe. His face is blank. He actually looks like he would rather be anywhere else right now.

He and Ayanda follow Sizwe outside.

Dikeledi and I look at each other, then head to the lounge. We need to sit down and process whatever that was.

"What the hell was that?" I ask, and we both crack up.

"I thought you said Lerato and Sizwe were dating," DK says, wiping the corner of her eye.

"That's what I thought too. Nqobizwe said it's complicated. But how is it complicated when they live together?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to leave. You know those types of girls who force things."

"It could be. And if that's the case then she is dangerous. She can do anything to keep Sizwe."

"Dangerous and Lerato in one sentence?" She laughs. "She looks dumb, but let me not underestimate her."

We go quiet for a moment.

"I still can't believe Sizwe kissed me," DK says, almost to herself.

"That's what I want to know. How did that even happen?"

"I don't know, it all happened so fast." She pauses, pressing her lips together. "But I loved it," she adds dramatically, leaning back into the cushions.

I smile. "Do you like him?"

"I don't know. But have you seen that man, Refilwe? He is gorgeous. And the way he kissed me…" She shakes her head slowly. "I understand Lerato, shame. I'd force things too if I were her. He just annoys me, that's the problem."

I laugh at the way she says it. You can tell she really, truly enjoyed that kiss.

"I think he annoys you because you like him."

"I don't think I do," she says, and leans back into the couch.

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We head back outside and I already don't like what I see. Lerato, Precious and Phumi have moved themselves to the braai area. I thought they didn't like the smoke. I am already irritated. This braai would be perfect if it was just us and the guys.

Phumi is trying to make conversation with Zwee, who is very clearly ignoring her. The girls clock us the moment we arrive and look at us like we have personally wronged them.

The meat is already sizzling on the braai. As I move to sit down Zwee reaches out and pulls me by the hand, drawing me in close to where he is standing with the guys.

He wraps his hands around my waist from behind and leans down close to my ear. "What were you two doing inside?"

"Just talking" I say.

Nqobizwe is very touchy feely. I have noticed that about him. He is not shy about showing affection in public and right now he has me pulled close, kissing

my cheek, his hand moving slowly up and down my arm, tracing slowly over my body. We drift into our own little bubble.

A loud sharp laugh pulls us back to earth. Phumi is standing nearby, laughing at something. Laughing alone by the looks of it because Zwee is paying her zero attention.

I glance over at DK, she has attached herself to Sizwe's side again and he looks very much like he does not mind at all. Lerato is standing with Precious, faking a smile, laughing at nothing. You can see straight through it.

"Phumi, do you mind? Giving us a bit of space?" I ask annoyed.

She laughs, but nothing about it is genuine. "I love how confident you are that he is yours. We all know he uses women and throws them away like rubbish. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Phumi!" Nqobizwe's voice comes out sharp. I feel him tense behind me. I press my hand over his and turn to face him.

"Leave it. She is pointless," I say quietly.

And I mean it. I don't have the energy for Phumi. I know exactly what kind of girl she is. I am not insecure and I trust Zwee. She can try every trick she has. I will not give her the satisfaction.

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Narrated

Dikeledi is trying to make sense of the whole situation. Sizwe clearly does not want Lerato around, so why is he still letting her stay here? Why not just tell her to leave properly?

Lerato keeps trying to start small conversations with her. Smiling too wide. Laughing a little too quickly. It is so obviously forced that Dikeledi finds herself wondering if this is something Lerato does with every girl who comes near Sizwe.

Dikeledi is bored. All she wants is to enjoy the afternoon. She stands up.

"Sizwe, come with me please. I need help with something." she says, flashing him a quick smile before turning away.

Sizwe looks at her for a moment, suspicious, before standing up and following anyway.

Refilwe watches them go, already suspicious. She knows DK well enough to know something is cooking. Ayanda and Nqobizwe exchange a quiet glance.

Dikeledi and Sizwe walk inside to the lounge and sit down. Dikeledi knows what she is about to ask is none of her business. She is going to ask anyway.

"What did you need help with?" Sizwe asks, one eyebrow raised.

"Why did you kiss me?"

He tilts his head. "Are we still on this? It is not a big deal. You kissed me back mos and you even enjoyed it."

"I never said I didn't. Yes, I enjoyed it. But why did you do it?" She folds her arms across her chest, watching him carefully.

Sizwe blinks, surprised by her honesty.

"You were flirting with me, Dk." He sighs, even though he knows the flirting was never really about him.

"I was not flirting with you. I was trying to irritate Lerato and her friends," she says.

"Why?" His voice drops.

"Because your girlfriend invited Refilwe here so she and her friends could harass her for dating Nqobizwe. What kind of people do that? And for them then to sit there and suggest we are not beautiful because we don't look like them?" She shakes her head. "That is just ridiculous."

Sizwe clenches his jaw. "She is not my girlfriend."

"Okay," DK says simply.

He sighs. "Lerato is… I have tried getting rid of her but it is nearly impossible. I kissed you because I wanted her to see it and maybe finally get the message. But you saw how she reacted. She is even acting like nothing happened."

"And you don't find that strange?"

"I do. I just haven't had a strong enough reason to actually do something about it. So I started staying out of my own house." He pauses. "I didn't have the energy for fights."

Dikeledi nods slowly, taking that in.

"Well, I want to enjoy this braai," she says. "I want us all to have fun." She pauses. "You annoy me, but you are still better company than those three. Your kind of annoying is at least interesting."

She smiles and stands. Sizwe stands at the same time and suddenly they are very close to each other.

He looks at her. Not a glance, he actually looks at her. Like he is trying to work something out and slowly finding the answer.

"You like staring at me, Sizwe. It makes me uncomfortable," Dikeledi says.

"You? Uncomfortable?" He almost smiles. "Don't lie, Dk. You are the last person to be uncomfortable."

"I am human."

"Well, don't be upset with me for staring." His voice is quieter now. "How can I not, when you are this beautiful? When you make me ask myself so many questions and I still don't have the answers. When just being near you makes me want to be better." He holds her gaze. "How can I not stare?"

Dikeledi swallows. She was not expecting that. She is not sure whether to believe him or whether this is all part of some game. She decides not to sit with the feeling for too long.

She clears her throat. "Okay. Let's go back outside."

Sizwe catches her gently by the waist before she moves. He doesn't say anything. Just looks at her and pulls her a little closer.

"You are beautiful, Dk. Don't let those girls make you feel otherwise for even one second. They wouldn't know a rare diamond if it was sitting right in front of them."

Dikeledi glances down at his lips. The memory of earlier rushes back. She wants to kiss him again. She can feel it pulling at her.

She doesn't fight it. She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him.

Sizwe doesn't hesitate. He kisses her back and this time there is no audience, no performance, no reason except that he wants to. The kiss deepens. He pulls her closer, his hands firm at her waist. She makes a soft moan against his mouth and he tightens his grip.

He lifts her. Her legs wrap around him. Her dress slides up. He moves to her neck and she tips her head back, feeling everything.

He takes a step toward the staircase. His foot hits the first step and something snaps Dikeledi back into herself.

"Put me down," she says, breathing hard.

Sizwe stops. He looks at her, his own chest rising and falling. "Did I do something wrong?" His voice comes out rough.

"Now, Sizwe."

He sets her down carefully. She straightens her dress and clears her throat. Then her eyes drop below his belt without meaning to and she freezes.

"You are big, jeez," she says out loud.

She presses her lips together. That was supposed to stay inside her head.

Sizwe chuckles and turns slightly, adjusting himself.

“I have a mission to complete,” Dikeledi says, straightening herself. “Forgive me for almost giving myself to you like that, with all those people outside and your not-girlfriend still roaming around.” She exhales dramatically.

“You are dangerously hot, I’ll give you that,” she adds, pointing at him briefly. “But no. Not today. I still have self-respect… sometimes.”

She takes a breath. "Please just play along with whatever I am about to do. Forgive me in advance."

She walks outside before he can respond. Sizwe stands at the bottom of the stairs for a moment, collects himself, then follows her out.

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Outside, Dikeledi rejoins the group. She got her answer about Sizwe and Lerato in that lounge. More than an answer, actually.

Lerato is still at it, making small talk nearby, smiling too hard, pretending everything is fine. Dikeledi watches her for a moment. Then she stands up.

"Baby." She looks over at Sizwe. It takes him a second to register she is talking to him. Then he remembers. ‘Please play along’”

Everyone looks up.

"My heart," he says, catching on quickly.

"Come here please." He walks over, calm, no idea what is coming but fully present.

"So, girls." Dikeledi smiles pleasantly at Lerato, Precious and Phumi. "Sizwe and I were talking, and we have made a decision. Your presence is no longer needed here. We would love for all three of you to leave."

Refilwe chokes on her juice.

Ayanda and Nqobizwe go very still… then very impressed, very quickly.

"Sorry, what?" Lerato blinks.

"Yes," Sizwe says without skipping a beat. "All three of you. Please leave."

"Lerato, what is going on?" Precious asks, blinking rapidly.

"Sizwe, what is this?" Lerato's voice cracks. "I live here. You are telling me to leave because of someone you met an hour ago?"

"We have been doing this for months, Lerato. You know I stopped coming home because of you. You refuse to leave, so now I am telling you directly. It is time."

"I am not going anywhere. You will not use me and treat me like this. I refuse."

"Refuse all you want," Dikeledi says pleasantly. "But you are still going."

She gets up, walks calmly into the house, and comes back two minutes later with three of Sizwe's security guards behind her.

"Please escort them out. Outside the yard, please."

The guards look at Sizwe. He gives them a single slow nod, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth.

He never planned for today to go like this. But something about Dikeledi landing in the middle of his afternoon feels less like accident and more like something he didn't know he needed.

For months he had been avoiding this house, avoiding the confrontation, feeling just guilty enough to let Lerato stay and too drained to do anything about it. Right now, for the first time in a long time, he feels like he can breathe.

"You will get your things tomorrow, Lerato. All of them." He says

Lerato stares at him. This is not the Sizwe she knows. The Sizwe she knows goes quiet. Swallows things. Looks the other way. This Sizwe is looking straight at her and not moving an inch.

The guards step forward. Lerato starts screaming as they guide her toward the gate.

"Sizwe you will know me, you hear me? You. Will. Know. Me!"

Her voice carries over the yard wall and fades into the street. Precious and Phumi follow behind, too stunned to cause their own scene.

The gate closes.

Dikeledi sits back down on the outdoor couch and picks up her wine glass. Takes a slow, satisfied sip.

"Dikeledi, you are savage, shame," Refilwe says, dropping down beside her.

"We are at peace now." She looks over at Sizwe. "Let's enjoy ‘Lerato's braai’. And Sizwe, you owe me. Big time."

Sizwe laughs, a real one. "Name your price."

"Men!" Dikeledi shakes her head. "Why were you suffering in your own house?"

"Please ask him, Dk." Ayanda can barely get the words out. "Did you see how happy he looked just now? That man was relieved."

"You guys will never understand," Sizwe says, shaking his head.

"Damn right we won't," Dikeledi says, and takes another sip.

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The Ngwenya Kingdom - Pretoria

King Langa sits beside Queen Liyana in the Pretoria residence, one of Nqobizwe’s properties assigned to them since their arrival.

"Liyana." He turns to look at her. "Have you really forgiven me?" he asks, worry evident in his voice.

The conversation with Nqobizwe earlier, about marrying Thobekile, about everything that followed, hasn't left him. It sits somewhere in his chest, pressing quietly.

"Of course I have. I told you," Queen Liyana says.

"I will fix everything, Liyana. I will fix our family."

She sighs softly. He has been saying this for days. She doesn't know exactly what it means yet. She will believe it when she sees it.

The Kings phone rings. Its one of the guards from the royal palace. He answers on the third ring.

"Yah."

He listens. His expression doesn't change much, but his jaw tightens and his eyes go flat. On the other end, faintly, he can still hear screaming in the background.

"Ngiyabonga ngokungazisa. Tie her inside the house. We will be there tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, my King? She is…"

"Do as I say. Nkanyezi and Buhle will assist. Call me if anything major happens."

He ends the call. Sits still for a moment. His eye twitches once.

"What happened?" Liyana asks.

"Useyahlanya uThobekile," he says. Calm. Too calm.

Liyana sits forward. "Langa, what are you saying? She was fine hours ago."

"She is running around the yard screaming Vilakazi."

Liyana goes still. "Haibo….Uhlanganaphi uThobekile nabantu bakwa Vilakazi?"

"Nami ngimangele nje ngawe," he says quietly.

"So why are we still sitting here? We need to go to her." She starts to rise.

"Sit down, Liyana." His voice is quiet but firm. "We will leave tomorrow. Thobekile will be fine."

Liyana looks at him for a long moment. There is something in his face she cannot quite read. She sits back down slowly, her mind turning over quietly in the stillness of the room.

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Nqobizwe

It is peaceful now. Since Lerato and her friends left, the whole afternoon has shifted. Music floats out from the house, the meat smells good on the fire, and everyone is actually laughing.

A proper Saturday braai, the way it is supposed to be. I can’t believe it took Dikeledi less than an hour to do what Sizwe failed for months. Getting rid of Lerato.

My phone rings. My father.

I step away from the group. "Baba."

"Tomorrow morning, come with the chosen queen. I want to hear the message she carries. We are leaving in the afternoon."

I exhale quietly. There is no running from this.

"Yebo, Baba. I will bring her."

"Thobekile is going crazy," he says then, almost as an afterthought.

I go still. "What do you mean crazy?"

"Bathi she is running around the yard screaming Vilakazi."

My mind starts moving immediately. Why is she screaming that name? Was she working with someone from the Vilakazi family? Is the witch a Vilakazi? How did a Vilakazi get into the kingdom without the seer picking anything up? Not one sign?

My father sounds too calm. That is what unsettles me more than anything. I know this man. When he gets this quiet, something is already decided.

With Thobekile falling apart, I am not shocked. I expected it eventually, just not this soon.

"Hawu. Who does she even know who is a Vilakazi?"

"I don't know. Come see me tomorrow morning. That will be all."

He ends the call.

I stand there for a moment with the phone in my hand. Something in his voice is sitting with me and I don't like it. I don't know what tomorrow looks like when we get there. I can't even have one afternoon of peace before the next problem lands on my chest.

"Fifi."

She turns, laughing at something DK said. She looks over at me, still smiling.

"Come here, Mama."

She gets up and walks toward me. I watch her coming and I cannot help it. I smile before I even mean to. I chose well. I am whipped and I may as well accept it.

She smiles up at me. "I love how you look at me." She sa

I kiss her cheek. "You are beautiful. I can't help it."

"Thank you, my love." She kisses me softly. "What is going on?"

I breathe out. "My father wants to see you tomorrow morning. He wants to hear the message Queen Nomusa gave you."

She nods, no hesitation. "The sooner the better."

"Yeah." I pause. "And Thobekile has lost it. They are saying she is running around the yard screaming Vilakazi."

Her eyes go wide. "Already? How is she going to tell us who Buhle's father is if her mind is gone?"

"The ancestors know what they are doing. We wait and see." I lower my voice. "There is something else bothering me."

I tell her what my mother said about the Vilakazis.

"Why would she scream that name?" Refilwe asks quietly.

"I am as confused as you."

"Maybe that is the witch. The man I saw in the vision. Maybe he is a Vilakazi."

I nod. It is possible.

"So the visions will keep coming until our son claims his chosen one." She says.

"Unless we disobey or put the kingdom at risk." She is quiet for a moment. "I think I understand why your mother stopped seeing. The ancestors were not angry at her, they were angry at your father."

"How do you feel about that?" I ask

"I just hope we are done with witches," she says simply.

I pull her close and kiss her forehead.

My phone buzzes again. One of the men watching things at the palace.

"Let me take this, Mama."

She nods and walks back to the group.

"Sure," I answer.

"The witch is gone."

I stop. "What do you mean gone? Gone where?"

"He vanished. There is no sign of him anywhere. No trace that he was ever there."

“How did he vanish? You were supposed to watch his every move!” I snap, anger breaking through. “Find him. Search everywhere. And when you call me again, you’d better have answers.”

I end the call without giving them a chance to respond.

I stand with my back to the braai, the laughter and the music carrying on behind me like nothing has changed. I can smell the meat. I can hear Dikeledi saying something that makes everyone crack up.

All of it feels very far away right now.

That witch is not running. A man who runs leaves a trail. A man who vanishes without a trace is planning something. And until we find him, this is far from over.

Chapter 29

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Narrated

The maidens managed to get Queen Thobekile inside the palace. It was not easy. She fought them the whole way, pulling, twisting, screaming Vilakazi's name until her voice gave out completely. By the time they got her to her bedroom she had nothing left. Just a hollow, broken sound coming from somewhere deep in her chest.

They tied her to the bed with cloth. Soft but firm. Enough to keep her still.

Nkanyezi and Buhle are standing outside the bedroom door, neither of them speaking. No one loves seeing their parent in that state. They feel completely helpless. Thousands of questions turning over in their heads with no answers to reach for.

"Ma was okay, Nkanyezi," Buhle says quietly, her arms wrapped around herself. "She came and checked on me. She was acting a bit strange, yes. But she was still Ma." Her voice drops at the end of the sentence.

"This looks like witchcraft, mntase. I am telling you." Nkanyezi shakes her head slowly. "But who would dare do this to a queen? What are we going to do?"

"You really think someone used dark magic on her?"

Nkanyezi nods. "We need to get the royal seer. He will be able to help."

Buhle paces a little, her bare feet quiet on the floor. "But you heard the guard. Father said she must be tied. That's all he said."

"I don't see Father here, Buhle." Nkanyezi's voice comes out harder than she intended. "He doesn't care about Mom. Neither does Queen Liyana. This is an emergency and look around you, it's only us." She pauses, pressing her back against the wall. "I used to think Mom was the problem. I didn't want to involve myself in the family politics. But after today I know exactly where I stand with this family."

Buhle goes quiet. It sinks in slowly, the weight of it settling on her shoulders. Their brother is lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life. And now their mother has come apart out of nowhere. The King is not here. Queen Liyana is not here. Nqobizwe has never pretended to care and they have never expected anything from him.

But their father not showing up… that lands differently.

They feel completely alone in this.

"Let me ask the guard to fetch the seer," Nkanyezi says, already pushing off the wall and moving down the corridor. "We cannot just sit here and do nothing."

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Buhle steps inside her mother's bedroom and closes the door softly behind her.

She moves toward the bed slowly, like she is afraid of disturbing something fragile in the air.

She sits on the edge of the mattress beside her mother and stays very still for a moment.

Thobekile's wrists are bound loosely to the bedposts. Her chest rises and falls. Her lips are still moving, but the words have shrunk down to almost nothing now. Just a whisper. Just his name, over and over, like a record that cannot find its end.

"Vilakazi… Vilakazi…"

Buhle reaches out and touches her mother's cheek gently. Her hand stays there.

"Shhh, Mama."

Thobekile's eyes shift toward her face. And for a moment, just one moment, something clears. Like a window wiped clean after a long rain. She looks at Buhle properly. Sees her.

Then it clouds over again.

"Tholani uVilakazi," she whispers. "Vilakazi."

Buhle's eyes fill with tears . She doesn't look away. She stays there with her hand on her mother's cheek, blinking slowly, not letting the tears fall.

The door opens softly behind her. Nkanyezi comes in. She stops in the doorway for just a moment, takes a breath, then crosses to the corner, picks up the chair and drags it close to the other side of the bed.

She sits. Reaches through the gap between the cloth binding and takes her mother's hand in both of hers, careful and gentle, the way you hold something you are afraid might break.

Thobekile's head turns toward her. "Nkanyezi," she breathes.

"I am here, Mama." Nkanyezi's voice is steady, even though her face is not.

Something in Thobekile's face shifts. Her fingers curl weakly around Nkanyezi's hand.

The three of them stay like that. The candle flickers. The room is quiet except for the sound of Thobekile's breathing and the low, fading murmur of his name on her lips.

After a while the whispers slow. Nkanyezi watches her closely, not moving.

A few minutes pass.

"Is she sleeping?" Buhle asks quietly.

"Almost," Nkanyezi says.

Thobekile's lips go still. Her eyes close fully. The grip on Nkanyezi's hand loosens but doesn't quite let go.

Buhle pulls the blanket up over her mother's shoulders with her free hand, slowly, careful not to wake her. Then she leans forward and rests her head against the side of the bed, her hand still loose around her mother's.

Nkanyezi stays in the chair, upright, watching.

Neither of them speaks. There are too many questions and none of the answers are in this room. They both know it. They sit with it anyway because there is nowhere else to be right now.

Neither of them moves to leave.

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The guard reaches Baba Ngubeni's house and knocks. It takes a moment before the door opens. Baba Ngubeni stands in the frame, wrapped in a heavy blanket, clearly heading for bed. He takes one look at the royal guard's uniform and his expression shifts slightly.

He already knows.

"What are you doing at my house this late?" he asks.

"Princess Nkanyezi asks for your presence, Baba. Queen Thobekile is not well."

Baba Ngubeni is quiet for a moment. Then he shakes his head slowly. "Tell Princess Nkanyezi her mother will be fine. My assistance will not be needed."

The guard nods. Baba Ngubeni closes the door.

He stands alone in his sitting room for a moment, the quiet of the house pressing in around him. He sighs from somewhere deep. He feels sorry for Thobekile's children. Truly sorry. They are suffering for something they did not choose and did not cause.

He shakes his head again.

Thobekile better be ready. Because this, what happened today, this is only the beginning. The ancestors are not done with her. Not even close.

She will learn.

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Kingdom of Thabamoya

Queen Mmabotle sits in the royal sitting room with her hands folded neatly in her lap. She called for this meeting herself. She needs to get ahead of this before it festers into something she cannot manage.

King Serithi sits beside her on the couch. His face is tired. It has been a long day. A long week, if he is honest.

Across from them, Prince Lesole and Prince Qeto sit side by side. Their faces are unreadable. The tension in the room settles heavy and thick before anyone says a word.

Queen Mmabotle takes a quiet breath. "I called you both here because we need to talk. As a family."

"I already know what it is about," Lesole says, his tone flat. "Dad's child."

"Your sister, Lesole." Queen Mmabotle's voice firms gently but clearly. "She has a name. Refilwe."

The moment she says the name, both sons shift in their seats. Qeto's jaw tightens. Lesole looks away toward the window.

"As you both know; she will be coming home. She will be here with us soon." Queen Mmabotle continues.

Silence. Neither of them responds.

King Serithi leans forward, elbows on his knees. "I know this is difficult. I want us to talk about it. Openly."

More silence. Then Qeto speaks. His voice is low and controlled, but there is something hot underneath it.

"What is there to talk about? I don't want to be bothered by this. I don't want to be involved. That is your child, not mine." He looks at his father. "Can I go to bed now?"

"Qeto!" Queen Mmabotle snaps, her voice sharp enough to cut through the room.

"No, Mama. I am sorry, but no." He stands, his hands moving as he speaks. "Ntate hurt you. He hurt all of us. And now I must force a relationship with her? I don't care about her."

He begins pacing the length of the room. "A sister who has been out there living her life while we were here, following rules, doing what was expected of

us. And now she will just walk in and enjoy the fruits of everything you and Dad built? How is that fair?"

Lesole nods, his face hard. " He's right. This is a lot, Mama. We saw how broken you were when you found out about her existence. How are we supposed to just erase that from our minds? How do we accept this?"

Queen Mmabotle looks at her sons, her heart cracking quietly behind her eyes. "I understand. I do. But Refilwe is not your enemy."

"Maybe not," Qeto says, stopping and turning to face them. "But she is also not innocent. She gets to show up now, after twenty-eight years, and what, take her place as a princess? Like nothing happened?"

King Serithi stands, his voice dropping low and firm. "Enough, Qeto."

"No, Ntate." Qeto's voice rises. "I am speaking." He points at his father, his hand trembling slightly. "You don't get to tell me enough. You created this mess. You slept with a married woman. You got her pregnant. You put this kingdom at risk because of what, two minutes of pleasure?"

"REMEMBER who you are talking to, Qeto." King Serithi's voice fills the room. He rises to his full height, his chest heaving. " Ha ke mmatao (I am not your mate). I will rough you up, boy." He takes a breath, steadying himself. "Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I am proud of what I did? I made a mistake. One mistake. And I have carried it every single day since."

Qeto stares at him. His eyes are blazing but his feet stay planted.

Lesole looks between them and then speaks, his voice measured. "Ntate, I hear you. Ha ke o tshwaye phoso (I am not blaming you). Empa you have to understand where we are coming from."

King Serithi sits back down slowly. " Ke mametse (I am listening)."

Lesole takes a breath. "We have spent our entire lives being prepared for our roles. Me as the heir. Qeto as my support. We know what is expected of us. We know our place." He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "But now there is a sister. An older sister. And we are supposed to welcome her, someone who came from a situation that nearly destroyed this family? And from what we have heard she already belongs to another kingdom. She is going to be a queen. So what exactly are we welcoming her for?"

Qeto lets out a short, bitter laugh. "Of course. She gets everything. A father. A kingdom. A title." He shakes his head. "While we were here doing everything right."

Queen Mmabotle stands. She walks across the room to Qeto and sits directly in front of him, taking both his hands in hers. He doesn't pull away.

" Mora waka (My son). Listen to me."

He looks at her. His eyes are red at the edges.

"Refilwe is not your competition. She is not here to take anything from you. She is your sister and she is innocent in this."

Qeto's jaw works. He looks down. "Why does it feel like we are losing something then?" he says quietly.

"Because you are scared," Queen Mmabotle says gently. "You are scared that things will change. That your father will love her more. That you will be forgotten."

He doesn't answer. But he doesn't argue either.

"That will not happen," she says. "Your father's heart is big enough for all of you. And so is mine."

She squeezes his hands once before letting go and standing to look at both of them. "Refilwe needs to be welcomed warmly. She needs acceptance. This is not easy for her either. All I am asking, begging, is that you give her a chance."

Lesole nods once. "I will try, Ma. I am not promising more than that."

Qeto wipes his eyes roughly with the back of his hand. "I need time."

"That is fair," King Serithi says. "Take all the time you need. But when she comes, I expect you to be respectful. You do not have to love her immediately. But you will treat her with dignity. That is not a request."

Queen Mmabotle looks at both of them and smiles softly "Thank you, my sons. That is all I ask."

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King Serithi and Queen Mmabotle are alone now. She crosses to him and wraps her arms around him without saying anything first. He pulls her in immediately, one hand at her back, the other resting at the back of her head.

"They will come around," she says into his chest.

"I hope so."

"They will. They are good boys. They just need time to find their footing with this."

He nods, resting his chin on top of her head. A long quiet passes between them.

"I just want her home, Mmabotle," he says finally. His voice has lost all its authority. It is just a father talking. "I just want my daughter home."

"I know, my love," she says softly, holding him tighter. "I know."

They stay like that in the stillness of the room, neither of them in a hurry to let go.

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Nqobizwe

We are in Sizwe's study. The braai is done. Fifi and Dikeledi left a little while ago. It ended up being a good day, all things considered. Good food, good company, genuine laughter. Exactly what I needed. But the phone call about the witch hasn't left the back of my mind. Not for a single minute.

I have not been at ease since.

"I love Dikeledi," Ayanda says, shaking his head slowly. "She did what Nqobi and I have been wanting to do for a long time."

Sizwe chuckles and leans back in his chair. "That woman… I genuinely did not know I needed her until today."

We laugh at that.

"You better thank her properly," I say.

"Oh, I will. She deserves everything." Sizwe is smiling but there is something underneath it, something quieter and more serious. "I need to find a way to keep her around a little longer. We have unfinished business."

"I knew it. Niyafunana nina. Strong futhi."

"I cannot wait to watch a player finally fall in love," I say. "This is going to be something."

Sizwe points at me. "In love? Those are big words ndoda. Too early."

"Let me tell you something," I say. "You don't choose when or how it happens. It just does. One day you are fine and the next you are driving across town at night because you cannot sleep without someone."

Ayanda raises his glass slowly and looks at me. "Speaking from experience, my prince?"

I chuckle and say nothing. I just check the time. It is late. Later than I realised.

I stand and straighten my jacket. "Alright guys. I am heading out."

I look between them, my face hardening. "We need to find that witch. Yesterday, not tomorrow. Every contact we have, every pair of eyes available. I want them all looking. That man does not get to disappear."

"We will find him," Ayanda says, his voice sobering. "But he is not ordinary, Nqobi. He is a witch. A clever one. Consult with the seer. And your ancestors. Do not try to track this one with only human eyes."

"I know." I nod. "I will."

We say our goodbyes. I walk out to the car, alone, no driver. Tonight I feel like driving myself.

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I am driving to Refilwe's place. I am not sleeping without her tonight. Dikeledi will have to be strong.

A few minutes later I pull up outside her apartment building, cut the engine. I grab my phone and call her.

"Mhmm." she answers sleepily. Her voice thick with sleep.

"Are you sleeping, Mama?" I ask, stepping out of the car.

"Zwee?" A pause. "You just woke me up."

Even half asleep her voice does something to me. I clear my throat. "Ngiyaxolisa. I am outside. Please come."

"Outside? Baby, are you serious?" She sounds more awake now.

"I am not sleeping alone again, Fifi. Asambe, Mama."

I lean against the car, legs crossed, eyes on her apartment door. I am crossing fingers she agrees. But I am not taking no for an answer tonight.

A short silence.

"Okay. I am coming," she says.

I smile and end the call.

Five minutes later the door opens and she comes out in a night robe and slippers, her hair loose, eyes still soft from sleep. She walks toward me through the quiet and I watch her the whole way.

"Hi," she says.

I pull her in by the waist before she can say anything else and hold her there for a second. She smells like sleep and something warm and familiar and I already feel better than I have all evening.

"What made you agree?" I ask. "I was ready to beg."

She looks up at me smiling. "Do you want me to change my mind?"

I don't wait to be told twice. I open the passenger door, she gets in and I walk around to the driver's side.

We get to my place and I freshen up quickly. When I come back to the bedroom she is already lying on the bed, scrolling her phone, legs stretched out, completely at ease.

I get in beside her and lie back. She doesn't look up from her phone but she shifts slightly toward me without thinking about it.

This… this is what makes my heart feel full. My woman next to me, her presence filling the room without trying. It’s time she moves in.

"You should move in, Mama," I say.

She puts her phone down on the nightstand and turns to look at me. "You think we are ready for that?"

"We are ready. If you had already been introduced to your father's ancestors, we would be married and crowned by now."

Her eyes go wide. "What is the rush though?"

"I met you late." I say it simply because it is the truth. "Soon I will be crowned king. We were supposed to have found each other earlier, had time to just be us before all of this." I look at her. "I am trying to catch up."

She is quiet for a moment, taking that in.

Then she sighs softly. "I am nervous about tomorrow. Meeting your father for the first time while already carrying bad news. That is a lot."

"Don't stress. I will be right there. You will see he is not as difficult as you are imagining. He will be devastated by the message, yes. But it has to be done and he will respect that it comes from Queen Nomusa." I reach over and take her hand.

She nods slowly, not completely convinced but settling.

I look at her lying next to me, peaceful, unaware of how much space she has taken inside my heart. How deeply I love her.

For a moment, everything feels calm. Just us.

Then my thoughts drift back to the witch still out there somewhere. To how quickly things can change. How easily peace can disappear.

My chest tightens.

I know one thing for sure, anyone who tries to touch her, anyone who tries to take this away from me, will regret it. I would burn down anything standing between me and her safety.

She turns and catches me staring.

"You are doing it again," she says.

"Doing what?"

"That thing where you just stare at me."

"Because you are beautiful." I say it simply. "What do you want me to do."

She drops her eyes and tries to hide the smile but I see it. I always see it.

I lean in and find her lips. And already, I want her.

Refilwe is slowly turning me into an addict. I am addicted to everything...her laugh, the way she smells, the way she looks at me like she chose me on purpose.

She exhales softly against my mouth and presses closer, and that alone is enough to undo me. My hand slides to the back of her neck. She turns fully toward me, her hand gripping the front of my shirt, pulling me closer.

I pull back slightly and look at her.

Her eyes stay closed for a moment before opening and finding mine.

“Nqobizwe,” she says softly.

“Hmm.”

Whatever she was going to say, she decides against it. Instead, she pulls me back down, and I go willingly.

My arm wraps around her waist, drawing her closer until there is no space left between us. Her fingers slide up my chest, slow and certain, and I feel my breath deepen.

The kiss changes… softer, heavier, filled with everything we are not saying out loud.

I move slowly, giving her time, letting her guide the rhythm between us. She melts into me, her warmth settling under my hands, her quiet sighs making it impossible to think about anything else.

The world outside disappears. There is only her touch, her breath against my skin, and the way she holds onto me like she needs me just as much.

I pull her closer, holding her firmly as we disappear into each other, the night wrapping around us in silence.

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Narrated

Lentswe is fast asleep when she hears it. The front door opening.

Her eyes fly open. She sits up quickly, her heart beating hard in her chest. She listens carefully, hoping maybe she imagined it.

Then her bedroom door opens.

Motaung.

He walks in like he belongs there, like coming into her room in the middle of the night is a normal thing. Without saying anything, he pulls the chair from the corner, turns it around and sits on it, facing her. He is very calm and comfortable.

Like he has all the time in the world.

Lentswe pulls the blanket up to her chest, gripping it tightly.

Everyone knows Motaung. His stories move around the community faster than gossip. He may be old now, but that has never made him harmless. He always has people watching. Always has money doing things for him. And money makes problems disappear.

“Aww, Lentswe,” His voice is low, filling the bedroom like it belongs there. “I came to collect. Where is my money?”

“I… I will give it to you. I promise.” Her voice sounds small, even to her own ears.

“When? You have been saying that for a long time.” he asks, tilting his head

“Refilwe’s biological father is coming to pay for the damages. After that, I will give you everything. Every cent. Just give me a little more time.” She says it quickly, trying to hold herself together.

Motaung goes quiet.

He looks at her for a long moment, his face giving nothing away. Then he smiles slowly. But is not a nice smile.

“Mhm,” he says, leaning back. “I think I have a better idea.”

Lentswe feels her stomach tighten.

“Organise a meetup. Me and Refilwe. You do that, then maybe…maybe we can talk about reducing your debt.”

Lentswe just stares at him.

Even now, after all these years, this man is still focused on Refilwe. She does not understand it. What is so special about that girl? Why has he never let it go?

“Motaung, Refilwe wants nothing to do with me. She hates me. She will not come here.” She says carefully.

“Then make her come, Lentswe. You let her run away last time. Don’t let it happen again.” He pauses. “I just want to talk to her. That’s all.” His voice stays calm. It always does

He stands up slowly, rubbing his hands together, then looks down at her.

“One week, Lentswe. One. Re a utloana?” (Do we have an understanding?)

She nods quickly. She cannot say anything else.

He walks out like nothing happened. She listens to his footsteps moving through the house, then the front door opens and closes.

Lentswe sits there in the dark, still holding the blanket, staring at the chair he used.

Something is not right. If Motaung really wanted to find Refilwe, he could. Everyone knows that. He has people everywhere. Money everywhere.

So why involve her? Why make her bring the girl to him?

She is certain now. Motaung played them… her and Molefe. The loan does not end. Ten years later, they are still trapped in the same debt. It was never about the money.
This is punishment for failing to give him Refilwe.

Anger rises inside her.

If Refilwe had just stayed. If she had not run away and made everything difficult, life could have been simple. The debt would be finished.

But no.

“Nx, What is so special about Refilwe? Nx. Refilwe my foot.” She hisses into the quiet room, her lips pressing together

She lies back down, staring at the ceiling, her jaw tight. The chair stays in the corner where Motaung left it.

She loses all sleep. After this, she knows she won’t sleep again.

Chapter 30

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Refilwe

I woke up very early. I couldn't sleep anymore.

I am in the kitchen making breakfast, trying to keep my hands busy so my head doesn't spiral. It is the only thing I can think to do right now.

If I was meeting Nqobizwe's parents as his girlfriend, just a normal introduction, I would still be nervous but it would be a different kind of nervous. The excited kind. This is something else entirely. I am walking in there to tell a man that the child he has been raising as his own is dying. And she is not his.

That is not a conversation. That is a grenade.

I focus on the pancakes.

Nqobizwe comes downstairs already freshened up, dressed, put together. He walks straight to me and kisses my cheek.

"Smells nice in here," he says, settling onto the kitchen counter.

"I thought I should make us something before we leave." I flip a pancake without looking up.

"You woke up very early." He is watching me with that look. The one that sees too much.

I nod. "I needed a distraction." I laugh but it comes out nervous. "I don't even know why I am this nervous."

He slides off the counter and comes to me, takes both my hands and holds them still.

"Don't think too much," he says.

He presses his lips to my forehead and holds them there for a second.

I breathe.

"Let me dish up so we can get going," I say, gently pulling my hands back and reaching for the plates.

We eat at the kitchen counter, just the two of us, the house quiet around us.

"The house helpers are still off?" I ask, looking around. I haven't seen them since I started coming here.

"Yeah. Why, do you need them?"

"No, I was just asking."

"They come back tomorrow," he says.

I nod and carry on eating.

After breakfast I go upstairs, touch up my face and change into something more put together. It is a good thing I have a few pieces here, the ones Nqobizwe's PA sorted for me. Today they are earning their place.

I stand in front of the mirror and look at myself. I look presentable. Like someone meeting a king and queen. Like someone meeting her boyfriend's parents.

I pick up my phone and call DK. She knows I am at Nqobizwes; we talked before I left last night.

She answers immediately. "My love."

"Hey. Still good?" I ask.

"I am fine, don't worry about me. How are the nerves?"

"Terrible," I say honestly. "But it has to be done."

"Your man will be right there with you. Try to breathe, babe."

"Yeah." I take a slow breath. "Call me if you need anything. I will see you when I get back."

"Okay. Sharp. Go handle it."

We hang up. I look at myself one more time in the mirror.

Okay.

Let's do this.

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We drive to his parents' place. It is not far. Nqobizwe holds my hand the whole way, his thumb moving slowly across the back of it. He doesn't say much. He doesn't need to. Just having his hand around mine is enough to keep me from completely unravelling.

We pull into the yard. The driver opens the door and we walk to the entrance hand in hand. Nqobizwe knocks.

The door opens and a woman is already smiling before she has fully seen us.

"Come in, come in."

We step inside and she goes straight to Nqobizwe and hugs him with both arms, proper and full.

He pulls back and turns to me. "Fifi, this is Queen Liyana. My mother."

"Fifi ka Nqobi." She looks at me warmly, her eyes moving over my face. "I finally get to see you."

I smile and look down without meaning to. I have never done this before. Met anyone's parents. I don't know the protocol. I don't know where to put my hands.

"Nice to finally see you too, Queen Liyana," I manage.

She studies me for just a moment. Then she opens her arms wide.

"Come. Come and give your mother a hug."

Something moves in my chest. I step forward and she wraps her arms around me and holds on and it is the warmest thing; full and genuine, the kind of hug that doesn't need a reason.

I hold on for a second longer than I planned to.

When I step back Nqobizwe is standing to the side smiling like he knew exactly how this would go.

"Welcome, my child," Queen Liyana says, her hands still on my arms. "Your father is sitting outside. Go to him, I will have something brought out for you both."

"We already ate, Ma," Nqobizwe says.

She turns to him with a look. "There is always space for more. Look at you, you are too thin. Awudli."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

"It is fine, Ma. I would love something," I say.

Her face lights up. "That is my girl." She looks at me seriously. "Makoti, you must feed him. How will he protect you if he is this thin? Look at him."

"Ayi, Ma, in front of her?" Nqobizwe says, somewhere between embarrassed and amused.

"Ayi suka. Go, your father is waiting." She waves us off and disappears toward the kitchen.

I feel the tightness in my chest loosen slightly. Queen Liyana just did in two minutes what nothing else could do this morning. I feel like I can breathe.

I hope I am reading her correctly. I hope this warmth is real. Because I could really use a mother like that.

We walk outside.

A man is sitting in a chair facing the garden. And the moment I see him I understand where Nqobizwe gets everything from. Same build. Same posture. Same quiet that fills a room before he has even spoken. But his face is sharper, more closed off. More years in it.

I feel my nerves come back all at once.

"Baba, sawubona," Nqobizwe says, keeping my hand in his.

The King looks at us. Says nothing yet.

I lean slightly toward Nqobizwe. "Should I bow?" I whisper.

He chuckles under his breath. "No." Then to his father, "Baba, this is Refilwe. The chosen queen."

He guides me gently to the chair beside the King. I sit. My hands are not entirely steady.

The King clears his throat. "Unjani, sisi." His voice is deep and measured.

"I am well, Baba. How are you?" I say, working hard to keep my voice even.

He nods slowly. "Nqobizwe says you have a message for me."

Straight to it. No small talk. He is sitting with his hands resting on his knees, face unreadable, and the weight of him is making the air feel thick.

My hand trembles slightly in my lap. Nqobizwe finds it and holds it.

"Khuluma phela, ntombazana," the King says, a little louder.

I startle.

"Baba, you are scaring her," Nqobizwe says, laughing.

And then the King laughs too. A real one, his chest moving with it. He shifts in his chair and leans forward, his whole energy changing.

"You are the chosen queen. Powerful and protected." He stands and opens his arms. "You should fear nothing. Woza la ngani yami."

I stand, not sure what is happening, and he pulls me into a hug. Firm and certain.

"Welcome to the family, Nkosazana." He pulls back and looks at me. "Nice to finally see you."

He was testing me. The whole thing, the silence, the sharpness, the loud voice. Testing me.

And it worked completely. I was terrified.

"Thank you, Baba," I say, and he nods and settles back into his chair. I sit back down, my heart still coming down from wherever it went.

"How is my son treating you?" he asks. His face is relaxed now. Open. He actually looks like a kind man. I find myself wondering how things went so wrong with Thobekile.

"He is treating me well, Baba," I say, smiling.

He nods, satisfied.

Queen Liyana comes out and joins us, settling herself comfortably.

"Baba, uyambona muhle kanjani usisi nkosiyami?" She looks at him pointedly. "Ancestors chose a real gem."

I look down, smiling.

"Nawe umuhle nje, Liyana," he says simply. "Chosen ones are always beautiful."

Queen Liyana looks down, a small smile playing at the corner of her mouth. I watch them quietly. There is something tender between them, quiet and careful,

like two people who have been through something hard and are still finding their footing with each other.

"Nkosazana." The King's voice shifts. "What message do you have for me?"

Here it is.

I take a quiet breath. "Queen Nomusa said, 'Tshela umyeni wakho, no Langa ukuthi bahambise leyo ngane kubo. Ingafeli ecekeni lakwaNgwenya. Lezo lwane abamufake zona ahambe nazo aziyise kubo, afe nazo.'"

I say it exactly as she said it to me. Not one word changed.

The King's face darkens. A deep frown settles between his brows.

"Tell me everything she showed you," he says. "Because right now you are not making sense, Ngani yami."

I do not want to go back to what I was shown. It was painful and frightening. But I close my eyes briefly, steady myself, and begin.

I tell him everything. The vision. Queen Thobekile. The witchcraft. Buhle.

By the time I finish the King is on his feet, standing with his back to us, hands deep in his pockets, staring at nothing.

Queen Liyana has tears running quietly down her face.

"Oh, Thobekile," she whispers. "Why do this to Buhle? She is just a baby."

"Can't we do anything to help her?" I ask, looking at her.

She shakes her head slowly. "We can't interfere. We can only return her to her father as instructed."

"Maybe there is something…"

"We can't, Ngani yami." Her voice is gentle but final. "The Ngwenyas don't want to be involved. She didn't tell you who the father is?"

I shake my head.

Silence falls over all of us. Heavy and still.

"Baba." That is Nqobizwe, his voice low.

The King turns. His eyes are red but dry. He holds himself together with the practised control of a man who has been carrying things for a long time.

He clears his throat. "Ngiyabonga, Nkosazana. For the message."

I nod. There are no words I have that are enough for this moment.

"How are you going to handle this, Baba?" Nqobizwe asks quietly.

The King is quiet for a beat.

"Return the bastard," he says, his voice cold and flat. "All of her bastards."

He turns and walks inside, the door closing behind him.

The three of us sit in the quiet he leaves behind.

"Kuzo lunga, sisi," Queen Liyana says softly.

I nod and hold onto that.

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Narrated

Sizwe slept well. Better than he has in months. He woke up easy, no weight sitting on his chest, no dread about what he would find downstairs. Just a quiet house that finally felt like his again.

He gets ready to head out and check on one of his businesses. As he moves through the kitchen he finds himself thinking about Dikeledi. The way she just walked in and turned the whole day around without even trying.

He picks up his phone and dials before he talks himself out of it.

"Hello?" She answers.

"How are you?" he asks, leaning against the counter.

"Depends on who's asking. Who is this?"

He smiles. "Your future husband."

Dikeledi laughs softly. "Is the future husband rich? I would hate to find out I attract poverty."

Sizwe throws his head back. "I think he is doing okay."

"Okay is not good enough for me. I don't want my bride price paid in instalments."

"I think he can afford you, Dk." He is still laughing. "How are you, for real this time?"

She sighs softly. "I am fine." A pause. "Who gave you my number, Sizwe?"

He smiles, pleased that she recognized him by his voice.

"A man makes a plan, Dee."

She shakes her head on the other end he can picture it exactly. "What do you want?"

"Ouch. I can't check on you?"

"We are not friends," she says.

"What did I ever do to you?"

"You said teaching is boring."

"I never said that. You took what I said and built a whole story in your head."

"Whatever. I am ending this call if you don't get to the point."

He smiles. "Can we go for breakfast?"

There is a small pause.

"No. Is that all?"

Sizwe chuckles. "Have a beautiful morning then. Like yourself."

"You too," she says. "Beautiful as me."

He can hear the smile in her voice before she cuts the call.

He stands there for a moment with the phone in his hand, still smiling at nothing.

Then his guard comes through the door breathing hard.

"Sir. Lerato is outside the gate. She is screaming. The neighbours are going to start complaining."

Sizwe's smile dies. "She is outside?"

"Yes, sir."

He clenches his jaw and walks out.

He can hear her before he even reaches the gate. He opens it and she storms in the moment it swings back, eyes swollen, mascara down her face, the sharp smell of alcohol on her.

"Yah. Come here, you asshole," she had been screaming at the gate. Now she is right in front of him, chest heaving.

"What are you doing here, Lerato?" Sizwe says. Cold and flat. "I thought I made myself clear."

"You made yourself clear?" She laughs, but there is nothing funny in it. Tears are already falling. "That ugly thing threw me out. She humiliated me in front of everyone."

"You missed the part where I told you to leave myself." He holds her gaze. "Let me say it again slowly. Leave. Don't set foot here again. Siyazwana?"

"NO." She steps closer, her voice breaking open. "NOOOO. You think you can use me and then throw me away? I am not Phumi. I am not all those other girls you and your friends played. I will not allow it. You will not get rid of me like this."

Sizwe looks at her for a moment. Then he turns and signals to two of the guards standing nearby.

"Remove her from the yard. And if she comes back screaming again, call the police."

He turns to walk back to his car.

"DON'T TOUCH ME. DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH ME."

He stops.

He turns slowly.

Lerato is standing with a gun in her hand, pointing it at the guards. Her whole arm is shaking. Tears are streaming down her face.

"Touch me and I will blow your brains out." Her voice cracks on the last word. Then she swings the gun toward Sizwe. "If you don't let me stay. If you don't make me your girlfriend. I will kill myself. Right here. Right now."

"Do it," Sizwe says.

She goes completely still. Stares at him.

"You never cared about me. Not once." Her voice drops to almost nothing.

"It was never a secret, Lerato." He keeps his voice steady, his eyes on hers. "We had an arrangement. One you agreed to. I call when I need you, that's it. I gave you money, I made sure you were taken care of, and I was clear from the beginning that it was nothing more than that. You staying here didn't change the arrangement. I should never have allowed it."

"But I love you, Sizwe." She says it quietly, like the fight has gone out of her all at once.

"I don't love you." He says it without cruelty but without softness either. "Please leave my property."

Lerato's knees go and she drops to the ground, sobbing. Then something shifts in her face and she raises the gun again, her eyes locking onto Sizwe.

She doesn't get the chance to pull the trigger.

One of Sizwe's guards moves in from the side, swift and quiet, and the gun is out of her hand before she even registers it happening.

Lerato screams.

"Make sure she doesn't come back," Sizwe says, walking to his car without looking back.

Behind him Lerato's screaming fills the yard, raw and ragged, the sound of someone losing something they never really had.

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Nqobizwe

I follow my father down the corridor. He goes to the small bar area and pours himself a whiskey without a word. Doesn't offer me one. Doesn't look up.

I stand in the doorway watching him for a moment. Then I walk in and sit on the bar chair beside his.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

He lets out a short, humourless breath. "The same way any man would feel after finding out he married a witch and the children aren't his."

I say nothing. I let it sit.

"I regret marrying her," he says, his voice low. "I regret making her a Ngwenya. Right now I could wring her neck with my bare hands."

"She should be banished from the kingdom," I say. My jaw is tight just saying it.

"When Ngubeni told me I had been bewitched I already suspected her." He turns the glass slowly in his hand. "I kept asking myself why she would need to control me. What she was afraid of. I was waiting for confirmation." He sips. "When they called yesterday about her losing her mind, I knew. That was my confirmation."

"You are too calm about this. I don't like it."

He chuckles quietly. "Because I brought this to my own door. I had already decided to return her to her father, after yesterday. That was already my plan."

He pauses. "But I was not prepared for what I heard today."

He sets the glass down. "Thobekile is rotten. Cold all the way through. Who does that to their own child? What kind of woman uses witchcraft on her own daughter? She wanted Sbonga on the throne, a child who carries not one drop of Ngwenya blood. What kind of madness is that?"

He drains the glass in one swallow. I don't interrupt him. I just listen.

"I almost lost everything." His voice drops. "I almost lost you, my only true son. That woman wanted to remove you so her child could take what is yours. What is ours." He shakes his head slowly. "She should have researched my ancestors before trying. She clearly has no idea who she was dealing with."

"Now that she has gone mad…"

"She will talk." He says it with certainty. "The ancestors broke her down on purpose. If Buhle has to be returned to her father, we need to know who that father is. They are not done with Thobekile. More is coming for her." He is quiet for a moment. "This punishment they gave me for going against their terms, I deserve every bit of it. I was impatient. I was foolish. I will not make that mistake again."

He stands and refills his glass.

"The witch ran," I say.

He shoots me a sharp look.

"We will find him."

"I think he is a Vilakazi, Baba. If he came here to avenge his chief this is bigger than a hired witch. Finding him will not be easy."

He brings his fist down on the counter. "DAMN you, Thobekile!" The word comes out from somewhere deep. He breathes. Steadies himself. "I will speak to Ngubeni."

I nod and stand. "When are you leaving for the kingdom?"

"This evening."

"I am coming with you."

He looks at me and almost smiles. "You don't trust me not to kill her."

"I just don't want you punished again because of that woman," I say. "You don't know what state she will be in. You don't know what she will say or do when you question her. She will push you, Baba. She always does."

He considers this. Then he nods once.

"Thank you, son." He looks at me properly for a moment. "You are going to make a great king."

I laugh and shake my head and walk out to check on Fifi.

Chapter 31

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Narrated: The Ngwenya Kingdom

Buhle slept in the chair beside her mother's bed. She didn't mean to, she just never left. At some point exhaustion pulled her under, and now she sits with a stiff neck and heavy eyes, watching her mother's chest rise and fall in the early morning light.

Nkanyezi checked in twice through the night. Neither of them slept properly. Every small sound from the bed had them both on their feet.

Buhle shifts in the chair and studies her mother's face. Still. Quiet. Nothing like yesterday.

She doesn't know what today will bring. She doesn't know if her mother will wake up as herself or if it starts all over again.

Then Queen Thobekile's eyes open. Slowly, like she is surfacing from somewhere deep.

Buhle gets to her feet without making a sound, watching carefully. Waiting.

Thobekile's eyes move around the room, taking it in. Then she looks down at her wrists and frowns.

"Why am I tied, Buhle?" She says, her voice groggy.

Buhle exhales. She knows her mother's voice. That is her mother's voice clear, present, impatient. She smiles, relief flooding through her. She can see her mother is back. No more 'Vilakazi's' name coming out of her mouth.

She moves quickly to undo the cloth from her wrists, her hands a little clumsy with relief.

"Ma, you are back." She pulls her into a hug before Thobekile can say anything else, pressing her face into her shoulder, trying to hold back her tears.

Thobekile sits up slowly, rubbing her eyes. "What happened? Why do I feel like I was dreaming?"

"Ma, are you okay? Do you remember anything from yesterday?" Buhle asks gently

Thobekile looks around the room again, trying to piece it together. In her head it was a dream. She does not want it to be anything else.

"Tell me, Ngani yami (my child). What happened?"

"Yoh, Ma." Buhle sits on the edge of the bed. "Nkanyezi thought it was witchcraft. She called the royal seer but he didn't come, he just sent word that you would be fine."

"Khuluma, Buhle (Talk Buhle). What happened?" Thobekile asks, running out of patience.

"You were running around the yard like a mad person. Screaming 'Vilakazi.' Saying we must find Vilakazi." Buhle says quietly.

Thobekile goes very still. Processing everything.

the door opens. Nkanyezi stands in the frame for a moment, reading her mother's face carefully. Then she sees it, the recognition in her eyes, the sharpness, and she crosses the room in quick strides and wraps both arms around her.

"Ma. You scared us. We barely slept. We were so worried."

"Buhle has been telling me," Thobekile says, pulling back and holding Nkanyezi by the shoulders. "The seer said I will be fine?"

Nkanyezi nods. "He said it without even coming to see you. Just sent word."

Thobekile is quiet for a moment. Turning everything over. Trying to build it into something that makes sense.

She remembers it. All of it. But in her mind it played like a dream, she could see everything happening, could hear herself screaming, but could not stop any of it. Could not reach herself. She asks herself quietly whether it is possible to watch yourself lose your mind.

The last real memory she has is standing in that empty hut. Vilakazi gone. The floor swept clean.

She gets angry again when she thinks of how Vilakazi played her. She clenches her fists.

"Ma, are you okay?" Buhle asks, noticing the shift in her expression.

"I have to find someone. Where's your father?"

She asks, getting out of bed.

"Weee, Ma, asina baba thina. Mxm." (Ma, we don't have a father.) Nkanyezi says bitterly. "He literally told the guards he'll come today to assist. Ma, we were alone. We didn't even know what to do."

"Mxm." Thobekile clicks her tongue. "ULiyana wonke lo. I am sure she told him not to come. You know your father, he would have dropped everything otherwise. Lately that woman gets inside his head."

"That's what I said, Ma." Nkanyezi pulls the chair closer and sits down, leaning forward. "Someone bewitched you. And now that you say it; I think it might be Queen Liyana."

Thobekile goes quiet.

She considers it. Liyana using dark magic, it is almost hard to picture. That woman is terrified of the ancestors. She has never had the stomach for anything like this. But then again, desperate people find courage in strange places.

Could she have been working with Vilakazi? Could the two of them have planned this together, to get rid of her, to clear the way for Langa to move on fully? It would explain how Vilakazi disappeared so completely. Someone helped him. Someone with access and something to gain.

"Hayi, Nkanyezi." Buhle shakes her head. "Queen Liyana is not a witch. She is kind. You both know her."

"The kindest ones are the most dangerous. Because you never see through them." Nkanyezi says.

"Nkanyezi is right," Thobekile says, her voice hardening. "Liyana has been hiding it well. She is trying to make me lose my mind. She wants to turn the king against us completely. And my son is fighting for his life in that hospital..." She stops. "I suspect her. The king needs to know."

Nkanyezi nods firmly. "She needs to go."

Buhle says nothing. She sits with her hands folded in her lap, looking at the floor. She knows Queen Liyana. She has sat with her, talked with her, felt her warmth. Whatever this is, it does not fit the woman she knows.

But she also knows better than to say that in this room right now.

She keeps her thoughts where they are.

"Let me freshen up. I need to find someone." Thobekile says.

"Vilakazi?" Buhle asks quietly.

Thobekile looks at her. "Yes. He took something from me and he has not answered for it. That changes today."

"Is that why you were saying his name? Over and over like that?" Buhle presses.

Nkanyezi cuts in before their mother can answer.

"Buhle. It is obvious. Dark magic was used on her. The last thing on her mind before it happened was finding Vilakazi. That is why his name kept coming. It does not need more explanation than that."

Thobekile gives Nkanyezi a small look of appreciation. She has always kept herself out of family matters before now. Something shifted in her last night.

Queen Thobekile walks to the bathroom and closes the door.

She stands in front of the mirror and stares at herself for a long moment.

She will find Vilakazi today. She will turn this kingdom upside down if she has to. And if Liyana is behind any of this, she will deal with her too.

She does not put much stock in the power of the Ngwenya ancestors. All this talk of chosen ones and royal seers and punishments from above. She does not believe that the ancestors are as powerful or as watchful as everyone claims. If they were, how did she raise three children under Langa's roof without a single sign being given to him? How did she control him for years when they say a

king cannot be bewitched? She did it. She managed it. And nothing came for her.

She tells herself this while she turns on the tap.

She does not let herself think too hard about yesterday.

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Queen Thobekile comes downstairs looking composed. Pressed. Not a trace of yesterday on her face or her clothes. The maidens in the kitchen glance at each other when she walks in but not one of them says a word. They know better. Whatever they witnessed yesterday stays within these walls. Nobody in this palace is brave enough to bring it up to her face.

She eats in silence. Unhurried.

When she is done she goes outside to where the guards are stationed.

"We are going back to the bush. I want every corner covered. And some of you must go into the community, ask around. Anyone who knows a man named Vilakazi. Anyone who has seen him. I want information brought back to me." She says

The guards nod in unison. They do not ask questions. But the glances they trade behind her back say enough. Yesterday they spent hours searching and found nothing. Not a footprint. Not a name. Not a single person who knew anything about a Vilakazi living in those parts.

But they take their orders.

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Nqobizwe

We have just left my parents' place. The driver is taking us to Fifi's apartment. I wanted to spend the afternoon with her before I leave with my father tonight, but I have to make a stop at Ayanda's first. One of our trusted guys from the street has information and I cannot miss it.

My father is not okay. He is holding himself together. But I know what is sitting underneath it. Tonight at the palace we will see what comes out.

Fifi has been looking out the window since we got in the car. She has not said much.

"Are you okay?" I ask, brushing the back of her hand.

She turns to me. "Your father is very hurt."

"He is," I say. "But he will be alright. My mother is with him and she has forgiven him. I am going to be there tonight. We still have each other, let us hold onto that."

She nods slowly. "He raised those children. He loved them. I keep thinking about who the father could be."

"So do I" I shake my head "Thobekile is something else. That woman is the devil in a headwrap."

"My only worry is her children. They are caught in the middle of all of this and they didn't choose any of it." Fifi says quietly.

I nod. I don't have much to say to that. Nkanyezi and Buhle are old enough to find their own way through it. It will not be easy, but they are not children.

We pull up at her building. The driver opens the door and we step out. I take her hand.

"I will see you when I get back," I say.

"When will that be?" she asks, looking up at me.

"Tomorrow morning. Depending on how tonight goes."

She reads my face. "You think your father might actually kill her."

"I think Queen Thobekile can push any man to the edge if she puts her mind to it. And she will." I pause. "That's why I am going. I need to be there."

She nods. "Go be there for him. He doesn't need to be punished by the ancestors any further because of that woman."

"I love you," I say.

"I love you." She stands on her toes and I meet her halfway. The kiss goes on a little longer than either of us planned for. I pull back before I change my mind about leaving.

"Be safe, Mama. Call me if anything happens."

"I will, baby. Don't worry about me."

I press my lips to her forehead. She squeezes my hand once and then lets go, turning toward her building. I watch her until she is inside.

Then I get back in the car and tell the driver to take me to Ayanda's.

•••

Sizwe is already there when I arrive. We are in Ayanda's study and he is finishing telling us about Lerato and the gun this morning. I knew she was unstable but not to that level.

"Do you think she will be a problem going forward?" I ask.

Sizwe leans back, jaw tight. "I hope not. I really do not want to have to deal with her beyond today."

I know exactly what he means by that. We leave it there.

"How is the King?" Ayanda asks, turning to me.

"Taking it like a man. Holding it in. Which worries me more than if he was shouting."

Ayanda nods slowly. "Will you need me at the palace tonight?"

"Yes. Come. If I can't get through to him you step in. You have always been the voice of reason between us."

He nods and reaches for his phone. Then he looks up. "Spura has arrived."

He walks out to let him in.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. Whatever Spura has, I need to hear it.

A minute later they come in together.

"Ey majita, zithini?" (Gents, how are you?)" Spura moves around the room shaking hands, easy and familiar.

"Si grand, mfethu. Akukho lutho. Usiphatheleni?" I say (We are good man no stress. What do you have for us?

He sits down and his energy shifts. More serious now. He laces his fingers and looks at me directly.

"Someone is asking questions about you," he says.

My jaw tightens. "Who?"

"I don't have a name yet. Small fish, from what I hear. Nothing serious on their own."

"Then it should not be hard to find them," Sizwe says. "Is that all?"

Spura shakes his head. "This is where it gets interesting." He looks at me again. "Who did you upset in the Free State?"

"Nobody. That is not my territory. Why?"

"Because someone from there is asking questions about your woman."

The room goes quiet.

"About Refilwe?" I say slowly.

"MaRussia. Small gang. Their leader is a man called Jonas Motaung. Seventies. Old school." Spura pauses. "How does your madam know him?"

I sit back. Something cold settles in my chest.

An old man in his seventies asking about Refilwe's whereabouts. I don't know the connection yet but I will find it. And whoever this man is, he has made a very stupid decision putting his nose anywhere near my woman.

"I will find out," I say, keeping my voice even. "What exactly is he asking about her?"

"Her whereabouts. Where she is, who she is with. That kind of thing."

Sizwe leans forward. "Nqobi, ask Refilwe if she knows this man first. Then we move."

"Agreed." I look at Ayanda, who already has his phone out.

"I am doubling her security right now," he says without looking up.

I nod.

She will always be covered. I made sure of that. But the witch is still out there, and now we have a seventy-year-old gang leader making enquiries about my woman. I did not think I would be fighting on this many fronts at once.

These people are testing the wrong man.

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Refilwe

DK and I are on the couch. The apartment is quiet and the afternoon is long and I cannot stop thinking about the King and what tonight looks like for him. For

all of them. Thobekile deserves everything that is coming, I believe that, but it still sits heavy knowing how much damage she has done to people who did not deserve it.

"So weekend re a mopata moloi? (So weeekend we are burying the witch)" DK says, looking at me sideways.

I almost choke. "I think death is too easy for her. She should suffer first. Long and properly."

"She will get what is coming. People like that always do. She will reap everything she planted."

I sigh and we sit quietly for a moment.

"Are you really leaving tomorrow?" I ask.

She looks at me and raises an eyebrow. "Girl, you cannot keep me here forever."

I laugh even though I mean it. I have genuinely loved having her here. The apartment feels different with her in it.

"Besides," she says, dropping her voice like she is confessing something, "Sizwe is going to be a problem for me."

"How? I thought you two were fine now."

"We are fine. That is the problem." She shifts on the couch. "Refilwe, I almost disrespected myself yesterday. In his house. With Lerato still on the premises." She shakes her head. "That man is a bad influence. He will make me do things I will regret. I need distance. He is too much, too hot, too everything, and I am trying to be a responsible adult."

I am laughing now. I cannot help it.

"He likes you," I say.

"Sizwe looks like the type who does not do relationships." She says it firmly, like she has already thought this through several times. "I don't want that kind of confusion in my life. And Lerato is not finished, I am telling you, that girl will go back there. I don't want to be anywhere near that drama."

"I hear you," I say.

She nods. Sighs softly.

I remember suddenly. I stand up. "Let me call King Serithi. I keep forgetting. I haven't set a date."

DK nods. "Go."

I walk to the bedroom and dial. It rings twice and he answers.

"Fifi." His voice is warm, easy. Only Zwee calls me Fifi. It sounds strange hearing someone else say it.

"Ntate Serithi, how are you?"

"I am well, my child. I was not expecting your call."

"I want to set a date to come and see you. I was thinking sometime during the week, after work. Would that work?"

"Any time you choose works for me."

"Tuesday then," I say.

"Perfect."

"That is all. Thank you."

"Fifi." He pauses. Just a beat. "Thank you for calling."

I am not sure what to say to that so I say, "Uhm, yeah. Bye."

I end the call and stand there for a second.

I let out a breath I did not know I had been holding.

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Narrated

Senzo has been at Sbu's apartment for most of the day. Sbu is the best he knows when it comes to this kind of thing; cyber security, digging, getting through doors that are supposed to stay closed. If anyone can find something on Nqobizwe, it is him.

Except he cannot get through.

"Tell me you found something, Sbu. Anything."

Sbu leans back from his screen and rubs his eyes. "Man, I cannot get in. There is a wall around everything this guy owns. His financials, his communications,

everything is locked down. I have never seen a setup like this on a private individual."

"There has to be a way. Did you try his phone?"

"I tried his phone. I tried his associates. I tried three different angles." Sbu turns to face him. "Senzo, listen to me. When someone is protected like this it is not because they are just a rich businessman. Normal rich people do not have walls like this. Walk away from this one."

"If he is dangerous then Refilwe needs to know. I am doing this for her."

Sbu looks at him for a long moment. He does not argue. He has known Senzo long enough to know when he is too far in to be pulled back.

He turns back to his screen.

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Narrated: The Ngwenya Kingdom

The King, Queen Liyana, Nqobizwe, and Ayanda have arrived in KwaZulu-Natal. They're now driving to the palace. They're in different cars. Nqobizwe is with Ayanda. The King is with his wife.

King Langa is on a phone call with Baba Ngubeni.

"Ngubeni, what do the ancestors say?"

"They haven't said anything, my King. What happened to Thobekile was just to make her feel what's coming. There is still more that's going to happen to her. She'll end up killing herself when it gets too much. That's what I was told."

Baba Ngubeni says.

"Did you know about her bastard kids?"

The King asks.

"No, my King. I only suspected. That was never shown to me." Ngubeni says.

The King nods, looking out the window.

"Come to the royal house. We'll be having a meeting today. Your presence is needed." He says.

"I will be there, my King."

He ends the call.

A few minutes later the cars arrive at the royal homestead as the afternoon is beginning to cool. They come in quietly, the King's car, then Nqobizwe and Ayanda behind. The gates open. The guards straighten.

They are barely out of the cars when two more vehicles roll in behind them.

Queen Thobekile steps out. She is composed, dressed well, chin up. She scans the group assembled in the yard and something moves behind her eyes, a flicker of confusion, quickly controlled. The King. Queen Liyana. Nqobizwe. Ayanda.

All here. All at once.

She walks toward them and bows.

"My King. You are back." She smiles.

He does not look at her. He turns to the guard who was standing beside her vehicle.

"Nibuyaphi?" His voice is cold and absolutely even.

The guard glances at Thobekile, just briefly, just for a fraction of a second — before catching himself.

"YEEI." The King's voice drops low and sharp in a way that is more frightening than shouting. "I am your King. When I ask a question I expect an answer. Nibuyaphi?"

The guard straightens. "Queen Thobekile asked us to go look for a man named Vilakazi, my King. We went to search."

"Very well."

King Langa turns and walks inside without another word, his jaw set, his hands loose at his sides.

Queen Liyana looks at Thobekile for just a moment. Something passes across her face, not anger, not satisfaction. Something quieter. Sadder than either of those.

She shakes her head slowly.

Then she follows her husband inside.

One by one they all walk in.

Thobekile is left standing in the yard.

Alone.

The gate is still open behind her. The empty yard in front of her. The palace doors closing slowly ahead.

She stands very still.

Her jaw tightens. Her fists close at her sides.

She already knows. Something has shifted. Something has changed in this house since yesterday.

She will not let them see that she is afraid.

She walks in after them, her head still high.

Chapter 32

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Narrated

"Nkanyezi! Buhle!!"

King Langa's voice fills the entrance hall the moment he steps through the door. It bounces off the high ceilings and carries up the staircase.

A few seconds later footsteps come from above. Nkanyezi and Buhle appear at the top of the stairs and come down together. Queen Thobekile has followed everyone inside and stands slightly behind, watching.

"Baba," Buhle says softly when she reaches the bottom.

King Langa's jaw tightens. Something moves through his chest at the word, a tightening, a pressure he cannot name cleanly. He raised this girl. He loved her. But the rage sitting inside him right now is thick enough to cloud everything that came before it.

"EVERYONE. PRIVY CHAMBER. NOW."

His voice leaves no space for questions. He turns and walks. Everyone follows.

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They file into the privy chamber and take their seats. Baba Ngubeni settles quietly in his corner. Queen Liyana sits to the King's left. The space to his right remains empty.

Queen Thobekile moves to take the chair beside him.

"Thobekile." The King's voice is flat. "Sit in front."

She stops. Frowns. "In front? On the floor?"

He nods once.

"Why though? This dress…"

"NOW, THOBEKILE."

The word comes out like a stone dropped from height. She swallows and lowers herself to the floor without another word, arranging her dress around her with shaking hands, her jaw set tight.

"Buhle. Nkanyezi. Join her."

The two girls look at each other, a quick, confused exchange. Then they move without argument, heads bowed, settling onto the floor beside their mother. They know better than to hold eye contact with elders in a moment like this.

Queen Thobekile stares at the floor. She tells herself this is about yesterday. About the yard. About losing herself and embarrassing the crown. She should not be made to sit on the floor like a criminal awaiting sentencing, she was not well. She will explain that.

The King's eyes have not moved from her face since she sat down.

"Who is Vilakazi to you, Thobekile?"

She looks up. And what she sees stops her breath for just a moment. She has seen this man angry before, she has seen him roar, seen him slam his fist, seen him cold and distant. But this is different. There is a vein raised at his forehead. There is something in his eyes that is not anger exactly, it is beyond anger. Something that has been held in for a very long time and has finally reached its edge.

She looks down again.

"No one, my King," she says.

"oVilakazi izitha zakwa Ngwenya. Akekho ongayazi leyonto." (The Vilakazis and the Ngwenyas are enemies. There is no one who does not know this.) His voice is measured but his hands are gripping the arms of his chair.

"EVERYONE KNOWS. But you; you went looking for him. Yesterday you were screaming his name across the entire yard. So what I want to know is, uhlanganaphi nomuntu wakwa Vilakazi?" (How are you connected to someone from the Vilakazi family?)

The room is completely silent. Everyone is still. Waiting.

Thobekile clears her throat. "I don't know anyone from that family, my King. Someone bewitched me…"

Nqobizwe lets out a short, sharp laugh and shakes his head slowly.

King Langa leans forward. "Thobekile. When you look at me, do you think I am your playground?"

"She is telling the truth. Queen Liyana bewitched her." Nkanyezi says from the floor, still looking down.

The words come out before she can stop them.

Nqobizwe is on his feet before the sentence is finished. Queen Liyana's eyes go wide. The King's gaze stays locked on Thobekile, he doesn't even turn his head.

Nqobizwe steps in front of Nkanyezi, his whole body taut.

"Uthini, Nkanyezi?" (What did you say, Nkanyezi?)

She says nothing. She stares at the floor. She had not planned to say it, the words came out because she watched her mother get spoken to like that and something in her snapped.

"Repeat what you just said." His voice is low and controlled and that somehow makes it worse.

Nkanyezi breathes. Then she looks up. "Fine. Mama was sick yesterday and not one of you came. We were alone here. We didn't know what to do. We didn't know if she was going to make it through the night." Her voice wavers but she keeps going. "And now you all arrive together like a happy family and treat us like we are the ones who did something wrong. We don't deserve this."

"I do not care about your mother." Nqobizwe's voice doesn't rise. It goes flatter.

"She could have died yesterday and I would have woken up relieved. Everyone in this room knows how I feel about her. I have never hidden it. So why are you shocked I didn't come?" He steps closer. "Now I am going to ask you one more time. Repeat what you said about my mother."

Nkanyezi presses her lips together and says nothing.

"Ndodana." The King says it quietly. One word.

Nqobizwe stops. He holds still for a moment, then turns and walks to the seat beside his father.

King Langa looks at Nkanyezi. "Call my wife a witch again. Nx" He says it slowly. "Close your mouth and only open it when you are asked a question. Siyezwana?"

Thobekile lifts her head "Don't gang up on my child. Your precious wife is a witch. I was looking for Vilakazi because she is the one working with him."

Queen Liyana lets out a laugh. Not a polite laugh. Not a controlled one. A real, full laugh, the kind that comes from somewhere beyond amusement. She leans back in her chair and lets it go and then it fades and what is left on her face is something sadder than anything she started with.

Thobekile just stares at her.

"I regret the day I married you, Thobekile. You are a disgrace." The King's voice drops to something quiet and final.

Thobekile's eyes go wide. The fear starts to creep in now, slow and cold, moving up from her stomach. She shifts on the floor and her mind is already running, already calculating.

"Tell me, who fathered your children, Mthakashana ndini." (You witch.) King Langa says, leaning forward, his eyes never leaving her face.

Sweat prickles at her hairline. Her hands grip the fabric of her dress.

How does he know.

"You fathered my children, my King," she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Lalela ke." (Listen then.) He sits back. "Not one seed of mine was planted in that womb. Tell me who fathered those children, Thobekile."

"You, Langa. You. What do you take me for?"

"Maybe this will make you talk." He pauses, and his voice when it comes again is very calm and very deliberate.

"Your daughter Buhle is dying. Whatever you did to her is eating her from the inside and before long she will be gone. And she cannot die here. She does not belong on this ground." He lets that sit.

"Your witch played you, Thobekile. You sacrificed your own child's life for a throne that was never going to be your son's. He took the womb. He took her soul. And he left you with nothing."

Thobekile's hands begin to tremble. She clenches them in her lap and stares at the floor.

"Ma… What is Baba talking about?" Buhle's voice breaks open.

King Langa's eyes cut to Buhle.

"Do NOT… Do not call me that. I am not your father." His voice is not cruel but it lands like a blade. "Ask her who your father is. Perhaps they can still save your life."

Buhle swallows. She looks down. She does not cry, not yet. She is still trying to fit the shape of what she just heard into something that makes sense.

Nkanyezi has gone very still beside her. She is staring at the floor but she is not seeing the floor.

"That is a lie, Langa. These are your children." Thobekile's voice comes back with sudden force

"YEEI, WENA NJA." (You dog.) He straightens. "Your child's life depends on what comes out of your mouth right now. You can save her. Take her to her father. Take all your bastards to where they belong."

"You never loved us." Nkanyezi speaks without raising her head. Her voice is flat and dry and every word is measured. "We were always the outsiders. Always second. I used to think mama was the one causing problems, that she was making fights that didn't need to be made. I defended you in my head." She pauses. "But you are sitting there telling us we are not yours. That is not something a man who ever loved us could say."

"SHUT UP." The King's voice fills the room. THOBEKILE. Who is the father?"

Thobekile's mind is moving fast. If they are this desperate to know it means they will get rid of her the moment she gives them the name. She has one card left and it is the only thing keeping her breathing.

"You," she says again.

King Langa stands.

"You thought you could control me. Make me your servant. Kill my son and hand my kingdom to a child who carries none of my blood. Because of power." His voice has changed again, quieter now but with something underneath it that is worse than shouting.

He chuckles once, short and without any warmth. "You see this woman, the one you called a witch; she is the reason this kingdom has what it has. We defeated the Vilakazis because of her. Our crops, my businesses, all of it grew because of her. And you wanted to walk in and take it. Just like that."

He takes a step toward the door. "You will talk. I will make sure of it."

Baba Ngubeni is on his feet instantly, moving to block the doorway. His hands are raised, his face urgent.

"Yehlisa umoya, Nkosi. Don't do it. Bathi inkosi ayiyehlise umoya." (Calm down, my King. Don't do it. They say the King must calm down now.)

"Suka, Ngubeni." (Move, Ngubeni.) The King's voice is granite.

Ngubeni shakes his head but steps aside. Nqobizwe is already up, moving past him into the corridor.

"What is happening?" Nqobizwe asks, his voice low and urgent.

Baba Ngubeni turns to him, his hands trembling slightly. "He is going to kill her. Ngibona igazi." (I see blood.) "Stop him, Nqobizwe."

Nqobizwe goes.

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Nqobizwe

I follow my father down the corridor. He is moving fast, his head down, and when he turns into the side passage I see the gun already in his hand.

I understand it. I felt the rage myself sitting in that room. Thobekile would test the patience of a saint. But killing her is not ours to do. The ancestors have

claimed that. We punish her, yes. But we do not put her blood on our hands. And we cannot have her dead before we know who the father of those children is.

"Baba." I step in front of him.

"Suka endleleni yami, Nqobizwe." (Get out of my way, Nqobizwe.) His voice is barely above a murmur. That is when I know he is at his most dangerous.

"Don't kill her, Baba. Not yet. Control this." I put my hand out, not touching him, just there. "Just breathe."

"Nqobizwe." He looks at me. "I will not say it again."

I have seen my father in many states. I have seen him commanding, furious, cold, grief-stricken. But what is in his face right now I do not fully recognise. His eyes are somewhere past reason.

But I am not moving.

He raises the gun.

I do not move.

He pulls the trigger.

The pain tears through my arm and drops me to one knee. I hear myself swear, one sharp word, and then I am up again, one hand clamped over the wound, blood already coming through my fingers.

He walks past me through the door.

I stand in the corridor for a second. The pain is real and sharp and I file it somewhere to deal with later. Right now it has not fully registered. I am still processing the fact that my father just shot me.

I push through the door after him.

Outside, lightning splits the sky and the rain comes down hard and immediate. I know those are not ordinary clouds. The ancestors are not pleased.

Guards come running toward me, their faces alarmed.

"Prince Nqobizwe, are you…"

I walk past them. The rain soaks through my shirt immediately, cold against the heat of the wound in my arm. I do not stop.

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Narrated

King Langa walks back into the privy chamber, gun at his side. Ayanda is in the doorway he heard the shot and was heading out to check. He sees the King's face and steps aside without a word.

Every eye in the room locks onto the gun.

Then Nqobizwe comes in behind his father, one hand pressed hard against his upper arm, blood seeping through his fingers, rain still dripping from his clothes.

Ayanda moves to him immediately. "Shit, Nqobi, what happened?"

"Dad. Put the gun down." Nqobizwe's voice cuts across the room.

Thobekile's eyes land on the gun and she scrambles to her feet, her composure gone completely.

"HAWU. HAWU. NGAFA." (Oh no. Oh no. I am dying.) She backs toward the wall, hands raised. "DON'T. PLEASE."

Nkanyezi and Buhle grab each other. Buhle buries her face. Nkanyezi holds her and stares at the gun with wide, glassy eyes.

In the corner, Baba Ngubeni's eyes have closed. His lips are moving. The ancestors are speaking and he is somewhere between two worlds, receiving what they are sending.

Queen Liyana has moved to Nqobizwe's side, pressing her hands over his wound, her face pale, her eyes wet.

"Sit. Down." King Langa looks at Thobekile. His voice is almost gentle. That makes it worse.

She sinks back to the floor, sobbing, both hands clasped together.

"I am going to ask you once more." He tilts his head slightly. "Who is the father of these children?"

No one breathes.

Thobekile wails. "PLEASE DON'T KILL ME. HAWU JESU…"

"Thobekile. Just tell us. The damage is already done. Tell us." Queen Liyana speaks from across the room, her voice steady despite the tears running down her face

Thobekile shoots her a look. Something shifts in her face, the fear cracks and the venom underneath comes through.

She almost laughs. "Oh please. Perfect Liyana. The chosen one." Her voice twists with it.

"You Langa, you married me and told me I was there to give you an heir because your first wife could not carry one. I gave up everything for that. Everything." Her hands shake as she speaks. "And the moment you had your precious heir I became useless. Sbonga deserves that crown. He earned it just by existing in this house."

She is shaking from the core of her now. "Your useless sperms couldn't give me children. I had to do what any woman in my position would have done. These children may not carry your blood but you raised them. You held them. You called them yours." She lets out a laugh, short, hollow, wrong. "Where were your precious ancestors to warn you then? What were they doing?"

"Mama" Nkanyezi's voice breaks. Just the one word.

Buhle is crying quietly, her shoulders shaking. Because she knows now. She has known since the King said it but hearing her mother confirm it by not denying it is something different. Something final.

"Ayi suka, mama yami." Thobekile's voice turns sharp as she looks at her daughters. "I gave you the best life I could. I spent every year in this house fighting for your place because these people never cared about you. Only the heir. Always only him."

"Who is their father?" King Langa asks again.

Thobekile looks at him. Steadies herself. "I will not tell you. You want to kill me the moment I do." She shakes her head. "Never."

"Maybe this will help you decide."

He raises the gun.

Ayanda steps forward slowly, positioning himself close to the King's side. His voice is low and even. "Yehlisa umoya, Ngwenya." (Calm down, Ngwenya.) "You don't want to do this. Not because of her. You will anger the ancestors and

lose everything, not because of this kingdom or this throne, but because of this woman who is not worth a single thing you have built."

He pauses. "Queen Liyana is here. Nqobizwe is here , bleeding, because of you. Those are your people. The ones given to you by fate itself." Another pause. "Don't kill her. Death is too easy. But making her suffer, that you can enjoy for a long time."

King Langa's jaw tightens. His hand trembles.

Then…

Boom.

The room lurches. Everyone flinches at once.

Thobekile screams, a sound that fills every corner of the chamber. She grabs her leg and falls sideways, blood spreading through the fabric of her dress.

Boom.

The second shot takes the other leg. She collapses fully, both hands clawing at the floor, screaming and sobbing, the sound animal and raw.

Queen Liyana cries out, tears streaming. Buhle and Nkanyezi are locked together, both of them shaking, too terrified to make a sound.

Lightning blazes outside and the rain hammers the windows like something is throwing itself against the glass.

King Langa lowers the gun. He looks at Thobekile on the floor for one long moment, no satisfaction on his face, no relief. Just something empty and ancient and exhausted.

He turns and walks to the door.

"Take that witch to the basement," he says to the guards as he passes.

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Refilwe

DK and I are on the couch. A movie is playing but I stopped watching it a long time ago. My eyes are on the screen but my mind is somewhere in KwaZulu-Natal and I cannot pull it back.

Then it hits me.

A pain straight through the centre of my chest. Sharp and sudden, like something has reached in and grabbed my heart with both hands. I cannot breathe. I cannot get air in.

"DK…" My voice comes out wrong.

She is off the couch immediately. Her hands find my arms. "Refilwe, what is happening? Talk to me."

"I can't… I can't breathe…" I press my hand to my chest, bent forward, trying to find air.

Then it begins to ease. Slowly. Like whatever it was has let go by degrees. I sink back into the couch, still holding my chest, still shaking.

"Refilwe. What just happened?" DK crouches in front of me, her face tight with worry.

"Something is wrong. Something happened. I need to call Nqobizwe." I say reaching for my phone.

"How do you know that?"

"I felt it DK. Right here." I press my hand against my sternum.

Then the pull comes. That particular heaviness behind my eyes that I have learned to recognise now. It moves fast this time, faster than before.

"DK." I reach out and find her hand. "I am going to sleep. Call Zwee please." My voice is already slowing. "It’s the ancestors."

"Refilwe"

"Call him."

I lie back. The couch is underneath me and then the darkness comes up to meet me and everything else goes quiet.

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"Hello?" I say into the dark.

Nothing for a moment. Just the black.

Then light, soft, sourceless, and Queen Nomusa is there. I feel her before I see her. And when I see her I see the anger on her face immediately. It is not directed at me but it radiates off her like heat.

"Uyadelela uLanga. Ulimaza inkosana yethu." (Langa is disrespectful. He hurt our Prince.) Her voice is controlled but tight with it. "He will learn."

"What happened? Is Nqobizwe.."

"He is hurt but he will be fine." She holds up a hand, reading my face. "We would not let anything truly bad happen to him. His father did not mean to go that far, but he did, and he should not have. We are angry." She exhales, something shifting in her expression. "Uyangicasula uLanga." (Langa is making me angry.) "But that is not why I am here."

She steps closer, and the air around us changes, denser, more urgent.

"I am here about Vilakazi. Listen carefully because there is not much time." She holds my gaze. "The Vilakazis are no longer working alone. They have formed an alliance with someone from inside the village. They want this kingdom dismantled. They want to avenge their chief and they are using witchcraft to do it; it runs in the descendant, passed down like a gift." Her face tightens.

"This descendant found a way into the palace. He found a way to block us, to limit how much we can intervene. If Buhle dies on that ground, he gains full access. The door opens and we cannot close it again." She takes a slow breath. "Buhle must be returned to her father before that happens. It cannot wait."

"But who is her father?" I ask.

"Bakwa Zungu," she says. "The King will know which one from the Zungus when he hears the name. Tell him." She pauses, her eyes steady on mine. "And tell him I said; the Zungu man is the one he should take his anger to. Thobekile is ours. She belongs to us now. Tell Langa to leave her to us."

She holds my gaze a moment longer.

Then the light begins to pull back.

And everything goes dark again.

Chapter 33

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Nqobizwe

Nobody has moved. Nobody has said anything. The only sound in the privy chamber is Queen Thobekile's crying, low and continuous, like something that has run out of energy but cannot stop.

My father made it clear before he walked out, she does not go to any hospi-tal. She stays in the yard. The basement. She does not leave these grounds.

I have seen a man scorned today. I saw what it looks like when years of swallowed truth finally come up all at once.

My father brought this to our door with his own hands and today it came back to collect.

And even with her daughter's life on the table, Thobekile sat there and re-fused to give us a name. Still protecting herself. Still calculating. Not one moment of remorse for what she has done to Buhle.

Two maidens are kneeling beside her, pressing cloth firmly against her legs, trying to slow the bleeding. She is still conscious. Still crying. She will live, for now.

The door opens and a young woman walks in, a guard behind her carrying her medical kit.

"Dr Nzuza was unavailable," the guard says. "He recommended his niece."

His niece? I did not know Dr Nzuza had a niece who was a doctor. I file that away. Dr. Nzunza is the royal doctor who lives nearby.

"What is your name?" Ayanda asks, already looking up from his phone.

"Dr Mbali Nzuza," she says.

He holds her gaze for a moment. "Dr Nzuza recommends you, which means you are good." He glances toward the floor where Thobekile lies, then at me. "That woman has two gunshot wounds to her legs. The Prince has a flesh wound to his arm."

She nods and takes in the room with calm, professional eyes. She looks young but her hands are steady and her face gives nothing away. "Can we move them to the Royal Medical Suite? I need proper light and a clean surface."

Ayanda is staring. I clear my throat.

"Yes," I say. "Guards will carry Thobekile. I can walk."

She nods, turns and crouches beside Thobekile without hesitation.

Nkanyezi and Buhle have not moved from the floor. They are sitting exactly where they were left, both of them somewhere far inside themselves. I do not know what my father plans to do with them. Right now I cannot think about that. Right now I am not in a place to think about my father at all.

We move to the Royal Medical Suite. The guards carry Thobekile carefully, her cries dropping to a low moan with every movement. They place her on the examination bed and step back.

Dr Mbali comes to me first. "My Prince, may I start with her? She will go into shock if I wait any longer."

"Go ahead," I say.

She bows slightly and turns to Thobekile. She works quietly, efficiently, no wasted movement. An hour passes. I sit in the corner, my arm throbbing, watching the door and trying not to think about what I want to say to my father.

When she finishes with Thobekile she comes to me and begins to clean the wound. I watch her work without speaking.

My phone rings.

Refilwe's name on the screen. I answer immediately with my free arm. "Fifi…"

"It's DK. Refilwe just passed out and she said I must call you. She said it's the ancestors, Bayede, I don't know what to do. Do I sprinkle water on her face? Will she wake up on her own? What if something went wrong, what if they took her again, what if…" Her voice is rushing.

"DK." I keep my voice even. "Did she just feel sleepy and go under? Was it sudden?"

"Yes, that's it, but she told me before she went that it's the ancestors. She said it specifically."

"Okay. She will wake up with a message." I am already standing, the doctor pausing her work. "I am coming. Don't panic."

I end the call and look at Ayanda. "I have to go back to Pretoria. Refilwe is having an episode. I think it is connected to what happened today."

He nods once. "Go. I will stay and keep an eye on things here."

"I cannot speak to my father right now."

"I know" he says, almost smiling. "Go."

Ten minutes later Dr Mbali ties off the bandage and steps back. I flex my fingers, test the arm. It will do.

I find my mother in the kitchen, alone, both hands wrapped around a cup of tea, staring at nothing.

"Ma."

She looks up and the smile she gives me is tired and thin and doesn't reach her eyes. "How is the pain?"

I pull a chair close and sit. "Manageable. I am leaving. Queen Nomusa has visited Refilwe again. I want to be there when she wakes up."

My mother nods slowly. "It will be about what happened today. Your father spilling your blood…" She stops and shakes her head, pressing her lips together.

"You are the only heir. You are not to be touched. He knows this. He has always known this and he did it anyway." She lifts her cup and takes a slow sip. "He will answer for it."

I lean forward and kiss her cheek. "What happens to Nkanyezi and Buhle?"

"We have to find the father." She says it simply. "There is a reason the ancestors said she must be returned, not just removed, but returned. There is always a reason. You have to listen carefully to every word they give."

I nod. "I will find out through my own channels. That witch will not talk so we have to find another way." I stand and kiss her cheek again. "I will call you."

I walk out to the car. The driver is already waiting.

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Narrated

Dikeledi is pacing. Three steps one way, turn, three steps back. She has done this eleven times. She stopped counting after that.

Refilwe is lying still on the couch, eyes closed, breathing even. She looks peaceful, which should be reassuring, but the air in the apartment feels different tonight. Heavier. Like something invisible has filled the room and is pressing gently on everything in it.

The hair at the back of Dikeledi's neck has been standing for the past ten minutes and no amount of telling herself she is imagining it is helping.

She picks up her phone.

"Future wife," Sizwe says when he answers.

"In your dreams. I am calling for something serious, man."

He hears her tone and drops the humour immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Please come to Refilwe's apartment. She is doing the ancestor sleep again and I do not want to be alone right now. I called Nqobizwe but he is far. I cannot leave her here and I cannot sit here by myself, Sizwe. Something is in this house."

"Send me the address. I am leaving now." A pause. "Does she look okay?"

Dikeledi looks at Refilwe. Chest rising and falling. Face relaxed. "She looks peaceful. But I am telling you there is something here. I think the ancestor spirits are present."

"You are probably thinking too much. Send the address. Ten minutes."

"Okay." She hesitates. "I am going to sprinkle salt around the house. Just in case."

"Do that," he says, no judgement in his voice.

They end the call. Dikeledi sends the address and then goes straight to the kitchen.

It is not the coarse kind, just regular table salt, but salt is salt and it will have to do. She starts at the front door and works her way methodically through every room, pouring a thin line along the doorways and window-sills, muttering under her breath as she goes.

By the time she is done she feels marginally better.

She sits on the couch opposite Refilwe and watches her.

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Sizwe dials Nqobizwe while he drives.

"Sure," Nqobizwe answers.

"Hey. How did things go?"

A beat. "My father shot me."

Sizwe's eyes go wide. "What… was he shooting everyone?"

"He wanted me out of his way. Flesh wound. I am more pissed than hurt." His voice is flat and controlled in the way it gets when he is holding something in very tightly.

"As for Thobekile… if Ayanda hadn't stepped in it would be a different conversation right now. Two shots, both legs. She still won't give us the name. Still refusing." A short exhale. "It is raining badly here. Lightning. The ancestors are angry. And now Refilwe is in an episode, I am already on my way."

Sizwe shakes his head slowly. "Too much, man. Too much at once." He turns onto Refilwe's street. "Don't worry about this side. DK called me, I am almost there. She is convinced there are ghosts in the apartment and she is panicking."

Nqobizwe makes a sound that is almost a laugh. "Ngiyabonga, mfethu." (Thank you, man.) "Keep me updated."

Sizwe slows as he approaches the building. "Will do. There is one more thing. The person asking questions about you, it is Senzo. Apparently he was with Refilwe before."

Silence on the line.

"I know who he is," Nqobizwe says finally. His voice has gone very quiet. "I will pay him a visit. He is not my priority right now, the witch and this old Motaung guy are. But I will get to him."

"What is the story with him and Refilwe?"

"He still wants her. Uyadakwa." (He is crazy.)

Sizwe clicks his tongue. "Lerato type. Some people honestly. We will sort him out. You focus on what matters. I will be at your madam's place."

They hang up. Sizwe parks and jogs to the entrance.

Dikeledi opens the door before he can knock, grabs his arm and pulls him inside.

"Come in. Thank God. I have genuinely never been this happy to see you in my life."

Sizwe steps inside and looks around the apartment, amused. "Because of ghosts?"

"You don't feel it?" She stares at him. "Nothing at all?"

He looks around properly this time. Sniffs the air. "No. How is she?"

"Peaceful. But Sizwe, I am telling you. They are here." She drops her voice as if whatever is in the room might hear her.

He bites down a smile. "I am sure it is fine. Sit down, Dk."

"I already put salt everywhere."

"Good."

They sit on the opposite couch and watch Refilwe together.

Then Refilwe gasps.

Her eyes snap open and she sits upright in one motion, both hands gripping the cushion beneath her. Sizwe and Dikeledi are on their feet immediately.

"Ref, o sharp?" (Ref, are you okay?) Dikeledi's hand goes straight to her back.

"Mulethele amanzi." (Get her water.) Sizwe says

Dikeledi is already moving toward the kitchen.

Sizwe takes the glass from Dikeledi when she returns and presses it into Refilwe's hands. She drinks the whole thing without stopping.

"Okay." DK exhales. "That was a whole horror film. Was this a friendly visit or were they taking pieces of your soul because I felt them in here, I promise you. The air, Refilwe…"

"They are angry," Refilwe says quietly. She is still catching her breath, her eyes slightly unfocused the way they always are when she first comes back.

DK stands up, both hands going to her head. "Oh my GOD. Were they angry with you? Were they taking it out on you? Tjonna weee"

Refilwe almost smiles despite herself. “No, man. Not with me. I have to call Zwee."

"He is on his way," Sizwe says. "He is coming to you."

Refilwe looks up at him. "Why? Is the family meeting done?"

"He heard your name and dropped everything." Sizwe says it simply. "That man would delay his own funeral if you needed something."

She laughs softly at that. She sets the empty glass on the table and starts to stand, a little slow, a little careful.

"I need to lie down. Just to rest, my head is heavy." She looks at Sizwe. "Thank you for coming."

"Anytime."

"IS IT THEM AGAIN?" Dikeledi spins toward the ceiling, both arms raised. "Please. PLEASE. Give this poor girl some rest. What kind of ancestors are you people? Bathong"

"DK." Refilwe laughs properly this time. "It is not them. I am just tired. My mind needs a rest, that is all."

"Ho betere." (That's better.) DK drops her arms. "Go sleep. A real sleep. We will be here."

"Tell Zwee to wake me when he gets here. I have a message for the King. Its urgent"

"We will," Sizwe says.

She nods and moves toward the bedroom. Dk and Sizwe are just quite looking at her.

"Royalty ke masepa, shame." (Royalty is shit, shame.) DK says.

Refilwe disappears through the door.

Sizwe and Dikeledi look at each other.

Dikeledi drops onto the couch. "I need something strong to drink after tonight."

Sizwe sits beside her. "There is no alcohol in this apartment."

"I know. That is the problem."

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The Ngwenya Kingdom

Nkanyezi and Buhle are still on the floor of the privy chamber.

Nobody came back to tell them they could move. So they did not move. They have been sitting in this exact spot since the King walked out, since the guards carried Thobekile away, since the room emptied around them.

The floor is cold. Neither of them mentions it.

"What do we do, Nkanyezi?" Buhle asks. Her voice is worn through from crying. Fresh tears come anyway.

"I hate her." Nkanyezi says it without raising her voice. That is what makes it land so heavily. "I hate her."

"I am going to die." Buhle says it the way someone says something they have been turning over in their mind for a while and have finally decided to say out loud.

"She sacrificed my womb. For what? For a throne that was never even going to be Sbonga's. For what?"

Nkanyezi straightens up, something resolving behind her eyes. "We need to leave here. I don't know where we will go but we cannot stay."

Buhle shakes her head. "I don't want to leave. I want to know who my father is. If I have to walk there myself I will." She wipes her face with the back of her hand. "I am not dying before I know who he is."

"She will not tell us. You saw her. She does not care. She has never cared about anything except herself." Nkanyezi says

The door opens.

Queen Liyana comes in quietly. She stops just inside the doorway and takes them in, two girls on a cold stone floor, both hollow-eyed, both holding the weight of an evening that would have broken older and harder people.

Her chest pulls tight.

She crouches down to their level, forearms resting on her knees.

"Come. Get up from the floor and come inside. I made warm coffee."

Nkanyezi looks at her sideways. "You are here to gloat."

Queen Liyana breathes in slowly and lets it out. She thinks about how long Thobekile spent filling these children with stories about her. How many years of quiet poison went into what is sitting behind Nkanyezi's eyes right now.

"I am not here to gloat," she says gently. "I made coffee. Come." She walks to the doorway.

Buhle is still crying silently. Nkanyezi gets to her feet, jaw set.

"Sukuma, Buhle. Sihambe. We are leaving" (Stand up Buhle. Let's go.) She reaches down for her sister's hand.

Buhle takes it and stands.

"Niyaphi, Nkanyezi?" (Where are you going, Nkanyezi?) Queen Liyana asks.

"To Sbonga. He will know what to do."

Queen Liyana pauses before she speaks. "Nkanyezi, Sbonga is fighting for his life and everything Sbonga has comes from this house. From the King. If that has been taken back, what does he have to offer you?" She gives them a moment with that.

"The King was angry tonight. He said things in rage that rage does not always mean. You were here. You heard and saw your mother…" She stops. Chooses carefully. "She pushed him beyond what most men could hold. That is the truth of it."

Buhle looks at the floor.

Nkanyezi says nothing but she has not moved toward the door.

"I have always loved you both." Queen Liyana's voice is quiet and steady. "Both of you. I had a problem with your mother, because of what she is, what she has done to this family. Not because of you. Never because of you." She steps aside from the doorway. "I will not let you walk out into the night not knowing where you are going. It is not safe. Stay until we find your father. After that you can decide what you want to do. But stay."

She walks out. Her footsteps fade down the corridor.

Nkanyezi and Buhle stand in the empty chamber. The cold of the floor seeps up through their feet. The torches along the wall throw unsteady light across the stones.

Then Buhle starts walking toward the door.

Nkanyezi watches her for a second. Then she follows.

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King Langa is on his back on top of the bed, still dressed, staring at the ceiling.

He has been lying here since he walked out of the privy chamber. He has not changed. He has not eaten. He has not called anyone.

He shot his son. He knows it. He can feel it sitting in his chest like something calcified and immovable. He wanted Nqobizwe out of the doorway and he chose the wrong way to make that happen. He knows that too. He knew it the second it happened.

And Thobekile still walks, still breathes, still refuses to give him a single name. He could not even finish what he went in there to do.

The rain and lightning outside have been going for over an hour. He does not need Ngubeni to tell him what that means.

Queen Liyana walks in. She does not slam the door. She does not come in hot. She closes it behind her carefully, which somehow is worse.

He looks at her.

Her face is calm on the surface. But he has been married to this woman long enough to know the difference between calm and contained. This is contained. This is something that has been decided before she walked through the door.

"Langa." She stands at the foot of the bed. "What was that?"

"I lost control, Liyana. That woman, that witch…"

"The witch you brought here." Her voice doesn't rise. "You chose her. You brought her into this home. Ukuhlulile, manje " she breathes "and you shoot my son? Your only son, Langa."

"I needed him to move. I was not trying to kill him, I swear to you. It was wrong. I know it was wrong."

"You shoot people to move them out of your way now." She looks at him steadily. "And what happens next? You have chosen to anger the ancestors again. After everything. You don't learn."

He pushes himself upright on the bed. "Where is he? I need to apologise…"

"He is gone. He went back to Pretoria." She sits on the edge of the mattress, not close to him. "Langa. Nqobizwe has been carrying this kingdom on his back. He has been running behind your mistakes and cleaning them up and trying to protect you from yourself. He did nothing to deserve a bullet tonight. Nothing."

He drops his head. "I know."

"You married Thobekile without approval. The ancestors turned their backs. You raised children that are not yours. You were controlled by muthi for years. You nearly lost your kingdom, your son, your life's work." She pauses.

"I stopped receiving guidance from the ancestors. Because your choices affect me too. They affect all of us." Her voice stays even but it costs her something to keep it that way. "Tonight you shot Nqobizwe. And you tried to kill Thobekile knowing the laws of this kingdom. If Ayanda had not stopped you, who do you think would have suffered? Not you alone. All of us. The entire village, Langa."

He is quiet for a long moment.

"I am sorry, Liyana."

"I am not the one who needs your apology." She stands. "Ngubeni's door should be your first stop tonight. The ancestors' door. And then your son's." She looks at him one more time. "Stop making decisions from your anger. Start listening. Before there is nothing left to protect."

She walks out and closes the door behind her.

He sits with his hands over his face.

Then his phone rings. His farm manager, Zweli.

He stares at the screen. Something in him already knows. He answers any-way.

"Zweli."

The noise in the background hits him first. Shouting. Movement. The particular chaos of people trying to fight something that cannot be fought.

"My King." Zweli's voice is strained. "The farm is on fire. All of it. Lightning struck the dry grass near the east field and it spread. The fire brigade is here but my King, there is nothing left to save."

King Langa's hand goes slack around the phone.

The Royal Farm. Three generations of Ngwenya crops, Ngwenya soil, Ngwenya labour. The thing that fed the village, employed hundreds of people, funded half of what the kingdom runs on. The business that grew and multiplied after Lyana came to him. After the ancestors blessed their union.

"Was anything saved?" he asks. His voice is very quiet.

"Everything is gone, my King. We could not get there in time."

He lowers the phone slowly. He does not hang up, he simply lets it rest in his lap.

Liyana was right.

He has been sitting here thinking about Thobekile. About his rage. About himself. And while he sat here, the ancestors took back what they gave.

Hundreds of people will wake up tomorrow without work. Without income. Families in this village who depended on that farm. People who did nothing except trust that the Ngwenya name meant something.

He did this. With his own stubbornness. His own choices. His own refusal to listen until it was too late.

He lies back on the bed and stares at the ceiling again.

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Ayanda is outside on the steps, a glass of whiskey balanced on his knee, watching the rain ease into something lighter. The worst of it has passed. The sky is beginning to settle. He is trying to do the same.

He has seen a lot of difficult nights in service of the Ngwenya family. To-night is near the top of that list.

He hears the door behind him open and footsteps approach.

Dr Mbali Nzuza comes out and sits down on the step beside him. She ex-hales long and slow, like she has been holding it in for hours. Which she probably has.

"I hope you don't mind," she says.

"Not at all." He looks at her. "Long day."

"Very." She tucks her hands between her knees.

"How is Queen Thobekile looking?" He asks.

"She will live. The wounds are serious but she is stable. I need to stay over-night to monitor her progress. Since the King has said no hospital."

Ayanda nods. He turns the glass slowly in his hand.

"I have never seen you around before," he says. "I did not know Dr Nzuza had a niece. A doctor niece at that."

She smiles at the ground. "I don't come here often. I needed some air. A change of scenery." She pauses. "I am healing a broken heart, if I am hon-est."

Ayanda looks at her. "Someone broke your heart?"

"He told me he was still in love with his ex. So I walked away." She says it plainly, without self-pity.

"Tell me you left immediately."

"On the spot."

"Good." He nods once, firmly. "Some men are idiots."

She laughs, a real one, quick and surprised. "That is exactly what I told my-self."

"You came to the right place. Villages have a way of slowing everything down. The noise stops." He looks out at the wet grounds, the last of the lightning far off in the distance now. "Pretoria can be a lot."

"That is exactly it," she says. "Too much noise."

"Well." He glances at her sideways. "You have met a friend now. I am also in Pretoria. I know good places, quiet ones, loud ones, whichever you need on whichever day. And I am told I am a good listener."

He pauses. "I would not mind helping you get that loser out of your sys-tem."

Dr Mbali looks at him for a moment. Then she smiles. Not a polite smile. A real one.

"I would actually like that," she says. "A distraction sounds good right now."

Ayanda raises his glass slightly, an unspoken agreement, and they both look out at the clearing sky.

Chapter 34

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Refilwe

I feel arms wrap around me and I startle awake. Then the cologne hits me and everything settles immediately. I know that smell.

He presses his lips to my neck.

I open my eyes. It is dark outside. I slept longer than I meant to.

"Mama," he says softly, feeling me stir.

I turn to face him. He looks tired. More than tired, like someone who has been carrying something heavy for hours and has not yet put it down.

"When did you get here?" I ask, smiling despite myself.

"A few minutes ago." He pulls me closer and kisses my forehead. Holds it there for a second.

Then I see the bandage on his arm.

I sit up. "What happened?"

He sits up too, shifting against the headboard. He is quiet for a moment, like he is deciding how to say it.

"My father spiralled. He shot me for standing in his way. He wanted to get to Thobekile and I wouldn't move." He pauses. "Thanks to Ayanda, he did-n't finish what he started."

I stare at him. "Baby…" I reach for his arm gently. "How is the pain?"

"It stings. It is fine, Mama. Don't worry."

I lean forward and kiss him softly. He holds the kiss for a moment before I pull back.

"Queen Nomusa did say he hurt you. I just did not think she meant a gun-shot wound."

"She told you everything?"

"She was angry, Zwee. Really angry. Your father does not listen and now the ancestors are tired of it."

He exhales slowly. "I know. The rain back home, the lightning, it was bad. Tell me what else she said."

I shift to sit properly, pulling my knees up.

"The Vilakazis are moving. They have formed an alliance with someone from inside the village, that person helped the witch disappear. They found a way to block the ancestors from intervening fully."

I hold his gaze. "The reason Buhle has to go back to her father… if she dies on Ngwenya ground while that door is open, the witches get full access. Buhle has to be returned. Tomorrow, Zwee. Not next week."

He sits with that, jaw tight, hands resting on his knees.

"That witch didn't give us anything," he says quietly. "Gun pointed at her. Two shots in her legs. Her own daughter's life on the table. She still re-fused." He shakes his head slowly. "She does not care about that child."

"Queen Nomusa gave me a surname." I pause. "She said bakwa Zungu. And that your father will know exactly who from the Zungus. She also said, tell the King to take all his anger there. Leave Thobekile to them."

He stands from the bed and walks to the window. My bedroom feels smaller with him in it somehow, not in a bad way, just in the way a room changes when someone fills it properly. He stands with his hands in his pockets, looking out at the dark.

Then he turns.

"The only Zungu I know is Chief Bukizwe and his brothers. So one of them fathered Buhle? Or all of Thobekile's children?" His voice is measured but his eyes are working

"Your father will know who specifically. That is what I was told."

He is quiet for a moment, connecting things I cannot see.

"They wouldn't dare try us like that. Form an alliance with the Vilakazis…" He stops. "But why? What does Bukizwe want badly enough to go that far?"

"Who is Chief Bukizwe?" I ask.

He turns back to the window briefly then faces me. "Thobekile used muthi to get into my father's head. She convinced him to arrange a marriage be-tween me and Bukizwe's daughter, Nolwandle. My father was pressing me hard about it. I refused." He pauses. "Could be that Bukizwe was working with Thobekile from the beginning."

My mouth falls open. "She wanted you to marry someone? While you have a chosen queen?"

That was the plan "That was the plan. Let me call my father. Something is not adding up and I need to hear his voice when I say the name."

"I will go shower," I say, sliding off the bed.

He nods, already reaching for his phone. I grab my things and slip out.

The apartment is quiet. Empty. Dk and Sizwe are gone.

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Nqobizwe

My mind is running fast.

If Bukizwe is the father of Buhle, Nkanyezi, Sbonga, all of them… then he and Thobekile were not just connected. They were partners. They made promises to each other. She offered him something and he offered her some-thing in return. The throne most likely. Power. Access to everything the Ngwenya name carries.

And Sbonga. Sbonga has been sleeping with Nolwandle. If they share a fa-ther that is not just a complication; that is a disaster.

My head is loud right now.

As angry as I am at my father, Buhle has to leave that palace and we need answers tonight. I dial his number.

He answers just before the third ring.

"Ndodana."

His voice is calm. That is different from earlier. I breathe in and out slowly before I speak.

"You are calm," I say.

"Yes." A short pause. "I am glad you called. Your mother told me you left. Nqobizwe… Ngiyaxolisa, my son. I did not mean to shoot you. I wanted to reach Thobekile and I lost myself completely." His voice drops. "The royal farm burnt down tonight. Everything. Gone." He exhales. "I deserved it. I let my anger lead and the ancestors answered."

I close my eyes briefly. The farm. The people who depend on it. All of it gone in one night because he could not hold himself together.

I do not say any of that.

"I did not call about the shooting," Queen Nomusa says Buhle's father is a Zungu. She said you will know who." I say.

Silence.

Then

"WHAT." He catches himself and breathes. "Bukizwe. That bastard."

"So it is Chief Bukizwe."

"They were planning to take this kingdom. All of, it was planned. They worked together" His voice has gone flat and cold.

"We have to return Buhle immediately. All of them if they are all his. The Vilakazis have formed an alliance with someone from inside the village. They have found a way to limit how much the ancestors can do. If Buhle dies on our ground she becomes a door. We cannot let that happen."

He breathes out hard. "Bukizwe is the one working with the witch. I do not know yet what he was promised. What he and Thobekile agreed to. Her child marries you and then what, what was supposed to happen next?"

"I found out," I say. "I listened to Thobekile and Sbonga's calls. They planned to push Nolwandle at me. They were going to give her a poison; told her it was a love portion. She would give it to me unknowingly. I die. Sbonga steps in, takes the throne, takes my businesses, everything I have built." I pause. "That was the plan."

"This is madness," he says. Quiet madness.

"What Bukizwe and Thobekile did not account for is Sbonga actually developing feelings for Nolwandle. They ended up sleeping together."

"Imihlola ke le." (What strange things these are.)

"The ancestors also said, take all your anger to Bukizwe. Leave Thobekile to them."

"I will." Another pause. "Nqobi. I am sorry, my boy. Truly."

I do not respond to that. I am not ready to. I am still sitting with the image of my father raising a gun at me in a corridor.

Still sitting with the royal farm reduced to ash because of choices I had no hand in making but will spend years helping to rebuild.

"Tomorrow we return the children. Bukizwe cannot run, he does not even know we know yet." He says. His voice even.

"Update me tomorrow. I have things to handle on this side." I say.

We end the call.

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I walk to the lounge.

And put my phone down and sit back.

The apartment is quiet around me. I can hear the shower running. I lean my head back against the couch and stare at the ceiling, letting everything settle into some kind of order in my head.

Bukizwe. The witch. The Vilakazis. The farm.

Motaung.

I close my eyes briefly.

After a while the shower stops. I hear movement, the soft sounds of some-one moving around the bedroom. Then footsteps in the corridor.

Refilwe comes into the lounge in her sleep clothes, hair wrapped, skin still warm from the shower.

She sees me on the couch and something in her face relaxes slightly, the way it does when she has been alone with her thoughts too long and is glad to not be alone anymore.

She comes and sits beside me, tucking her feet under her, leaning into my side without making a thing of it.

I put my arm around her.

"My father confirmed it," I say. "It is Bukizwe. Nolwandle's father."

She lifts her head to look at me. "So all three and Nolwandle are…"

"Siblings. Possibly. Yes."

She stares at me. Presses her hand over her mouth.

"If Bukizwe is also Sbonga's father, why did Thobekile not fight for Buki-zwe's chieftaincy line?" I think out loud. "Why come for the Ngwenya throne when her son has a direct bloodline somewhere else?"

"Power. A chief is powerful. But a king, and everything you have built on top of that, that is something else entirely. They wanted all of it." she says simply

I shake my head. Bukizwe will have King Langa at his door soon enough. That is out of my hands now. What I need is for him to lead us to the witch. His time has run out.

I look at her.

There is one more thing that has been sitting with me since this afternoon.

"Who is Jonas Motaung?" I ask.

The shift in her face is immediate. She swallows. Pulls back slightly and looks at me.

"Why?" she asks carefully.

"Answer me first, Fifi."

She is quiet for a moment. Then she looks down at her hands.

"He is the man Molefe wanted me to marry. When I was eighteen. The rea-son I ran away." She says it quietly.

I stare at her. "That man is in his seventies."

"I know."

"Refilwe…"

"I know, Zwee." She closes her eyes briefly. "Why are you asking? What has he done?"

"He has been making enquiries. About you. Your whereabouts." I watch her face go tight and I reach over and take her hand before the panic fully sets in. "Hey. Look at me."

She looks at me.

"I will handle it. He will not get anywhere near you. You know that." I hold her gaze steady. "I would not let anything happen to you. You know this."

She nods slowly. Her hand tightens around mine.

"Will we ever just…" she starts, then stops. Exhales softly. "Will we ever get one moment of peace, Nqobizwe? Just one. To breathe."

I pull her into me properly and press my lips to the top of her head.

"We will, I promise you we will." I say.

She leans into me and I hold her there. The apartment is quiet around us. Outside the city carries on, indifferent to all of it.

Inside I am already ordering everything in my head. Bukizwe. The witch. Motaung. Senzo.

One at a time.

…

Narrated

Sizwe and Dikeledi left the apartment to give Refilwe and Nqobizwe some space.

Sizwe took her to his other house. The one he shared with Lerato carries something he does not want near Dikeledi. Bad energy. Bad memories. Bad everything. He did not say all of that out loud. He just drove to the other house and she did not question it.

They are in the lounge now. Dikeledi is curled into the corner of the couch with her wine, legs tucked under her. Sizwe is beside her, relaxed, watching her the way he has been watching her all evening.

"No man, Sizwe." She points at him over the rim of her glass. "Tell the truth. O guluva neh?" (You are a gangster, right?)

He chuckles. "What if I am?"

"Re tla reng (What can we say) If it's working for you." She sips unbothered

Sizwe looks at her. More like stares. He has been doing that all evening and cannot stop. He keeps asking himself where this woman has been his whole life.

He made a decision about himself a long time ago, that he was not built for attachment, that he would not settle, that nobody would get close enough to make him want to. He believed that completely.

And then Dikeledi opened her mouth and dismantled the whole thing with-out even trying.

"Why did you decline my invitation this morning?" he asks.

She tilts her head. "Even me being here tonight is by luck. Don't push it."

He smiles but there is something more honest sitting underneath it. He leans forward, elbows on his knees. "I don't know what you are doing to me, Dee. But it's working. I can't get you out of my head. I look forward to whatever is going to come out of your mouth next. That has never happened to me before."

She looks at him sideways. "Are you in love with me?"

"I don't know what this is," he says honestly. "I have never been in love. But I know I want you around. A lot."

"That's dangerous," she says.

"How?"

"Because you are dangerous." She says it simply, like a fact she has already accepted. "You don't do relationships. You are a player, Sizwe. And I am a lover girl, okay. I love hard. I don't do situationships or arrangements or confusion. I want something real or I want nothing at all."

"I am not going to make excuses for who I have been. Yes, I have never set-tled. But I have also never met anyone like you." He says

She gives him a look. "Jwale o batla ho test'a kanna." (Now you want to test with me.) "I am not a trial run. I refuse to be that."

"That is not what I am saying." He shifts to face her properly. "I am saying give me a chance. Utla bona." (You will see.)

"No." She shakes her head firmly.

"Just like that? No?"

"Just like that. No." She picks up her wine glass. "I don't know you well enough, Sizwe. What I know is that you annoy me and you are too good looking for your own good and that is a dangerous combination. I am pro-tecting myself."

He watches her sip her wine. Something about the way she says it, not with cruelty, not with performance, just plainly and honestly, gets to him more than anything else could.

"Ngizo kuphatha grand, Dee," he says quietly. (I will treat you well, Dee.)

She looks at him. He looks back.

"I hear you," she says. "But no."

And that is where she intends to leave it.

Except she does not leave it there.

Because Sizwe stops pushing. He does not argue or negotiate or turn on the charm. He simply accepts her answer and tops up her wine and asks her about her teaching and actually listens when she talks.

He laughs in the right places and asks the right questions and at some point, without her fully tracking how it happened, they are sitting closer than they were before and the wine is nearly finished and Dikeledi is no longer looking at the room when she talks, she is looking at him.

"You are doing the staring thing," she says.

"I know," he says. He does not stop.

"Sizwe."

"Dk."

"I said no."

"I know you did."

"So stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

She opens her mouth. Closes it. "You know like what."

He reaches over slowly and rubs her cheek with his thumb. She goes still.

"I am not asking you for anything," he says quietly. "I am just sitting here."

"You are not just sitting here," she says. Her voice comes out smaller than she wants it to.

"What am I doing then?"

She looks at him. At his eyes which have not moved from her face all night. At the completely unfair way he is looking at her, not pushing, not perform-ing, just present and patient and certain.

"You are making it very difficult," she says.

"For what?"

"For me to keep saying no."

He does not smile. He does not say anything. He just looks at her and waits.

Dikeledi takes a breath.

"I want to be clear," she starts. "I still think…"

He kisses her.

Gently. One hand at her jaw, no rush, no urgency. Like he has all the time in the world and is not afraid she will pull back.

She does not pull back.

She sits with it for half a second and then she kisses him back properly and her hand finds the front of his shirt and she stops thinking about what she was going to say. The whole sentence dissolves.

When he pulls back she keeps her eyes closed for a moment longer than she means to.

She opens them.

"I was talking," she says.

"You were about to talk yourself out of something you wanted," he says.

She stares at him. "That is not…" She stops. "Okay that is accurate but still."

He smiles. Just slightly.

She looks at him for one more second, weighing it, and then she decides to stop weighing it.

She pulls him back.

One thing leads to another the way it does when two people have been cir-cling each other for long enough.

The couch becomes the corridor becomes the staircase, navigated without incident because Dikeledi is in flat shoes and nobody takes out any pictures.

They get to the bedroom.

She steps back from him and holds up one hand. He stops immediately.

"Before anything," she says, completely serious. "Do you have a condom?"

He blinks. "Yes."

"Where?"

"Drawer. Right side."

She points at it. "Get it now. Before things progress and we lose our heads."

"You think I would forget?"

"I think you are very distracting and I do not trust either of us in the next ten minutes." She folds her arms. "Drawer. Please."

He opens it, holds it up for her to see.

She looks at it. Nods once. "Put it somewhere you can find it."

"Dk it is in my hand."

"I know where it is now. I want to know where it will be later when we are not thinking straight."

"Bedside table," he says, and places it there with unnecessary ceremony be-fore turning back to her.

She is pressing her lips together trying not to laugh. "Okay," she says. "You may continue."

"Thank you for the permission," he says seriously.

"You are welcome."

He crosses the room and the laughing settles and what takes its place is something quieter and warmer and Dikeledi, for all her no's and her conditions and her very organised condom logistics, does not move back.

She moves forward.

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Much later, Dikeledi is on her back staring at the ceiling. Sizwe has one arm folded behind his head, doing the same. The room is quiet.

"Okay," she says eventually.

"Okay what?" he asks.

She is quiet for a beat.

"Nothing," she says. "Just okay."

He turns his head to look at her. She does not turn to look at him but he can see the corner of her mouth.

"Dikeledi."

"Sizwe."

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"It was not nothing."

She pulls the sheet up. "I was just going to say…" She stops. Breathes. "Fi-ne. You were right. I was talking myself out of something I wanted."

He says nothing. Just looks at her.

"Don't be annoying about it," she adds.

"I am not saying anything."

"Your face is saying things."

He smiles at the ceiling. "I like you, Dee. A lot."

She absorbs that for a moment. "I know," she says quietly.

"That's all you're giving me?"

"For now." She closes her eyes. "Ask me again in the morning."

He looks at her, this woman who still managed to negotiate in the middle of everything, who asked for condom placement confirmation, who said no three times and meant it each time right up until she didn't, and he thinks he has never been more interested in another person in his life.

"In the morning," he agrees.

He closes his eyes.

Neither of them moves apart.

Chapter 35

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Refilwe

It is morning and I am going back to work today. Sick leave is over. I was genuinely starting to enjoy not thinking about emails and deadlines. Today that ends.

I woke up early and came straight to the kitchen. I am going all out this morning, and honestly it is for Zwee.

My man is carrying so much right now and he just keeps going, keeps being strong for everyone. He deserves to be taken care of for once. And yes, last night helped too. The things he did to me, arm injury and all. I keep having flashbacks and I need to stop because I have to function today.

Dikeledi did not come back last night. Zwee said she is safe with Sizwe so I left it. She did not answer my calls either. I wonder if she is still planning to leave today. I hope not. I know that is selfish of me, she has a life in Free State, a brother, a home. I just love having her here.

But first, breakfast.

Bacon sizzles in one pan. Boerewors cooks slowly beside it, the fat catching and spitting softly. I do the eggs next, then stir the mushrooms, and leave the baked beans on low heat. The smell fills the whole apartment.

I wipe the table down and lay the cloth properly before setting out the plates and cutlery. Glasses, then mugs for tea and coffee. I carry the food out dish by dish, eggs first, then bacon and sliced boerewors. Baked beans go in the middle with a basket of warm bread beside them. Butter, jam, and a small fruit bowl fill the remaining space.

I step back and look at it. It looks like something his mother would approve of.

Zwee comes out of the bedroom while I am still standing there. He showered, still in yesterday's clothes since he did not plan to stay, but he looks more rested than last night. He walks straight to me and holds me by the waist, those eyes finding mine.

"You smell like me," I say.

He chuckles. "And now I am going to miss you the whole day. How am I supposed to focus?" He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead, then looks past me at the table. His whole face changes. "You did all of this?"

"I thought I should go all out for you this morning." I look up at him. "Just to say thank you. Thank you for always wanting to protect me. For loving me. For carrying the kingdom on your back and still showing up for me through all of it. I see you, Zwee. I really do."

He looks at me for a long moment without saying anything. Then he pulls me into his chest, both arms around me, my face pressed against him. His heart is beating fast. He kisses the top of my head and pulls back to look at me.

"Thank you," he says. Almost a whisper.

I kiss him softly. He holds it for a moment.

"Come, let's eat. I still have to get ready for work."

We sit down together.

"Mhm." He looks at the spread and shakes his head slowly. "My mother would be so happy seeing you feed me like this."

I laugh. "I cannot believe she called you skinny."

He laughs too and reaches for his fork. "She has been saying that my whole life."

After a moment he puts his fork down and reaches across the table for my hand. His face has shifted.

"Mama, I have doubled your security. It will no longer be from a distance, they will be close. I know I wanted you to have a normal life and move freely without feeling watched." He pauses, his thumb moving across my hand. "But I cannot take chances right now. If I could, I would not let you leave the apartment."

I didn’t even know I was being watched.

I exhale. "You think I am actually in danger?"

"Motaung is a gang leader. If he is asking questions about you, it means he is planning something. And the witch has found a way to interfere with our

ancestors, that makes everything less predictable." He holds my gaze. "I am not taking risks with you."

My life has genuinely become a film.

"So bodyguards at work too?" I ask.

"Already arranged. I spoke to your employer. It is handled."

I wonder what on earth he said to my boss. But I trust him. I do.

“I am also having the royal seer come here to Pretoria. I want this place protected before anything else. He needs to strengthen us.”

He pauses. "I also need to speak to your father soon. He has to introduce you to your ancestors. The Monahengs need to cover you too. If something ever got through to the Ngwenya side, which I do not think will happen, but if it did, I want your own bloodline standing behind you."

"And you? Who is protecting you?" I ask

” You are the true target because you represent the kingdom. My safety doesn’t matter as much as yours. Protecting you protects everything.”

"You have been up thinking about all of this, haven't you?" I say quietly.

He looks at me "I could not sleep properly. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you, Fifi. I genuinely don't know."

I squeeze his hand. Neither of us says anything for a moment.

We finish breakfast slowly, talking about small things, easy things. It helps.

Then I go and get ready. Dark tailored trousers, a simple blazer over a blouse, comfortable heels. Professional but comfortable. I look at myself in the mirror and feel like myself again.

I come out and grab my laptop bag from the couch.

Zwee is already waiting. He takes the bag from my shoulder before I can argue.

"You look beautiful," he says.

"Thank you. Are you going to your place to change?"

He picks up my bag "Yes. Your driver is already outside. I sorted everything, Mama. Just go to work."

We walk out together. Outside the building we say our goodbyes properly, a real kiss, his hand at my jaw, unhurried despite everything waiting for both of us.

"Call me when you get there," he says against my forehead.

"I will."

The driver opens the door for me. I get in. As we pull away I see a black SUV ease out behind us.

The security team.

I watch it in the side mirror and breathe.

This is life now. For a while at least. I trust Zwee to fix it.

•••

I am at my desk now. Two bodyguards stand outside my office door, shoulders back, eyes forward, completely unbothered. I, however, am very bothered by the stares I collected walking through the office this morning.

My boss welcomed me back and confirmed the guards were expected. He did not say much beyond that. I did not ask. Whatever Nqobizwe said to him, it worked, and I have decided not to pull at that thread.

I am settling into my chair and opening my laptop when I see a figure at the glass door.

Senzo.

He looks at the guards first, then knocks. I signal him in.

He comes through holding a bouquet of red roses. Full, proper roses, the kind you buy when you have decided to make a statement.

I stand as he approaches and we share a quick hug. He extends the flowers.

"Welcome back. These are for you." He says

I take them. "Thank you. I love them."

I look at him. "Since when do you buy flowers though? You used to say men who buy flowers are…"

"Idiots," he finishes, chuckling. "I know. I didn't know better."

We sit.

"Mbali has been schooling you. O kenya sekolo." (She is teaching you well.) I say smiling.

His face closes. "We broke up."

My eyes go wide. "Oh… I'm sorry, Senzo."

"Don't be. It was coming."

I nod and leave it there. His love life is not my business and I have enough on my plate.

He glances at the guards through the glass, then back at me. "And now? You are Patrice Motsepe suddenly. The whole security detail?"

I laugh. "Something like that. Long story."

He leans forward slightly."Is it that restaurant guy? He has already put you in danger, hasn't he?"

I frown. "What are you talking about?"

He shifts in his chair. "Ref, listen. I know it is none of my business. But I care about you. That man is not who you think he is. Whatever he has told you about himself…"

He pauses, glancing at the guards again. "Seeing those guys out there just confirms it. He is dangerous, Refilwe."

I look at him calmly. "You are right. It is none of your business."

He stares at me like I have said something in another language.

"I am looking out for you. Since when do you get involved with men like that? I care about you and…" He stops. Exhales. "I have been trying to fight it but I can't. Refilwe, you and I were good together. I destroyed it and I regret it every day. I love you. I never stopped."

"Brick'a net daar." (Stop right there.). I stopped loving you. That is done and buried. Please don't bring me additional stress right now. I have more than enough. If you don't mind, I have work to do." I keep my voice completely even

He looks at me like he genuinely did not expect that response.

"Ref…"

"Please, Senzo."

He stands slowly. Walks toward the door, then turns back. His jaw is tight. His hands are fists at his sides.

"I will win you back. You will see. That man does not deserve you."

"If he is as dangerous as you say, then for your own sake, stay away from me. He is very possessive. You would not want to be on his bad side." I say pleasantly.

"I am not scared of him."

"You should be." I hold his gaze. "I don't love you, Senzo. This friendship is done. Please leave my office."

He holds my eyes for one more second. Then he walks out, jaw set, something unreadable in his face.

I watch him go through the glass.

Then I open my laptop and get to work.

•••

Narrated

Dikeledi wakes up warm and comfortable, which is immediately suspicious because her bed at home does not feel like this.

Then she feels the arms.

She turns slowly. Sizwe is still asleep beside her, face relaxed, completely unbothered by the world. She looks at him for a moment. The eyebrows, the jaw, the lips that she now has very specific opinions about.

"Staring is rude," he says, eyes still closed.

She startles. "I was not staring."

He opens his eyes slowly, voice still thick with sleep. "I don't mind. I'd stare too."

She clears her throat and moves to get up. He catches her before she can, arm pulling her back firmly.

"I have to go. Refilwe is probably worried and I am leaving today." She says.

His expression shifts. Something crosses his face that he does not fully hide. "I thought you might stay a bit longer."

"My brother is alone. I have to check on him and the house."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-four."

"Hawu, indoda endala leyo. He can take care of himself." (He is old enough) He props himself up. "Awume, Dee. Stay a bit longer." (Come on, Dee.)

"Nope." She shakes her head.

"What is my answer then? You said ask in the morning."

She laughs despite herself. He smiles at the sound of it like it is the best thing he has heard all week.

"And you believed me?"

She moves to get out of bed. He rolls on top of her in one smooth motion, already hard, pressing against her. She goes still.

She knows exactly what that feels like now. That is the problem.

"Sizwe, I have to go," she says, trying to sound like someone who means it.

"Kiss me first."

"I haven't brushed my teeth."

"I don't care."

"Sizwe I really need to…"

He kisses her.

She does not respond for exactly one second. Then she kisses him back.

They kiss hungrily, no patience for anything slow. Dikeledi is already warm all over before anything has properly started. She opens her legs and he positions himself without ceremony.

"Already wet. You are ready for me." He says, voice rough

"Sizwe just…" She does not finish the sentence. He pushes in and they both groan at the same time.

"F*ck," he says low, feeling the warmth close around him.

He moves his hips, steady and deliberate, hitting exactly the right places. He lifts one of her legs and she arches off the mattress.

"Si…Sizwe… oh… yes…"

"You are so tight, baby." His jaw is tight, holding himself back.

The room fills with the sound of them, breathless and unrestrained.

"What is my answer, Dee?" He asks it while still moving, not slowing down.

"Ahh… Sizwe…"

He hits it harder.

"Tell me, baby…"

"Ahh… I'm…"

"Say it."

"I f*cken like you… I like you… sh*t…"

He feels her tighten around him and that is enough. She comes with his name on her mouth and he follows right after, releasing completely, collapsing on top of her with the last of his breath.

They lie there. The room quiet. Both of them wrecked.

"F*ck, baby," Sizwe says eventually, still face down in the pillow. "Your pussy is fire."

Dikeledi laughs. A real one, from deep in her chest. "And you are too big but I love it."

He lifts his head and looks at her. "Leave tomorrow. Stay today. I will drive you myself, that is all I am asking."

"Sizwe, you don't need to drive all the way…"

"Please. I enjoy being with you, Dee. Just today." He looks at her properly, no performance.

She looks at his face. The begging eyes that have absolutely no business being on a man who looks like him.

She sighs. "Tomorrow. And do not try to change my mind when tomorrow comes."

He grins. He reaches for his shirt off the floor and wipes her carefully.

Then she realises.

She sits up slowly. "Sizwe."

"Hmm."

"We did not use a condom."

He stops. Looks at her. He can see it on her face, the slow crawl of panic. "I am sorry, Dee. I should have…"

"It slipped my mind too. We were both…" She waves a hand. "Lost."

He sits beside her "I am clean. And I know you are. I will get someone to bring essentials. Tell me what you need."

"Add the morning after pill to the list," she says, already chewing her nail.

He nods without making a thing of it. Kisses her forehead. "I will sort it now."

He reaches for his phone. She sits on the edge of the bed and breathes.

•••

Washed, changed into fresh clothes from the delivery, Dikeledi picks up her phone and calls Refilwe.

"My love," Refilwe answers.

"Hey. I am fine, I am with Sizwe. Before you say anything."

"Zwee did tell me you were safe. I trusted him."

"Refilwe. This man has superpowers." Dikeledi drops her voice.

Refilwe cracks up immediately. "What? Sizwe? Why?"

"He dickmatised me. Completely. I forgot the condom, Ref. Me. I forgot. I even told him I like him, while he was inside. That was not a fair question, that was entrapment."

Refilwe is howling. "Girl, that is your man. Stop fighting it."

"I am trying to guard my heart here. You know how I am."

"I know. But the heart wants what it wants, babe."

"Dee, breakfast is ready!" Sizwe's voice carries up from downstairs.

Dikeledi looks at the ceiling. "Girl. We will talk later. I have to go eat. I am starving, we missed dinner last night if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean," Refilwe says, laughing.

"Yeii, Sizwe ate it good, Refilwe. AA…okay I am going. Sharp."

Refilwe is still laughing when the call ends.

•••

Free State

Lentswe has been sitting with this problem since Motaung left her bedroom in the dark of night. One week. He gave her one week.

Refilwe is not answering her calls. She is not respond to any of messages. She knows she has to do something before Motaung comes knocking at her door.

She is walking back from the spaza shop, her mind turning the problem over and over, when she sees Tumelo coming the other way down the road.

Something clicks.

She slows. He clocks her and his face does the thing young people's faces do when they see someone they would rather avoid, a flicker of resignation before he stops anyway.

"Mme Lentswe," he says flatly.

She adjusts her bag and arranges her face into something soft. "Tumelo, my boy. How are you? I haven't seen your sister around for a while."

"Why?" No warmth. No pretence.

"I wanted to talk to her." She lets her shoulders drop slightly, manufacturing the weight of guilt. "I want to apologise. To her and to Refilwe. But Refilwe won't answer my calls and I don't blame her. I deserve that."

Tumelo says nothing but he is listening. She can see it.

"I feel terrible for what I put that girl through," she continues, her voice dropping. "She did not deserve any of it. She is the only child I have left, Tumelo. Step or not, she is mine. And I threw her away."

She lets her eyes go glassy. Just enough.

Tumelo shifts on his feet. Something in his face softens despite itself. "She will forgive you. Refilwe has a good heart."

Lentswe nods, dabbing at the corner of her eye. "She does. She always did."

"Dk visited her, she is coming back today actually. I will tell her you asked."

"Ke a leboha, Tumi." (Thank you, Tumi.) She smiles, sad and grateful.

He nods and walks on.

The moment he turns the corner the softness leaves Lentswe's face completely. She walks home quickly, already reaching for her phone.

•••

Motaung picks up on the second ring. His voice is cold before she says a word.

"I hope you have Refilwe for me."

"Not yet. But I have a plan. Just listen before you…"

"Call me only when Refilwe is there, Lentswe."

"If you want her, you will listen to me before you hang up." She keeps her voice steady. "I mean it."

A pause. "Remember who you are talking to. Now Talk."

She breathes. "Refilwe hates me. She won't come anywhere near me and I can't reach her. But her friend Dikeledi, she is a neighbour here, she knows where Refilwe is staying."

She pauses. "Dikeledi is coming back today. If you get to her first. Threaten her. Tell her to call Refilwe to come to her house. Refilwe will come running for her friend."

Silence on the line.

Then, slowly, a smile enters Motaung's voice. "Now I like how you think, Lentswe."

The call ends.

Lentswe stands in her kitchen and stares at the wall. Then she drops onto the couch and stares at the ceiling instead.

She has just handed Dikeledi to a man like Motaung to use as a tool.

She tells herself she had no choice.

She almost believes it.

•••

The Ngwenya Kingdom

The cars are ready. Buhle and Nkanyezis' bags packed. King Langa moves through the palace with the particular energy of a man who has made a decision and is no longer interested in debate.

He descends to the basement.

It is cold down here. Dark. The kind of place that reminds you very quickly of how much you have lost.

Thobekile is in a chair, both legs bandaged and elevated, a thin blanket around her shoulders. She was given food but not comfort. She looks up when she hears footsteps and arranges her face into something defiant, which under the circumstances takes effort.

The guards follow with a wheelchair.

"Yah, m'thakathi." (Yeah, witch.) King Langa stops in front of her.

She stares at him. Says nothing.

"Still got the attitude. Even now." He chuckles, genuinely amused. "You are something, Thobekile. I will give you that."

"What do you want?" she asks flatly.

"I thought you might want to know that I found out." He watches her face carefully. "Bukizwe. I know."

The defiance cracks. Just for a second, a flicker of something cold moving through her eyes, before she pulls herself back.

"Whoever told you that lied," she says.

"We will see about that shortly." He nods to the guards. "Put her in the wheelchair."

"UNGIYISAPHI?" (Where are you taking me?) She grabs the armrests, already starting to fight despite having two useless legs.

To your lover. Let us all sit together and have a conversation. Like adults" He turns and walks toward the stairs, his laugh low and easy and completely without mercy.

•••

The royal convoy rolls through the gates of Chief Bukizwe's homestead and the day changes immediately.

Workers freeze mid-task. A woman carrying a basin sets it down on the ground. Two children who were running stop running. Everyone reads the flags on the cars and straightens.

King Langa steps out. Behind him, Queen Liyana. Two senior elders. Then the guards ease Thobekile out in her wheelchair.

Then Buhle and Nkanyezi step out.

They walk with their heads down, shoulders carrying the weight of everything.

Chief Bukizwe, standing at the entrance of his home with his wife and son beside him, watches her appear and feels the blood drain slowly from his face.

He swallows. His forehead is already damp.

He bows. His family bows. The workers bow. Everyone bows because this is their King and the instinct is older than thought.

"My King." Bukizwe's voice holds.

"I am glad you know that I am your King." King Langa looks at him for a long moment. Just looks. Letting the silence do its work.

Then he smooths his jacket.

"This way, my King," Bukizwe says, gesturing toward the entrance. His hand is not entirely steady.

They walk inside.

Chapter 36

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Narrated

Nolwandle has been coming to the hospital every day since Sbonga was admitted. She tells herself it is because she feels responsible. She does not examine that feeling too closely.

Sbonga is sitting up today. Still fragile, still moving carefully, but more present than he has been since they brought him in. His eyes are clearer.

She pulls the chair close to the bed and sits.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better," he says, keeping his jaw as still as possible when he speaks.

She nods, turning her bag over in her hands.

"I could not get hold of your mother. But I heard there is some kind of meeting happening, at my father's house. The whole family is there. Nkanyezi and Buhle too." She pauses. "Your mother arrived in a wheelchair."

Sbonga goes still. "What?"

"I don't know what happened. I am trying to find out."

He processes that slowly, his face working through things he does not say out loud.

"I am going to see Nqobizwe today," Nolwandle says, keeping her voice even.

"I bathed with what your mother gave me. Drank the herbs too." She almost grimaces saying it. "They did not taste good."

Sbonga's jaw tightens. He looks at her, at her face, her hands, the way she is sitting, and something moves through his chest that has nothing to do with the plan. He has been trying to push it down since she started visiting. It is becoming harder.

This needs to be done. He knows that. But he does not want her near Nqobizwe. He does not want her near anyone.

He does not say any of that.

The door opens. The doctor comes in holding a folder, her expression professional and carefully neutral, the kind of neutral that means something.

"Hey, Sbonga. You look better today," she says.

"I feel better."

She opens the folder. " Good. I need to talk to you about something. Your medical aid has contacted us." A short pause. "You have been removed from the policy. As of this morning, we can no longer carry your expenses. You would need to transfer to a public facility within the next thirty minutes, or arrange to cover the costs yourself."

Sbonga stares at her. "That is not possible."

"I understand it is unexpected…"

"Did you call my father? The King?"

"He actually contacted us first. Before the medical aid did. He informed us directly that he would not be covering any further expenses." She says

The heart monitor ticks louder in the silence.

"Are you sure? There must be a mistake." Nolwandle asks, leaning forward.

"I wish I could tell you otherwise. Please do call to confirm. But the instruction came from the King himself." She closes the folder. "Thirty minutes."

She walks out.

Sbonga picks up his phone. His mother…voicemail. His father… voicemail. Buhle… nothing. Nkanyezi… nothing. One by one, silence from everyone.

He stares at the screen.

Then he dials the last number he wants to dial.

Nqobizwe picks up on the second ring.

"Sbonga."

He doesn't even greet. "Why has father cut me off the medical aid?"

Nqobizwe chuckles, a short, dry sound. "He has cut you off everything, Sbonga. Haven't you heard? He is not your father." A beat. "Sorry, hey."

The line goes dead.

Sbonga sits with the phone in his hand. The room feels smaller than it did a moment ago.

"What is it?" Nolwandle asks quietly.

"Nqobizwe says my father is not my father." He says it slowly, like the words need time to form. "And that I am cut off everything."

"What…"

"Call the bank." He passes her the number without looking up.

She dials and hands the phone back. He goes through security questions on autopilot, his voice steady even as his grip on the phone tightens.

The consultant comes back. "Your account is currently restricted, sir. All transactions have been frozen until further notice."

"On whose instruction?"

"I'm unable to disclose full details. But the restriction is active."

He ends the call. Sets the phone face down on the bed.

"Everything is frozen," he says quietly.

Nolwandle stares at him. Then she straightens. "Okay. Do not stress about the hospital, I will cover what is left at reception." She stands and picks up her bag before he can object. "We will figure the rest out."

"Nolwandle…"

"Let me handle it." She looks at him. "Rest. I will be back."

She walks out. Sbonga watches the door close behind her and lies back slowly, staring at the ceiling.

The Prince. From a powerful kingdom. Taking money from a woman because he has nothing left.

He closes his eyes.

•••

The Ngwenya Kingdom: Chief Bukizwe's Council Chamber

The maidens set refreshments on the table. Tea, fruit, small dishes arranged with the care you give a King's visit.

"No need. We will not be long." King Langa says, not looking at them.

They bow and disappear.

The room settles. Bukizwe sits across from the King, his hands on his knees, trying to look like a man who has nothing to hide. His wife sits beside him, her eyes down. His son sits at the far end of the table with his arms folded and his jaw hard.

Buhle and Nkanyezi sit together on the side, shoulders touching. They have not spoken since they arrived.

Queen Liyana sits beside King Langa, calm and watchful.

Thobekile is in her wheelchair, positioned where everyone can see her.

King Langa takes his time. He looks around the room slowly, at the walls, the furniture, the ceiling, everywhere except Bukizwe, and then he settles.

"Bukizwe." He says the name like he is picking something up and examining it. "I came bearing bad news."

"What is it, my King?" Bukizwe asks.

"You decided to enter my kraal and disrespect me." King Langa's voice does not rise. It stays very even.

"You slept with my wife. And you made her pregnant." A pause. "Three times."

Bukizwe's wife makes a small sound. Her hands fold tightly in her lap. She does not look up.

Bukizwe opens his mouth. "My King, I think there has been a misunderstanding…"

"Look at her." King Langa nods toward Thobekile in the wheelchair.

"Look at what she looks like now. That is what I did to her for what she did to my family." He lets that sit. "You think I would hesitate to do the same to you? Don't make me stupid, Bukizwe."

Bukizwe looks at Thobekile. She looks back at him. Something passes between them, a silent, rapid negotiation, and King Langa watches all of it.

Bukizwe's wife is crying without sound, tears falling onto her hands.

The King has seen enough.

"Guards." He raises his voice. "Take him. He will be hanged today. For denying his King the truth."

The room erupts.

Bukizwe's wife cries out. His son lurches forward before stopping himself, fists clenched. Thobekile goes very still, watching the King's face to see if it is real.

The guards move to Bukizwe.

"Wait…wait, please…" Bukizwe's composure breaks completely. "My King, please. I will speak. I will say everything, please."

"I am listening." The King does not signal the guards to release him. They hold their position.

Bukizwe breathes. Swallows. "Thobekile and I… we were together before. Before she was given to you. That is how we know each other." He keeps his eyes down.

"She came to me. She said your sperms were useless, that you could not give her children. She said she needed to give you an heir. That Sbonga was yours, only Nkanyezi and Buhle are mine." His voice drops. "I am sorry, my King. I should not have. I know that."

"BUKIZWE THULA!" (BUKIZWE SHUT UP!) Thobekile's voice tears across the room.

The King nods once. A guard steps close to Thobekile and raises a gun. She goes very still.

"Continue," King Langa says to Bukizwe.

Bukizwe does not look at Thobekile. "That is the truth, my King. I am sorry."

"Sbonga is yours too," King Langa says simply.

"All three of them. None of them carry my blood." He pauses. "As for my sperms, my ancestors made sure nothing of mine grew in that rotten womb. Not because I cannot. But because they knew what she was before I did."

Bukizwe's mouth opens. Closes.

"Sbonga cannot be mine," he says carefully. "Because Thobekile was planning, " He stops. Catches himself.

"Planning what?" The King's voice drops. "Say it, Bukizwe. Have the chest to finish that sentence."

Silence.

"She was planning for him to marry Nolwandle. After…" Another stop.

"AFTER KILLING NQOBIZWE." King Langa's voice finally fills the room. He stands, his chair scraping back. "YOU WANTED MY SON DEAD? YOU PLANNED THIS?"

"Ngwenya." Queen Liyana places her hand over his. Firm. Steady.

He stops. Looks at her hand. Breathes.

He sits back down. One breath. Two.

"So you did not know Sbonga is yours," the King says, his voice returning to that dangerous quiet. He turns to Thobekile slowly. "But you knew. You have always known." He lets that sit. "You were willing to let your own son marry his sister. Knowingly. And you said nothing."

The room goes completely still.

Bukizwe stares at Thobekile. Whatever he thought he knew about her shifts visibly on his face.

Thobekile looks at the floor.

Queen Liyana claps her hands together once, sharply, the sound of someone who has run completely out of patience.

Bukizwe's wife breaks. "How could you do this, Bukizwe? With my child? How?"

"It is worse," King Langa says, almost conversationally. "They are already sleeping together. Have been."

"HAWU, HAWU. Amanyala, Nkosi yami" (This is filth, My God) Bukizwe's wife wails, rocking forward with the weight of it.

Bukizwe's son says nothing. His tears keep coming but his face is stone.

King Langa leans forward. " Now. Let us talk about what you wanted in return. Sbonga takes the throne, yes. And you?"

Bukizwe is a broken man now. "The Royal farm. I wanted the farm." He says quietly

King Langa looks at him for a long moment. Then he laughs. A real, deep, full laugh that fills the chamber and bounces off the walls.

He wipes the corner of his eye.

"You are ambitious," he says. "I will give you that. All of you. Truly ambitious." The laugh fades. "The farm burned down last night. Every crop. Every building. Gone." He spreads his hands. "So there is your silver platter, Bukizwe. Go and build it from ash. If you want it that badly."

"My King, I am sorry, I…"

"Now you don't want it. Now that it is ruins. Hypocrite." He straightens his jacket. "One more question. Where is Vilakazi?"

Thobekile's head snaps up.

"I don't know who that is, my King," Bukizwe says.

"Do not insult me." The King's eyes are steady. "You helped him disappear. Where is he?"

"Ini? BUKIZWE. You were working with that witch behind my back?" Thobekile's voice is furious.

"Angazi lutho ngo Vilakazi mina." (I know nothing about Vilakazi.) Bukizwe looks at the floor.

"A witch, played in her own game." King Langa shakes his head slowly.

"You notice something, Bukizwe? You threw Thobekile to the wolves without a second thought. But Vilakazi, that name you will not give me. You see, that tells me everything." He raises an eyebrow.

Bukizwe says nothing.

Thobekile stares at the side of his face with something beyond rage.

King Langa stands. "These children will remain here. One of your brothers will perform the welcoming ceremony for them, they are your blood and they will be received as such." He looks at his guards. "Take him. He is coming with me."

"Please, my King… Please, I am begging you…" Bukizwe grabs the armrests of his chair.

"You will not give me Vilakazi here. Perhaps a change of scenery will help you remember." He turns to the door. "Asambe." (Let's go.)

The guards pull Bukizwe to his feet.

Thobekile is wheeled out behind them. Queen Liyana follows.

King Langa pauses at the doorway and looks back at Bukizwe's family, his wife still bent over herself, his son rigid with grief and fury, two strangers on the side of the room who carry his blood and his secrets in equal measure.

"These children are now yours," he says to Bukizwe's wife, not unkindly.

"Inform your in-laws. Make arrangements for the welcoming." He looks at Buhle for just a moment. "The young one is ill. Prepare yourselves."

Buhle's breath catches.

Nkanyezi takes her hand under the table and holds it.

The King walks out.

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Outside at the cars, King Langa dials.

Nqobizwe picks up immediately. "Baba."

The King hears the coldness and does not try to move past it. "Son. How are you?"

"I am fine. How did it go?"

"Bukizwe admitted everything. He did not know Sbonga was his, Thobekile kept that from him. She was willing to let them marry knowing they share a father." He exhales. "He refused to give me Vilakazi. Completely refused. But he knows him, I am certain."

"What was in it for Bukizwe?"

"The Royal farm."

A short silence on the line.

"Bring him here," Nqobizwe says. "Pretoria. Away from the kingdom, away from the witches. Bring Baba Ngubeni too. We need spiritual cover for whatever comes next. Bukizwe will talk, just not there."

"Prepare the jet, son."

"It will be ready."

They end the call. King Langa looks at the house one last time, then turns to his driver.

"To the airport."

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Nqobizwe

It is afternoon now. The jet is arranged. Tonight we work.

Bukizwe needs to give us Vilakazi and he will, just not in the Kingdom where he feels protected. Bring him somewhere unfamiliar, away from everything he knows. He will talk.

I have people watching every corner. Ayanda is holding things down at the palace. Everything is moving.

Sizwe has not called once today. I already know why. Good for him.

Fifi said she is coming here when her shift ends. She misses me. I smile at that.

There is a knock at my office door.

My PA opens it slightly. "Sir, Princess Nolwandle is here. She did make an appointment."

I forgot about her. Right, let us hear what she has to say. A young witch who has no idea how badly things have already gone for her side.

"Send her in. And when Refilwe arrives, bring her straight through."

She nods and closes the door.

A few minutes later Nolwandle walks in. I smell it before she reaches the chair. Something thick and herbal and deeply unpleasant, like someone mixed wet soil with something rotten and called it a remedy. Whatever Thobekile gave her, she applied it generously.

She smiles at me and sits down without being invited to. She crosses her legs and tilts her head.

"Nqobizwe. We meet again."

"Why do you smell like that?" I ask.

The smile wavers. "Like what?"

"Like something died. What did you bathe with, Nolwandle?"

She sniffs her own wrist. "I don't smell anything."

"You smell like a riverbank in summer. It is coming off you in waves." I lean back in my chair. I can feel what the herbs were supposed to do, some soft pull at the edges, the kind of thing that works on a man who is not claimed, not covered, not protected. On me it does nothing except make me want to open a window. The emotion it produces is not love. It is irritation.

She clears her throat and resets the smile. "I came to talk about the arrangement. Our marriage. I know it was set by the King but I believe we could build something real, Nqobizwe. Something…"

"Call your mother," I say.

She blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"You slept with your brother, Nolwandle. That is a more urgent conversation than whatever you came here to say."

She goes completely still.

"Sbonga is Bukizwe's son. Same father as you." I hold her gaze. "Did Thobekile not mention that part when she was handing you the bathing herbs?"

"I…what…no, that is not…"

"Your father is with my father as we speak. Everything came out this morning. Everything." I pause. "You were a tool, Nolwandle. Both of you were. She used you and she did not care what it cost you."

Her hands start shaking. She looks at me and for the first time since she walked in there is no performance on her face. Just a young woman realising the full shape of what she was pulled into.

The door opens.

Refilwe walks in, looking exactly like everything I have been waiting for since this morning. She sees Nolwandle and her eyes move between us, careful and composed.

"Hi, sorry, your PA said I could come straight in. I didn't know you were…"

"It is fine, Mama. I told her to let you in." I look at Nolwandle.

"That woman standing there is the only woman for me. My chosen one. Your chosen queen." I hold Nolwandle's gaze. "Now get out. And bow on your way."

Nolwandle stands. Her legs are not entirely steady. She turns to Refilwe, drops into a bow, and walks out without a word, pulling the door closed behind her.

Refilwe watches her go. Then she turns to me.

"And then?"

"Nolwandle," I say.

"Oh." She thinks about it for a second. "She is pretty. She looked like she had just seen something terrible though."

"She had." I stand and walk to her. "Did you smell anything on her?"

She frowns slightly. "She smelled fine? Normal."

I shake my head. "She smelled like a ditch to me. Thobekile's herbs. They were meant to work as a love portion." I look at Refilwe's face. "On me they do the opposite. You are already claimed. There is nothing to pull."

Refilwe shakes her head slowly. "Is she desperate?"

"She was used. There is a difference." I pull her close from behind, my arms around her waist. She leans back into me.

"I love this office," she says, looking around. "It feels different to the Ngwenya one."

"I love you," I say into the side of her neck.

She turns in my arms and looks at me. Those eyes. She wraps her hands around my neck and something in her face shifts into something softer and more deliberate.

"I love you so much," she says.

"I have been thinking about last night since this morning." She presses her lips together. "I could not stop crossing my legs at my desk."

I smile. "Is that why you came?"

"That." She tilts her head. "And I missed you. Is it wrong to want some servicing from my man?"

I go hard immediately. I did not know she had this side. I love it.

"Let me lock the door," I say.

She laughs softly and starts removing her blazer.

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I lock the door and walk back. I have to hold myself because it is already throbbing.

She has removed her blazer and blouse, standing in her bra and trousers, looking at me with those eyes.

"Mhm, Mama." I shake my head slowly. "You drive me completely crazy."

"Then devour me," she says.

I laugh, a real one, and close the distance.

The kiss starts fast. Impatient. My hands go to her waist and I lift her onto the table, sweeping things carefully to the side first. She helps me off with my shirt, her hands moving quickly. I kick off my shoes and step out of my trousers.

She reaches into my underwear and wraps her hand around me, stroking slowly.

"Mhm." I close my eyes for a second. "Fifi…"

She slides off the table and kneels before I can say anything else, and what happens next takes all rational thought with it. The warmth of her mouth, the way she moves, the sound she makes. I grip the edge of the table.

"Ah… f*ck, Fifi…"

She keeps going. I feel it building fast, too fast.

"Ba… baby… move … I'm…" I cannot finish the sentence. I finish something else.

She disappears into the bathroom. I lean against the table, breathing.

She comes back wiping her mouth, completely unbothered, like she did not just take me apart completely.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" I ask.

She smiles. "I don't kiss and tell."

I laugh and pick her up, carrying her back to the table. I set her down and look at her.

"Bend over."

She holds my gaze for one slow second and then turns.

I move her thong aside and find her soaking. I take my time, fingers first, her breath catching immediately.

"Nqobizwe…"

"I hear you." I slide in.

"Mmm." She drops her head forward.

I move slowly at first and then I don't. The room fills with the sound of us, her crying my name, my breathing ragged, the desk solid beneath us. This room is soundproofed. Nobody hears a thing outside these walls.

She comes apart before I do, shaking, gripping the edge of the table. I follow seconds after.

I stay inside her for a while, both hands on her waist, neither of us moving.

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We are on the couch now. She is lying on my chest, the room carrying the warmth of what just happened.

"I love your freaky side," I say.

She laughs quietly. "You give it to me too good. I cannot hide it."

"I am glad."

She shifts slightly and then goes still. "You were right about Senzo," she says.

I look down at her. "What did he do?"

"He came to my office. Brought flowers." She pauses. "Told me he loves me. That he never stopped. That you are dangerous and he is going to win me back."

I clench my jaw. "That piece of…"

"I threw him out," she says. "I told him we are done. The friendship, all of it."

"He is going to be a nuisance." I keep my voice even. "I do not like nuisances."

She plays with her fingers quietly.

"Come here." I pull her back against my chest and hold her there. "You are mine, Fifi."

She exhales and relaxes into me.

"I know," she says softly.

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Narrated

Vilakazi paces the small room. Three steps. Turn. Three steps back. His brothers watch him from their seats, Mandla with his arms folded, Bheki with his head in his hands.

They heard about Bukizwe hours ago. Taken by the King. Loaded into a convoy and gone.

Everything they built is cracking.

"Senzanjani?" (What do we do?) Mandla asks.

"The child is at Bukizwe's homestead now." Vilakazi stops pacing. "This changes everything. It was all working, everything was in place…"

"We need to run. Before they find us." Bheki says

"How?" Vilakazi spreads his hands. "They have eyes everywhere now. You think we walk out of this kingdom without being seen? After Bukizwe?"

"AHHHH." Mandla slams his fist against the wall. "We were so close."

Silence falls over the room.

"Those ancestors are stronger than we thought," Bheki says quietly.

"It is the chosen one," Vilakazi says. His voice is different now, lower, more careful.

"The new one. The girl. I could not even see her face clearly when I tried. The moment she was claimed it changed everything. She closed doors we were counting on being open."

He sits down slowly.

"But she cannot block everything," Mandla says. "She is new. She does not know what she is yet."

"We make that girl sleepwalk," Bheki says, sitting up. "Into the palace grounds. She dies inside the Ngwenya yard…"

"We cannot kill her," Vilakazi says firmly. "What was planted in her will do that on its own. The womb, the soul, it is already working. We do not touch her directly." He pauses. "But if she enters and dies there…"

"The door opens," Mandla finishes.

They sit with that.

The room is quiet except for the distant sound of wind moving through the trees outside, and somewhere far off, thunder that has no clouds to explain it.

Vilakazi looks at the ceiling.

"They are watching," he says softly.

Nobody disagrees.

Chapter 37

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Refilwe

Nqobizwe and I are leaving the building together. The driver opens the door and we get in. I sink into the seat and exhale.

"Yoh. The stares I got today." I shake my head. "Walking around with bodyguards like I am someone."

He takes my hand. "Be strong, Mama. It will be over in due time."

I look at our hands. "I know. I should get used to it anyway. I will be queen."

He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it.

"Tonight I have business to handle. You will sleep at my house." He says.

I turn to look at him. "Why?"

"I need to know you are safe so I can focus on what I have to do. I cannot leave you alone right now, Fifi. Not with everything that is moving."

I sigh. "Okay."

He squeezes my hand. "Thank you. We will stop at your apartment first so you can pack a bag."

"When will you be back?" I ask.

"I cannot confirm."

I swallow that and look out the window. I do not ask what the business is. I have learned that some things I am better off not knowing before they happen.

We stop at my apartment. I pack quickly, overnight things, something decent for tomorrow since I am meeting King Serithi. The days moved fast. Faster than I expected.

Nqobizwe picks up my bag without being asked and we head back down.

We are in the car again, driving to his place, when my phone rings. Unknown number.

I look at it. Then at Nqobizwe. Worry crosses his face immediately.

I answer carefully. "Hello?"

"Hi, Refilwe." Male voice. Young. "You are speaking to Qeto. King Serithi's son." A pause. "Your alleged father."

I ease slightly. "Hi, Qeto. Is everything okay?"

"Everything was fine before you," he says.

I blink. "I'm sorry?"

"Stay where you are. We don't want you here. Dad only went looking for you because the ancestors pushed him to, other than that you are nothing special to us. You cannot just show up and play the precious long-lost princess. We have been here from the beginning. His sons. His real family." His voice hardens. "You are not needed. Be a queen wherever you are and stay away. Bastard child."

He ends the call.

I sit with the phone in my lap and stare at nothing.

My mouth is open. I close it slowly.

I did not expect that. I knew it was possible. I have been afraid of exactly this ,but hearing it said out loud in that voice, with that much cold in it, is different from imagining it.

My chest tightens. My eyes go hot before I can stop them.

"Refilwe." Nqobizwe's voice is careful. "Who was that? What did they say?"

I cannot answer right now. I press my lips together and look out the window and focus on breathing until we pull into his yard.

We get out. I walk straight to the bedroom, peel off my work clothes and go straight into the shower.

The hot water hits and I let it.

I am not going to cry. I press the back of my hand against my mouth.

I cry anyway.

I am tired of this. Tired of being the person that people decide to hate before they have even met me. Tired of rejection finding me no matter where I go or how well I carry myself. Lentswe. Molefe. And now a brother I have never spoken to who already has a verdict.

I wanted this. I wanted to belong somewhere. When Dikeledi told me about King Serithi looking for me, something in me that had been closed for a long time cracked open just a little. Hope. Stupid, dangerous hope.

And now this.

The shower door opens. Nqobizwe steps in without a word. He does not ask what happened or tell me it will be fine. He just stands there and looks at me.

I hate that he can see me like this. I hate that I am the thing he has to worry about on top of everything else.

I have to be stronger than this.

We finish and dry off in quiet**.** I wear his shirt and throw myself onto the bed, lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling.

He comes out in a vest and sweatpants. Casual. Relaxed. I have never seen him like this and despite everything I notice.

"You look hot," I say.

He laughs and drops onto the couch. "And you look incredible in that shirt."

I smile a little.

"Who called?" he asks. His face has changed, the softness is still there but underneath it something has gone hard.

"Qeto. He said he is King Serithi's son."

"What did he want?"

I tell him everything. Word for word. When I finish I swallow the lump that keeps coming back up my throat.

Something moves across Nqobizwe's face that I have not seen before. A particular kind of angry, quiet and deliberate and not going anywhere fast.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

That is exactly the wrong question to ask me right now. The tears come before I can stop them.

He crosses the room and sits on the edge of the bed, wiping my face with his thumb.

"Rejection is my worst enemy. Is it wrong to just want to belong somewhere?" I say

"It is not. Everyone deserves that."

"I don't want another Lentswe and Molefe situation. If the son already hates me then the mother probably does too. And what if he is right, what if Serithi is only doing this because the ancestors said to? Not because he actually wants me?"

"Ask him tomorrow," Nqobizwe says.

I shake my head. "I won't ask him that directly. But I will go. I will let him do the ceremony because I need the protection. I need the Monahengs covering me. That much is logical and I can hold onto that." I breathe. "But I am not building hope around a father-daughter relationship. I am done setting myself up."

"I hear you," he says. "But do not decide everything tonight. Listen to his story first. Hear him before you close the door."

I nod even though part of me is already building the wall.

"Come here." He opens his arm.

I move into his chest and he wraps around me, his chin resting on top of my head.

"I love you. My family loves you. And when I get my hands on that boy…" he says.

"Don't," I say quietly.

"Fifi…"

"Not tonight. Please."

He breathes. Holds me tighter instead.

"You are not alone. Whatever happens with Serithi. Whatever Qeto decides. You are not alone." He says.

I close my eyes.

"I know. You are my home. That is enough."

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Narrated

King Langa and Baba Ngubeni are outside on the veranda of the Pretoria house, tea between them, the city humming quietly in the distance. Queen Liyana has gone inside to rest. Bukizwe and Thobekile are held at Nqobizwe's warehouse across town.

Ngubeni wraps both hands around his cup and looks at the King.

"You went very far yesterday, Langa."

King Langa stares at the garden. "I know. I saw only darkness. I felt betrayed and I felt guilty all at once, because I know I caused this. I brought that woman to our door. I made her a Ngwenya." He shakes his head. "I hate myself for it."

Ngubeni sips slowly. " I hear you. But tell me honestly. Buhle. Nkanyezi. Sbonga. You raised those children. Blood or not, they are yours in every way that counts. How do you feel about them?"

King Langa is quiet for a long moment. He touches his chest.

"Angiyazi lento engiyizwa ngaphakathi," (I don't know this thing that I am feeling inside) he says. "I loved those children. I still do somewhere. But the hate I carry for their mother is so heavy it covers everything. I just want anything connected to Thobekile out of my sight. I cannot separate the two right now."

Ngubeni nods slowly. "Kuzo lunga. It will untangle itself in time. Your son will help carry this."

"My poor son." King Langa's voice drops. "I failed him, Ngubeni. For years I failed him."

Ngubeni puts his cup down. "Don't drown in that. Liyana gave you iqhawe." (A warrior.) "The ancestors named him well. UNqobizwe ngempela." (He is truly a conqueror of nations.) "Look at what he has built. Look at how he carries everything you put on his shoulders and still stands straight. That did not come from nowhere."

King Langa sits with that. Nods once.

He sips his tea and looks out at the dark garden and for the first time in days says nothing. Sometimes silence is the only honest response.

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Sizwe checks his watch. He and Dikeledi have been folded into each other on the couch all afternoon, talking about nothing important, and he has not wanted it to end. But the clock does not care what he wants.

"Dee. We have to move."

She makes a sound against his shoulder. "Go where? I am comfortable."

"Pack what you need. We are going to Nqobizwe's house."

She lifts her head. "Why?"

"We have business tonight. I cannot leave you alone, not right now. There are people after Refilwe and Nqobi. Those close to them could become targets. Nqobi's house is covered, you will be with Refilwe."

She reads his face and nods. "Okay."

Then, because she cannot help herself: "You are going to rob a bank, aren't you?"

Sizwe stares at her. "What?"

"Late night. Urgent business. Serious face." She lifts both eyebrows.
"It's definitely a heist."

"Do I look like someone who does heists, Dikeledi?"

"A little bit, honestly. You have that energy."

"Think highly of me please," he says, standing up and pulling her with him. He sounds genuinely put out.

She wraps her arms around him and kisses his cheek, then his nose, then his mouth. "I am sorry. I was joking. I think very highly of you."

He softens despite himself. "Let's go."

She smiles and puts on her shoes.

•••

Nqobizwe

"Baby, DK is coming with Sizwe." I say it from the doorway. She is still lying down, turned on her side now, the shirt pulled around her.

"She will be here?" Her voice is small. Not herself.

I sit on the edge of the bed. "Yeah…Baby. Please stop crying. You are breaking my heart and I cannot leave you like this."

"I am not crying," she says, which is technically true at this exact second.

"Fifi."

She sits up and wipes her face. "I am fine. Let me just feel it properly and then I am done. I will have ice cream and Dk will be here and you know what she does to a bad mood." She almost smiles. "Go do what you need to do. I will be okay."

I look at her for a moment. "I will speak to Serithi tomorrow. Before you see him."

She opens her mouth to protest.

"Not to fight," I say.

"Just to talk. He needs to know what his son said and what it did to you. He needs to be clear with me about his intentions before you walk in there."

She does not argue. She just nods.

"You will be fine," I say again.

She nods again. This time I believe her a little more.

I stand and check my watch. Sizwe and I have to get Sbonga from the hospital. And Nolwandle should be at the warehouse by now.

Tonight Bukizwe talks. Tonight Sbonga hears everything.

Sizwe and Dikeledi arrive minutes later. Refilwe gets up and they hold each other properly.

I pick up my jacket. "We will be back. Don't wait up."

"Okay, love," Refilwe says.

"Okay love?" Dikeledi spins around. "You don't want to know where they are going? They have that Mission Impossible energy right now. Are you people spies?"

"Dikeledi." Sizwe gives her a look.

"I am sorry, baby, I cannot help it." She drops onto the couch. "My mouth works faster than my brain sometimes, ayi."

Baby? I look at Refilwe. She looks back at me. We say nothing because we do not need to. Those two.

"Try, Dee. For my sake," Sizwe says.

She laughs. "Fine. Go save the world or whatever."

"Guards are everywhere," I say. "If anything, anything, feels wrong, you call. Do not decide it is nothing. Call immediately."

"You are scaring me," Refilwe says.

"Everything is fine. I am just being careful." I cross to her and kiss her forehead. "I love you."

"I love you," she says softly. "Be safe."

Sizwe and I leave.

•••

The hospital is quiet at this hour. I made one call this afternoon and the cameras in Sbonga's corridor are dark. No record of this visit. No complications.

I go in alone. Sizwe stays in the car.

Sbonga is in his bed but not asleep. He looks up when I come through the door and his face does the thing it always does when he sees me, a flash of something, then the mask.

"Brother," I say. I make sure he hears the sarcasm.

"What are you doing here?" He is not pleased.

I throw a set of clothes onto the bed. "Gqoka, sihambe." (Get dressed. We are leaving.)

He stares at the clothes. "I am not going anywhere with you."

I reach under my jacket and place the gun where he can see it clearly.

"Get dressed. I will not ask again." I say

He goes pale. His hands shake as he pulls back the sheets. He is still in pain. I can see it in how he moves, how carefully he manages every shift in position. The beating left its marks. He removes the drip himself, wincing, and reaches for the clothes.

I wait.

When he is done we walk out. The corridor is empty. The gun stays out of sight but he knows it is there.

We get to the car. He gets in and I slide in beside him.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks as the car pulls away.

"Family reunion," I say.

He looks at me. I look straight ahead.

•••

Refilwe

I tell Dikeledi everything while she is eating ice cream directly from the tub, Motaung, and then Qeto's call. By the time I finish she has put the tub down and is standing in the middle of the lounge.

"Don't tell me you cried because of that boy," she says.

"I just got triggered. I am fine now."

"WHO ARE YOU?" She steps close and says it directly into my face.

I blink. "What?"

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?" Louder this time.

"Refilwe?" I say, uncertain.

"You are Refilwe. Soon to be Ngwenya." She points at me.

"A chosen queen of a powerful kingdom. A woman who survived abuse, built herself up from nothing, and made it on her own terms. Your man is the finest thing walking on this earth and he is obsessed with you. You speak to ancestors. You carry warnings for kings." She spreads her hands. "You are powerful, Refilwe. You are powerful and you keep forgetting it every time some small person opens their mouth."

My throat tightens. My eyes fill.

"Wipe those tears." Her voice goes firm. "You are pissing me off. Stop wasting yourself on useless people. Forget Lentswe. Forget Molefe. And forget Serithi's son. Be the baddass that you actually are. Use your power. Return the energy you are given and stop breaking down for people who do not deserve the time it takes to cry over them."

She steps forward and wraps both arms around me. Tight. The kind of hug that does not ask anything. Just holds.

I hold back.

She is right. She is completely right and I know it and sometimes you just need someone to say it at full volume directly into your face.

Then it comes.

That particular pull. The heaviness behind my eyes. I already know what it is before it fully arrives.

I break the hug.

"Don't call Zwee," I say.

DK reads my face. "Refilwe…"

"They are doing something important tonight. You saw it when they left. Do not pull him away from that. You know he'd drop everything" I hold her eyes. "Thirty minutes. If I am not back in thirty minutes, call."

She looks at me hard. Then nods. "Thirty minutes. Not thirty-one."

I sit back on the couch and the darkness comes up to meet me.

•••

"Refilwe."

Queen Nomusa is holding both my hands. Her face is urgent in a way I have not seen before.

"This will be quick. Listen carefully." She says

"I am listening."

"Tell Nqobizwe, one of the Vilakazi brothers is going to take that child. Buhle. He is going to make her sleepwalk into the palace yard and hide her there so she cannot be found." Her hands tighten on mine. "He cannot enter the palace himself, the Ngwenya fire will consume him if he tries. But he will send her in on her own feet while she is sleeping. She will walk in and she will be hidden and she will die inside those walls."

"Queen Nomusa…"

"He tried to block us from seeing this in time. We only just broke through." Her eyes are steady and urgent at once. "Nqobizwe has to move now. Tonight. Go."

The darkness lifts.

•••

Narrated

The house is quiet.

Vilakazi and Mandla have been asleep for over an hour. The stress of the day took what was left of them, the news about Bukizwe, the realisation that their plan was unravelling from every corner. Sleep came quickly and heavily for both of them.

Bheki did not sleep.

He has been lying still in the dark, listening to his brothers' breathing slow and deepen, waiting. His eyes are open and his mind has been running a single calculation over and over since the moment Vilakazi said *we cannot interfere with her death.*

He does not agree.

Partial access is better than no access. Limited entry is better than standing outside the door with nothing. Yes, interfering will cost them, the Ngwenyas will not be fully blocked, the door will not open all the way. But right now they have nothing. Bukizwe is gone. Their hiding place is compromised. Time is running out and Vilakazi wants to wait and be careful and Bheki is done waiting.

He moves slowly. Every sound feels amplified in the silence of the room. He slides his feet to the floor and sits up, listening. Mandla shifts slightly. Goes still again. Vilakazi does not move.

Bheki stands.

He crosses to the far corner where his bag is kept, crouching low, moving by feel in the dark. He pulls the bag toward him and opens it carefully, one clasp at a time.

Inside, wrapped in old cloth, are the things he has been saving. Small pouches, sealed with wax, each one labelled in his own hand. A small clay bowl. Ash from a specific fire. Roots that were dried and ground in a particular order under a particular moon.

He takes what he needs and moves to the window.

The night outside is still. No wind.

He works without lighting anything, without making a sound. His hands move from memory. He opens the first pouch and presses the contents between his palms, warming them, releasing the smell, something damp and ancient, like soil that has never seen sunlight. He whispers into his hands. Not words exactly. Something older than words. Sounds that his grandfather's grandfather passed down in the dark.

He opens the second pouch and mixes it in the clay bowl with the ash, turning it three times clockwise and three times back.

Then he speaks her name.

"Buhle."

Softly. Once.

He speaks it into the mixture in the bowl and the sound disappears into it like a stone dropped into deep water.

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At Chief Bukizwe's homestead, in the room where Buhle was given a bed for the night, something changes.

Buhle's eyes open.

Not the way eyes open when a person wakes, gradually, with blinking, with the slow reassembly of consciousness. They open all at once. Wide. Fixed. Staring at the ceiling with no recognition in them at all.

She sits up.

She does not look around. She does not reach for the light. She swings her legs over the side of the bed and stands, her feet finding the floor without sound, and she walks to the door.

The house is asleep. The guards outside are positioned at the main gate, not at the interior doors. Nobody sees a young woman in a white nightgown move through the corridor like something weightless, like something being carried by a current she cannot feel.

She passes Nkanyezi's room. The door is closed. Nkanyezi does not hear.

She reaches the back of the house. A window. She opens it without hesitation and climbs through, landing barefoot on the cool earth outside. She does not flinch. Does not look down at her feet or up at the sky.

She just walks.

The path to the Ngwenya palace is a thirty-minute walk. A dirt road, mostly, cutting through low bush and open ground. At this hour it is completely empty. The moon is out but thin, just enough light to see shapes, not details.

Buhle walks it like she knows the way by heart.

Her feet find every stone and root without stumbling. Her eyes are open but they are not seeing. Her lips move very slightly, barely, just the shape of breath, as if somewhere deep beneath everything that has been done to her, something is trying to call out and cannot find its voice.

She walks.

The palace walls come into view after twenty minutes, rising dark against the slightly lighter dark of the sky.

She does not slow down.

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Back in the room, Bheki is still at the window. His hands are shaking slightly, not from doubt, but from the effort of holding the working open. Keeping the path clear. Making sure she does not stumble, does not wake, does not stop before she reaches the yard.

He can feel the resistance.

It is there, a pressure pushing back against everything he is doing, like hands pressing against both sides of a door he is trying to force open. The Ngwenyas. Not asleep. Not unaware. Fighting him at the edges, probing for a way in, trying to find the thread that connects him to the girl so they can cut it.

He holds on.

His nose starts to bleed. He ignores it. A drop falls onto the clay bowl and he does not stop.

She is almost there. He can feel it, the proximity, the nearness of the palace walls, the shift in the air that happens when you approach ground that is spiritually claimed and ancient and not yours.

Almost.

He presses his palms together harder and speaks her name again, low and urgent.

"Buhle."

The floorboard creaks behind him.

He freezes.

"Bheki."

Vilakazi's voice.

Low. Awake. Standing in the middle of the room.

Bheki does not turn around immediately. He takes one more breath. Then he lowers his hands and turns slowly.

Vilakazi is standing there in the dark, looking at the bowl, at Bheki's bloody nose, at the open pouches on the floor. His face is unreadable in the low light but his eyes are not.

"Bheki." His voice is very quiet. "Wenzani?"

Chapter 37

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Narrated

Dikeledi is pacing. Three steps to the window, turn, three steps back. She has done this so many times the carpet should have a groove in it by now.

She presses both hands to her cheeks. "Oh my God. What do I do? Nqobizwe said call if anything happens. Refilwe said do not call." She looks at Refilwe's still body on the couch and then at her phone and then back at Refilwe. "Oh my God, oh my God."

She checks her watch.

Twenty minutes left of the thirty.

She shakes her head. " No. I am not waiting twenty minutes. Absolutely not. Something is wrong. Something feels wrong. Ayi, fuck this."

She grabs her phone and calls Sizwe.

He picks up immediately. "Dee, is everything okay?"

"Okay so Refilwe told me not to call and she fell asleep again and I do not know what to do, I…"

"Shit." She hears him shift.

"Nqobi…Refilwe is under again." Then back to her: "When did it happen?"

"Maybe ten minutes ago she said don't disturb you guys but I couldn't just sit here and…"

Refilwe gasps.

Dikeledi drops to her knees in front of her in one movement, phone still in her hand, both hands going to Refilwe's arms. "REFILWE."

"Dikeledi… Dikeledi is she up?" Nqobizwe’s voice comes through the phone.

DK is not listening. She is just staring at her friend, checking her face, her breathing.

"My phone. Where's my phone? I need to call Zwee" Refilwe says, already moving, already sitting up.

"Here…he is on the line…" She shoves the phone into Refilwe's hands.

"Zwee."

"Mama, talk to me. What happened?"

"Buhle is being sleepwalked to the palace. One of the Vilakazi brothers is doing it. When she gets inside she dies and they get their access. You have to stop her before she enters the yard…send anyone, guards, anyone you have at the palace. NOW!"

"Fuck." The line goes dead.

Refilwe lowers the phone and falls back against the couch cushions. She stares at the ceiling and just breathes.

Dikeledi sits beside her slowly, her mouth open.

"What in the level of witchcraft did I just listen to?" she says.

Refilwe shakes her head. "These people are on a mission. I did not even know things like this existed."

"I am leaving tomorrow," Dikeledi says, her voice completely flat. "I love you. I love being here. But I am leaving tomorrow. I am a simple Free State girl, Refilwe. This is above my pay grade."

Refilwe almost laughs despite everything.

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Nqobizwe

My mind is moving too fast. I am in the back of a car in Pretoria and Buhle is somewhere between Chief Bukizwe's homestead and the Ngwenya palace walking in her sleep and I cannot get there.

I call Ayanda. One ring.

"Nqobi."

"Listen to me carefully. I need every guard, every person on those grounds on their feet right now. Buhle is coming to the palace. I do not know how far she is. She is sleepwalking, she will not respond, she will not stop on her own. You need to find her before she sets foot inside that yard." I pause. "Ayanda. Before she enters. Do you understand me?"

"I am already moving."

He ends the call before I do.

I sit back. My hand is not entirely steady. I look at my phone like staring at it will make it ring faster.

Sizwe turns from the front seat. "He will handle it. You know Ayanda."

I nod. I know. I trust Ayanda with my life…I have done it before. But knowing that does not stop the feeling sitting in my chest right now.

"What is wrong with Buhle?" Sbonga's voice comes from beside me. Low. Uncertain. "What did you do?"

I look at him. "What did your mother do, you mean." I keep my voice level.

"She sacrificed Buhle's womb. She made a deal with a witch to gain power and control over me, over the Kingdom. Your sister was the price she paid." I pause. "That witch had his own agenda that Thobekile did not know about. He used Buhle as a key. When she dies on Ngwenya ground, he gets access. Everything comes down." I look at him steadily. "Your mother did that. To her own child."

Sbonga's mouth opens. Nothing comes out for a moment. "You are lying. She would never…"

"She also gave Nolwandle muthi to use on me," I say. "Are you going to tell me she would never do that either?"

He closes his mouth.

He turns to the window and says nothing for the rest of the drive.

We pull into the warehouse yard. My father's car is already there. He and Baba Ngubeni step out as we arrive.

"Baba. Baba Ngubeni." I greet them quickly.

"Something happened. One of the Vilakazi brothers performed a working tonight, sleepwalking Buhle to the palace. I have Ayanda on it. He will stop her before she enters."

My father exhales and runs both hands down his face. "These people."

"They are desperate. Bukizwe is gone, their plan is falling apart. They are improvising and making mistakes." I shake my head.

Baba Ngubeni nods slowly. He already knows. His eyes are somewhere else for a moment. Reading things none of the rest of us can see.

"He will not be doing it again," he says simply.

My father looks at me. I look at him. We leave that where it is.

"Let us go in. We are finding Vilakazi tonight. I am done with this." My father says.

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Narrated: The Ngwenya Palace

Ayanda moves fast.

He pulls every guard off their stations and sends them in pairs along every perimeter of the palace grounds. Maidens are woken and told to light every lantern in the outer corridors. He does not explain why. He gives the instruction and they obey.

Lantern in hand, he walks fast through the outer corridor and pushes open the low wooden gate leading to the bush path. The night is very still. The thin moon gives just enough light to see.

He stops.

Listens.

Somewhere ahead, the soft, irregular sound of bare feet on dry earth. Slow and uneven. The sound of someone moving without intention.

He goes toward it.

She comes into the edge of the lantern light thirty seconds later. Buhle in a white nightgown, bare feet, her arms loose at her sides, her eyes open and

seeing nothing. Walking in a perfectly straight line toward the palace entrance like something is pulling her on a string.

She is four steps from the threshold.

Ayanda covers the distance in two strides and gets his arms around her from behind, pulling her back and away from the opening.

He holds her outside the yard. Both of them on the wrong side of the entrance.

"Buhle." He turns her gently. "Buhle."

Her eyes blink. Once. Twice. The blankness cracks slowly, like ice thawing from the edges in. She looks at his face and then at his hands on her arms and then at the ground under her feet and then at the palace wall beside her.

Her face crumbles.

"Where…" Her voice is barely there. "How did I…"

She starts shaking. It begins in her hands and moves through the rest of her until she is trembling completely, still standing, her teeth pressing together against a sound she is trying not to make.

Ayanda does not let go.

"OVER HERE." He calls it out clearly, loudly enough for every guard on the perimeter to hear. "I FOUND HER. EASTERN WALL"

Footsteps converge from three directions. Lanterns bob through the dark.

Ayanda holds her steady.

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At the Vilakazis'

Vilakazi asks again.

Bheki turns from the window slowly. His nose is still bleeding. The clay bowl is in one hand. He looks like a man who has made a decision and is not going back from it regardless of consequence.

"Listen," Bheki says. "She will enter the palace any moment now. She is almost…"

The lightning comes through the window.

Not the gradual build of a storm. Not the warning flicker. It arrives in a single, clean, vertical strike, white and absolute, and it finds Bheki where he stands.

The sound is enormous in the small room.

Bheki drops.

The clay bowl shatters on the floor. The pouch contents scatter. The window frame is scorched black at the edges and the smell of it fills the room instantly, sharp and acrid and wrong.

Vilakazi stumbles backward until his back hits the wall.

Mandla jerks awake from the floor, disoriented, and then he sees his brother and he is moving before he is fully conscious, sliding across to him, pressing his hands to Bheki's chest.

Nothing.

He presses again. Harder.

Nothing.

"Bhuti." Mandla's voice breaks open. He puts his ear to Bheki's chest and lifts his head and his face says everything.

"He is cold. There is no pulse. He is gone." His voice drops to almost nothing

Vilakazi stands against the wall without moving. He does not go to his brother. He stares at the body on the floor and at the scorched window frame and at the scattered contents of the bowl and he understands exactly what he is looking at.

He slides slowly down the wall until he is sitting on the floor.

"He didn't listen…I told him. I told him we could not interfere with her death. He didn't listen." Vilakazi says. He is not speaking to Mandla. He is speaking to the room. To whatever is still present in it.

Mandla is shaking over Bheki's body, one hand still on his brother's chest, not ready to take it away.

"We came here to avenge our chief," Mandla says. His voice is breaking but beneath it something is hardening. "The whole clan. We cannot sit here and do nothing, Vilakazi. We came here for a reason..."

"Look at your brother." Vilakazi's voice is very quiet.

Mandla looks at him.

"Look at him," Vilakazi says again.

"That is what happens when we move without thinking. When we get desperate and we act alone and we do not listen." He looks at the scorched window. "They are not sleeping, Mandla. They have never been sleeping." He breathes. "If you go at them the way Bheki did, you are next."

Mandla wipes his face with the back of his hand. His jaw is working. He looks at Bheki and then at the window and then at Vilakazi.

He does not say anything.

But he does not agree either.

And Vilakazi sees that clearly.

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Nqobizwe

We walk into the back room of the warehouse.

Four chairs. Four people taped and bound and silent. Thobekile in her wheelchair at the end. Sbonga next to her, his face still processing the car ride. Bukizwe with his eyes on the floor. Nolwandle staring at the ceiling like she is trying to find a way out through it.

"One witch down," Baba Ngubeni says quietly as we enter. "Bamutholile oNgwenya." (The Ngwenya got him.)

My phone rings before I can respond. Ayanda.

I step back to the doorway.

"Sure."

"I found her. She almost made it through. I got to her just outside the eastern wall. She did not enter." His voice is steadier than I expected.

I close my eyes for half a second. "How is she?"

"Shaking. She is very shaken up. This is… it is not good, man."

"Take her back to the Zungus. My father will address everything with them tomorrow. There has to be something that can be done for her." I pause. "She is just a child, Ayanda."

"I know. I will take her back now." He says

"Good man. Thank you."

I walk back inside. The relief that moves through me lasts about four seconds and then the room pulls me back into what is in front of me.

I signal the guard. He moves along the row removing the tape from their mouths.

Nolwandle breathes in sharply. "Nqobizwe, what is this, what is happening?" She looks at her father. "Dad? Dad, what is going on?"

Bukizwe stares at the floor.

Sbonga turns to Thobekile. "Mom. What is happening? Will someone please say something?"

Thobekile looks away. The fight in her is gone. She looks smaller than I have ever seen her. Hollowed out.

"Thobekile tell him," my father says. His jaw is set.

She says nothing.

"THOBEKILE."

She startles. Clears her throat. Looks at Sbonga.

"Bukizwe is your father," she says. Flat. Empty. "All three of you."

The room absorbs it.

"Finally," my father says quietly.

Sbonga stares at her. His mouth opens and closes. Then he looks at Nolwandle and something in his face just falls apart.

"What?" Nolwandle whispers.

"She said…" Sbonga stops. His voice cracks.

"Ma, you wanted me to marry my sister. You knew." He shakes his head. "I slept with her. I have feelings for her. I…" He cannot finish. He drops his head and cries without trying to stop it.

"I was doing it for you. For all of you. I wanted you not to be looked down on. I wanted you to have everything" Thobekile says

Sbonga's head comes up. His eyes are red. "At what cost? You sacrificed Buhle's womb. She is dying, Ma. She is dying and you did that to her…"

"You wanted the throne too, Sbonga. Do not stand there and pretend you didn't. You agreed to everything. Don't blame me alone."

The room goes quiet in a different way.

I take the pocket knife from my jacket and walk toward Sbonga slowly.

I stop in front of him. " And you. You planned to kill me. Take everything I spent my life building. Did they tell you the full plan, Nolwandle?" I look at her.

"They used you. You were a tool. The idea was for you to give me a love portion without knowing what it was. I marry you, fall under it. Then they give you more, but by then you would not know the difference between a love portion and poison. I die. Sbonga steps in. Takes the throne. Takes my businesses." I pause. "And your father gets the Royal farm."

Nolwandle stares at her father. "What?"

Bukizwe says nothing.

Sizwe is watching me from the side. He knows what this silence in me means. He knows when I have reached the place where I stop deliberating.

I stab Sbonga through the thigh.

He screams. The sound fills the room.

"NqoBIZWE please…" He is already crying. "I am sorry, I am sorry…"

I stab again. Same leg.

"Please, man. Please. I am sorry, Nqobizwe, I am sorry…"

"THOBEKILE." I turn to her. She is looking at the floor. "LOOK."

She does not look up.

I nod to the guard. He moves behind her, takes her head firmly in his hands and holds it forward.

"Don't close your eyes," I say.

She keeps them open. She has no choice.

"This is who you were going to put on the throne. A man who was willing to kill his own brother for money and power. This is your legacy, Thobekile." I say to her.

She is crying now. Silent tears running down a face that is trying very hard not to feel anything.

My father walks over to Sbongs and rests a hand on his shoulder.

“I knew you as my son. I loved you,” he says quietly. “But the moment you chose to kill my son, you chose your place against me. And when my blood is threatened… mercy ends. That is how my heart works. I can be evil too.”

I look at Sbonga. He is pleading with his eyes, his hands, his whole broken body.

I slit his throat.

It is quick. He does not suffer long.

His head drops back. Nolwandle screams, a full, raw, horrified sound that she cannot stop. Bukizwe vomits onto the floor beside his chair. Thobekile's tears fall faster but she makes no sound.

I take the cloth from my jacket pocket and wipe my hands.

"Minus one problem," I say.

My father looks at Bukizwe, who is still retching, still shaking.

"You know witchcraft," my father says to him. "You plan to take kingdoms. But you cannot watch a man die in front of you." He lets out a short, humourless sound. "Coward."

He raises his gun and points it at Nolwandle.

Bukizwe's head snaps up.

"Last chance. Where is Vilakazi?" My father says.

"The river bank. At the end of the village river, at the far end where the water bends. Behind the trees there is a small structure I built. That is where they are." Bukizwe says immediately. No hesitation this time.

"Baba Ngubeni," I say.

The old man has his eyes half closed. He nods slowly. "I see the bush. I see the water. Yes." He opens his eyes. "That is correct."

My father lowers the gun slightly.

Then he draws back his hand and hits Bukizwe across the face with the full weight of it. The crack of it is sharp in the quiet.

Bukizwe's head snaps sideways. Blood from his nose hits the concrete floor.

"That, is for entering my kraal." My father says

He straightens his jacket.

"Now. What was the full plan?"

Bukizwe spits blood. "They were going to block the Ngwenya ancestors completely. Create enough of an opening to move through. Kill all of you. I would step in as the new authority, take the land, everything under the Ngwenya name."

"And you thought you could do that." My father says it without inflection. Just states it.

"I was stupid," Bukizwe says.

"You were." My father looks at Nolwandle. "You. What do you have to say to your father?"

She is a mess. Face wet, body still shaking from watching Sbonga die. She looks at Bukizwe for a long moment.

"Nothing," she says finally. Her voice is hollow.

"He used me. He planned to use me to kill a man and marry me to my own brother." She shakes her head. "I have nothing to say to him. I want my mother. I just want to go home."

"Take her out," my father says to the guard.

The guard cuts her hands free and walks her to the door. She does not look back at Bukizwe.

My father turns back to Bukizwe.

Raises the gun.

Pulls the trigger.

No warning. No speech. Just done.

Bukizwe slumps.

Thobekile covers her eyes. Her shoulders heave.

"She is next and she knows it," I say quietly. "But that is not our job."

I look at the guards. "Clean this up. Tie her hands and gag her. She stays in the corner until morning."

"Just kill me. Please. Just finish it." Thobekile says. Her voice is cracked and used up

"You are asking too early. Your witch friends will be joining you soon. Enjoy the wait."

She makes a sound that is not quite crying and not quite anything else.

We walk out.

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We are Outside the warehouse now. My father stands with his hands in his pockets looking at the sky. Baba Ngubeni comes out behind us and rolls his

neck slowly, like a man releasing something he has been carrying on his shoulders.

"Baba Ngubeni, can the guards move on the Vilakazis now or do they need preparation?"

"Send them now. The Ngwenya are back at full strength. One of those brothers has already felt it tonight, the others will be shaken, unsteady. Move now before they think of another direction to run." He says

I step aside and make the call.

"How did it go with Ayanda?" Sizwe asks while I dial.

I cover the speaker briefly. "He found her before she entered the yard. She is safe."

Sizwe exhales and nods.

My father turns to me when I finish the call. "We need to speak to the community about the farm. People are frightened. They have lost their livelihoods overnight."

"After the witches. One thing at a time." I say

He nods.

Baba Ngubeni claps his hands together once. "We cannot carry this home. Mele sihambe niyogeza isinyama manje." (We need to leave now so you can wash off the dark cloud.) "I have everything ready. You all know the procedure."

We do.

After taking a life you do not simply continue. You cleanse. You separate yourself from what was done so it does not follow you home, does not attach itself to the living.

We know the procedure.

Chapter 39

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Refilwe

Nqobizwe is here. I did not hear him come back last night. I was already deep asleep when he got in.

It is morning now. I turn over slowly and look at him. He is still under, completely still, his face relaxed in a way it almost never is when he is awake. He looks younger like this. Less like a man carrying a kingdom and more like just a man.

I lean over and press a soft kiss to his lips.

His eyes move. Then he wakes up, slow and easy, and when he sees me a small smile crosses his face. He pulls me closer without saying anything first.

"Hi," he says. Voice thick with sleep.

"Hi."

He opens his eyes fully and looks at me properly. "Why are you up so early?"

"It is not that early. I have work, Zwee. Breakfast, getting ready…"

"The chef will handle breakfast," he says, already pulling me back down.

"Oh." I had forgotten about the chef. I settle for a moment then sit up again. "How did it go last night? Buhle… did Ayanda get to her?"

"He got there before she entered the yard."

I exhale. "Thank God. It was a close call?"

"Very close." He stares at the ceiling. "They almost succeeded."

I shake my head. "Poor child. She does not deserve any of this. Is there anything that can be done for her?"

"Our hands are tied in terms of direct involvement. But I will speak to my father, pressure the Zungu brothers to do a welcoming ceremony quickly and find her proper help. Even if it takes threatening them to move."

"Why the brothers? Bukizwe is her father, why is he not handling this?"

He clears his throat and says nothing.

"Some parents," I say quietly.

"Some parents," he agrees.

I move to get up. He catches my wrist.

"Why are you running away from me?"

"I am not running. Time is moving, Nqobizwe."

"I won't be long," he says.

I look at him. He looks back at me. I already know what he wants, I can feel it against me.

I wrap my arms around him and within seconds he is over me, his weight settling carefully, his hands finding me. He takes his time. That is the difference this morning, he is not rushed, not driven by anything urgent. He is just here.

He holds my hands above my head and starts moving and I cannot touch him and it is somehow the most maddening and the most freeing thing at once.

This is different. There is no hurry in it. It is slow and deep and present, the kind of thing that does not just live in the body, it reaches somewhere further in. I feel every small shift, every breath between us, like we are finding the same quiet at the same time.

I stay completely open to it. To him. There is nowhere else I want to be.

"Ah, fuck, I love you, Fifi," he says, his voice low and rough, just before we come together.

He collapses onto me. I feel his weight and his heart and his breath all at once.

"I love you," I say close to his ear.

He lifts his head and looks at me. Smiles properly, warm. He kisses me once and then gets up to find a towel. He wipes me clean without being asked.

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We shower and I do my hair standing in front of the mirror making a mental note that this style needs to change soon. A few touch-ups and I am done. I start stripping the bed sheets.

"Leave it. The maidens handle that." Nqobizwe says from the doorway, already dressed.

I look at him. "No they don't."

"They always have."

"Well that changes now." I bundle the sheet and pull off the pillowcases. "They cannot come in here. This room is ours. I don't know, maybe I am overthinking it, but I am not comfortable with people moving around in here."

He frowns slightly. "You cannot do that when you are queen. They do everything."

"At the palace, fine. I understand the protocol there. But not here." I look at him.

He considers this. "Okay. I will let them know."

"Actually…" I straighten up. "You said they are here? Let me tell them myself. I would like to meet them anyway."

He smirks. Just slightly. "Alright."

I finish making the bed, smoothing the fresh sheets properly, and then head downstairs.

Nqobizwe goes outside on a call. The sound of the chef working comes from the staff kitchen, something that smells incredible already.

In the lounge, a young woman stands waiting, still and composed, in the dark green and gold of the Ngwenya royal staff uniform. She is beautiful. She is also looking at me with an expression I cannot immediately name.

I walk to her.

"Good morning. My name is Refilwe."

She says nothing. Her face does not shift. She looks at me with something flat and unreadable and does not open her mouth.

I hold the smile and wait.

A second maiden comes rushing in from the hallway and takes her place beside the first, slightly breathless, eyes immediately lowered.

"Good morning, ma'am," she says.

So they do speak.

"Morning," I say.

Nqobizwe comes back in. He looks between us. "Mama, these are the maidens. Zodwa and Thandiwe." He looks at them. "This is the woman of the house. Your future queen."

Zodwa's eyes go wide for exactly one second before she pulls her face back to neutral. But I saw it. I file it carefully.

"Zodwa," I say pleasantly, "are you allowed to speak?"

Nqobizwe looks at me. "Why are you asking that?"

"Because I greeted her and she gave me silence and a look I did not appreciate." I turn back to Zodwa. "Are you okay, sisi? Did I do something?"

"My apologies, ma'am," Zodwa says. Her voice gives nothing away.

I look at her for a moment. She looks back, carefully composed.

I decide not to pull at that thread right now. She will show me what she is made of eventually. They always do.

"Nice to meet you both." I look between them. "I understand you also look after the master bedroom?"

They nod, eyes down.

"From today, leave it. Do not enter, do not clean it, do not touch anything in there. There is nothing wrong, it is simply the new rule."

Thandiwe nods quickly. Zodwa nods a half beat later.

"Breakfast is ready," Nqobizwe says, his voice carrying something amused that he is doing a decent job of not showing.

"Where are DK and Sizwe?"

"Still upstairs I think. They will come down."

We move to the table. A few minutes later DK and Sizwe come downstairs together, she is mid-sentence, he is shaking his head at whatever she has said, and they both look rested and entirely too comfortable with each other.

"Family. Good to see you all alive." DK announces, dropping into her chair.

"Good morning," I say, smiling.

The chef and the maidens bring everything out, eggs, bacon, toast, fruit, juice, coffee, and lay it out properly. Thandiwe moves efficiently. Zodwa keeps her eyes down. I watch them both without making it obvious.

"Now this is the life," DK says, looking at the spread. "But I will say it again, I would still rather stay in the Free State. All the supernatural activity you people have here." She shudders. "Count me out."

"A whole Dikeledi scared of witchcraft," I say.

"Anything I cannot see or fight back? Yes. I am terrified. Completely. I refuse to be ashamed."

Sizwe laughs quietly beside her.

"You are really leaving today?" I ask.

She looks at me. "I have to. But I am coming back. It is not goodbye; it is see you later. Do not make it sad."

"I know. I should come visit you too, it should not always be you making the trip."

"Do not come to the Free State right now," she says immediately. Sizwe and Nqobizwe both look up from their plates. "I love you and I want you there but Lentswe and Motaung are still roaming around down there. Your safety comes first. Visit me when it is clear."

"Dk is right. Free State is the last place you should be going right now." Nqobizwe says

"Until everything is settled," Sizwe adds.

"I know, I know." I hold up my hand. "I meant in future. Not now. Relax, all of you."

DK points at me. "I mean it."

"I hear you."

"Call me before you leave," I say to her.

"Sizwe is driving me." She glances at him.

"Oh." I look at him. "That is really good of you. Thank you, Sizwe."

He shrugs. Cuts his toast. He is trying to look like it is nothing. It is not nothing and we all know it.

We finish breakfast and it is good. Everything is good. I try to hold onto the quiet of it because I know the day has things waiting in it.

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Nqobizwe

Refilwe leaves for work and the house shifts the way it always does when she is not in it. Sizwe takes DK to pack. I get in the car and head to my father.

I want to talk about Buhle. And I need to hear from Baba Ngubeni about what the ancestors are saying.

My mother opens the door before I knock.

"My son." She pulls me in. "How are you? How is my daughter-in-law?"

"We are good, Ma. How are you holding up?"

"I am fine. Your father told me what almost happened at the palace last night." She shakes her head.

"I know. Ayanda really did a good job" I follow her through. "Where is Baba?"

"Outside. His favourite spot."

I find him and Baba Ngubeni at the small outdoor table, tea between them, the morning still cool around them.

"Sanibona." I shake both their hands and sit.

"What brings you here so early?" my father asks.

"The guards are positioned and waiting for the Vilakazis to move. But I did not come about that." I look at him. "I want to talk about Buhle."

He is quiet.

"I know we cannot be directly involved. But I was thinking, if we pressure the Zungu family to move quickly on the welcoming ceremony and find a sangoma to help her, even if it takes putting a little weight behind the request; it is worth doing."

My father looks at me for a long moment. Then he exhales slowly. "I will see what I can do."

I nod and turn to Baba Ngubeni. "Is there anything that can reverse what was done to her?"

He nods slowly. "It can be addressed. But not by me, the ancestors have been clear that I am not to become involved in that matter. My role is to the royal house." He pauses. "However, if the Zungus find a powerful enough sangoma, she can be helped. The womb is gone. That will not change. But the curse sitting on her life; that can be broken."

I shake my head. "She is just a child."

"She is," he says simply.

"I would go with you but Refilwe is not settled here yet and I am not leaving her."

"Refilwe is always safe," my father says.

"I know. I am still not leaving her. I can’t risk it"

He does not push it.

"The ancestors are at full strength. Once you have Vilakazi, the threat is contained. Everything else can be rebuilt." Baba Ngubeni says

I nod. "Do we still need strengthening?"

"Not anymore. The Ngwenya are back. Just do not let Vilakazi slip."

We talk for a while longer and then I leave. I drive to the Ngwenya office. I will work from there today. Patient. Waiting.

The Vilakazis cannot stay hidden forever. And when they move, we will be ready.

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Narrated: The Ngwenya Kingdom

Ayanda brought Buhle back to the Zungu homestead in the early hours. He explained what had happened simply and without elaboration. The guards at the gate and the maidens inside heard enough to understand that something serious had taken place and asked no further questions.

Nothile, Bukizwe's wife, had been awake already. She did not sleep after the events of the previous evening. She took Buhle from Ayanda at the door and said nothing beyond a quiet thank you.

By morning, breakfast is on the table.

They are all seated, Nothile, her son Njabulo, Nkanyezi, and Buhle. Nobody has said much. Njabulo has said nothing at all. He has sat with his jaw set and his eyes fixed at a middle distance since he woke up, working through things he has not yet found words for.

"Buhle." Nothile looks at her gently across the table. "How are you feeling, nana?"

Buhle does not answer. She looks at the food in front of her and then at the table and then at nothing. Her eyes fill slowly and she wipes the tears away quickly, like she is annoyed at herself for having them.

Nothile gets up without a word, moves around the table and wraps both arms around her. Holds her firmly.

"Shhh. You will be okay. God is watching everything. I am praying for you."

Buhle holds the hug. Her shoulders shake once and then she breathes and stills herself.

"You don't have to pretend to be nice to us. We know this is not a comfortable situation for you." Nkanyezi says from her side of the table. Her voice is not cruel, it is just honest, the way a person speaks when they have run out of energy to soften things.

Nothile returns to her seat and looks at both of them steadily.

"You are Bukizwe's children," she says. "Which means you are also mine, by extension. Whether I chose that or not." She folds her hands on the table. "Yes, I am angry. I am devastated. A man I gave my entire life to, I was loyal to him completely, and he did this. He brought children into the world that I knew nothing about and he used my daughter as a piece in a plan I never consented to." She breathes. "But that anger belongs to him. And to your mother. Not to you. You did nothing to me. You did not choose this situation any more than I did."

She looks at them both. "You are children. I am a mother. I cannot watch you suffer in my house and do nothing. The King brought you here and I will care for you until things are resolved. That is the end of it."

Nkanyezi looks at her for a long moment. Something behind her eyes shifts, not fully, not completely, but enough.

"The King hates us," she says. "He blames us for existing."

Nothile shakes her head. "No man raises children from birth to hate them. He is angry. There is a difference. Your mother wanted to destroy his kingdom, kill his son, put her child on a throne that was never hers to claim, all while living in his house, eating at his table, sleeping beside him." She pauses. "That is too much for one person to process without rage. The rage has to go somewhere." She looks at Nkanyezi. "He will come around. Give him time."

Nkanyezi says nothing. But she picks up her fork.

The door bursts open.

Nolwandle comes in fast, her eyes wild, her hair loose, still in yesterday's clothes. She looks like she has been walking for the last hour and has not fully caught her breath.

She stops in the middle of the room and takes everyone in, her mother, the princesses, her brother's rigid silence, and then something in her legs gives a little and she sinks into the nearest chair.

Nothile is on her feet. "Nolwandle. What happened? What is wrong?"

Nolwandle looks at her mother and then at Buhle and Nkanyezi and then at the wall.

"Ma," she says. "I almost died last night."

Nothile's hand goes to her chest.

Njabulo looks up for the first time all morning.

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Nolwandle's room.

She has showered and changed. She is sitting on her bed with her knees pulled up when Nothile comes in carrying a small tray, soup, bread, a glass of water. She sets it on the nightstand and sits on the edge of the bed, taking Nolwandle's hands in hers.

"Tell me everything. From the beginning " she says quietly.

Nolwandle does. All of it. The arrangement, the herbs Thobekile gave her, what she was told to do, what she tried to do. She tells it without leaving anything out and by the end her voice is barely above a whisper.

Nothile is very still.

Then she stands and walks to the window. Her back is to her daughter. Her hands grip the windowsill.

"They held you in a warehouse," she says.

"Yes, Ma."

"Nqobizwe. The King." She closes her eyes.

"Ma…"

"Your father is not coming home, Nolwandle." Her voice does not break. It has something harder in it than breaking. "I do not know what they did to him and I

do not want to know. But I know that King and I know what it means when he takes someone like that." She turns. "I married the devil. I have to accept that."

Nolwandle looks at her.

"I am disappointed in you," Nothile says. She says it plainly, without cruelty, which somehow makes it worse.

"You are old enough to know better. To think better. You do not need muthi to make a man love you, Nolwandle. You are educated. You are beautiful. You have everything. If you ever find yourself needing to force someone, that is the sign to walk away." She breathes. "And you tried to use it on the Ngwenya Prince. Of all people."

"I know, Ma. I know. I am sorry."

"Do not apologise to me. You should be grateful they let you walk out of that room." She crosses back to the bed and sits again, taking her daughter's face in both hands. "Now listen to me carefully. What you saw last night, you forget it. What you heard, you forget it. You do not speak of this to anyone. Not your friends, not cousins, no one. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Ungayithi vu. Uyangizwa?" (Do not breathe a word. You hear me?)

"I hear you."

Nothile holds her face a moment longer. Then she lets go and stands.

"Eat your soup," she says. "You look like a shadow."

She walks out. The door clicks shut behind her.

Nolwandle sits alone in the quiet of her room, the soup going cold on the tray beside her, and stares at the wall.

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Narrated: The Village River Bank

The plan was simple. Leave in the morning. Carry only what they needed. Follow the river south until the trees grew thick enough to hide them, then turn east and leave the village before anyone noticed they were gone.

Vilakazi leads. Mandla follows, carrying Bheki's bag along with his own because he cannot leave it behind. He has not spoken since they wrapped his brother in the only cloth they had and laid him against the wall.

The river is low this time of year. The water moves quietly. Bushes crowd both sides, thick and dark, and in the soft morning light it almost feels like they are alone.

They are not.

The first sign is the silence.

Vilakazi stops.

In the bush, silence means something. Insects go quiet when something larger is nearby. This kind of stillness along a riverbank is not natural.

He raises his hand. Mandla stops behind him.

They wait.

A twig snaps to the right. Deliberate. Not an accident.

Another snap to the left.

Then one behind them.

Vilakazi turns slowly. In the growing morning light, shapes appear between the trees, figures standing too still to be animals. One. Three. Five. Eight. They surround the bend of the river without leaving a gap.

He knows what this means.

The guards step forward together. No shouting. No warning. Just controlled movement as the circle closes.

Mandla drops his bag and turns. There is nowhere to run. His body understands before his mind does.

"Vilakazi, you are coming with us." the lead guard says calmly as he steps forward

Vilakazi looks at the men around him. At the empty space where Bheki should be.

He considers running, measuring distance, angles, shadows between the trees.

Then he feels it. The weight in the air he has known all his life. The ancestors are present. Close. Watching at the edge of the river, in the still space between guards and water.

He has nothing left to fight with.

He drops his bag.

Mandla looks at him. “Bhuti…”

“It is over,” Vilakazi says quietly.

The guards move in.

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The call comes through to Nqobizwe's phone while he is at his desk in the Ngwenya office.

"My Prince." The guard's voice is steady and satisfied. "We have them. Both of them. No resistance."

Nqobizwe leans back in his chair. He exhales slowly through his nose.

"Good," he says. "Drive them to Pretoria." He pauses. "Do not stop. Do not make any other calls. Come directly."

"Understood, my Prince."

He ends the call and sits with it for a moment. The quiet of the office. The sound of the city outside. The feeling of something that has been coiled tight in his chest for weeks beginning, just beginning, to loosen.

He picks up his phone and calls his father.

"Baba."

"Ndodana."

"They have them. The guards picked up Vilakazi and Mandla at the river bank. They are driving them to Pretoria now."

A long silence on the other end. Then King Langa exhales, a sound like a man setting down something very heavy that he has carried a very long way.

"Good," he says. "Good."

"It is not finished," Nqobizwe says. "But it is close."

"It is close," his father agrees.

They stay on the line for a moment without speaking.

Then Nqobizwe says, "I have to go. Refilwe is meeting her father today"

"Go," his father says. "We will speak later."

Nqobizwe puts the phone down and looks at the window for a moment, at the Pretoria skyline in the midday light, at everything that is still standing.

Then he picks up his jacket, walks into the restaurant, and stands behind the counter, waiting for King Serithi.

Chapter 40

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Nqobizwe

The Vilakazis are on their way to Pretoria. That is one weight off. But right now my focus is here, on the man sitting at the corner table who is about to meet my woman for the first time.

King Serithi arrived a few minutes ago with three guards and took the most private table in the room. I watched him settle and decide that I would speak to him before Refilwe arrives. He does not know that yet.

I walk over.

"King Serithi."

He looks up. His eyes move over my face, trying to place me. His guards straighten slightly.

I sit down without waiting to be invited.

He clears his throat. "Who are you and do…"

"I know who you are," I say. "And I think you can figure out who I am. I am the man your daughter was chosen for."

Something shifts in his expression. His jaw moves once. "So you are the one who claimed her." He leans back. "I was looking for her. You knew that."

"You were taking your time. Her life was in danger. You would not be sitting here waiting to meet her today if I had not acted when I did. So you are welcome." I say evenly

He looks at me for a long moment. I can see he does not particularly like me right now. That is fine. I did not come here to be liked.

"What do you want?" he asks.

I hold his gaze. "I want one thing. Qeto. Put him on a leash. I would hate to have to address him directly."

He goes still. "Are you threatening my son?"

"Yes," I say simply.

We look at each other.

"He called Refilwe yesterday," I say. "Told her she should stay wherever she is. That nobody wants her. That you are only looking for her because the ancestors said to." I pause and let that settle. "She cried. I do not accept that. Whatever your family is working through, she does not get to be the thing they take it out on. She has been through enough."

Serithi wipes his hand down his face slowly. He says nothing for a moment. I watch him process it, the way a man looks when he is genuinely caught off guard by something his child has done.

"I did not know he called her," he says finally.

"I know. Now you do."

"I have been searching for Refilwe for years." His voice drops. "This is not because of ancestors. She is my blood. My child." He exhales. "Qeto is struggling to accept the situation. That does not make what he said right. I will deal with him."

"That is all I am asking," I say. I stand. "I hope for both our sakes we can get along, King Serithi. You are about to become my in-law. I would prefer we start on level ground."

He looks up at me. Something in his face has changed, not quite respect, but something moving in that direction.

I walk back to the counter and position myself where I can see the door.

Eight minutes later Refilwe walks in.

She is in her work clothes still, tailored, composed, her bag over one shoulder, and she moves through the room like someone who knows where she is going without making a performance of it. She spots me immediately and changes course, coming to me first.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

"Is he here?"

I tilt my head toward the corner table.

She exhales once. Short and controlled. Then she plants a quick kiss on my lips and turns and walks toward him.

I watch her go. Shoulders back. Chin level. That is my woman.

She is going to be fine.

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Refilwe

I stop at the table and look at him.

He is looking at me like I am something he thought he imagined. Like he is checking whether I am real.

I clear my throat. He snaps out of it and stands quickly.

"Refilwe." He opens his arms. "May I?"

I nod.

He holds me. Properly, fully, both arms around me. It goes on longer than a polite greeting and I do not pull away. When he steps back I see the tears on his face and I do not know what to do with that so I just stand there.

He takes a folded handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wipes his face carefully.

"I am sorry. This feels like a dream. I was not sure this day would actually come." He says

"Let's sit," I say.

We sit. The waiter comes and we both order without really looking at the menu. Then he goes and we are left in the quiet.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I am fine," I say.

"You have grown." He chuckles softly and looks down at his hands. "You look so much like my mother."

I nod. I do not know what to say to that.

"I am sorry about what Qeto said to you," he says.

I look at him. So Nqobizwe did speak to him. "You met Nqobizwe."

"I did. He is a very brave man." He pauses. "Very protective of you."

"He is," I agree.

"I want you to know, what Qeto said is not true. None of it. I will deal with him when I get home. And I want you to know that I have been looking for you for a long time. You are my child, Refilwe. My blood."

I exhale slowly. "It's fine. If that is how he feels, then so be it."

"It is not fine. And I will fix it." He holds my gaze. "I want you to know your brothers. I want you to have that. But if it does not happen I will understand. I am not going to force anything on you."

I swallow. I want it. I want it more than I want to admit sitting across from a stranger who happens to share my blood. But I have been disappointed enough times to know better than to lean into hope before it has earned the right.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

"Anything."

"Where did you meet my mother? What actually happened?"

He shifts in his seat. Not uncomfortable, more like a man settling in for something he owes someone.

"I came to Matswalleng to inspect land. I had plans for a farm in that area. The chief offered me accommodation. That woman…Lentswe…she was working there, making traditional beer. One evening she came with another woman." He pauses. "Your mother."

I stay still.

"We were all talking, drinking, good conversation. Your mother was sharp. She had ideas about what a farm could bring to that village that surprised me. We

kept talking until everyone else had gone and it was just the two of us." He looks at the table. "She did not know I was royalty. She did not know I was married. I was not wearing my ring. And she did not say anything about her own situation. One thing led to another." He exhales. "In the morning she was gone. I felt the guilt immediately. I think she did too."

"When did you find out about me?" I ask.

"When you were born. I was told a princess had been born and I knew, she was the only woman outside my marriage. I went back to the village. Lentswe told me your mother had left. That there was no child." He looks up. "She lied to my face."

I nod slowly. Of course she did.

"I looked for years. Your mother's husband, his ancestors had influence in the spirit world and they used it. You were hidden from me. Both of you."

He leans forward slightly. "I never stopped looking, Refilwe. I want you to know that. I spent years searching. It was the dream that finally gave me your face and your name. And when I came back and found that woman Lentswe" He shakes his head. "Your friend was the one who truly helped me."

"DK," I say.

"Yes. She did not hesitate."

I look at him. "I ran away from Matswalleng when I was eighteen. They wanted me to marry a man old enough to be my grandfather. They abused me, Lentswe and Molefe both. Every day." I say it plainly. "She married her friend's husband right after my mother died. That is who she is. I would not be surprised if she had a hand in my mother's death."

He reaches across the table and takes my hand. "I am sorry. I should have found you sooner. I should have looked harder."

"You did not know where to look. I am not blaming you." I say.

"I am here now." He holds my hand. "I know you are grown. I know you have built your own life without me. But it is not too late. I want to be your father. I want you to know what that feels like, to have someone in your corner who is there because they want to be, not because they have to be."

A tear slides down my face before I can stop it. I wipe it quickly.

"Your family…" I start.

"My wife is excited to meet you," he says. "She has prepared a room for you already. She is fussing over everything." He smiles. "The boys are having a hard time adjusting. But that will not stop me from being your father. Nothing will stop that."

"I do not want to cause pain in your home. But if your wife is truly okay and you want this, then yes. I would like to know where I come from. I would like to know your family." I say carefully

His whole face changes. Something lifts in it.

"That means everything to me, my princess."

Our food arrives. We eat and the conversation loosens slowly, the way it does when two strangers discover they are not quite strangers after all.

"I do not mean to overwhelm you," he says after a while. "I am just too happy. Too excited. I have so many things I dreamed of doing with you." He laughs softly. "But you are grown now."

"What did you dream of?" I ask. I am curious in spite of myself.

He looks at me. "I wanted to teach you how to ride a bike. Buy you your first ice cream." He smiles. "I wanted to accept that you would leave me broke with all the shopping, like other princesses. I used to wonder what it would be like, having a daughter."

I wipe a tear before it falls properly.

"We can still do that while you are here. I actually do not know how to ride a bike." I say

He stares at me. "You do not know how to ride a bike?"

"No one taught me."

He sits back and shakes his head slowly, something moving across his face that is half laughter and half something heavier. "Then I will teach you. That is settled."

We laugh together.

"I would love that," I say.

"What have you ever wished for?" he asks then, his voice quieter. "In a father. What did you want?"

I exhale. "Love. I wanted to be loved and protected. The opposite of what I had. Support. Someone to say happy birthday. To say I am proud of you." I pause. "My graduation, I was alone. No one was there. I just wanted someone to be there. A call. A message. Anything. I have never wanted more than that."

He reaches across and takes my hand on the table. "I am here now. I know you will take time to adjust. You are about to become a wife. But I will be here through all of it, showing up, showing support. Please open your heart, allow me to be your father."

I laugh softly through the tears. "You know I am getting married?"

"Our seer was shown. The chosen queen. Yes." He says

"How does it feel, being a princess?" I ask.

He laughs. "Ask Mmabotle. She was a princess before she was queen. She will tell you everything."

I smile. "I am going to be queen anyway. I should probably focus on that."

"You still have a little time before the crown. Enjoy every moment before it." He says

He asks about my work and when I tell him he sits back and looks at me like he is calculating something.

"Beauty and brains. You did all of that alone." He shakes his head. "I am proud of you, Refilwe. You should hear yourself."

I smile before I can stop it. "Thank you."

"Can I see your office while I am here?" he asks. "I want to take pictures for Mmabotle. She will not believe me otherwise."

I laugh. It surprises me, a real, unguarded laugh. "Yes. I will call you tomorrow."

"I will be there," he says immediately.

We talk until it is dark outside. I tell him more than I planned to. About growing up, about leaving, about making it on my own.

He listens without looking away and when I talk about the harder parts his face does something I was not expecting, it breaks quietly, the way a parent's face breaks when they realise what they missed.

When we finally stand to leave he hugs me again at the door and this time I hold on properly.

It feels like something I have been owed for a very long time.

Nqobizwe is at the counter. He has been there the whole time, working from his phone, giving me my space while staying close enough that I could find him in a second. He sees us coming and steps out.

"Nqobizwe," King Serithi says. “My daughter has told me a great deal about you. My first impression of you was not ideal." He pauses. "I would like to sit with you properly. There is much to discuss."

"Whenever you are ready, King Serithi," Nqobizwe says.

Serithi nods. Then he turns back to me and cups my face briefly with both hands, the way a father would, and then drops his hands and steps back.

"Tomorrow. Your office. I will call you," he says.

I laugh softly. "Good night."

He leaves with his guards. I watch him go until he is through the door.

"Looks like it went well," Nqobizwe says beside me.

I turn to him. I cannot keep the smile down. I gave up trying to ten minutes ago. "It did."

"So Qeto was lying after all."

"I hope so. I would be devastated if he is not genuine." I say

Nqobizwe pulls me into him and holds me there, his arms all the way around me, his chin resting on the top of my head.

I close my eyes.

For the first time in a long time I feel like something that was always supposed to be mine has finally been returned to me.

•••

Narrated

Sizwe parks outside the yard in Matswalleng and kills the engine.

He looks at the house. Small, clean, familiar in the way homes are when they belong to people who have lived in them a long time. He looks at Dikeledi beside him.

"Are you sure you don’t want to return with me to Pretoria?" he asks.

She laughs. "You are going to miss me."

"Too much," he says. Simply. No performance around it.

She smiles at her lap. Then she opens the door.

They both get out. He lifts her bag from the back seat and leans against the car, holding it out to her. She takes it but neither of them moves toward the gate.

"Come stand closer," he says.

She takes two steps toward him and stops. He reaches out and closes the remaining distance, taking her hand.

"I mean it, Dee. I am going to miss you."

"I know," she says softly. "Me too."

"You will visit."

"I will visit."

"Soon."

"Soon," she agrees.

He pulls her in and kisses her, slow, unhurried. When he pulls back he looks at her face for a moment.

Then he picks up her bag and walks her to the gate. He hands it over the low wall and she takes it from the other side.

"Bye," she says.

"Bye, Dee."

She turns and walks inside. He stands at the gate until the door closes behind her. The neighbourhood is quiet around him.

He stands there longer than he should.

Then he walks back to the car feeling like she took something with her that he did not know he was carrying until just now.

He drives.

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Inside, Tumelo is on the couch, the television going, completely unbothered by the time.

"Brother. Long time." Dikeledi says, dropping her bag at her bedroom door.

"Wa jola now?" (You are dating now?) he asks, not looking away from the screen.

"None of your business."

She drops onto the couch and calls Refilwe, to let her know she has arrived safely. They talk, about King Serithi, about how it went, about everything. When she hears the happiness in Refilwe's voice she feels it in her own chest. She ends the call and sits for a moment just smiling at nothing.

Then her phone buzzes. R5000 notification. Refilwe.

She calls back immediately.

"And then, wena rich kid, ke 5 tao yang?" (What is this five thousand?)

"Friend allowance. I love you. Thank you for being in my life. Bye" Refilwe ends the call.

Dikeledi stares at her phone and laughs. Of course she ended it. Clever girl. She knows DK would argue.

She sits with the warmth of it for a minute.

"Was that Refilwe?" Tumelo asks.

"Yeah. I had a really good time." She leans her head back. "A boyfriend and everything, I cannot lie."

He nods "I saw. He seemed respectful. Left you at the gate."

"He is." She smiles.

"Oh…and Lentswe was asking about you, I told her you went to visit Refilwe. She wanted to apologise apparently. To both of you." Tumelo says, still looking at the television.

Dikeledi's smile disappears.

She sits up straight.

"You did what?"

"The poor woman sounded genuine, Dk…"

"Poor woman." She laughs once, short and sharp.

"Poor WOMAN. Lentswe?" She stands. "Tumelo, you might have just put my life in danger. And yours. And Refilwe's."

He frowns. "What are you talking about…"

"Did you tell her when I was coming back?"

"I said yesterday you were supposed to…"

"I cannot believe you." She shakes her head, breathing hard.

"Lentswe once asked me where Refilwe stays. She asked me, Tumelo. She wanted Refilwe to marry Motaung ten years ago and now that weird old man is looking for Refilwe."

"She does not want to apologise. She wants information." She grabs her phone. "You are going to get us all killed and you are sitting here talking about the poor woman. Dom kop. Yeses."

She walks to her bedroom and slams the door.

She calls Sizwe. He answers on the first ring.

"Miss me already?"

"My brother told Lentswe I was at Refilwe's," she says, the words coming fast. "What if she already told Motaung? She once asked me where Refilwe stays. Sizwe, what if…"

BANG.

The sound fills the house, a door connecting with its frame at full force, wood against wood, something giving under a kick.

"Dk" Sizwe's voice sharpens immediately. "What is that?"

"Let me check…"

"Dk, do not…"

She opens her bedroom door.

Tumelo is on the floor in the corridor. Face down. A dark stain spreading from his hairline where something hard has connected with the back of his head. Two men stand in the lounge, weapons drawn, breathing hard from whatever it took to get through the front door.

They see her at the same moment she sees them.

She steps back and slams the bedroom door and turns the lock in one motion, pressing her back against it.

"SIZWE." She keeps her voice low because there is no point in screaming now. "There are men with guns. Tumelo is down in the corridor, he is bleeding, I don't know…"

"I am coming." His voice is completely different now. Flat. Focused. She hears the engine accelerating. "Keep the door locked. Do not open it for anyone except me."

"Sizwe…"

The door shudders behind her. They are hitting it from the other side.

Once.

Twice.

On the third hit the lock gives and she stumbles forward. They are in the room before she can move anywhere, one hand grabbing her arm, pulling her upright, the gun pointed at the ceiling not at her but close enough.

"Boss wants a word. Let's go. Now." the man says.

"Get your hands off me." She tries to pull free. He holds firm.

"Now. Don't make this harder."

"I will make it as hard as I want. You broke into my house, you hit my brother, who do you think you are…"

He pulls her forward. She digs her heels in, grabs the door frame with her free hand. He is bigger than her and it does not matter, she is not going quietly.

They drag her through the corridor, past Tumelo on the floor, she looks down at him, his chest is moving, he is breathing, she holds onto that, and out through the broken front door.

The gate.

She opens her mouth and screams.

Headlights.

A car tears around the corner too fast, brakes hard, and Sizwe is out before it has fully stopped. Behind him, further back, two more vehicles, his security, the ones that always keep their distance, that she never noticed until now.

They pour out with weapons drawn.

"Let her go." Sizwe's voice carries across the yard with no effort. "Weapons down. Now."

The man holding Dikeledi looks at the guns pointed at him. He looks at his colleague. Something passes between them, a quick, silent calculation.

They let go.

Sizwe does not wait.

Two shots. Both of them down before she has processed that he has moved. Professional and unhesitating and nothing like the man who stood at her gate twenty minutes ago kissing her goodbye.

He reaches the third man, the one still standing near the gate, and nods to the security team. They grab him, pull him back, hold him.

Then Sizwe is in front of her.

He grabs her face in both hands and looks at her, eyes moving over her quickly, checking her, all of her, and then he pulls her into him so hard she almost loses her footing.

She grabs the front of his jacket and holds on. Her whole body is shaking. She did not know it was shaking until he held her still.

She cries. She does not mean to but she does, pressing her face into his chest, her hands fisted in his jacket.

He holds her tighter.

"I have you," he says. Just that. His voice is rough. "I have you, Dee."

After a moment she pulls back and wipes her face fast. "Tumelo. He is inside, he was on the floor…"

She is already moving. Sizwe moves with her, one hand at her back, through the broken door and into the corridor.

Tumelo is sitting up against the wall, both hands pressed to the back of his head, blinking hard and slow. Alive. Conscious. Confused.

"Tumelo." She drops beside him. "Talk to me."

"What…" He squints. "Three men…"

"Shhh. You are okay." She exhales. "You are okay."

She sits on the floor beside her brother with one hand on his arm and the other pressed to her own mouth and she lets herself breathe.

Sizwe stands in the corridor doorway, phone already at his ear, his voice low and controlled, arranging things she does not need to know the details of.

He looks at her once… just once… while he talks, making sure she is still upright.

She is.

She nods at him.

He nods back and keeps talking.

Chapter 41

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Narrated

Sizwe's men hold the remaining man against the outside wall. The other two are already on the ground where they fell.

This one is trying to look unbothered. He is not unbothered.

"Who sent you?" Sizwe asks.

The man chuckles. Spits on the ground near Sizwe's shoe.

Sizwe nods once. His men throw two punches in quick succession. The man's head snaps sideways.

"What did you want with her?" Sizwe asks.

The man spits blood this time instead of air. "She has information the big boss needs."

"Who is the big boss?"

He looks up at Sizwe with something that is trying to be defiance but is sitting closer to fear. "Why would I tell you that. Do your worst."

Sizwe looks at him for a moment. Then he turns to the man on his left.

"Take out his shoe lace."

The man frowns. The guard crouches and pulls the lace from his shoe and hands it to Sizwe.

Sizwe holds it loosely between his hands and looks at the man in front of him.

"I am not going to shoot you," he says. His voice is completely level. "You think you are being clever by not talking. But I want you to feel this. All of it. When your soul leaves your body I want you to feel every second of it."

The man tries to pull free. Sizwe moves quickly, trips him, takes him to the ground, pins him and wraps the lace around his neck with both hands. The man fights. His legs kick. His hands claw at Sizwe's wrists and find no purchase.

Then his body gives up.

Sizwe stands. He straightens his jacket. He looks at the three bodies on the ground and then at his men.

"I want these dropped at Motaung's door. All three. A message from nobody, understood?" he says.

They nod.

"This is not our territory. We do not know what we are walking into and I will not have anyone doing anything without proper information. More men are on their way. Stand down until I say otherwise." He turns toward the house.

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Dikeledi is on the floor in the corridor beside Tumelo when Sizwe comes back in. She has not moved since he left. She is still in the same position, one hand on her brother's arm, her other hand pressed flat against the wall behind her like she needs something solid to hold onto.

She looks up when he comes through the broken door.

He crosses to them and crouches in front of her.

"We need to leave. Now." He says.

"Back to Pretoria?" she asks. Her voice is smaller than he has ever heard it.

He nods. He looks at her face, at the way she is holding herself, the tightness around her eyes, and something in his chest pulls sharply. Dikeledi is always the loudest person in any room. Right now she looks like someone has turned the volume all the way down.

"Both of you," he says. "Now, Dk."

She nods and starts to stand. He takes her arm and helps her up. Tumelo gets to his feet slowly, one hand still at the back of his head, blinking against the pain.

"Pack what you can. Five minutes."

Dikeledi picks up the bag she never unpacked. She goes to Tumelo's room and he moves with her, grabbing what matters quickly. They are out of the house in four minutes.

The car pulls away fast.

Sizwe drives without speaking. His eyes are on the road and the mirrors. The neighbourhood slides past, dark yards, sleeping houses, street lights.

The silence holds for a long time.

"Who were those men?" Tumelo asks eventually. He has been turning it over since he came back to consciousness, and the shape of it still does not make sense to him.

Dikeledi does not respond.

"Dikeledi?" he tries.

She looks at the window. "You opened your big mouth to Lentswe. Those were Motaung's men." She exhales slowly. "You are too kind, Tumelo. Too trusting. People like Lentswe use that. She was never going to apologise, she wanted information and you handed it to her." She shakes her head. "You almost got us killed."

"I thought she was genuine," he says quietly. "I thought if Refilwe heard her out…"

"Lentswe doesn't apologise. That is not who she is." Dikeledi's voice is tired rather than angry now. "Next time, nothing. You tell her nothing about me, about Refilwe, about anything. You hear me?"

He nods. Then after a moment: "Why is she after Refilwe?"

"I don't know exactly. But that old man Motaung wants to find her. Lentswe is helping him. That is all you need to know." Dikeledi says.

Tumelo sits back and decides not to push further.

"Grootman," he says to Sizwe. "Where are you taking us?"

Sizwe glances at him in the mirror. "Pretoria. You are both staying with me until this is settled. You cannot go back to that house right now."

"The house will be empty…"

"I will arrange someone to stay there. The house will be fine." His voice is final. "No more questions."

Tumelo nods and falls quiet.

Sizwe’s phone rings. Nqobizwe.

"Sure," Sizwe answers, one hand on the wheel.

"How are things? How is Dk?"

"We are fine. Moving. Nothing suspicious behind us."

"Good. I have sent men for Lentswe. She will know who I am."

"I dropped a message at Motaung's doorstep," Sizwe says. "He will think about it before he moves again."

"Copy. Drive safe."

They end the call. The highway opens ahead of them and Sizwe accelerates.

Dikeledi leans her head against the window and closes her eyes.

•••

Nqobizwe

I need to get to the warehouse. The Vilakazis are there waiting and my father is on his way.

But first I go to the bedroom.

Refilwe is out of the shower, her hair wrapped, skin still warm, pulling a shirt on when I walk in. She sees my face and the small contentment from earlier today shifts immediately.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I have to go somewhere. Business." I sit on the edge of the bed. "The Vilakazis are here. I need to go and speak to them."

She sits beside me. "I am glad you caught them." A pause. "Are you going to kill them?"

"Fifi…"

"Make them suffer," she says, cutting me off cleanly. "They do not deserve mercy."

I look at her. I do not want her in this part of my life. I do not want her thinking about it or carrying any of it. But she has been in the middle of everything whether I wanted her to be or not.

"Dikeledi is coming back. With Sizwe and her brother." I say

She sits up straighter. "What happened?"

"Motaung's men went to the house. Her brother told Lentswe she had been visiting you. They were waiting for her." I hold her hands before she can stand. "She is okay. Sizwe was there. But they are coming back tonight."

"I need to call her…"

"In the morning, Mama. Let her rest. She has been through enough tonight."

She exhales and sits back. "What does Motaung want? He cannot still be trying to… that does not make sense. After all these years?"

I clench my jaw. "I will find out exactly what he wants. That is a promise."

She nods slowly. I can see her filing it away, putting it somewhere manageable so she does not fall apart with it.

I kiss her softly. "Guards are here. Call me if anything feels wrong."

"I will," she says.

I leave.

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The warehouse back room is exactly as it was left, two chairs, tape on mouths, hands bound. Thobekile is in her corner, the wheelchair pushed against the far wall. She looks hollowed out. Like something that used to have fire in it and has run out of fuel.

The guard removes the tape.

I look at the Vilakazis. They look back at me.

They are afraid. That surprises me slightly, I expected arrogance, the particular confidence of men who have always worked from the shadows. But without their herbs, without their rituals, without the safety of darkness and distance, they are just two men in chairs.

"It is good to finally see you both. Quite the operation you ran." I say

Vilakazi says nothing. His brother looks at the floor.

"Thobekile." I turn to her. "What do you have to say to your friends? You were screaming his name across the entire yard not long ago."

The look she gives me could strip paint. She hates me. She has hated me since I was old enough to understand what the word meant. But underneath the hate tonight there is something else, exhaustion. She has nothing left to fight with.

The Vilakazis look at her. Vilakazi's expression shifts slightly when he sees her, taking in the wheelchair, the bandaged legs, the general wreckage of a woman who was powerful three weeks ago.

My father comes in. Baba Ngubeni behind him.

King Langa looks around the room slowly, taking inventory. Then he looks at the two men in the chairs.

"Vilakazi. Finally," He almost sounds pleased. "You are a very hard man to find." He clasps his hands behind his back. "Three witches in one room. What an occasion."

Thobekile stares at the wall.

"I only want one thing. " my father says. His voice is conversational. Relaxed. That is when he is most dangerous and the Vilakazis seem to sense it, they shift in their chairs simultaneously. "Answers. That is all. What did you want? What was worth coming after my ancestors for?"

Silence.

"Kill us. We are not talking." Vilakazi says.

My father tilts his head. "Have you heard much about me? Do you know what I am capable of?"

"I know you killed our Chief," The brother says.

"And still you came." My father looks genuinely curious. "Your Chief was the most powerful witch this region has seen in generations and he failed. Completely. And you thought, what? That you would succeed where he did not?"

Nothing.

My father looks at me. I look at the guard and nod. He leaves and comes back with the finger cutter.

The brother's eyes go wide when he sees it. Vilakazi's jaw tightens.

My father walks to his chair. He crouches to his level.

"Every time you choose silence, you lose a finger," he says simply. "We have time. The question is whether you do." He straightens up. "Why did you want access to the palace?"

"Khohlwa," he says. (Forget it.)

But his voice shakes on the word.

I move to the other side and help my father hold the hand flat against the chair arm.

Snap.

The sound is sharp. His scream fills the room completely.

Baba Ngubeni watches from the doorway without expression.

"Still nothing?" my father asks pleasantly.

"OKAY." His chest is heaving. "Okay. We wanted to wipe everyone out. Block the ancestors, take away your warnings, your protection, and kill the royal family. All of you. That was the plan." He is crying now, not trying to hide it.

Vilakazi closes his eyes.

"That was quick," my father says. "Uyigwala." (Coward.) He looks at him almost with pity. "Why?"

"You killed our Chief," he says. "You banned the whole clan. We had nothing left."

"Your Chief came after the royal house first. What were we supposed to do? Praise him for it?" I say

He says nothing.

"You want to kill us because we protected ourselves from your Chief," I say. "That is what I am hearing. You want revenge for a man who started a war he could not finish."

"HE WAS FIGHTING BACK." Vilakazi breaks. The words come out before he can stop them.

My father looks at him slowly. "Fighting back for what?"

Vilakazi breathes. He looks at my father with something that is not quite hatred, something older and rawer than that.

"Queen Liyana," he says. "Our Chief was supposed to marry her. And then you came and took her. Because the Ngwenya always get what they want."

The room goes quiet.

My father blinks. Once.

"Liyana," he says.

"He loved her. He had loved her for years. And you walked in and she was declared your chosen one and that was it. Nobody asked him. Nobody cared." Vilakazi says.

My father is quiet for a long moment.

Then he laughs. A real laugh, not cruel, just genuinely caught off guard.

"Your Chief never told Liyana any of this," he says. "She had no idea he existed in that way. You want to know how she chose me? She chose me. Freely. She looked at me and she chose me." He shakes his head. "Your Chief went to war, lost everything, lost his life, and now his clan has lost three more men, over a woman who did not know he was waiting for her."

"Don't mock him," Vilakazi says quietly.

"I am not mocking him. I am telling you the truth." My father's voice is not unkind. Just honest. "He could have spoken to her. He could have tried. Instead he chose war. And war with the Ngwenya is what he got."

Vilakazi stares at the floor.

"To go through everything you went through," my father says slowly, "to lose this much, for a chief who never once told the woman he loved that he loved her." He shakes his head. "That is a tragedy."

The room sits with that.

"Don't mock us," Vilakazi says again, his voice smaller this time. "Just kill us."

"In a moment," my father says. He straightens. "When you get to the other side, tell your clan what I told you tonight. Tell them the Ngwenya are not their enemy. But if they come for us again…" He looks at both of them. "Tell them to remember this room."

He steps back and looks at me.

I nod to the guards. They bring the ropes.

The Vilakazis see what is coming. They do not fight it, not because they are not afraid, they clearly are, but because there is nowhere to go and they know it.

The guards work quickly.

My father looks at her in the corner. "Thobekile. You will sit here and watch your associates leave. We will see you in the morning."

She says nothing. She looks at the floor. She does not watch.

I have my gun out. I look at the two men and I say it quietly.

"Azishe."

They step onto the chairs. The ropes are placed. The chairs are removed.

We walk out.

"Langa. Please. I am sorry" Thobekile's voice. Just above a whisper. For the first time tonight.

My father pauses in the doorway. He does not turn around. He does not say anything.

He whistles softly, almost to himself, and walks out.

•••

Narrated

Motaung's office.

He has been checking his phone for two hours. His boys left with a simple job, pick up the girl, bring her, do not make a scene. Two hours and nothing. No call. No update. No answer when he dials.

"Kat." He calls the name without raising his voice. The man appears immediately. "Where are my people? They said they had the girl and that was the last I heard."

"I don't know, boss. E re ke lo check'a." (Let me go check.)

"Go." Motaung waves him out. "Something is wrong."

He stands at his window. The township is quiet at this hour. He has run this community for decades. He knows the sound of everything here, what is normal and what is not. Tonight something in the air sits differently.

He does not like it.

A different man comes through the door at a run. Hat in his hand, face communicating everything before he opens his mouth.

"Ntate Motaung." He is breathless. "Ba ba bolaile." (They killed them.)

Motaung turns from the window. "O bua kang?" (What are you saying?)

"A car dropped three bodies at the gate. Drove off fast. It is your men, the ones you sent for the girl. All three. Dead."

Motaung stares at him.

He has not been surprised in a very long time. He has been in this business long enough that very little reaches him anymore. But this, three men, his men, dropped at his own door like a returned delivery, this reaches him.

"Who did this?" he asks.

"We don't know yet, boss. But we are asking."

He picks up his jacket from the chair. "I want Lentswe. She will tell me who was with that girl. Let's go."

He walks out already moving through the calculations. Someone was there. Someone who was not afraid of him, who knew what he was doing, who moved fast and clean and left no name behind. That is not a random person. That is someone with resources and intent.

The question is who.

And the question after that is whether they know who he is.

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Lentswe's house

Motaung does not knock. His men push through the front door and he walks in behind them, moving through the small lounge into the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom.

Nothing.

The lights are off but not switched off, they were not turned off deliberately, they simply were not on when whoever left, left. Her handbag is on the kitchen counter. Her shoes are at the bedroom door. The wardrobe is full. The kettle is still slightly warm.

She did not pack. She did not plan.

She is simply gone.

Motaung stands in the middle of the bedroom and looks at the wardrobe, the shoes, the unmade bed. He has been doing this long enough to read a scene. This is not a woman who ran. This is a woman who was taken, or who left in such a hurry that she could not take anything with her.

"Find her," he says to the room at large. "Every contact. Every person she has spoken to in the last week. I want to know where she is before morning."

His men scatter.

Motaung stands in the small bedroom alone for a moment. The warm kettle. The full wardrobe. The shoes at the door.

Whoever is protecting this girl, this Refilwe, they moved faster than he did.

That is new.

He does not like new.

•••

Nqobizwe

Sizwe arrived. They are at his other house, Dk, her brother, Sizwe. I spoke to him briefly. Everyone is settled for the night. Tomorrow we deal with everything in the daylight.

I come through the front door. The house is quiet. I check my watch.

My phone rings before I reach the bedroom. The men I sent to Lentswe's.

"Talk to me. Did you find her?"

"When we arrived she was gone. The house was open, main door unlocked. Clothes still there, bag still there. No sign of where she went."

I stop walking. "Someone was there before you."

"Looks like it, boss. But nothing was disturbed. She just, is not there."

"Stand down. I am going to call Spura. Stay close to the house and wait for his instruction."

"Copy."

I call Spura immediately.

"Boss man."

"What is happening in the Free State right now? Talk to me."

"Eish. I got a tip not long ago." He pauses. "Motaung is shaken. Three bodies dropped at his gate. He is asking questions about who touched his men. And…" another pause " his guys are looking for someone. A woman. Lentswe."

I frown. "Motaung is looking for Lentswe?"

"That is what I am hearing. His boys are out right now asking around."

"Tell my men to stand down. If Motaung's people are already searching that area, I do not want my guys caught in the middle without proper backup." I think for a second. "Find out what you can about Lentswe. Where she went. Whether she ran herself or someone moved her."

"I will have something by morning."

We end the call.

I stand in the corridor outside the bedroom door.

Lentswe is gone and I do not know if she ran or was taken. Motaung is looking for her too, which means something shifted on his side tonight that he did not expect. Three bodies at his gate will do that.

My head is too full for this hour.

I push the door open softly. Refilwe is asleep, curled on her side, the room dark and quiet around her. I stand in the doorway for a moment just looking at her.

Then I get undressed, slide in beside her, and pull her close.

She stirs slightly. "You are back," she murmurs.

"I am back," I say.

She settles against me without waking fully.

I stare at the ceiling.

Lentswe. Motaung. The royal farm. Senzo. Thobekile. All of it still turning.

But right now this is what I have, her breathing, the quiet, the fact that everyone I need to be alive tonight is alive.

I close my eyes.

Chapter 42

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Narrated

The warehouse is quiet now.

Vilakazi and Mandla are still. Thobekile has not moved from her corner. She watched them go, their legs kicking, then slowing, then nothing, and she did not look away. She could not. The guard made sure of that.

Now it is just her and the dark and the smell of the room.

She stares at the concrete floor. For the first time in as long as she can remember she has no plan forming in the back of her mind. No angle. No next move. The thing that has driven her entire adult life, the need to control, to manoeuvre, to always be three steps ahead; has gone completely quiet.

Because there is nowhere left to go.

Sbonga is dead. Buhle is dying. Nkanyezi is at a stranger's house being cared for by the wife of the man she used as a stud. Vilakazi and Mandla are hanging behind her. Bukizwe's blood is on a warehouse floor somewhere she will never see again.

Every single person she gambled with is gone.

And she is still here. In a wheelchair. In a cold room. Tied at the wrists. Being kept alive not out of mercy but because someone else has decided when and how she ends.

She has never been on this side of things before.

She wipes her face with the back of her bound hands.

She blames Vilakazi. If he had not worked with Bukizwe behind her back, if he had not had his own agenda running parallel to hers, they could have adapted. Found another way. But he played her. Used her access to the kingdom, used her desperation, and all along he was feeding information to Bukizwe who was feeding his own plan.

She was the only one who did not know the full picture.

A sound.

She looks up.

Sbonga is standing in front of her.

His neck is bleeding. The wound is open and dark and wrong in the way a wound looks when it has been made quickly and without mercy. He is looking at her with eyes that should not be open.

"Ma," he says. "Save me, Ma."

She shakes her head hard. "No. No, you are dead. You are not real."

"MA." His voice gets louder. "MA. Help me. Please."

She squeezes her eyes shut and presses her bound hands against her ears. "Oh Jehova ngiyaxolisa." (Oh God I am sorry.) "Oh God, oh God…"

"MA. MA. MA…"

"YOU ARE DEAD." She screams it at the inside of her own eyelids. "You are dead, I know you are dead…"

"Help me please…"

She rocks forward, hands over her ears, eyes shut. The voice does not stop. It layers over itself, his voice and then the echo of his voice and then something underneath that is not a voice at all but a feeling, the particular feeling of a mother who knows, in the place that exists before thought, exactly what she has done to her children.

She has been keeping that feeling at arm's length for years.

Tonight it is in the room with her and it is not leaving.

"Ngiyaxolisa," she whispers into her hands. "I am sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry."

The word keeps coming out of her like something she cannot stop, not directed at anyone, not a performance, just the only sound left that her body knows how to make.

The warehouse is cold.

Outside, nothing moves.

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It is early. The sun is just coming over the roofline. Dikeledi is on the outdoor couch with a throw blanket pulled around her shoulders and a cup of tea going cold in both hands.

She has been out here for forty minutes.

She keeps replaying it. The bang of the door. Tumelo on the floor. The two men with guns filling the small corridor of her childhood home. The wall against her back. The helplessness of being grabbed and pulled and having no way to fight it that would actually work.

She is not a person who feels helpless easily. She does not like the feeling. She has been sitting with it out here trying to put it somewhere it will not follow her around all day.

And underneath that, Sizwe.

The headlights. Him out of the car before it stopped. The way he moved, not panicked, not uncertain, just decisive and fast and completely without hesitation. The sound of the shots. The way he came to her after, both hands on her face, checking her over, and then pulling her in like she was something he was not willing to let go of.

Nobody has ever done that for her.

She wipes the corner of her eye quickly and drinks her cold tea.

The door behind her opens. Sizwe comes out with his own cup, still in the clothes he slept in, hair not yet sorted, looking like a man who also did not sleep as well as he pretended to.

He sees her and does not say anything pointed about the fact that she has clearly been out here a while. He just sits close to her.

"I looked for you inside," he says.

"I wanted to think."

He nods. He reaches over and takes the throw, wraps it around both of them, and pulls her into his side.

She lets him. She stops pretending she does not want to be held.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I am fine. Just replaying everything." She pauses. "If I had not called you. If I had waited thirty minutes like I was going to…"

"Don't do that," he says.

"I know. I know, I am just…" She stops. "I am grateful. That is all. Thank you, Sizwe."

He tightens his arm around her. "Anytime. I mean that." He is quite for a moment “When I spinned that car aound, I was shaking. I was already thinking the worst”

She swallows.

"You shot them without hesitation," she says.

"I know how to handle a gun. It is part of my life." He says it directly, no apology in it. "How does that make you feel?"

She shrugs. "Does it matter?"

"It matters to me. What you think of me matters."

She turns and looks at him. At his face in the early morning light. He is looking back at her steadily.

"You looked hot. I don't care that you kill people." She says

He lets out a short laugh. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." She shifts to face him better. "But what I care about is this…do you kill innocent people or only people who deserve it? Will your life choices land you in prison? And will being near you make me a target?" She holds his gaze. "Those are my honest questions."

He nods slowly. "Those are fair questions." He thinks for a second. "I do not touch innocent people. I deal with those who threaten me, my business, or the people I care about. My life will not catch up with me in the way you are thinking, and if it ever looks like it might, I have ways out. I plan for everything." He pauses. "And as for being a target, yesterday happened because of Lentswe and Motaung, not because of me. That situation is being handled. I will not let anything come near you."

She looks at him for a long moment.

"How long are we staying here?" she asks.

"Worried about imposing?"

"I don't want to depend on you. I don't like depending on people." She says.

"I know." He almost smiles. "How about this. I don't know when. Maybe never."

"SIZWE."

He laughs and kisses her cheek. "I am joking." He sobers. "Until it is safe for you both. However long that is." He picks up his cup. "The house needs groceries though. I genuinely cannot tell you the last time I did a grocery shop."

"We can do groceries," she says immediately. "That is fine. That I will accept."

"Just groceries? It also needs some furniture, to feel homey" He looks at her sideways.

"Just groceries. Don't try to take me furniture shopping, I see that face."

He laughs. Caught.

"Fine. Groceries only."

She shakes her head but she is laughing and he is laughing and the morning feels lighter than it did when she came out here.

They sit together under the one throw they already have, the sun coming up properly now, the city starting its slow noise in the distance.

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Tumelo comes out twenty minutes later.

He stands in the doorway for a moment, taking in the size of the garden, the house behind him, the general scale of everything. He went to sleep in a daze last night and this morning the full picture is landing properly.

He clears his throat. "Good morning."

"Morning," Sizwe says.

"Hi," Dikeledi says. Flat.

Tumelo comes and sits on the chair across from them. He looks at his sister and she looks somewhere past him.

"I am sorry, Dikeledi," he says.

"First you sent Refilwe's father to Lentswe," she says, still not looking at him directly. "And then you gave her information about me. Those are two strikes, Tumelo."

"I know. I know. I just…"

"I know you just. I know your heart. That is the problem." She finally looks at him. "Your heart will get us killed in this world. You need limits."

He looks at his hands.

Sizwe leans forward. "Hey. I don't know you. But from what I can see you are a good person. Too good, maybe, for the things that have been happening around you lately. But that is not something to be ashamed of." He pauses. "You just need to be vigilant. There is a difference between having a good heart and being naive. You can keep one and fix the other."

Tumelo looks at him. "How? How do I change what I am?"

"You don't change what you are. You just sharpen it." Sizwe says simply.

Tumelo nods slowly. He looks around the garden again. At the house. At the space of it all.

"This place is something. Once it is furnished properly it will be incredible." He says

Sizwe chuckles. "It is just walls right now."

"Good bones though." Tumelo nods professionally. Then: "Where do you work? You must be earning seriously."

Sizwe chokes on his tea. He composes himself. "I earn enough."

"Are they hiring?" Tumelo says it like it is the most natural question in the world. "You never know."

Dikeledi looks at her brother sideways. Even she did not see that coming.

Sizwe smiles slowly. "Any qualifications?"

"BCom financial management," Tumelo says. "Still job hunting. I want to take care of my sister, you know. She gave up everything for me, left university, to take care of our mother. I told her if I make it, she makes it too. I am still working toward that." He shrugs. "Got hope still."

Something moves across Sizwe's face. He glances at Dikeledi for a half second, she is looking at the garden, and then back at Tumelo.

"I will check whether there is an available post. I like that you asked. Most people wait to be offered. Grab every door you see, Tumelo." He says

Tumelo grins. "I had to. I don't know people in high places."

"I am in high places?"

"Obviously."

They both laugh. Dikeledi is watching them now with a small expression she is not entirely managing to keep off her face.

"How did you meet my sister?" Tumelo asks.

"Through Refilwe's boyfriend. We were waiting for her to arrive and Dikeledi was already there."

"Oh, this is new then. New couple." Tumelo looks between them with the particular calm of a man conducting a quiet assessment. "Do you love her?"

Sizwe coughs. "I… I like her. A lot."

Tumelo shakes his head slowly. "You don't know it yet. That is fine." He leans back. "She is my sister. And if you can handle her as she is, that whole personality, all of it, no editing, then what you feel is already love. It just takes a special kind of person to stay comfortable in Dk's orbit." He looks at Sizwe directly. "Don't hurt her. I don't want to not like you. You seem like good people."

"I won't," Sizwe says.

Tumelo nods. That is enough for him.

They sit in the morning light, the three of them, and the conversation moves to lighter things.

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Refilwe

Nqobizwe and I are ready and in the car, heading to Sizwe's place to see Dikeledi before I go to work.

I cannot stop thinking about Motaung. What does an old man in his seventies actually want with me now? It cannot still be about marriage, even he must understand the world has moved on. Something else is driving this and I cannot figure out what.

It is eating at me.

We pull up and before the driver has fully stopped I am out of the car. The front door opens and Dikeledi is right there and I grab her.

"DK." I hold her properly. "I could not sleep thinking about you."

"Being your friend is a full-time job," she says, laughing into my shoulder. "Now I was almost kidnapped."

I pull back and look at her. She looks okay on the surface. But there is something underneath it that was not there before yesterday.

"Are you actually okay?" I ask quietly.

"We'll talk," she says, the same low tone.

We go inside. The house is enormous and almost entirely empty but it has a good feeling to it, clean and open and full of light.

Sizwe and Tumelo are at the kitchen table, mid-conversation, looking entirely comfortable with each other. I rush to Tumelo and he stands up.

"Last time I saw you, you were so young," I say, hugging him.

He frowns. "Hayi, Refilwe. You are not that old yourself."

I laugh. "How are you holding up after last night?"

"I am fine. Trying to stay positive." He pauses. "I feel bad, Ref. If I had not…"

"Stop," I say. "You have a good heart, Tumelo. You expected good from people because that is what you give. That is not a character flaw. It is just a lesson." I squeeze his arm. "We are all okay. That is what matters."

He nods. His shoulders drop slightly.

Nqobizwe comes in behind me and finds Sizwe and Tumelo.

"I am Nqobizwe," he says, extending his hand to Tumelo. "Her future husband." He points at me.

Tumelo raises an eyebrow at me. "She forgot to introduce."

"I completely forgot my manners, I am so sorry…"

"You are excused," Tumelo says generously, and everyone laughs.

Dikeledi calls me to the kitchen to help dish out the breakfast that was delivered. I follow her in and we start pulling out plates.

"Talk," I say.

She exhales. She picks up a plate and puts it down again. "Sizwe is scaring me."

"Scaring you how?"

"He is doing too much. For someone who claims he just likes me." She looks at the counter. "Yesterday when he came, when he saved me, and then held me after." She pauses. "I felt safe. Like home. And Refilwe…" She stops.

"What?"

"I think I am falling for him. And I do not know if it is too soon or if it is real or if I am just feeling it because of the adrenaline"

"Dee." I put my own plate down. "That is a good thing."

"Is it? He doesn't do relationships. I am a lover girl. I fall completely and I stay fallen. If he decides this is not for him I am going to be the next Lerato." She shakes her head. "I do not want to be Lerato."

"You will never be Lerato," I say. "Look at how he treats you. Look at what he did last night. He drove back for you, Dee. He was already turning around before you told him what was happening. That is not a man who is casually

passing time." I hold her gaze. "Talk to him. Tell him what you told me. You gave me that advice. Take it yourself."

She is quiet.

"And whatever happens. I am here. You will never be stranded. But I genuinely do not think it will go wrong. I have watched him with you. He is different."

She swallows. "You could have seen him last night though. Guns, Refilwe. Handling everything. I am not going to lie to you…" She drops her voice. "It was so attractive. If he had asked me to do anything in that moment, I would have said yes to everything."

I burst out laughing.

"You are gone," I say.

"So gone. Judge me, I don't care."

"I am not judging. You should see how I look at Nqobizwe when he is being serious about something"

"You are worse than me. Do not even start." She says

We take the food out to the table and everyone sits and eats and the conversation goes everywhere, easy, warm, occasionally ridiculous. It feels almost normal. Almost like a regular Saturday morning with people you love.

I hold onto that feeling on the way to work.

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Nqobizwe

Refilwe has gone. The apartment is quiet again.

I cannot settle. Motaung is sitting in the back of my head like a splinter I cannot reach. Lentswe vanishing makes it worse, not better. A missing person with information that multiple parties want is never a simple situation.

Sizwe and I drive to my office. We need to think and his house has no study yet.

"What are you doing with the main house?" I ask while we drive. I am curious. That house has been a sore point for months.

"Selling it," he says. He does not hesitate.

"Good."

"Yeah." He is quiet for a moment. Then: "I want to start fresh. New place. Something that is just mine… mine and Dk's…without any of that history in the walls."

I look at him. "Did you just say yours and Dk's?"

He wipes his hand over his face. "I said what I said."

"Sizwe. You are selling a house for this woman."

"I know." He sounds like a man who has accepted something and is still slightly shocked by the acceptance. "When she called me yesterday and I heard those shots…" He pauses. "I have never driven that fast in my life. I was scared, Nqobi. Actually scared. Not for myself, for her."

"You are in love with her," I say.

He laughs. "Maybe."

"Not maybe."

"It is too fast…"

"It does not ask for your schedule," I say. "It just happens. You know this."

He is quiet for a long moment.

"I cannot stop thinking about her," he says finally. "She drives me crazy in every single possible way and I cannot stop." He shakes his head. "What is this."

"Welcome. It gets worse before it gets better." I say

He laughs. "Great."

We park and go up to the office. I make coffee and we sit.

"Motaung got the message," I say, getting to it. "Spura says he is running around trying to find out who touched his men."

"Let him run. A man asking questions is not a man making moves. It means he does not know what he is dealing with yet." Sizwe says

"Lentswe is gone. Vanished from her house. Clothes still there. Door was open. Someone was there before my guys." I say

"Someone took her?" he asks.

"Or she ran. But her shoes were still at the door and her bag was on the counter." I shake my head. "She did not choose to leave. Someone moved her."

"Who?"

"That is the question. Motaung is looking for her too. Which means he does not know where she is either." I lean back. "So we have two parties looking for the same woman and neither of them has her."

"Which means a third party has her," Sizwe says.

"Or she is hiding somewhere none of us have thought to look yet."

We sit with that.

"Ayanda is coming back today," Sizwe says.

"He will figure it out. Give him the information and six hours."

Sizwe nods. "He always does."

My phone rings. My father.

"Baba," I answer.

"Ndodana. Thobekile has gone crazy again. They had to sedate her."

I close my eyes briefly. "The ancestors have started."

"This is the worst kind of punishment," he says, and there is something almost like awe in his voice. "She comes back to herself just long enough to understand what is happening, and then she goes under again. Back and forth, back and forth." He pauses. "It will drive her to the edge eventually. That is the intention."

"She deserves worse," I say.

"She will get there." A pause. "We are leaving for the palace today. The warehouse has been cleaned. When you have resolved everything on your side, come home. We need to talk about your coronation, son."

Something shifts in my chest when he says it. Not fear, something more serious than fear. Weight.

"I will come," I say.

We end the call.

I look at Sizwe. "Thobekile has gone crazy again."

He shakes his head slowly, something between amusement and disbelief on his face. "Your ancestors are something else."

"They do not play," I say.

He leans back. "So after Motaung, coronation?"

"Coronation," I say.

The word sits differently out loud than it does in my head..

He tells me he is taking Dikeledi grocery shopping later.

I look at him.

"Groceries," I say.

"Groceries," he confirms. He is looking somewhere past my left shoulder.

"Sizwe."

"Nqobizwe."

"You are in love with that woman."

He picks up his coffee cup. "Groceries are a basic necessity."

"You have had someone else do your shopping for three years."

He drinks his coffee.

I laugh until my chest hurts.

Chapter 43

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Refilwe

Lunch is almost here and I am already watching the clock. King Serithi, I still cannot bring myself to say *my father* out loud, it sits strangely in my mouth, he is coming to see me at work. He called this morning and offered to bring food and I said yes.

I am walking back from the boardroom after a project meeting when Senzo appears from nowhere, falling into step beside me like he was waiting.

"Hi, Fifi," he says.

"Hi," I say. I keep walking.

"Would you like to grab lunch together?"

I stop. I turn to look at him. "What part of stay away from me did you not understand, Senzo? The friendship is done. I said that."

"Am I wrong for feeling how I feel?" he calls after me as I start walking again.

I stop one more time. I turn back. "No. You are not wrong for feeling it. But you need to accept that I do not feel it back and move on. What you are doing right now is starting to be weird. Stop it."

He smiles. Not a defeated smile, a patient one. "He will show you who he really is soon enough. I will be right here waiting, Ref. I love you."

I look at him for a moment. Then I raise both hands and walk away.

Okay. He is crazy. And crazy is dangerous. I file that and keep walking.

I get to my office and close the door and breathe.

A knock.

I look up and King Serithi is at the glass door, holding a takeout bag in each hand and looking slightly unsure of himself, which is endearing on a man who carries himself the way he does.

I open the door.

"Ngwanaka," he says. (My child.) "How are you?"

"I am good. Thank you for coming. Sit, please."

He sets the bags on my desk and we settle. He looks around the office properly, at the shelving, the framed credentials on the wall, the view from the window, the general evidence of a life built carefully and deliberately.

"This is beautiful," he says. "I love the woman you have become, Refilwe. You did all of this. It makes me happy." He shakes his head slowly. "Very proud."

I smile before I can stop myself. Like a little girl. I cannot help it. "Ke a leboha." (Thank you.)

We open the food and start eating.

"The bodyguards. What is the full story?" he says after a moment, nodding toward the door where my security stands.

I sigh. "Nqobizwe felt I needed close protection. There is a man, Motaung. The man Molefe wanted me to marry when I was eighteen. Apparently he is a gang leader and he has been asking questions about my whereabouts." I pause. "So that is why."

Something moves across his face. A tightening around the jaw that he controls quickly but not quickly enough.

"Nqobizwe did well. I will have to thank him properly. He is a good man." He says

"He is. He really is." I say

"And how is your friend? I have to also thank her for Giving me your number."

"Last night she was almost taken. At her house in the Free State. Motaung's men." I still cannot say it without feeling it in my chest. "Nqobizwe's friend was close by. He got there in time."

"Why did they go to her?" he asks.

"Her brother, Tumelo, you asked him about me and he pointed you to Lentswe, remember?" He nods. "He has a kind heart. Lentswe told him she wanted to apologise to us both, and he believed her. He told her DK had been visiting me."

I shake my head. "Lentswe had asked DK before where I stay. So when she found out DK was with me, I think she told Motaung and his men were waiting." I pause. "Lentswe is missing now. Nqobizwe is looking for her."

He listens to all of it without interrupting, his face doing the work of a man filing information carefully.

I stop and notice something. I am talking to him like I have known him for years. Freely. Easily. Without measuring every word. He is listening the same way, like this is just what we do, just how we are with each other, even though we have had precisely two conversations.

Something in me is healing that I did not know was still broken.

He clears his throat. "You need more guards. I will dispatch some of mine as well." He sets his fork down. "I want to meet with Nqobizwe. I need to know what he has found on Motaung and where he needs support. As your father I cannot just sit on the side and watch. I have to be useful." He looks at me. "You are my baby. I failed you once. I will not fail you again."

I smile. "He is probably at work. Let me call him."

I dial. It rings longer than usual.

"Zwee. How is your day?"

He sighs. "Good."

I frown. That is not his voice when things are good. "I am with King Serithi. He would like to meet with you and talk. Are you available?"

"Yeah. I am at Ngwenya till late." Cold. Short.

"Zwee, are you okay?"

"I am fine. Tell him to meet me here."

He ends the call.

What was that.

I put the phone down and look at King Serithi. "He is available. He is at Ngwenya."

He nods.

We finish eating. We take pictures, silly ones and proper ones, and he looks at every single one with the expression of a man who cannot believe his luck. It is a good afternoon. A really good one.

"I think I like having a father," I say, laughing. "It seems nice."

He laughs. "I am glad, my child. When can you come to Thabamoya? I can take you with me when I leave."

"As soon as everything is settled here and everyone is safe. I really want to come. I want to see it."

"Then we will make it happen." He stands and gathers himself. "Let me leave you to work. I am going to find Nqobizwe."

I walk him to the door. He squeezes my hand once before he goes.

I watch him leave and then I stand in my doorway for a second.

Now. Nqobizwe.

I dial again. He picks up.

"What is going on?" I ask immediately.

"Nothing. Is your father still coming?"

"Nqobizwe. You cannot be cold with me and tell me it is nothing. What did I do?"

Silence. Long enough for me to know he is deciding something.

"What were you talking to Senzo about?" he asks.

I close my eyes briefly. The guards. Of course.

"So your guards report everything," I say.

"They report what is relevant. Everything Senzo does near you is relevant to me. I do not trust him." A pause. "What was he saying?"

"You will be angry all the time if this is how it goes, because I work with him, Nqobizwe…"

"What did he say, Refilwe."

I tell him. All of it. Verbatim.

"Why do you keep entertaining him?" he asks.

My eyes go wide. "Entertaining? Did you miss the part where I told him to stay away from me? To his face? Again?"

"You stop and you turn around and you engage. You should not even be standing still when he opens his mouth. Beyond work, you do not give him the time. That is entertainment, Refilwe."

"That is you being dramatic," I say.

A pause. When he speaks again his voice has changed, lower, quieter, a particular tone I have learned to pay attention to.

"I will see you later. Tell me to my face that I am being dramatic." Another pause. "I love you."

He ends the call.

I stand there with my phone in my hand.

I press my legs together.

I know exactly what that tone means and exactly what *tell me to my face* means and I need to think about something else immediately.

I go back to my desk and open my laptop.

I last about forty seconds before I smile to myself and close it again.

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Narrated

The grocery shop took an hour and a half because Dikeledi insisted on reading every label on everything and Sizwe has never read a label in his life and found the whole exercise both baffling and entertaining.

They are at a restaurant now, food in front of them, the groceries in the car.

Sizwe called ahead and the table was ready when they arrived, the waiter knew his order before he sat down. He does not make a thing of it. It is just how things go when he is somewhere.

Dikeledi noticed. She always notices. She filed it away.

She puts her fork down.

"I want to talk about something," she says.

Sizwe looks up. He reads her face immediately and she is nervous, which is not something he has seen on her before. Not really. He puts his own fork down and gives her his full attention.

"That sounds serious," he says.

She laughs, a little high. "Nothing makes me nervous like what I want to say right now. I genuinely don't know why."

He waits. He is good at waiting.

"I like you," she says. "A lot. We have only been doing this for a few days and I know that. But something shifted for me and I needed to say it out loud before I talked myself out of it and…"

"OH WOW. LOOK AT THAT."

The voice arrives before the person does, loud and sharp, landing across the restaurant like something thrown. Several heads turn.

Lerato.

She is standing near the entrance, looking across the room at their table with the fixed energy of someone who came here looking for exactly this. She does not look well. She looks like someone who has not slept properly, whose edges have been unravelling slowly, who has been holding herself together with the specific determination of a woman who refuses to accept what is in front of her.

"Plain Jane enjoying my leftovers," she announces to the room.

Dikeledi picks up her wine glass. Takes a slow, deliberate sip. Sets it down.

Does not look at Lerato.

People at nearby tables have gone very still, pretending to be interested in their food.

Lerato takes this as encouragement. She moves closer. "You think he loves you? You think you are special? I know this man. Better than you ever will. He cannot be with one woman and you are just the latest."

"Lerato." Sizwe's voice is flat. One word. The kind of one word that in other contexts would end most conversations immediately.

Lerato is past that point.

"No baby, let her talk." Dikeledi rests her chin in her hand. Completely relaxed. "She deserves to let it all out. So I took your man and then what? He will leave me and then what? Please, I am listening. Take your time."

Lerato laughs, brittle and sharp. "He is just going crazy for something new. I know how he operates. He will be back. He always comes back to what he knows."

Dikeledi nods slowly, like she is receiving a very reasonable presentation. "So your plan is to wait. Outside restaurants. Hoping." She tilts her head. "That is the strategy you landed on."

"I am not…"

"Because I have to be honest with you." Dikeledi gestures gently at Lerato's general state. "And I say this with genuine care because the waiting is not doing you any favours. You look like a woman who has been sitting next to a phone that stopped ringing and cannot accept it."

Two women at the next table look at each other.

"You threw me out of my own home…"

"Correction. I asked you to leave and Sizwe agreed and you were escorted out by security." Dikeledi holds up one finger. "That is different. Own the accuracy."

"That was MY home…"

"Was it your name on anything?" Dikeledi asks pleasantly.

Lerato opens her mouth. Closes it.

"Do you know what I think?" Dikeledi continues. "I think you have not been loved properly before. I think you confused his attention for love and you held onto that arrangement like it was a relationship because letting go means

admitting to yourself what it actually was." She pauses. "That is not a small thing, Lerato. That is painful. But it is not something he can fix and it is definitely not something I caused." She picks up her wine. "Go home. Drink water. Sleep. Call a friend who is not going to let you do this to yourself in public."

"You don't know anything about me…"

"I know you are standing in a restaurant in the middle of a weekday looking for a man who is having lunch with another woman." Dikeledi sets her glass down. "Baby. Go home."

"You think you are funny." Lerato's voice pitches up. "You think you are something special. You are NOTHING. You are a plain, basic…"

Dikeledi stands up.

Not fast. Not with drama. She just rises from her chair, smooths her jacket, and looks at Lerato from her full height with the particular calm of someone who has made a decision.

"Finish that sentence," she says quietly. "I am genuinely asking you to finish it."

Lerato takes one step forward.

Sizwe is already out of his chair.

He does not rush. He does not raise his voice. He moves between them the way a man moves when he has already calculated exactly what is happening and exactly how it ends, and he puts himself in front of Dikeledi facing her, his back to Lerato, both hands on her shoulders.

Something in his face, not what you would expect. Not anger at Lerato. Something focused entirely on Dikeledi. Like Lerato is simply weather and Dikeledi is the only thing in the room worth paying attention to.

"We are leaving," he says. Low. Just for her.

"She called me…"

"I know."

"I just want to…"

"I know." He holds her gaze. "We are leaving, Dee."

She looks at him. Something in his face settles her, not because he is stopping her, but because of the way he is looking at her while he does it. Like she matters more than whatever satisfaction the next thirty seconds would bring.

She breathes.

"Fine," she says.

He turns. He looks at Lerato once, just once, briefly, and then he looks away. He puts his hand at Dikeledi's back and guides her toward the exit.

He stops at the counter on the way out and settles the bill without breaking stride, card down, a word to the manager, done in fifteen seconds.

They get outside.

The air is cooler. The noise of the restaurant falls away behind them.

They walk to the car. He opens her door. She gets in. He closes it and walks around and gets in his side.

Silence.

Dikeledi looks at the restaurant door.

Then she looks at her lap.

Then she starts laughing.

It comes from somewhere real, not the performance laugh, not the armour laugh. The actual one, the one that makes her shoulders shake and her eyes water and produces almost no sound for the first few seconds.

Sizwe watches her laugh.

Then he smiles. He is watching her and feeling something he does not have a clean word for yet.

"She called me plain," Dikeledi says, still going. "In front of everyone."

She wipes the corner of her eye. Breathes. Looks at him.

He looks back. The smile has settled into something quieter.

"For the record," he says.

"Hmm."

"You are the least plain person I have ever met." He says it simply. Not as a line. Just as a fact he is reporting. "I meant that."

She holds his gaze for a moment.

"I know," she says softly.

He starts the car.

They pull out. The restaurant disappears behind them.

"You were saying something. Before we were interrupted."

She looks out the window. A beat.

She looks at him sideways. He is completely calm behind the wheel, one hand resting easy, eyes forward.

She faces forward.

"We will talk properly at the house”

He nods

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Nqobizwe

When Refilwe's guards sent me the report about Senzo I had to put my phone down and walk to the window before I responded to anyone.

The man is becoming a problem. A persistent, delusional problem. I have enough moving at once right now to deal with him properly but his time is coming and he should enjoy whatever countdown he has left.

I am at the restaurant now. King Serithi arrived ten minutes ago. He walked in with the quiet authority of a man who is used to being the most powerful person in any room and does not need to announce it.

We ordered. We settled.

"I love what you have done here," he says, looking around. "The food is very good."

"It is Refilwe's favourite. This is where I first saw her." I say

He smiles. Something in his face softens when I mention her. "Do you love her?"

Father mode. Direct. No preamble.

"With everything I have. She completes me." I say

He nods slowly. He looks at me for a moment in the way a man looks at someone he is deciding whether to trust.

"Motaung," he says. "She told me. What is your plan?"

"He is a gang leader operating in Free State. I cannot move on him properly right now. I am still building a full picture and Free State is not my territory. Without complete intelligence I will not go in blind." I pause. "Lentswe going missing has complicated things. She has information I need."

He looks at me. He leans forward slightly.

"It is my territory," he says.

I hold his gaze.

Something in his expression. Not quite admission. Not quite pride. Just the quiet certainty of a man who has already done the thing being discussed.

"You took her," I say.

He does not confirm it immediately. He just looks at me with that same quiet certainty.

"She abused my daughter," he says. "For years. I have heard enough of that story to know what Refilwe lived through in that house." He picks up his glass. "I want to make her feel something when I get home."

I sit back.

I thought this was a decent, straightforward man. A king, yes, but the kind who works within lines. I was not entirely wrong, but I was not entirely right either.

We all have our other side.

"She is with me. Held. I leave Friday." He looks at me. "You said she has answers about Motaung?"

"She has to. She is his contact for Refilwe. She knows more about what he wants and why than anyone else available to me right now."

He nods. "Come with me Friday. You can question her yourself before I decide what to do with her."

I look at him. I think about Refilwe. About what Lentswe did to her, year after year, a child in her own home.

"I will come," I say.

"Good." He settles back. "I also want to add Thabamoya guards to Refilwe's detail. She is a princess of that house and she deserves that protection formally."

"If she is comfortable with that, I have no objection."

He nods. "She will be comfortable. She just does not know it yet."

We talk more. He asks good questions and listens carefully to the answers and I revise my picture of him slowly as we sit there. Not a simple man. Not uncomplicated. But genuine, about Refilwe, about wanting to be part of what protects her, about making up for the years he was not there.

I can work with that.

He leaves after an hour.

I sit alone for a while after he goes, finishing my coffee, looking at the restaurant around me. The table where I first saw Refilwe. The exact chair she was sitting in.

I look at my phone. She called twice while we were talking.

I call her back.

"Finally," she says when she picks up.

"I was in a meeting, Mama. How was your afternoon?"

"Good," she says. "Your father-in-law is interesting."

I laugh despite myself. "He is something."

"Zwee," she says, her voice shifting.

"Hmm."

“Just checking, do you still want the official ‘you’re dramatic’ speech when we get home?”

I smile slowly. "Come home and find out."

She is quiet for exactly two seconds.

"I am leaving the office now," she says.

I laugh and end the call.

Chapter 44

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Narrated

Senzo is in his apartment when the knock comes. He opens the door and Sbu pushes past him before he has fully stepped aside, the way he always does, like doors are suggestions.

He is buzzing with something. Senzo knows that walk.

"You owe me for what I am about to tell you," Sbu says, dropping onto the couch and helping himself to the glass of water on the coffee table.

"Did you find anything on him?" Senzo asks, closing the door.

"Well." Sbu leans forward. "Not exactly on him. But listen to me because this is where it gets interesting." He points.

"I was out earlier. Just eating, minding my own business, right. And then this whole scene breaks out at the restaurant I am sitting in. Some woman walks in and starts causing drama to a couple at the table next to mine. You know, the usual. Girl loses her man, girl cannot accept it, goes to confront them in public." He waves his hand. "Normal township drama. The couple ends up leaving."

"And?" Senzo says.

"And nothing for a minute. But then two women walk in shortly after. They sit at the table behind me. Friends of the first girl I think. And whooo…"

Sbu sits back and shakes his head like a man who has witnessed something spectacular. "These two are talking. Loudly. You know how girls get when they are angry and feel wronged. No filter whatsoever."

Senzo says nothing. He is listening now.

"So one of them is going on about how they just lost their man. How some girl called Refilwe and her friend walked in and basically took over. How this Nqobizwe is not answering her calls anymore, not answering her texts." Sbu looks at Senzo directly. "Now that cannot be a coincidence. Nqobizwe. Refilwe. That has to be your girl man. Has to be."

Senzo sits down slowly. His jaw is working.

"So what do I do with that?" he asks.

"Think about it." Sbu leans forward again, elbows on his knees, the look of a man who has already done the thinking and is waiting for everyone else to catch up. "You want information on this guy, right. You want to get Ref back. These girls want the same thing you want. They are mad, they are motivated, they have history with this man and his circle." He spreads his hands. "You work with them. They help you get close enough to get what you need. You help them get their footing back. Everybody wins. You just have to play chess, Senzo."

Senzo is quiet. He is turning it over.

"How do we find them?" he asks.

Sbu reaches into his jacket and pulls out a small notebook. He flips it open with the ease of a man who is very pleased with himself.

"I got names," he says. He turns the notebook around so Senzo can see. "Lerato. Phumi. Precious." He taps the page. "You know how girls talk when they are in a public space and they think nobody is paying attention. They said all three names out loud between them. And I…" he reaches into his pocket and slides his phone across the table, a photo on the screen, "… stole a quick picture without them noticing.

Senzo picks up the phone and looks at it.

Three women. Dressed well.

"Give me a day," Sbu says.

"I will find them. Social media alone will do half the work. Girls like that are never offline." He takes his phone back and pockets it. "The question is whether you are ready to actually move on this. Because once we make contact with these girls it is not just information gathering anymore. You are choosing a side."

Senzo looks at the notebook. At the three names.

He thinks about Refilwe at her office desk. The bodyguards at her door. The way she looked through him when he tried to talk to her. Like he was already something from the past.

"Find them," he says.

Sbu nods and stands up. "I told you. Chess."

He lets himself out the same way he came in.

Senzo sits alone in the quiet of his apartment. He is not thinking about chess.

He is thinking about Refilwe.

And how far he is willing to go to get her back.

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Free State

The office is full and nobody is talking.

Motaung's men line the walls, shoulders straight, eyes forward, waiting. They have been standing here for twenty minutes. Nobody sits when Motaung is pacing. Nobody speaks when his jaw is doing that.

He paces.

Twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours of asking questions, sending people out, pulling every contact he has in this community and the surrounding ones. More than twenty-four hours of nothing. No Lentswe. No name attached to the men who were dropped at his gate. No trace of who drove that car.

He stops at the window.

"Nobody knows anything," he says. He is not asking. He is stating it like a thing he cannot believe is true.

Nobody responds.

He turns. "I have men everywhere in this province. And nobody knows who killed my boys and took a woman from under my nose?" He looks around the room slowly, moving from face to face. "Nobody?"

Still nothing.

He walks to his desk and puts both hands flat on it. "Someone brought a car into this community. A big car. Black. Nobody noticed? Nobody saw anything?"

One of his men at the far end clears his throat. Motaung looks at him immediately.

"Speak," he says.

The man steps forward slightly. "Boss, there is one thing. When we were asking around the neighbourhood near Lentswe's house. One of the old women on that street. She said she saw a black car. Parked outside Lentswe's house that evening." He pauses. "She said it was big. Black. Very clean. Not from here."

"What kind of car?"

"She didn't know the make. But she said it had two more cars behind it. Also black. All parked in a line." He pauses again. "She thought it was a funeral at first."

Motaung stares at him.

A convoy.

Not one car. A convoy.

He stands up straight slowly. His mind is moving now, going somewhere he does not want it to go but cannot stop it from going.

He knows one person in this province who moves in a convoy of black cars.

He has known him for years. Not closely, not personally, but you do not operate in the Free State for forty years without knowing who the real power in the room is. You learn fast or you do not last.

King Serithi of Thabamoya.

He walks to the window again. His hands are behind his back now, very still, which is worse than when he was pacing.

What does King Serithi want with Lentswe?

He turns that question over. He does not like where it lands.

Lentswe's only connection to anything significant is Refilwe. That is the thread. That has always been the thread. Lentswe knows what Motaung wants and why. Lentswe is the bridge between Motaung and the girl.

So if King Serithi has Lentswe then King Serithi knows about Motaung.

And if King Serithi knows about Motaung then the question is not where Lentswe is anymore. The question is who Refilwe actually is to that man and why a king is involving himself in this.

Motaung has been doing this long enough to know when the ground has shifted under his feet without him noticing. He is feeling it now.

He turns back to the room.

"All of you. Out." He says.

They file out without a word. The door closes.

He sits down behind his desk... He laces his fingers together and looks at the wall.

King Serithi does not move for small things. He does not dispatch a convoy, take a woman from her home, and disappear back across the provincial line for a person who means nothing to him. That is not how men like him operate.

Which means Refilwe means something.

Which means Motaung has been circling a girl who has powerful people standing behind her, and he did it without knowing.

He thinks about the three bodies dropped at his gate. Clean. Fast. No name left behind. That was not Serithi's style, too direct, too street level. That was someone else.

Two different forces moving around the same girl.

He sits with that for a long time.

Then he picks up his phone and dials a number he has not used in a while. It rings four times before it is answered.

"I need information," Motaung says. "About a girl called Refilwe. I want to know exactly who she belongs to and who is standing behind her." He pauses. "And I want it before the week is out."

He ends the call and puts the phone face down on the desk.

For the first time in a very long time, Motaung is not sure he is the most dangerous person in this situation.

He does not like that feeling at all.

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Narrated: Pretoria

Dikeledi is at the stove and the whole house smells like food. Proper food. She has three pots going and is moving between them with the ease of someone who grew up cooking for more people than herself.

Tumelo discovered the cinema room an hour ago and has not been seen since. Every now and then they hear a distant sound of something exploding on screen.

Sizwe is leaning against the kitchen counter doing absolutely nothing useful.

He is just watching her.

She reaches across for the vegetables and he watches that too.

"Sizwe stop staring. It is uncomfortable," she says without looking up.

"I cannot help it. Let me be," he says.

"Help me in the kitchen instead of just standing there looking decorative," she says.

He pushes off the counter smiling. "What do you need?"

She looks at him. Really looks at him. And the butterflies do the thing they have been doing since the grocery shop and she hates it.

"You are hot, Sizwe. It is actually irritating," she says.

He laughs, throwing his head back. "Out of nowhere just like that, Dee."

"You know me. I say what I think." She says

He is still smiling but he is watching her now. Properly. "What is eating you?"

She puts the vegetables down. She does not answer immediately. She wipes her hands on the kitchen cloth and leans against the counter beside the stove.

He steps closer and takes her by the waist and looks at her.

She sighs. "I think I am falling for you. It is too soon, I know that. But I cannot help it. Maybe you used a love portion on me because I have been fighting this feeling and I am losing badly."

Sizwe looks at her. His heart does something it has not done before. Something he does not have a name for yet but recognises as significant.

This is what scared him. This exact thing. Falling and not being able to stop it.

"Let us do this. Let us just be unstoppable. Be us and enjoy it." He says

She looks at him, not fully understanding.

"I am falling for you too, Dee." He says it plainly. "I cannot hide from it. I cannot run from it. And I do not want to." He looks at her properly. "Having you here, in this empty house with no furniture.This is everything I did not know I was missing. I just needed you to show up so I could see it."

She stares at him. "I thought you would run. You are a player who does not do relationships."

"Stop calling me a player," he says. Not sharp. Just firm.

"I am not a player. I told myself I did not do relationships because I had not met anyone worth doing them for." He pauses. "I was waiting. I just did not know what I was waiting for."

She looks at him for a long moment.

"Sizwe if you hurt me I will never forgive you. I mean that. I love hard. I do not do things halfway. So if you are not sure do not start." She says.

"I have never been more sure of anything," he says.

She searches his face. Looking for the exit, for the performance, for the part where he blinks and takes it back.

She does not find it.

She exhales. "Okay," she says softly.

"Okay?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Okay, I am yours. Don't make me regret it."

He pulls her in and holds her and she lets him. From the cinema room something explodes loudly on screen and Tumelo shouts at it and they both laugh into each other.

"Your brother," Sizwe says.

“He is never leaving that room”

She pulls back and picks up the vegetables. "Now help me. Stop standing there."

He takes them from her. "What do I do with these?"

"Chop them."

"How small?"

"Sizwe."

"I am asking genuinely…"

"Medium. Like a normal human person." She says

He looks at the vegetables. He looks at the knife. He looks at her.

"Show me," he says.

She looks at the ceiling and takes the knife from him.

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Refilwe

I open the front door and he is right there.

Standing in the entrance like he planned it. Sweatpants. Nothing on top. Just him. I swallow before I can stop myself.

"Come here," he says. "I have been waiting. Woza."

I walk in and drop my laptop bag on the couch.

"Baby," I say, looking at him. "You are dramatic. I stand by that."

He takes one slow step toward me.

I take one step back.

He tilts his head. Takes another step.

I turn and make a run for it and get approximately nowhere before his arm catches me around the waist and I am off the ground and giggling like I have completely forgotten I was supposed to be making a point.

He puts me over his shoulder and walks to the bedroom.

"NQOBIZWE I am trying to have a serious conversation…"

"We will have it," he says.

"I called you dramatic and I meant it…"

"I know you did." he says, pushing the bedroom door open.

He throws me on top of the bed and I land laughing.

The laughing stops when I see his face.

"Take off your clothes," he says.

I do not ask questions. I take everything off. I look at him standing there and his sweatpants are doing nothing to hide what is happening underneath them. He pulls them off and I swallow again.

I open my mouth to say something and he crosses to me and kisses it away before I find the words.

When he pulls back he looks at me.

"Turn around," he says.

I look at him.

"Refilwe."

I turn around.

He takes both my wrists gently and crosses them at the small of my back. I feel him reach for something, his tie from earlier, still on the nightstand, and he wraps it around my wrists. Firm but careful. He checks it once before he lets go.

I giggle. Nerves and excitement sitting right next to each other.

My chest goes down into the pillow. Everything else is up and exposed and I feel completely at his mercy which is exactly the point.

He spanks me once. I gasp.

Then he positions himself and enters me slowly and we both make sounds that have no business being as loud as they are.

What follows is slow and deliberate. He takes his time with every single thing. He is not rushing. He is making a point and he knows it and I know it and knowing it does not help me at all.

I cannot move my hands. Every sensation hits differently. Everything is sharper, more present, more everything. My face is in the pillow and I am saying his name repeatedly in a way I would be embarrassed about if I had any functioning dignity left.

I do not.

"Still dramatic?" he asks, his voice rough.

"Ahh… baby… I am sorry…"

"Are you sure about that?"

"YES. Nqobizwe please…"

He does not slow down.

I feel myself building and building and then I come apart completely, his name loud in the room. He follows not long after, groaning into my neck, both of us spent and still.

He unties my hands carefully and checks my wrists before he does anything else. Then he wipes me clean and pulls me close.

He lies beside me. I am face down and completely unable to move voluntarily. My whole body is warm and heavy and done.

"Dramatic," he says. Quiet. Not a question.

I say nothing for a long moment.

"You made your point," I say into the pillow.

He pulls me closer. His hand moves slowly through my hair.

The evening has settled outside.

"I love you," I say.

"I know," he says.

I pinch him.

He laughs

Chapter 45

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Narrated: Ngwenya Kingdom

Thobekile is still in the basement.

She has not bathed since they brought her down here. The only thing that comes to her is food, slid through the door by a guard who does not look at her when he does it. She eats when her mind is clear enough to remember she is hungry. When the ancestors come for her she forgets everything including her own name.

It goes like that. Clarity. Darkness. His voice. Clarity again. Over and over without rest, without mercy, without end in sight. A punishment built specifically around the one thing she cannot survive, losing control of her own mind.

She has always been the one in control. Always.

Upstairs, life in the palace continues without her.

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King Langa and Queen Liyana arrive at the Zungu homestead mid-morning. The gates open before the convoy fully stops. The staff move quickly with their heads down.

They are welcomed warmly but the warmth has fear sitting underneath it. Everyone in that yard remembers the last visit. Nobody has forgotten what was said in that chamber or what happened after.

Nolwandle hears the cars from her bedroom and does not move from her bed. She sits on the edge of it and stares at the door and tells herself she does not have to go downstairs. She tells herself this several times.

In the chamber, two of Bukizwe's brothers are seated. Nthuthuko, the eldest now, and Sakhile beside him. Nothile takes her place. Her son Njabulo sits at the far end, jaw tight, eyes forward, still working through everything at his own pace and in his own silence. He has said very little since the day his father did not come home. He does not ask questions. He is learning to live in the shape of things without needing them explained.

Everyone waits.

King Langa does not rush. He looks around the room slowly the way he always does, taking full stock before he opens his mouth.

"I am here for Nkanyezi and Buhle," he says.

"I will get them, my King." Nothile is already standing.

"And Nolwandle," he adds without looking up.

Nothile bows and goes.

The room sits in careful silence until footsteps come down the corridor. The three girls enter and take their seats. Heads bowed. Nkanyezi is composed in the way someone is composed when they have decided composure is the only thing they have left. Buhle looks pale and thin but present. Nolwandle is shaking and doing a poor job of hiding it. She keeps her eyes on the floor and does not lift them once.

King Langa looks at all three of them for a moment.

"The girls look well," he says.

Nothile straightens slightly "Yes, my King. They are Bukizwe's blood which in some way makes them mine. I am a mother. I cannot watch children suffer in my house and stand to the side."

He nods slowly. "Speaking of Bukizwe." He lets the name sit in the room for a second. "You all know what happens to a man who plans to kill his King. He is not coming back. Neither is Sbonga."

Nolwandle's tears fall without sound. She does not wipe them. She does not move.

"Nthuthuko." The King looks at him directly. "You come after Bukizwe. You are the head of this family now. What is your plan for the girls?"

Nthuthuko clears his throat. "I will do as tradition demands, my King. Introduce them to our ancestors properly. Welcome them into this family with ceremony. And I will take over everything Bukizwe left behind and make sure this house continues to stand."

"Good." King Langa nods. "Buhle needs urgent attention. The welcoming ceremony must happen immediately. And you need to find a healer, a powerful

one. Not from around here, go further if you have to. The curse on her can be reversed but time is against her." He pauses. "She will not be able to have children. That part is permanent. But her life can be saved and that is what we are focusing on."

Buhle lifts her head. Just slightly, just for a second. Something crosses her face, not quite hope but the beginning of it. The possibility that there is still a life ahead of her even if it looks different from anything she imagined.

She looks back down.

"The royal seer cannot be involved," the King continues. "The Ngwenya ancestors have drawn a clear line. This situation with the girls exists because of their mother and oNgwenya want nothing to do with resolving what she created. That is the boundary." He looks at Nthuthuko. "Work within it."

"We understand completely, my King."

"Financially I will continue to support the girls. Schooling, health, daily needs, that comes from me until they are fully established." He looks briefly at Nkanyezi and then at Buhle. "They did not choose any of this. I will not leave them without a foundation."

Nkanyezi looks up. She looks at the King properly for the first time since they entered the room. She searches his face for something, cruelty, obligation, anything she can dismiss. She does not find what she is looking for. She looks back down without saying anything but something in her posture shifts, just slightly.

"Ngiyabonga, my King," Nthuthuko says. (Thank you.) "That is far more than we expected."

"It is not for you. It is for them." King Langa says plainly.

He looks at Buhle one last time.

"Qina, ngani." (Stay strong, child.) He says it quietly. Almost privately. Just for her.

Buhle swallows hard. Her eyes fill but she holds it. She presses her lips together and nods once.

The King stands. Queen Liyana stands with him. She has been quiet and watchful through the entire meeting. Before she moves toward the door she walks to Buhle and crouches in front of her, taking both her hands in hers.

"We are going to find someone to help you," she says. "I am going to make sure of it personally. You have my word."

Buhle nods. One tear breaks free and she catches it quickly.

Queen Liyana squeezes her hands once before she stands.

Nothile watches her from across the room. Something opens up in her expression, a woman recognising another woman who means what she says.

The King and Queen leave.

The sound of the convoy fades through the gates.

The room breathes again.

Nolwandle finally lifts her head properly. She wipes her face and looks at nothing for a long moment.

Nkanyezi looks at her. "Are you okay?"

"No," Nolwandle says honestly. "But I will be."

Nkanyezi nods. She understands that answer completely.

Buhle reaches over and takes Nolwandle's hand without saying anything. Nolwandle looks at her, surprised by the gesture. Then she holds on.

Nthuthuko clears his throat and looks at Sakhile. "Siyaqala k'sasa." (We start tomorrow.) "Get everyone we need. I want the ceremony done before the week is out."

Sakhile nods. "I know a woman. In Ulundi. They say she has helped cases worse than this."

"Find her today," Nthuthuko says. "Not tomorrow. Today."

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Nqobizwe

Refilwe left for work. The house settles into that particular quiet it has when she is not in it.

I go upstairs to get my phone. I push the bedroom door open and stop.

Zodwa is inside. Moving around with a cloth, opening the curtains, touching things on the dresser.

I stand in the doorway and look at her.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask.

She turns. "Cleaning, sir."

"Was Refilwe not clear about this room?"

"Oh, I forgot. It has been the routine for so long. I will just finish quickly and…"

"Get out," I say.

She pauses. "Sir it really is not a big issue. I am sure she will understand it was just an honest mistake and…"

I step into the room. "I am not stupid, Zodwa. I know a game when I see one. Do you want to be sent back to the village? Have you forgotten your place in this house?"

She swallows. "I am sorry. I will leave."

"And fix your attitude while you are at it," I say. "Phuma." (Get out.)

She goes without another word.

I stand in the room for a moment after the door closes. That is a conversation that needs to happen properly and soon. Refilwe is going to be queen. Everyone under this roof adjusts to that or they find somewhere else to be.

I hear cars in the yard. I grab my phone and head down.

Sizwe and Ayanda come through the door within minutes of each other. The maidens bring coffee and disappear. We take the lounge.

I tell them about King Serithi.

Sizwe stares at me when I finish. "He took Lentswe himself."

"Before my guys even got to the street," I confirm.

"Clean?" Ayanda asks.

"Completely. No trace. Spura says one neighbour saw a black convoy. That was the only thread and it led straight to Serithi." I pause. "I did not expect that from him. He sat across from me looking like a man who was just a concerned father. Then he tells me the Free State is his territory and Lentswe has been with him the whole time."

"We all have our other side," Ayanda says.

"Clearly." I lean forward. "Which means we have an opening. Serithi operates in that province in ways we cannot. Motaung thinks he owns the Free State. He has been there years, everybody fears him, he has never been challenged properly." I look between them. "He does not know a king has been on the same ground the entire time and is now motivated."

"When are you going?" Sizwe asks.

"Friday. Serithi and I question Lentswe together. We find out exactly what Motaung wants and why he is still fixated on Refilwe after all these years. Then we use Serithi's reach to get to him properly. No more working blind from here."

Ayanda nods. "Motaung is going to have a very bad week."

"That is the plan." I sit back. "Before I forget, Zodwa was in the bedroom this morning when I went up. After Refilwe specifically told her not to enter that room."

Ayanda and Sizwe both look at me.

"She tried to play it off as a mistake," I say. "I sent her out and gave her a warning. But I need to deal with it properly. Refilwe is going to be queen. I cannot have a maiden in this house who has not fully accepted that."

"Final warning. Not a conversation. If she does it again she goes back to the village." Ayanda says.

"Agreed," I say.

Sizwe nods. "What else?"

I look at him. "You tell me."

He shifts slightly in his seat. Just slightly. I notice because Sizwe does not shift.

Ayanda notices too. He raises an eyebrow.

"Dikeledi and I are official," Sizwe says.

Nobody speaks for a second.

Then Ayanda leans back slowly with a smile spreading across his face.

"Say that again," I say.

"You heard me." Sizwe keeps his voice level but something in his face is warm. New warm. "I am serious about her. This is not a situation. This is not me passing time. I am all in."

"Sizwe," I say.

"Do not make it strange, Nqobizwe."

"I am not making it strange. I am just watching a man who sat in my office not three weeks ago and told me with full confidence that he does not do relationships, tell me he is all in with a woman he has known for…"

"Do not count the days," Sizwe says.

"five," Ayanda supplies helpfully.

"Thank you, Ayanda," Sizwe says flatly.

Ayanda raises his coffee cup.

"I know what this is," Sizwe says, and his voice drops into something more honest. "I am not confused about it. I am not testing anything. I know and I am not running from it." He pauses. "She makes me want to be better. I have never wanted that before. I did not even know I was missing it."

The room sits with that for a moment.

"I am proud of you," I say. And I mean every word of it.

He nods. "There is something else. Tumelo."

"What about him?"

"He asked me about a job. Straight up, no shame, no waiting to be offered. Just asked." Sizwe sets his cup down. "BCom financial management. Still hunting for work. Wants to take care of his sister." He looks at me. "We need a financial analyst. I want to bring him in."

"You trust him?" I ask.

"I trust Dikeledi. And everything she has told me about her brother. He has a good heart and a good head. He made one naive mistake and he has owned it." Sizwe shrugs. "He deserves a chance. I am giving it to him."

"Sort it out. You vouch for him, that is enough for me." I say.

Sizwe nods.

I look at Ayanda. He has gone slightly quiet. He is also checking his watch for the second time since he sat down.

"What is going on with you?" I ask.

He looks up. "Nothing."

"You have checked your watch twice," Sizwe says.

Ayanda puts his cup down. He is quiet for a moment in the way he gets quiet when he is deciding how much to say.

"The doctor," he says finally. "Mbali. Nzuza's niece."

Sizwe and I wait.

"We have been talking since she was at the palace. Every day." He says it evenly but his face is doing something he is not fully managing. "She is sharp. Interesting. Funny when she lets herself be." A pause. "She is going through something. Her ex did a number on her. Made her doubt herself." Something in his jaw tightens at that. "But that is not going to stop me."

"Stop you from what exactly?" Sizwe asks.

"From getting her," Ayanda says simply. Like the answer has been sitting there a while and he is just now saying it out loud.

Sizwe and I look at each other.

"Where are you going with this?" I say

"I am having lunch with her," he says. "Today. In forty minutes actually." He checks his watch again. "Which means I need to wrap this up."

"You have been sitting here this whole time knowing you have lunch with a woman in forty minutes," Sizwe says.

"Thirty-eight minutes now," Ayanda says, standing and buttoning his jacket.

Sizwe shakes his head laughing.

"Update us after Friday," Ayanda says to me. "Lentswe, Motaung, everything." He picks up his keys. "And Nqobizwe, the Zodwa situation. Handle it properly. Not a conversation. A final warning. Refilwe is going to be queen and everyone in this house gets in line or goes back to the village."

"Already in hand," I say.

"Good." He straightens his jacket. "See you both."

He leaves.

Sizwe and I sit in the quiet for a moment after Ayanda leaves.

"Are we all finding our missing ribs at the same time?" Sizwe says.

I shake my head slowly. "Weird, I tell you."

"Very weird," he agrees.

"Ayanda of all people. The man who analyses everything before he does anything. Sitting here checking his watch like a teenager." I say

Sizwe laughs. "Thirty-eight minutes."

"Thirty-eight," I repeat.

We sit with that for a moment.

"It is a good thing though," Sizwe says. He says it quietly, more to himself than to me. "All of us settling. At the same time."

I nod. "It is."

I think about Refilwe at her desk right now. About everything that is still moving around us that I am working to clear so that one day soon it is just us and nothing else pressing in.

"You think it gets easier? The worrying about them. Does it get easier?" Sizwe asks

I look at him. "No. You just get better at carrying it." I say honestly.

He nods like that is the answer he expected.

We finish our coffee in comfortable silence.

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Narrated

Mbali arrived at the restaurant early. She asked for the window table, ordered a drink, and has been having a quiet argument with herself ever since.

She tells herself this is just lunch with a new friend. She has said it four times in the last twenty minutes and believed it less each time.

Ayanda is interesting. That is the problem in the simplest terms. He does what he says he will do, which should not be remarkable but somehow is. He is direct without being unkind and attentive without making it feel like a performance. They have talked every day since the palace and it has been easy in a way she was not expecting and was not sure she was ready for.

She is not ready for anything. She knows that. Senzo left a specific kind of damage. Not the dramatic, explosive kind. The quiet kind, the slow erosion of a person who made her feel like she was almost enough but not quite, almost someone worth staying for but not quite. She is still putting herself back together.

She is not ready.

She takes a sip of her drink and looks out the window.

The restaurant door opens. Senzo walks in with another man, scanning the room, and then his eyes find her and stop.

She watches him say something to his companion and cross the room to her table.

"Mbali." He stops beside her. "Nice to see you. You disappeared after everything. Stopped taking my calls."

She looks up at him calmly. "Was I supposed to keep taking them? For what exactly?"

He chuckles. The easy, practiced charm. "Still angry. I get it. I am sorry. Matters of the heart, you know how it is. I could not help what I felt."

"We are fine, Senzo. Genuinely. I understood it the moment you said it. No hard feelings." She says

"Good." He softens. "You should move on though. Someone like you should not be sitting alone. You are beautiful and you deserve…"

"Hi."

She looks up.

Ayanda is standing at the table with flowers. Not a large arrangement, not a declaration. Just flowers, held naturally, like a man who picked them up on the way because they reminded him of something and did not think too hard beyond that.

She stands and smiles before she can consider whether to.

They hug and he kisses her forehead lightly. She is surprised by it, the ease of it, the naturalness, and then she is not.

Senzo clears his throat behind her.

She turns. "Was there anything else?"

He looks at Ayanda. "Sure, mfethu. (Hi, man)" He extends his hand.

Ayanda looks at him.

He knows exactly who he is. Not from Mbali, not from this moment. From Nqobizwe. From the reports. From days of knowing that someone has been asking questions about Refilwe and digging into Nqobizwe's life and that someone has a name and a face and that face is standing right in front of him extending a hand like they are strangers meeting for the first time.

They are not strangers.

Senzo just does not know that yet.

Ayanda looks at the hand. He does not take it. He does not explain why. He simply looks at it and then looks past him, settling into his chair with the complete ease.

Senzo reads it. He chuckles to cover what it does to him and walks back to his table without another word.

Ayanda picks up the menu. "How are you?"

"Better now," Mbali says, and then looks slightly surprised at herself for saying it.

He looks up and holds her gaze for a second. Then he looks back at the menu.

"Good," he says simply.

She puts the flowers on the table and looks at them.

"Thanks for the flowers," she says.

"I saw them and I thought of you, Mbali-enhle (Beautiful flower)."

She laughs softly. "I appreciate that."

"Who is he?" Ayanda asks after a moment.

She sighs. "The ex."

Something moves across Ayanda's face. He files it carefully and without drama. "What did he want?"

"To perform concern. I paid him no real attention." She says

Ayanda nods. He glances once across the restaurant. Senzo is looking over. Ayanda holds eye contact for exactly one second and then looks back at Mbali.

Senzo looks away first.

Ayanda files everything away carefully. Senzo being Mbali's ex is information. Useful information. How it connects to everything else moving around Nqobizwe and Refilwe he is not yet sure. But he will think about it and when the time is right he will know exactly what to do with it.

For now there is lunch.

"What are you having?" he asks.

Mbali leans forward and looks at the menu and he watches her read it and thinks that whatever Senzo did to make her doubt herself, he did not deserve her in the first place.

He does not say that out loud.

He just picks up his own menu and lets the afternoon be what it is.

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Across the restaurant Senzo cannot find his footing.

He keeps glancing over despite himself. The man with Mbali has not looked back at him since that one second, which is somehow more unsettling than if he had stared. He is completely relaxed over there, leaning slightly toward Mbali when she talks, laughing at something she says, unbothered by everything including Senzo's existence in the same room.

Mbali is laughing. A real one, the kind that reaches her eyes.

Senzo looks away.

"What happened?" Sbu asks, watching him.

"Nothing. She moved on fast." Senzo says

"That is what they do," Sbu says mildly. He is already on his phone.

"Who are you texting?" Senzo asks.

Sbu looks up with the expression of someone delivering information at a slightly inconvenient time. "So. Remember those names I got from the restaurant?" He turns his phone around. "I sent some DMs out. Fishing, you know. Testing the water."

Senzo leans forward.

On the screen is a profile. Phumi. Bright smile, curated feed, the kind of page that tells you exactly how someone wants to be seen. Underneath it a short conversation thread, still early, still surface level.

"She replied?" Senzo asks.

"Replied and kept it going," Sbu says, taking the phone back. "She is chatty. Friendly. A bit eager which makes this easier." He scrolls slightly. "I have not mentioned anything about Nqobizwe or Refilwe. Too soon. You do not lead with what you want; you lead with what they want to talk about. And right now she wants to talk about herself."

"So what is the plan?" Senzo asks.

"I keep going. Slowly. Build the comfort. Let her feel like she has found someone who gets it." Sbu pockets his phone. "Angry people love to vent to someone who seems sympathetic. She will bring up Nqobizwe on her own. They always bring it up themselves. I just have to be there listening when she does."

Senzo nods slowly.

He looks across the restaurant one more time.

Ayanda has his hand resting close to Mbali's on the table, not touching, just near. Mbali is talking with her hands the way she does when she is actually comfortable. She used to do that with him. Early on.

He looks back at his own table.

"How long?" he asks.

"A week," Sbu says. "Maybe less. She is not patient. You can tell."

Senzo picks up his drink.

"Fine. A week." He says

He does not look across the restaurant again.

But he thinks about the man sitting with Mbali for the rest of lunch and cannot explain to himself exactly why.

Chapter 46

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Refilwe

It is Thursday evening and the house is full and warm and I cannot stop smiling about it.

King Serithi is coming for dinner tonight. His last night in Pretoria before he and Nqobizwe leave together tomorrow morning. Nqobizwe told me about Lentswe being with Serithi and the plan to deal with Motaung together and I felt something I did not expect, relief. Deep, settled relief. Like watching people who love you pick up something heavy you have been dragging alone for too long.

Whatever they decide to do with Lentswe I am not losing sleep over it. That woman made my childhood a battlefield. She can reap every single seed she planted.

I wanted to cook tonight. Not the chef. Me.

DK offered to help and I said yes immediately because cooking with DK is never just cooking. It is also therapy and free entertainment and at least one moment where she says something that makes you put down whatever you are holding.

Tumelo, Sizwe and Ayanda arrived early. They are in the lounge being loud about something. The house smells like food and feels like exactly what I always wanted growing up, a full table, people who chose each other, warmth that nobody had to earn.

DK and I are wrapping up the last of the dishes and setting the table when she looks up at me.

"Sizwe told me something this morning," she says, arranging forks without looking up.

"What?"

"Lerato. The day after the braai." She sets the last fork down. "She showed up at his house with a gun."

I stop. "She did what?"

"A whole gun, Refilwe. She pointed it at the guards and then at Sizwe. Said if he does not take her back she will kill herself right there in the yard."

"And then?"

"Sizwe told her to do it."

I put the plate down.

"He looked at her," DK continues, "this woman with a loaded gun, and he said do it. Just like that. No emotion. Nothing." She looks at me. "The guard took the gun from her before anything happened. Sizwe walked to his car and left while she was still screaming in the street."

"And he told you this morning like it was nothing?" I ask.

"Like he was telling me what he had for breakfast. I am dating a dangerous man, Refilwe. A genuinely dangerous man." She says, "And I cannot even be upset about it. God help me."

I laugh. I cannot help it.

She throws the dishcloth at me.

The doorbell goes.

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King Serithi arrives with two guards who take their positions at the entrance without being told. He comes in holding a bottle of wine, looks around the house, and nods slightly like it confirms something he already thought.

He hugs me at the door. Warm and proper.

"Ngwanaka. (My child)" He holds me at arm's length and looks at me the way he always does, like he is still catching up on all the years he missed. “Smells nice in here”

“I cooked” I say smiling.

I take him around the room. He shakes hands with Ayanda, they greet each other. He gets to Tumelo and asks him something quietly that makes Tumelo stand up straighter. He gets to Sizwe and there is a moment, just a moment,

where two men take each other's full measure and then Sizwe smiles and extends his hand and that is settled.

Then he gets to DK.

She looks at him. He looks at her.

"Ke wena ya nthusitseng (You are the one who helped me.)," he says warmly.

"Ke nna (Its is me)," DK says, pointing at her own chest "And you are welcome, Your Majesty. I do charge a small consultation fee for such services though."

Serithi raises an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"We can negotiate over dinner," she says. "Sit down, sit down. Refilwe cooked so the food is amazing, I helped so it is perfect. Come."

She gestures to the table like it is her own house.

Serithi looks at me with an expression that says he already understands everything about Dikeledi and finds it delightful.

Nqobizwe appears from the corridor and greets Serithi properly and we all move to the table.

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The food is good. I know it is good because the first few minutes the table goes quiet in the way it does when people are actually eating rather than just being polite about it.

"How is Mmabotle?" I ask. "Is she well?"

King Serithi’s face lights up at the sound of her name. "She is well. Fussing about everything as usual. She has already decided what your room will look like when you visit." He shakes his head. "She sent me pictures this morning to approve. Three different curtain options."

"She sent pictures?" I laugh.

"Three separate ones. I approved all three because I have learned that is always the correct answer."

The table laughs.

"And the boys?" I ask. "What was it like raising them? Lesole and Qeto?"

He leans back. "Lesole was straightforward from when he was small. Serious. Knew what was expected of him and worked toward it without drama." He pauses. "Qeto was different. More fire. More feeling. He carries everything deeply, joy, anger, love. He is afraid of losing what belongs to him." He looks at me. "Which is why he reacted the way he did about you. It was not hatred, Refilwe. It was fear wearing anger's face."

I nod slowly. I am not all the way there with Qeto yet. But I hear what he is saying.

"Why can you not come with us tomorrow?" Serithi asks. He asks it genuinely, not as pressure. Just wanting to understand.

"I want to come to Thabamoya properly," I say. "Not in the middle of everything. I want to arrive and actually be present and enjoy it." I pause. "And I need Qeto to be ready. I do not want to walk into my father's house and feel like an intruder. I want to feel wanted when I get there."

Serithi nods. "That is more than fair."

"Fix Qeto first. Then I come." I say

"I will fix him," he says.

"I also want to say…" I look across the table at DK. "Thank you. Seriously. For giving him my number. For helping him find me. You did not have to do that."

DK waves her hand. "Ag sis, do not thank me. I looked at that man and I saw a father looking for his child. Simple mathematics." She points her fork at Serithi. "You however owe me. A proper thank you. In the form of something nice from Thabamoya."

"Dikeledi," Sizwe says beside her.

"What? I am being honest. Ke bua nnete." (I am speaking the truth.) She looks at Serithi. "But also joking. Mostly."

Serithi is chuckling. "What kind of thing from Thabamoya?"

"Surprise me. But make it something with weight. I have taste." Dk says

"She does. Unfortunately," Tumelo says from the other end of the table without looking up from his plate.

"Tumelo do not start with me," DK says.

"I am just confirming…"

"Eat your food."

Serithi looks at me. "I like her very much."

"Everyone does eventually," I say.

"Eventually?" DK puts her fork down. "Name one person who did not like me immediately. Take your time. I will wait."

"Sizwe," I say.

"Sizwe loves me now so that does not count. That is a disqualification. Try again."

Sizwe shakes his head beside her. He does not argue. He has learned.

Nqobizwe sets his fork down. He looks at Serithi and his voice shifts, still respectful but carrying something underneath it that is no longer casual.

"King Serithi," he says.

The table quiets slightly.

"About Qeto." He holds Serithi's gaze. "I understand he is young. I understand he is afraid. Those are reasons. They are not excuses." He pauses. "Refilwe has been through enough in her life. More than enough. She does not need to walk into her father's home and feel anything other than fully, completely wanted." Another pause. "If Qeto says or does one thing that causes her harm, one word, one action, he will not have me to deal with. He will have the Ngwenya ancestors. And I need you to understand, King Serithi, that that is not a conversation anyone survives comfortably."

The table is very still.

Serithi looks at Nqobizwe for a long moment. Reading him. Then he nods. Once. Slowly.

"Understood. And received." He says

"I said it with respect," Nqobizwe says.

"I know," Serithi says. "And I will deliver it the same way."

DK breaks the silence immediately.

"I really like this man" She points at Nqobizwe. "Very much. He speaks clearly. I respect it."

"You like everyone tonight," Sizwe says.

"I like people who say what needs to be said without wasting everyone's time. It is a gift. A rare one."

Serithi looks at Sizwe. "How long have you two been together?"

Sizwe opens his mouth.

"Long enough," DK says.

"Not long enough," Sizwe says at exactly the same time.

Serithi laughs. Ayanda puts his head down. Tumelo looks between them and then at his plate like he has decided this is not his business.

I catch Nqobizwe's eye across the table. We share a look that does not need words.

This is everything.

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The table clears slowly, and the evening becomes calm, with no one rushing to leave.

DK corners Serithi about Thabamoya. She wants to know everything, the land, the homestead layout, the size of the main house, whether there is a proper outdoor area.

"Why does the outdoor area matter to you?" Sizwe asks.

"Because I like to sit outside in the morning and I intend to visit," she says.

"You intend to visit," Sizwe repeats.

"Refilwe is going. I go where Refilwe goes. Those are the standing rules." She looks at Serithi. "How is the outdoor area?"

Serithi describes the homestead with great patience and DK listens seriously throughout like she is taking actual notes and might be tested on this later.

Tumelo finds his way to Ayanda at the other end of the room. I catch fragments of their conversation, work, starting out properly, Pretoria. Ayanda is listening the way he does, fully, and every now and then says something short that makes Tumelo nod and sit up.

I stand in the lounge and look at the table, at these people who were not in my life a few months ago and are now such a big part of it, and I feel full in a way I can’t quite explain.

It is the feeling of a life becoming what you always knew it could be if you could just get through the hard part.

I think I am getting through the hard part.

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Nqobizwe

Dinner was everything I did not know I needed tonight. Warm and loud and honest. Refilwe made that happen. She pulled all these people into one space and made it feel like they had always belonged together.

Now Serithi and I are in the study. The house has softened around us, the others are still in the lounge, I can hear DK's voice carrying through the wall asking Serithi something else about Thabamoya.

"I want to thank you properly," Serithi says. He sits back and looks at me directly. "I know Refilwe made herself. Everything she has, she built. But you have put life back in her. She looks happy in a way that is not surface. It goes deep." He pauses. "That is you."

"She makes it easy," I say. And I mean every word of it.

He nods. "Tomorrow. How do you want to handle it?"

"We go to Lentswe first. I want answers directly from her. What Motaung wants, why he is still after Refilwe after all these years, what he knows and what he has been told." I lean forward. "After that we move on Motaung using your reach in the province. He has been in the Free State for years thinking he is untouchable. We show him otherwise."

"Agreed," Serithi says. "There is also the matter of the Monahengs."

I look at him.

"The Molefes'. Traditionally I owe them damages. Three cows at minimum. I have to present myself formally and make the offering, give Refilwe back to me properly through tradition." He exhales slowly. "They have kept their distance from anything connected to her mother for years. They may resist. But I will push the process if I have to. She deserves to have this done correctly. She deserves to know where she comes from on every side."

"And Lentswe?" I ask.

Serithi meets my eyes. "She is not going back. She still has to account for what she did to my daughter. That process is not finished." He says simply.

I nod. I do not ask more than that.

He stands after a while and straightens his jacket. "I will come by early before we leave. Tell Refilwe I said goodbye and that Mmabotle is already planning the menu for when she visits."

"I will tell her," I say.

I walk him to the door. His guards fall in without a word. He stops at the threshold and turns back.

"You are a good man, Nqobizwe," he says. "A complicated one. But a good one."

"I am working on the complicated part," I say.

He smiles. "Aren't we all."

He leaves.

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Sizwe and Ayanda are in the study ten minutes later.

I sit down.

"Good dinner," Sizwe says.

"It was," I agree. "Refilwe did that."

"She did," Ayanda says. He says it quietly, like he is noting something important.

We sit for a moment.

"Yesterday," Ayanda says. He does not rush into it. "At the restaurant. The man who came to Mbali's table."

Sizwe and I both look at him.

"Her ex," he says. "Senzo."

The room shifts.

"The same Senzo?" Sizwe asks.

"The same one," Ayanda says. "The one who has been asking questions about Nqobizwe. Digging around Refilwe." He keeps his voice level. "I recognised him the moment I walked in. He did not recognise me."

"He does not know who you are," I say.

"Not yet. And I did not react. I did not take his hand when he extended it. That is all I did. He read it and walked away." Ayanda says

"Does Mbali know what he has been doing?" Sizwe asks.

"Nothing," Ayanda says. "She ended things before any of this started. He broke her heart, she walked. She has nothing to do with his plans." He pauses. "But I am close to her now. Which means I am close to someone he still has access to, even if he does not know it. That is a position."

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

"Nothing yet. I am not using Mbali for information. I want to be clear about that. She is not a tool." He looks at me steadily. "But if something comes through her naturally, something he lets slip through her without knowing, I will be paying attention."

"Understood," I say.

"Senzo needs to be dealt with," Sizwe says. "He is getting bolder.

"He is," I agree. "But we do it properly. Not reactively. After Friday. After Motaung." I look at both of them. "One thing at a time. We finish what we started before we open new fronts."

Ayanda nods. Sizwe nods.

We sit in the quiet for a moment.

"DK asked Serithi the size of his outdoor area," Sizwe says.

I look at him.

"She said she intends to visit," he says. "Apparently where Refilwe goes she goes. Standing rules."

Ayanda puts his head back and laughs.

"She is something else," I say.

"Tell me about it," Sizwe says. But the way he says it, soft, proud, helpless, tells you everything you need to know about where he has landed with that woman.

We finish our drinks and call it a night.

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Narrated: Free State

Disebo has been calling Lentswe for two days.

At first she told herself Lentswe was just being Lentswe. Sometimes she went quiet. Sometimes she did not feel like talking and you had to wait her out. That was not new.

But two days with nothing is different. Two days with a phone that rings once and dies is different. Disebo knows Lentswe. She knows the difference between a woman who is ignoring her calls and a woman who cannot answer them.

Its Friday morning. She is outside her house.

The front door is unlocked.

She steps inside and calls out. Nothing comes back.

She moves through the rooms quickly. What she finds tells the same story everywhere she looks, a woman who was here and then suddenly was not. Nothing packed. Nothing planned. Just gone.

She takes out her phone and calls her brother.

"Thabiso." Her voice is controlled but tight. "Bathong, Lentswe ha ayo mona." (Thabiso. Lentswe is not here.)

"She still has not answered?" he asks.

"Her things are all here. The door was not locked. She did not go anywhere willingly, Thabiso. Something happened here."

Silence on the line.

"Go to the police," he says. "Now. Do not touch anything else. Just go."

She takes one last look around and walks out.

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The police station is busy for a Friday morning. She sits across from a constable who writes slowly and asks questions in a flat procedural voice.

Full name. Age. Last contact. Any known conflicts.

Disebo answers everything clearly and watches him write and feels the particular frustration of a person who knows something is wrong trying to make another person feel the urgency of it.

"We will open a case," the constable says eventually. "Someone will follow up."

She nods. There is nothing else to do right now.

She walks out. Her mind is loud.

She stands on the pavement outside the station and thinks about Lentswe. About the last real conversation they had. Lentswe had been stressed, more than usual, saying things that did not fully make sense at the time. She mentioned Motaung.

Disebo stands there and puts it together slowly.

If Motaung is behind this then the case she just opened inside that building means nothing. Motaung knows which hands to grease and which doors to

close. The police will open a file and that file will sit in a drawer and nothing will come of it.

She knows that.

Which means if Lentswe is with Motaung then Lentswe is on her own.

She starts walking.

There is nothing more she can do from here. Not today. Not without more information and not against a man like that.

She just hopes Lentswe is still alive to be found.

Chapter 47

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Refilwe

Nqobizwe and King Serithi left early. The house is quiet and I am working from Nqobizwe's study because the bedroom feels too still without him in it. The study has a good energy. Focused and serious. Very him. I feel close to him in here even when he is not around.

I have my laptop open, emails to get through, a call scheduled for ten. I was doing well until I remembered my charger is in the bedroom.

I grab fruit and chips from the kitchen on the way and head upstairs.

The bedroom door is already open.

I stop in the doorway.

Zodwa is inside. Moving around with a cloth. Touching things on the dresser like she has every right to be here.

I have my apple in my hand and I stand there and look at her.

She does not stop what she is doing.

I clear my throat. "What are you doing in here?"

"Cleaning," she says. No apology anywhere near it.

"Was I not clear about this room?"

She turns slowly. "Nqobizwe does not mind. I have been cleaning in here long before you arrived."

I blink. "Askies?" (Sorry?)

"It slipped my mind," she says. Like she is talking to someone who has no authority over her whatsoever.

I keep my voice even. "He is not Nqobizwe to you. That is your Prince. And I am telling you for the last time, get out of this room. If I find you in here again we are going to have a very serious problem. Do not test me, Zodwa."

She laughs. Short and unpleasant. "You have been here five minutes and you think you run things. I have seen different women come and go in this house. You are not the first and you probably will not be the last."

"I am not just a woman," I say. "I am the chosen one. Be specific when you talk about me."

She smirks. "Chosen one or not that did not stop his father from taking a second wife while having one. These Ngwenya men do what they want. He is no different."

I look at her. "You are not afraid of losing your job?"

"He will not fire me," she says simply.

"And why is that?"

She holds my gaze for a second. "Because he knows the warmth between my thighs. How does a man fire all of that?”

The room goes very quiet.

I was not expecting that. I keep my face still because I will not let her see what that just did to me. I absolutely will not.

I smile slowly. "Oh. Look at that." I tilt my head. "You just lost your job."

"Just try," she says.

I throw the apple.

It hits her square on the face and she stumbles back, mouth open, more from shock than actual pain. She stares at me like she cannot believe I just did that.

I walk out.

"Security." I say it from the corridor without raising my voice. "Escort Zodwa out of this house. Now. Her things will be packed and sent to her. She is dismissed effective immediately."

The guard does not hesitate. He moves.

I walk back to the study and sit down and stare at my open laptop. I close it.

He slept with her.

She said it with too much certainty for it to be a lie. She said it the way someone says something they have been keeping warm and waiting to use at exactly the right moment. The right moment being when I am alone in this house without him and she can say it directly into my face without consequence.

And he kept her here. He kept her here knowing what happened between them and he said nothing to me. Not one word. He let her clean our bedroom. He let her be in our space.

I pick up my phone and call him.

It rings. No answer.

I call again.

Nothing.

From upstairs I hear Zodwa's voice. Raised and indignant, arguing with the guards. Why is she even fighting? I hear the gate open and then complete silence.

I put my phone face down on the desk and look at the wall.

I think about her face when she said it. The smirk and confidence that was on her face. The way she stood in our bedroom like she had more right to be there than I did.

She felt that way because he never took that from her. He never made it clear that those days were finished. He kept her in the house and let things stay blurry and I walked into that blurriness without knowing it existed.

I am hoping Zodwa is lying. I pray Nqobizwe didn’t sleep with her and kept her here still. I don’t know how I will forgive him for making me a fool like this.

I call again.

Still nothing.

I put the phone down and go back to staring at the wall.

•••

Nqobizwe

Serithi's warehouse is an hour from his palace. Hidden behind a tree line, unmarked, completely quiet. His people run it and nobody asks questions here.

We go inside.

Lentswe is in the back room tied to a chair. Wrists behind her, feet secured. She has been here since Serithi took her and you can tell the days have not been kind. She is worn down, hair loose, same clothes, eyes that have had too much time alone with their thoughts.

She looks up when we walk in.

Her eyes find me first. Then they move to Serithi.

She stares at him.

Her mouth opens slightly. She blinks. Looks again like she is checking whether she is seeing correctly.

"Wena?" (You?) Her voice comes out small. Almost a whisper.

Serithi says nothing. He pulls the chair and sits directly in front of her.

"You are the one who took me," she says slowly. Still processing it. "It was you." She shakes her head slightly. "I thought it was Motaung. This whole time I thought it was Motaung who…" She stops herself.

She looks at me. Then back at him.

"This is about Refilwe," she says quietly.

"It has always been about Refilwe. I have questions for you…" Serithi says.

Lentswe swallows. She looks at him differently now.

"You will answer my questions," he says. "Honestly. That is the only thing that matters right now."

She looks at him for a long moment. The calculation behind her eyes runs its course and reaches its end.

She has nowhere to go.

"Ask," she says quietly.

"Why did you abuse my daughter?" he asks.

"She was in my house," she says."I did not want her there."

"She was a child. A child with nowhere else to go." Serithi says quietly.

"She was a reminder. Every day. Every single day I looked at her." Lentswe says

"A reminder of what?"

"Of Nthabiseng," she says quickly. "Her mother."

Serithi leans forward slightly. "Tell me about Nthabiseng."

She signs "She had everything easy. Men liked her without trying. Molefe liked her." Her jaw tightens. "I wanted Molefe. I had wanted him for years. She knew that and she took him anyway and smiled in my face while she did it and called herself my friend."

"So you hated her," Serithi says.

"I hated her," she confirms. No shame in it. Just plain fact sitting in the room.

"And what did you do about it?"

She says nothing again.

The guard shows her a gun on his waist. She swallows.

"I used muthi on Nthabiseng," she says. "To turn Molefe against her. To make him treat her badly. It worked. He started hating her, treating her like nothing." She pauses. "And I was there. Waiting. He came to me."

I stand against the wall and listen and feel something cold moving through me that does not go away

“So did Nthabiseng know who was the father?" Serithi says.

Lentswe looks up briefly then back down. "She wanted to come forward. Tell the truth. She knew you were royalty. She knew what that would mean for her. A way out. A better life. Everything she always managed to get without really

working for it." Her voice tightens on the last sentence. "I could not let that happen."

"So you told Molefe," Serithi says.

"I told him Nthabiseng had been with another man. That Refilwe was not his. That she had been lying to him the whole time." A pause. "He beat her. Badly."

The room goes very still.

I look at this woman tied to a chair and I think about Refilwe. About the little girl who watched her mother fall apart slowly without understanding why. Who carried that grief out of that house and built her whole life on top of it without ever knowing what was really underneath.

"After that," Serithi says. His voice has not changed but I can see what is happening behind his eyes.

Lentswe breathes. "After that I made sure she did not recover. I had already been working on something. Something to end it. She thought it was illness. She died slowly thinking her body had failed her." A pause. "It was not her body. It was what I gave her."

Serithi sits back.

He says nothing for a long moment. He just looks at Lentswe. I watch him process it and keep himself together and it costs him more than he shows.

"Motaung," he says finally.

Lentswe shifts in the chair.

"What does he want with Refilwe?"

"He wanted her when she turned eighteen," she says. "Molefe owed him money. A loan he could not repay. Motaung offered to clear the debt in exchange for Refilwe." She pauses. "That was the arrangement. She ran before it could happen."

"And now?" Serithi asks. "Why is he still looking for her after ten years? A debt is long settled. So what is it really?"

"I do not know," she says.

The guard shifts.

"I genuinely do not know," she says quickly. "He came back asking about her and I helped him because I still owe him money. Molefe's debt came to me when he died. I have been paying it ever since and it never ends." Her voice drops. "He came back wanting her and he did not tell me why. He just said find her. Bring her to him. That is all I was told."

Serithi looks at her for a moment longer.

Then he stands. We walk out.

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We are outside the warehouse with Serithi. We walk away from the entrance and stand in the shade of the tree line.

I keep coming back to Nthabiseng. To what was done to her. To Refilwe growing up with a grief that was manufactured by a woman who was supposed to be her family. She has been carrying the wrong shape of loss her whole life and she does not know it yet.

I do not know how to tell her. I do not know if I should.

"What are you going to do with her?" I ask.

Serithi looks at the warehouse. "Death is too easy," he says. "I want her to feel it first. Really feel it." He pauses. "I am waiting on something from one of my channels. A drug. One that makes the body depend on it completely. Once you have had it you cannot think about anything else. Cannot function without it. Your whole world becomes about getting more." He looks at me. "I will give it to her until she cannot imagine existing without it. And then I will stop. Cold. She will want more and I will just not give it to her. She will feel every second of that need."

I look at him.

"She will not die from it," he says. "She will just wish she could."

"She is yours," I say.

He nods.

We stand quietly for a moment.

"Motaung," I say. "Something does not add up. A man does not stay fixated on a woman for ten years over an old loan. There is something else driving this." I

look at him. "Can you use your connections to find out if he is involved in any cult or witchcraft? I want to know what he really wants before I go near him."

Serithi considers it. He nods slowly. "Now that you say it. I will look into it. I will update you before you move."

"Motaung is mine," I say.

He chuckles quietly. "Whatever my daughter did to you, I have deep respect for it."

I laugh. "It is love, mkhwe." (Father in law.)

He laughs properly at that. The first real one I have heard from him today.

We walk back to the cars. Say our goodbyes.

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I notice the missed calls from Refilwe when we are on the road back. Three of them. Then a message comes through from my team.

***Zodwa was escorted off the premises. Madam gave the instruction. ***

I stare at the message for a moment. Then I try calling Refilwe back immediately but the signal out here is terrible. The call drops before it connects. I try again. Nothing. I put the phone down and look out the window and try not to think too hard about what happened in that house while I was not there.

Whatever Zodwa said to Refilwe, she said it alone. Without me there to shut it down. I already know that is bad.

By the time the signal comes back properly it is late afternoon. I try a third time and it connects.

"Hi," she says.

Something is wrong. I hear it straight away. Her voice is flat in a way it is never flat with me.

"How are you, Mama?" I ask.

"Fine. I tried calling earlier," she says.

"I was with your father. We just finished now." I pause. "Why did you throw Zodwa out?"

Silence.

"Oh. She told you," she says.

"The guards told me. What happened?"

"Have you ever slept with Zodwa?" she asks.

I go quiet. I know exactly where this is going and there is no version of this conversation that does not cost me.

"Why are you asking me that?" I say.

"Yes or no, Nqobizwe."

I breathe out. "It was a long time ago. Once. It was a mistake and it never happened again. She has always known that."

"Wow," she says quietly.

"Fifi…"

" You brought me into a house where someone you slept with still works as staff" she says. "You let her clean the bedroom. You let her move around your space every day knowing what happened between you two and you said nothing to me. Not one word." Her voice is controlled but I can hear the heat underneath it. "And because of that she felt confident enough to disrespect me today. In your house. While you were not here."

"Mama, I did not think it was a big deal. Can we not do this right now, sthandwa sami…"

"IT IS NOT A BIG DEAL?" She raises her voice and I hold the phone away from my ear slightly. "I cannot believe you just said that. You sleep with a maiden, fine, that is your business, it happened before me. But why was I not told? Do you understand how stupid I look right now? How sure can I even be that you two are not still sleeping together?"

"Come on, Refilwe…"

"So you sleep with your staff? Is that a thing for you? Because she is still working here, Nqobizwe. What must I think?"

"Do not do that. You know what kind of man I am…"

"I thought I did," she says. "And then your whore stands in the bedroom and tells me she knows your body because you gave her that confidence. You kept her here. You kept me in the dark. That makes me the fool in this situation."

"I am driving back now. Let us talk when I get…"

"There is nothing to talk about. The disrespect though…"

"Mama…"

She drops the call.

I call back immediately.

Nothing.

I try again.

Still nothing.

I put the phone down and look out the window.

Zodwa. I should have sent her back to the village the moment things got serious with Refilwe. I knew what happened between us and I left it sitting there without addressing it and now it has blown up into exactly this. Refilwe is hurt and she has every right to be.

I clench my jaw.

I pick up my phone and call my security team.

"Boss," he answers.

"Find Zodwa. Wherever she is right now. Take her to the warehouse." I pause. "I want to have a word with her."

"Copy, boss."

I end the call and look back out the window.

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Narrated

Ngwenya Kingdom

The afternoon is warm and still. Nkanyezi, Buhle and Nolwandle are sitting outside under the large tree in the Zungu yard, a bowl of mangoes between them. Nobody planned to sit together. It just happened the way things happen when people are thrown into the same situation and run out of reasons to avoid each other.

Nolwandle peels her mango slowly. Buhle eats hers in silence. Nkanyezi is looking at nothing in particular.

"So you are both okay with Chief Bukizwe not coming back?" Nkanyezi asks.

"I saw how the King and Nqobizwe operate," Nolwandle says. "I am not questioning anything they do."

"But that is your father, Nolwandle."

"A father who sold me off for power and arranged for me to marry my own brother without telling me." She does not look up from her mango. "What a father."

"Nkanyezi," Buhle says, her voice low. "I know that face. Drop it. Do not start."

"I am just asking," Nkanyezi says. "I will never get to know Bukizwe as a father. I will never see Sbonga again. And our mother is locked somewhere in a palace basement." She peels her mango slowly. "I am allowed to ask."

"Everyone you are talking about plotted to kill the King and his son," Nolwandle says. "They wanted the throne. They used all of us to get it. The people you are defending are the reason Buhle is dying. The reason you are sitting under this tree with nowhere to go. They only ever cared about themselves."

"People make mistakes, Nolwandle. My brother deserved a chance."

"And what about me?" Buhle says quietly. "Our mother sacrificed my womb. She did not make a mistake. She made a choice. Deliberately. And I am the one paying for it." She looks at Nkanyezi. "Do not have ideas. Whatever you are thinking right now, let it go."

Nkanyezi says nothing. She bites into her mango.

But in her head things are not as settled as she is pretending. The Ngwenya act like they are above everyone. Like their blood makes them untouchable and their decisions are final and the rest of the world must simply accept whatever they decide. Maybe that is what pushed their mother to do what she did. Maybe she was tired of being beneath them.

She keeps that thought to herself.

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Pretoria

Zodwa is sitting on the pavement outside the gate.

She has been here since the guards escorted her out and she has not moved because as far as she is concerned this is not finished. A woman who arrived recently does not get to throw her out. The guards listen to her because they are confused about who has authority. Nqobizwe will sort this out when he gets back.

She is sure of that.

She thinks about two years ago. Back at the palace. That is where everything started. She worked hard, kept herself useful, made sure she was noticed in the right ways. One night it happened between her and Nqobizwe. She woke up thinking it was the beginning of something. He woke up and apologised like he had committed a crime. Said it was a mistake. Said he does not do that with staff and if she wanted to keep her position she needed to forget it happened entirely.

She swallowed that and stayed.

Then Queen Liyana decided she wanted trusted maidens to go to Pretoria to help Nqobizwe settle into his house there. Two were chosen. Zodwa made sure she was one of them.

She packed her things and moved without hesitation.

She watched women come and go in that house. None of them lasted. She kept herself close and kept herself useful and told herself her time was coming.

Then Refilwe arrived.

And did not leave.

She hated that. She hated the way he looked at her. She hated the rule about the bedroom. She hated being told by a newcomer what she could and could not do in a house she had been running long before that woman appeared.

So today when the opportunity came she took it.

She does not regret it.

The gate opens and a guard steps out.

"Zodwa. The Prince wants a word. Come."

She stands and smooths her uniform. She smiles. She knew it.

"I knew he would want to speak to me himself," she says, walking to the car. "Where is he?"

"You will see," the guard says flatly. "Ngena emotini, sisi." (Get in the car.)

She gets in without hesitation. She is already thinking about what she will say. How she will remind him of what they have. How she will make him see that Refilwe is temporary and she is not.

The guard gets in and pulls away from the gate.

She looks out the window as the familiar streets give way to unfamiliar ones. The neighbourhood changes. Then the road changes. Then there are no more neighbourhoods at all.

She frowns slightly. "Where are we going?"

The guard does not answer.

She looks at the back of his head and something begins to shift in her stomach. Something small and cold that she tries to push away.

She keeps looking out the window.

The car keeps driving.

Chapter 48

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Narrated: Thabamoya

The convoy pulls through the gates into the homestead. The royal staff are already waiting, heads down, as the King arrives. Everything is in order

Mmabotle is at the door before he reaches it.

She is already smiling. She has been waiting since he called from the road and she could hear it in his voice even then, something lighter than when he left.

He comes through the door and she takes his jacket from his shoulders, and he pulls her in and they hold each other for a moment. He presses his lips to hers quickly and she laughs against his mouth.

"Welcome home, Ntate," she says.

"Thank you, Mohatsa'ka." (My wife.) He looks at her. "How have you been?"

"Good. And I already know it went well." She hangs his jacket. "I saw the pictures you sent. And I could hear it in your voice every time you called." She laughs. "You were a different man over there."

"It went well," he says, sitting down. "She is a good child, Mmabotle. Kind. Open. Very real. She did not make me work too hard to reach her. She gave me a chance and everything between us just came naturally." He shakes his head slowly. "I have been searching for her for so long. My heart is finally at peace."

"Mine too," Mmabotle says, sitting across from him. "I actually thought you would bring her back with you. I had everything ready."

"That was my plan," he says. His voice shifts slightly. "Qeto ruined it."

Mmabotle's smile fades. "Qeto? Wents’eng jwale Qeto?" (What did Qeto do?)

"He called her. Before I could even bring her home. Told her she is not wanted here. That nobody wants her. That she should stay where she is." Serity says.

Mmabotle claps her hands together once. "Bathong ngwana o, oentseile jwang mara." (Oh God whats wrong with this child) "Modimo." She shakes her head.

"And it was Refilwe's future husband who came to address it with me," Serithi says, standing. "Not me. Him. Because my own son made it look like I cannot manage my household." He straightens. "Where is Qeto?"

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Lesole finds Qeto in his room and tells him their father wants them both. Qeto comes out unbothered, hands in his pockets.

They go to the sitting room. King Serithi is standing. Mmabotle is on the couch. The energy in the room is not difficult to read.

"Sit down," Serithi says.

They sit. Lesole immediately. Qeto slowly.

"Qeto." Serithi looks at him directly. "You called Refilwe."

It is not a question.

Qeto says nothing.

"You called my daughter and told her she is not wanted in this house." Serithi's voice is even but there is something underneath it that fills the room. "You told her to stay where she is. That nobody here wants her."

"I said what I felt," Qeto says.

"What you felt," Serithi repeats.

"Yes. What I felt. And I still feel it." Qeto sits forward. "She does not know us. We do not know her. And now we must open our doors and welcome her like she has always been here? Like nothing happened? Like you did not go out there and find a child from another woman and bring her into our home?"

"Qeto…" Mmabotle starts.

"No, Ma. I have been saying this from the beginning. Everyone keeps telling me to give it time, give it time. But nobody is asking how I feel about it. Nobody asked me anything. It was just decided and we must all smile and accept."

"Nobody is telling you to stop feeling what you feel," Serithi says. "Feel it. Work through it. That is your right." He pauses. "But you do not get to call my daughter and weaponise your feelings against her. She did nothing to you. She

did not choose to be born. She did not choose any of this any more than you did."

"But she benefits from it," Qeto says. "She just shows up and gets everything. A father. A kingdom. A title. While we were here the whole time doing everything right."

"And you have lost nothing," Serithi says firmly. "Not one thing. Your place in this family has not changed. Your inheritance has not changed. Nothing about your life has changed except that you now have a sister." He looks at his son. "That is not a punishment, Qeto."

"It feels like one," Qeto says quietly.

"I know it does," Serithi says. "And I have told you, that is your fear talking. Fear that things will change. Fear that you will be loved less." He steps closer. "But I need you to hear me now. I will not allow that fear to be Refilwe's problem. She has been through enough in her life that you do not know about. She has survived things that would break most people. And she is still willing to give this family a chance." His voice tightens. "So if you cannot find it in yourself to receive her with basic dignity when she comes, then you should not be here when she arrives."

Qeto looks at him. "What?"

"You heard me," Serithi says. "If you cannot be respectful, not warm, not loving, just respectful, then I do not want you in this house for her homecoming. Remove yourself. Go and think. Go and do a proper self-introspection and ask yourself why you hate a person you have never met. And when you have worked through that properly, you know where the doors are. You are welcome back when you are ready."

The room is very still.

Mmabotle looks at her husband. She did not expect him to go this far. But she says nothing because she understands. A child who cannot be reached by words has to be reached by consequence.

Lesole sits with his hands on his knees and looks at the floor.

Qeto stares at his father.

"So she comes," he says slowly, "and I leave." He laughs once, short and bitter. "Exactly what I said from the beginning. She arrives and everything changes. I told you."

"Qeto…" Lesole says quietly.

"No." Qeto stands. "No, I am done. You want me gone? Fine." He looks at his father one last time. "I hope she is worth it."

He walks out.

The front door opens and closes.

Lesole exhales slowly and looks at his father. "Ntate…”

"Leave him. He needs to feel it. He will come back." Serithi says. His voice is tired now. The anger has done its work and what is left underneath it is just a father who is hurting.

"And if he doesn't?" Lesole asks.

Serithi looks at the door Qeto just walked through.

"He will," he says. But he says it quietly. Like a man trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Mmabotle stands and goes to her husband and puts her hand on his arm. He covers it with his own without looking at her.

Lesole watches his parents standing there and thinks about Refilwe. A woman he has never met who has already changed everything in this house before she has even walked through the door.

He does not know how he feels about that yet.

But he knows his brother.

Qeto will come back.

It is just a matter of how long and how much damage gets done in the space between.

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Pretoria

Sizwe walks through the front door and the smell hits him immediately. Something warm and rich coming from the kitchen. He stands in the entrance for a second just taking it in.

He has refused to not be around Dikeledi. Tumelo is here and he does not care, he minds his own business. He likes having Dikeledi close. Soon she will go back to the Free State and the house will go back to being just walls and furniture and silence and he is in no hurry to get back to that.

He finds her in the kitchen still busy, stirring something on the stove, her back to him.

"Mhm." He comes in and looks around at the pots. "I love what I am smelling in here."

She turns and smiles when she sees him. "You are back. Hi."

He walks straight to her and wraps both arms around her from behind, he turns her and plants rapid kisses all over her face. She shrieks and pushes him off laughing.

"Sizwe I am not a child wena, why are you kissing me like that…"

"So?" He looks at her with that expression she pretends not to like. "You are my baby."

She shakes her head still smiling and turns back to the stove. "Where have you been?"

He leans against the counter. "Sorting things out. Where is your brother?"

"Cinema room." She shakes her head again. " I think he lives there now."

Sizwe chuckles. "Good. I have news for him."

She looks at him sideways. "What news?"

"I got him an interview," he says. "Financial analyst position. Monday morning."

Dikeledi goes quiet. She puts the spoon down slowly.

"That was quick," she says.

"I thought you would be happy," Sizwe says, watching her face.

She turns to look at him properly. "Is it because you feel sorry for us?"

"No," he says without hesitation.

"It is because a young man came to me and asked. He did not wait to be offered. He saw an opportunity and he grabbed it with both hands and that deserves to be rewarded." He pauses. "And because he told me he wants to take care of you. After everything you sacrificed for him." He holds her gaze. "That is why."

Dikeledi looks at him for a moment.

Then her eyes go glassy and she blinks rapidly and turns back to the stove.

"Okay," she says quietly.

"Okay?" Sizwe says. "That is all I get? Okay?"

"What do you want from me Sizwe, a song?" She wipes the corner of her eye quickly with the back of her hand hoping he does not see it.

He sees it.

"Are you crying?" he asks.

"I am not crying. There is onion in this pot."

"You are not cooking onions."

"There was onion earlier. The smell lingers." She sniffs and stirs aggressively.

Sizwe steps closer and turns her gently by the shoulder. Her eyes are bright and she is pressing her lips together very hard.

"Dee," he says softly.

"Do not," she says. "Do not be nice to me right now I am trying to cook."

He pulls her in and holds her and she lets him, her face against his chest, one hand still holding the wooden spoon.

"Thank you," she says into his shirt. Quietly. Like it costs her something to say it.

"Anytime," he says.

She stands there for a moment and then pulls back and wipes her face properly and picks up the spoon again.

"Go call my brother," she says. Her voice is back to normal. Almost.

Sizwe smiles and walks to the corridor.

"TUMELO." He shouts down toward the cinema room.

"YOO?" Tumelo shouts back.

"Come here."

A minute later Tumelo appears in the kitchen doorway, snacks in hand, still chewing. He looks between Sizwe and Dikeledi. "What happened? Why does Dk look like she was crying?"

"I was not crying," DK says.

"Your eyes are red…"

"Tumelo I will put you out of this house."

"This is not even your house…"

"TUMELO." Sizwe cuts in, laughing. "Sit down. I have something to tell you."

Tumelo sits on the kitchen stool and looks at Sizwe.

"I got you an interview," Sizwe says. "Financial analyst. Monday morning. Eight o clock."

Tumelo stops chewing.

"Monday?" he says.

"Monday," Sizwe confirms.

Tumelo looks at his sister. She is stirring the pot and not looking at him but her shoulders are doing something.

"Grootman," Tumelo says slowly. "Are you serious?"

"Very," Sizwe says. "But I need you to draft your CV tonight. Send it to me before midnight. I need to forward it first thing tomorrow."

Tumelo puts his snacks down on the counter. He looks at Sizwe. Then at Dikeledi. Then back at Sizwe.

"I do not have a very long CV," he says carefully.

"That is fine. Put everything. Every project, every internship, every part time thing you did during varsity. Do not leave anything out even if you think it is small." Sizwe pulls out his phone. "I will send you my number now. Midnight. Do not be late with it."

Tumelo nods. He takes the number. He saves it. He looks at it on his screen for a second.

Then he looks at his sister again.

"Dikeledi," he says.

"Hmm," she says to the pot.

"Look at me."

She turns around. Her eyes are still bright.

"Thank you," he says.

"I did not do anything," she says.

"I know grootman took me serious because of you, my sister. It is obvious." He looks at Sizwe then back at her. "You have always been the reason good things happen for me. Even when you think you are not doing anything."

Dikeledi opens her mouth. Closes it. Points the spoon at him instead.

"Go write the CV, Tumelo," she says. Her voice comes out slightly rough at the edges.

"I am going," he says. But he does not move immediately. He stands in the doorway looking at his sister for a second longer. "I mean it though. Everything I do from here is for you. You gave up too much for me."

"Tumelo I swear if you make me cry in front of this man…"

"I am already seeing it," Sizwe says helpfully.

"SIZWE." She turns on him. "You are not helping."

He raises both hands laughing.

"CV. Midnight. GO." She waves the spoon at Tumelo.

He grins and disappears down the corridor.

Dikeledi turns back to the stove. She is blinking very fast and stirring very hard and pretending both of those things are completely normal.

Sizwe watches her and says nothing.

He just moves closer and stands beside her at the stove and after a moment she leans slightly into his side without saying anything about it.

He does not say anything about it either.

•••

Refilwe

I am sitting in the lounge when I hear the front door open. That is Nqobizwe.

I am not in the mood. I stare at the television without watching it and hope he just goes upstairs and leaves me alone for tonight.

He comes in and sits next to me on the couch.

I stand up and walk upstairs without saying a word.

I hear him follow a few minutes later. He comes into the bedroom and stands near the door.

"Can we talk?" he says.

"Is this how it works?" I turn to look at him. "We only communicate once the damage is already done? Once I have to get worked up first before you decide to talk to me?"

"This cannot really cause damage, Refilwe. You are overreacting."

I blink.

"How am I overreacting, Nqobizwe Ngwenya? HOW?" My voice goes up before I can stop it.

"It happened two years ago, baby. It meant nothing. I was being foolish. It never happened again. I do not see her like that."

"So it is okay that a woman you slept with has been living under the same roof as me and I had no idea?" I fold my arms. "You were ready to lose your mind because Senzo breathed in my direction. But I am overreacting?"

"That is different…"

"How? Tell me how it is different."

"Because in my head she is irrelevant. She means nothing to me. That is why I did not think it was important."

"You still do not get it," I say. "It is not about her. It is about you. Why did you not give me a heads up? How did you think it was acceptable for her to still be here, in your house, with me here, and you said absolutely nothing?" I look at him. "Are you still sleeping with her?"

He frowns. He sits on the edge of the bed and puts his face in his hands.

"I have had a very long day, Refilwe. I am tired. I have so much on my plate right now and I do not need you stressing me about Zodwa. This is pointless. Come on, Fifi."

I gasp.

I stare at him.

He did not just say that.

"I am sleeping in the guest room," I say. "Do not follow me."

I move toward the door.

"Don't be crazy, Refilwe. You are not sleeping in the guest room. Stop this."

I look at him one more time. He does not care about how this made me feel. He is dismissing me. My feelings are pointless because it meant nothing to him. I am being dramatic because it is not a big deal to him.

I walk out and bang the door behind me.

I go to the guest room and sit on the edge of the bed and breathe through my nose.

My mouth is twitching. My hands are shaking slightly. I am so angry I cannot sit still.

I lie down and stare at the ceiling.

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Nqobizwe

I am exhausted. I sat across from Lentswe today and heard things that broke something in me. I drove for hours. I have a woman in a warehouse I still need to deal with. And now Refilwe is in the guest room because of Zodwa.

Zodwa. Of all people.

It irritates me that we are fighting about her. She is nobody. She is not relevant. She is not even close to being relevant. Refilwe just needs to calm down and see that.

I grab my jacket and walk out.

My driver takes me to the warehouse.

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Zodwa is on the floor when I walk in. She scrambles to her feet when she sees me and her whole face changes. Relief. Like she has been waiting for exactly this.

"Oh my God, Nqobizwe, it is so good to see you. That guard brought me here and I did not know what…"

"That is Prince Nqobizwe to you," I say flatly.

She stops talking.

I look at her. Really look at her. And for the first time I see exactly what Refilwe was dealing with today. A woman who got too comfortable. Too confident. Too sure that what happened two years ago meant something beyond what I said it meant.

"You disrespected your future Queen," I say, stepping closer. "In her space. Why did you open that mouth of yours?"

"I am sorry, my Prince. I just…"

"You just nothing." I stop in front of her. "You think what happened two years ago meant something to me? Uyahlanya?" (Are you crazy?)

"After that night I could not look at you the same," she says quietly. Her voice is shaking. "I developed feelings. I thought maybe you felt something too. I waited. I tried to stay close. And then she came and…"

I take out my gun.

She steps back immediately, her back hitting the wall.

I fire once. The bullet hits the wall right beside her head. She screams, hands flying up, legs going under her slightly.

"Next time I will not miss," I say. "Take those feelings and bury them somewhere deep. I do not want you. I have never wanted you. What happened was a mistake I have regretted every day since." I look at her. "You are fired. Go back to the village. And if you think about doing anything stupid, saying anything to anyone about anything you saw or heard in my house, you will know me properly. Do you understand?"

She is crying hard, her whole body shaking against the wall. "Please, my Prince. I need this job. I am sorry. I promise I will never…"

"You should have thought about that before you opened your mouth to my Queen," I say.

I walk out.

I get back in the car and sit in the quiet for a moment.

I keep messing up with Refilwe. That is the truth of it. She is someone who needs honesty and transparency and open communication and I am someone who decides what is important and what is not based on how it sits with me. If something does not bother me I assume it does not bother anyone. I move on and I do not look back.

That is not how she works.

She needs to know things. She needs to be included. She needs me to bring her in on the details even when I think the details are small. Especially when I think the details are small. Because what feels small to me can feel like a wall to her.

And instead of seeing that tonight I told her she was overreacting. I told her I was tired. I made her feel like her feelings were an inconvenience on top of my long day.

She is in the guest room right now because of me. Not because of Zodwa. Because of me.

Zodwa just lit the match. I handed her the wood a long time ago.

I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes for a moment.

I tell the driver to take me home.

When I get there the house is quiet.

I stand outside the guest room door. I can see the light underneath it. She is still awake.

I knock once.

Nothing.

I knock again.

"Refilwe."

Silence.

I put my hand flat on the door and stand there.

"I am not going to talk through a door," I say quietly. "But know that I am sorry, Mama. I get it now."

I stand there for a few minutes.

Then the light under the door goes off.

I exhale slowly.

I push off the wall and walk back to the master bedroom alone.

Chapter 49

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Narrated

Friday night the feedback reaches Motaung.

He reads it twice. Then he puts it down on his desk and sits back and looks at the ceiling for a long time.

The girl is connected to a prince. Not just a wealthy man with a title, a prince with reach and resources and people everywhere. And she was seen with King Serithi of Thabamoya.

Either she is Serithi's blood or something significant is happening between the two families.

Either way it changes things.

Motaung does not sleep well that night. He lies in the dark and runs calculations and none of them land in a comfortable place. He has known since the bodies were dropped at his gate that whoever is protecting this girl is not ordinary. Now he has a clearer picture of exactly how not ordinary.

But he does not walk away.

He has never walked away from anything in his life and he is not about to start now.

Saturday morning, he is up early.

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Ntate Phiri's place is on the outskirts of town, no sign outside and no indication of anything from the road. Just a house that looks like every other house on the street except that the yard is always clean and the gate is always closed and the neighbours have learned over the years not to ask questions about who comes and goes.

Motaung has been coming here for a long time. Long enough that Ntate Phiri does not greet him at the door with pleasantries. He just opens the gate and leads him inside.

They sit in the back room. It smells like impepho and something older underneath that. The walls are covered with things Motaung stopped trying to identify years ago.

"You look like a man who did not sleep," Ntate Phiri says.

"I need strengthening," Motaung says. "Serious strengthening."

"Tell me what you are dealing with."

Motaung tells him about Refilwe. About ten years ago and what was promised to him then. About the prince and Serithi. About the bodies dropped at his gate and the men he sent who did not come back.

Ntate Phiri listens without interrupting. His face does not change much. When Motaung finishes he is quiet for a moment.

"That girl," he says finally.

"That girl," Motaung confirms.

Ntate Phiri shakes his head slowly. Not thinking and deciding. "She is not the same as ten years ago, Motaung. What we discussed then, what she was going to give you, that is no longer available."

Motaung frowns. "What do you mean not available?"

"She has been claimed," Ntate Phiri says. "Covered. What is around her now is not ordinary. These are old ancestors. Powerful ones. They do not sleep and they do not negotiate." He looks at Motaung directly. "What we planned for her body, what she carries, it will not work anymore. The door is closed."

Motaung is quiet. He looks at his hands.

"You told me ten years ago," he says slowly, "that if I get that girl, her body, what she carries inside her, it means power. More years. More money. Everything I have worked for multiplied." He looks up. "How do I walk away from that?"

"The same way a man walks away from something that will kill him," Ntate Phiri says. "By choosing to stay alive."

"I am not afraid of dying."

"You should be afraid of how," Ntate Phiri says. "Because it will not be clean. It will not be quick." He leans forward slightly. "Killing her is not impossible. I will not lie to you. But one drop of her blood, one, and those ancestors will be at your door before you have had time to breathe. That is not a story. That is what I see when I look at this situation." He pauses. "I have seen what powerful royal ancestors do to those who come against their own. It is not something I would wish on anyone."

Motaung sits with that.

"They are already coming for me," he says. "You think I do not know that? They already know my name. They know what I want. Running will not save me. Doing nothing will not save me." He looks at Ntate Phiri. "So the question is not whether I fight. The question is whether I am strong enough when they come."

Ntate Phiri studies him for a long moment.

"You have decided," he says.

"Le jwale, Se ke inkile qeto (Yes, I have decided)," Motaung says.

The old man exhales and gets to his feet. He moves around the room slowly, gathering things from shelves and from containers that line the walls. He works without rushing, without explaining. Motaung watches him and waits.

When everything is laid out Ntate Phiri looks at him.

"This will not make you untouchable," he says clearly. "Nothing can do that against what is standing behind that girl. What this does is give you a layer. Slow them down if they come. Buy you time." He holds Motaung's gaze. "Do not mistake it for invincibility. If you get brave because of this you will die faster than if you had done nothing."

"I understand," Motaung says.

Ntate Phiri nods and begins.

It takes a long time. The room fills with smoke from things burning in a small clay pot. There are things mixed and applied. There are words spoken quietly in Sesotho that are older than the language itself. Motaung does what he is told when he is told to do it and says nothing.

Finally, it is done.

Motaung stands. Something has shifted in him. Not loudly or dramatically. Something quiet. Like a door that was slightly open has now closed. Like a wall has formed inside him where there was none before.

"How long?" he asks.

"Long enough," Ntate Phiri says. He is already cleaning up, his back turned. "If you are careful."

Motaung pays. He walks out into the afternoon sun and stands in the yard for a moment.

He thinks about Refilwe, about ten years of waiting and about what was promised to him and what it would mean to finally have it.

He thinks about the prince and the king and everything that is standing in his way.

He rolls his neck slowly.

He has faced worse than this.

Or at least that is what he tells himself as he walks back through the gate and into the street.

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Narrated: Kingdom of Thabamoya

Saturday morning. King Serithi is having breakfast with Mmabotle when his phone rings. He looks at the screen and steps away from the table.

"Bua (Speak)," he says.

" Morena’ka (My King). Motaung was spotted this morning. Coming out of Phiri's place." His man's voice is low

Serithi goes still. "Phiri."

"Yes, my King. He was there for a long time. Over two hours."

Serithi knows exactly who Phiri is. Everyone in the province who needs to know, knows. Phiri does not do ordinary work. He deals in the serious things, strengthening, protection, power built on things that cost more than money.

Body parts. Sacrifices. The kind of work that leaves marks on a person that do not wash off.

The fact that Motaung went to Phiri on a Saturday morning tells him everything.

"Keep eyes on him," Serithi says. "I want to know every move. Where he goes, who he sees, everything."

"Yes, my King."

He ends the call and stands by the window for a moment. Mmabotle watches him from the table but says nothing. She knows that face.

He picks up his phone and calls Nqobizwe.

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Nqobizwe picks up on the second ring.

"Ngwenya," Serithi says. "We have a problem."

"Talk to me," Nqobizwe says.

"My man spotted Motaung this morning. He came out of a place belonging to a man called Phiri. You need to know who Phiri is." Serithi pauses. "He is a dark ritualist, a witch. But not the ordinary kind. He deals in serious dark work. Body parts. Sacrifices. He makes men powerful in ways that do not come cheap and do not come without cost to others." He pauses again. "Motaung was there for over two hours."

Silence on the other end.

"He knows we are coming," Nqobizwe says.

"He knows something is coming," Serithi says. "And he is not running. He is arming himself."

"Which means he is more dangerous now than he was yesterday," Nqobizwe says.

"Yes."

Another silence.

"Does your man know what was done? What Phiri gave him?" Nqobizwe asks

"Not exactly. But knowing Phiri's work, it will be strengthening. Protection." Serithi moves away from the window. "He is not going to back down, Nqobizwe. A man who goes to Phiri on a Saturday morning has already made up his mind."

"Then we move faster than him," Nqobizwe says. His voice is flat and certain. "I am not giving him time to settle into whatever Phiri gave him."

"Agreed," Serithi says. "But we need to be careful. Phiri's work is not ordinary muthi. It has a way of turning things back on the people going against it if they are not properly covered." He pauses. "Are you covered?"

"I will speak to Baba Ngubeni, our royal seer today," Nqobizwe says.

"Good. And Nqobizwe…" Serithi says.

"Hmm."

"Refilwe must not go anywhere alone. Not even within the house without guards close. If Motaung has gone to Phiri it means he is not just after information anymore. He is preparing to act." His voice drops. "Protect my daughter."

"She is always protected," Nqobizwe says.

"I know," Serithi says. "I just needed to say it."

They end the call.

Serithi stands in the quiet of his sitting room and looks out at the Thabamoya morning. The land stretching out green and wide beyond the homestead walls.

Mmabotle appears at the doorway. She reads his face.

"What is happening?" she asks.

He has never kept anything from Mmabotle. She knows about Refilwe's upbringing. She knows about Lentswe and Molefe and what was done to Refilwe growing up. She knows about Motaung and that he is still after Refilwe.

"Motaung went to Phiri this morning. He is preparing for a fight." He says

Mmabotle's face changes. "Is Refilwe safe?"

"She is safe. Nqobizwe and I will make sure of it." He says

She nods slowly. She looks out the window with him.

"Then handle it, Serithi," she says quietly. "Before it gets to her door."

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Nqobizwe

I clench my jaw after ending the call with King Serithi. I thought we were getting close to the end of this. I thought we were almost done. And now Motaung is sitting somewhere with whatever Phiri gave him and we have to move faster than we planned.

I walk downstairs.

Refilwe is at the table having breakfast. Dressed already, hair done, looking like she did not spend the night in the guest room because of me. She looks beautiful and she is not looking at me.

I barely slept. Every time I reached across the bed there was nothing. I am not okay about that. I did not know how not okay I was until this morning when I woke up and the room was empty and quiet.

I sit down across from her.

"Good morning, Mama," I say.

She continues eating. She doesn’t look up or respond.

I pour myself coffee and sit with it for a moment.

"You look beautiful," I say. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Can I please have my breakfast in peace?" she says.

"Fifi." I put the cup down. "So we are just going to sit here and not speak? That is how it is?"

She looks up at me slowly. "I thought you were tired. Too much on your plate." She raises her eyebrow. "Those were your words."

I exhale.

"I am sorry, Mama." I say it and I mean every part of it. "What I said last night was wrong. You had every right to feel what you felt and instead of sitting with that I made it about my day. About my tiredness. About everything except you." I look at her properly. "I am learning. I am learning how you need things done and I should have told you about Zodwa the moment you became important to me. Because you are important to me. More than anything. And I am sorry I made you feel otherwise."

She looks at me for a moment.

Then she looks back at her plate.

She sighs. Long and slow.

"Fifi…"

"Nqobizwe mamela." (Nqobizwe listen.) Her voice is quiet. "I hear you. I do. But nou kopa hoba mong." (But now can I please be alone.) "Can I have that?"

She is still angry. Not screaming angry. The quiet kind.

I nod. I do not push it.

"There is something I have to tell you," I say. "Your father called this morning. His man spotted Motaung coming out of a witch doctor in the Free State. Not ordinary work, this man deals in strengthening. Protection. The serious kind." I pause. "Which means Motaung knows we are moving and he is preparing himself."

She stops eating.

She looks up at me.

"So from today your guards are close. Not at a distance. Close. Every time you leave this house. Every time you move anywhere." I hold her gaze. "I need you to work with me on that."

She nods slowly. "Okay," she says quietly.

That is all.

She goes back to her breakfast.

I sit there for a moment looking at her.

I stand up.

I want to say more. I want to reach across the table and take her hand and make her look at me the way she normally looks at me. But she asked for space and the least I owe her is that.

I walk back upstairs.

I sit on the edge of the bed.

This cold silence she is giving me is the worst thing. Worse than shouting. Worse than the fight last night. Because at least when she was shouting I knew exactly where she was.

This quiet I do not know what to do with.

I pick up my phone and call Baba Ngubeni.

There is work to do. Motaung is armed and we need to move before whatever Phiri gave him settles into something we cannot push through.

I call Baba Ngubeni.

He answers on the second ring.

"Mntwana we nkosi." (My Prince.) His voice is warm and unhurried the way it always is.

"Baba Ngubeni, how are you?" I ask.

"I am good. Kwenzenjani?" (What is happening?) He already knows something is wrong. He always does before I even say it.

I tell him everything. Motaung. Phiri. What Serithi told me this morning.

He laughs when I finish. Not a small chuckle. A proper laugh.

"Don't worry about this man," he says. "He is a small cockroach. A nuisance. Nothing more." He pauses. “Phiri’s work will not reach you or the chosen queen. I can tell you that with certainty."

I exhale slightly.

"But Nqobizwe," he continues, his voice settling into something more serious. "the chosen one’s father needs to step back from this one."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"He is a strong man. A king. In the natural world he is powerful and I respect that." Baba Ngubeni pauses. "But this is not a natural war. This is not a fight of guns and men and money. What Phiri does operates on a different level entirely. Serithi does not have the covering for this kind of fight. If he inserts himself, he becomes a liability not an asset." He is quiet for a moment. "This fight belongs to you and the chosen queen. The two of you together. Your ancestors and hers. That is the combination that finishes Motaung. Nothing else."

I sit with that.

"So Serithi must do nothing?" I ask.

"He can handle the natural side. The logistics. The ground work in the Free State. That is his lane and he is good in it." Baba Ngubeni says. "But the moment it becomes spiritual he must step back. If he does not, he will be hurt and that will hurt Refilwe and that is the last thing we want."

"I understand," I say.

"Do not stress, my Prince," he says. "This cockroach has been making noise for a long time. His time is finishing. Just make sure the chosen queen is close to you and both of you are covered." He pauses. "How is she?"

I look at the closed guest room door down the hall.

"She is fine," I say.

Baba Ngubeni is quiet for a second. "Are you sure about that?"

"We had a disagreement," I say.

"Fix it today," he says simply. "A chosen pair that is not in agreement is a weak point. You cannot go into this with distance between you. Fix it today, Nqobizwe."

"I will," I say.

"Good. I will prepare what is needed on my side. Call me when you are ready."

We end the call.

I put the phone down and look at the ceiling.

Now I have to call Serithi and tell him to step back from a fight he has inserted himself into because of his daughter. That conversation is not going to be easy. Serithi is not the kind of man who steps back from anything.

But Baba Ngubeni does not give warnings without reason.

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Narrated

Thabamoya

Kapoko arrives at the homestead in a hurry.

He comes through the entrance moving quickly, his bag over his shoulder, his eyes already scanning for Serithi.

Mmabotle is in the corridor and she straightens when she sees his face.

"Where is the King?" he asks without stopping.

"Outside," she says. She turns and follows him.

Serithi is on the veranda with his morning coffee when Kapoko comes through the door. He sees him and puts the cup down immediately.

"Kapoko," he says. "What is it?"

Kapoko stops in front of him and catches his breath for a moment. He has clearly come straight here without stopping.

"They sent me urgently" He sits down without being asked."The ancestors, my King. They woke me this morning. Early. Before the sun."

Serithi sits forward. "About what?"

"About Motaung," Kapoko says. "And about you."

Mmabotle comes and stands quietly near the door.

"Me?" Serithi frowns.

"Ba re o tlohele, Morena'ka." (They say you must leave it, my King.) Kapoko looks at him directly. "Step back from the Motaung situation. Completely."

Serithi stares at him. "That man is after my daughter."

"I know," Kapoko says. "They know. That is exactly why they sent me running here this morning." He leans forward. "My King, what is operating around Motaung right now is not something your protection can stand against. He went to Phiri. You know what Phiri does. That work is dark and old and it will find the cracks in anyone who is not properly covered for it." He pauses. "You are a powerful man. A strong king. But this is not your battle. If you walk into it, you will be hurt."

"He is in my territory," Serithi says, his voice tightening. "I have handled men like Motaung my whole life."

"Men like Motaung, yes," Kapoko says. "But not a Motaung who has just come from Phiri's house. Not a Motaung who is now carrying what Phiri gave him." He shakes his head. "This is a different animal, my King."

Serithi stands up. He walks to the edge of the veranda and looks out at the land. His land. His province. The ground he has known his whole life.

"So I do nothing," he says. "While a man who has been hunting my child for ten years walks around strengthened and I sit here."

"You are not doing nothing," Kapoko says firmly. "The ground work is yours. The Free State is yours. Your reach, your connections, your knowledge of that province, all of that stays with you and it is needed." He pauses. "But the moment it becomes spiritual you step back. That fight belongs to the son in law and the princess. Their ancestors together. That is the combination that ends Motaung. Ba re ha ba na pelaelo." (They say they have no doubt.)

Serithi is quiet.

Mmabotle moves from the doorway and comes to stand beside him. She does not say anything immediately. She just stands with him.

After a moment she speaks softly.

"Ntate Serithi," she says. "She was claimed when she was in danger. He has been protecting her every day since. His ancestors carried her to him for a reason." She pauses. "Re a mo tshepa." (We trust him.) "That is not weakness. That is wisdom."

"He is going after my child," Serithi says again. But this time it is quieter. The fight in it is softer.

"And the right people are going after him," Mmabotle says. "Let them finish it."

Serithi stands there for a long moment.

He turns and looks at Kapoko.

"The ancestors are certain?" he asks.

"Ha ba na pelaelo, Morena." (They have no doubt, my King.) Kapoko says it without blinking.

Serithi exhales. He nods once. Slowly.

"Fine," he says. "I step back from the spiritual side." He points once. "But Motaung on the ground, that information, those movements, that stays with me. I am not blind in my own territory."

"Agreed," Kapoko says. "That is exactly where you are needed."

Serithi looks at Mmabotle. She meets his eyes and nods gently.

He sits back down and picks up his cold coffee and looks at it.

"Tell them," he says to Kapoko, "that if anything happens to my daughter I will hold them personally responsible."

Kapoko almost smiles. "Ba a tseba, Morena’ka." (They already know, my King.)

Chapter 50

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Refilwe

I need air.

That is the only thing I know clearly this morning. I need to get out of that house and breathe and talk to someone who will let me be angry without telling me I am overreacting.

I grab my bag and walk out.

The driver opens the door and I get in. Before the window is even fully down Nqobizwe comes through the front door and stands beside the car.

"Uyaphi, Mama?" (Where are you going?)

"Out with DK," I say.

He rubs his face. "Can she not come here?"

"I need air, Nqobizwe. Away from this house." I look at him. "Two hours. That is all."

"With everything happening right now going out is risky…"

"I have your guards. My father's guards. And the ancestors." I raise an eyebrow. "I think I am safe enough."

He almost smiles at that. "I know but Mama…"

"Two hours," I say firmly.

He looks at me for a long moment. That look where he is searching for something in my face. Then he nods.

"Two hours," he says. "I will check on you every ten minutes."

"Your guards report my every move anyway," I say. "They will fill you in."

His jaw tightens. "When I call, answer."

"Fine. Can I go now?"

He looks at me one more time. "I love you. When you come back we fix this. I cannot function with you cold towards me."

I say nothing.

"Refilwe."

"I hear you," I say.

He exhales. He taps the roof of the car and steps back.

The car pulls out and I watch him through the window, still standing there with his hands in his pockets watching us leave.

I hate that he is that handsome. I hate that even when I am angry at him I notice it.

But I am angry. And I need to stay angry long enough to say what I need to say to DK and let it out before it sits inside me and becomes something worse.

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DK is already at the table when I arrive. We hug properly.

We sit and order. I go for something light, I am still full from breakfast. She orders like she has not eaten in three days which is just her normal.

"So," she says, leaning forward. "O re Bayede o entse eng?" (What did the Prince do?)

I tell her everything. The whole thing. Zodwa in the bedroom, what she said, the fight, him telling me I was overreacting, the guest room.

DK puts her drink down.

"That bitch," she says. "I wish I had been there." She shakes her head. "But I blame Nqobizwe first. She should not have been in that house knowing what happened between them while you had no idea." She looks at me. "You were walking around with full confidence kanthe batho ba tsebana ba tsotse." (Not knowing they know each other naked.)

I laugh despite myself. Only DK.

"Exactly," I say. "That is exactly it. His business is his business, ke a utlwisisa. (I understand.) But to keep her there? In the same house? While I am there every day not knowing?"

"And then to say you are overreacting," DK says shaking her head. "That is the worst part. You were finally talking about it and he shut it down."

"He said he was tired. That he has too much on his plate." I sip my drink. "As if my feelings are something he can postpone."

"He messed up," she says simply. "Big time. That could have been resolved right there and then if he had just listened." She pauses. "But also, two years ago, probably a mistake. Men are idiots. The real issue is the keeping quiet part."

"Hundred percent," I say. "That is all it is. I am not jealous of Zodwa. I just needed to know."

"I wish we could find her and teach her a small lesson," DK says, already smiling at her own thought. "Hanyane fela." (Just a little.)

"I do not have the energy for whores," I say and we both laugh.

"Ladies."

We both look up.

Senzo.

Standing right there. Smiling. Like he was invited.

The guards at the table beside us shift immediately. I see them clock him without making it obvious.

He sits down without asking.

DK goes completely quiet. She looks at him with her straw in her mouth and says absolutely nothing which from DK means she is calculating.

"Dikeledi, right?" he says to her. "I remember you from the funeral. Nice to see you."

"And here I am wanting to puke seeing you," she says pleasantly and sips her drink.

He blinks. "What did I do?"

"Senzo. What are you doing here?" I say.

"I was passing. I saw you. Thought I would say hi." He shrugs.

"Hi. Goodbye. You can go," I say and look back at my food.

He looks at DK. She opens her eyes wide, straw still in her mouth, completely unbothered.

"You stole my friend," he says to her. "She even hates me now."

"If I stole her that easily she was never really yours," DK says. "Tsamaya, Senzo." (Go, Senzo.)

"Fifi, can I speak to you? Alone? Just for a minute?"

"No," I say.

He looks at DK. She raises both eyebrows. "Not happening, Senzilolo. I am not moving. You heard her."

He sighs and tries a different angle. Softer now. "I just miss my friend, Ref. I am sorry for how I handled things. For expressing my feelings and making it weird. I just…"

"TJOOOO WEEEE." DK sits up straight. "You did WHAT? Refilwe why was I not told about this?" She looks at Senzo. "My brother, I say this with love… please leave. The people connected to this woman will not be nice to you. Please go. Ke a o kopa." (I am begging you.)

He clenches his jaw. "I just want to go back to how we were, Ref. Just friends. Can we not do that?"

"No, Senzo. Please leave. If Nqobizwe finds out you are here, sitting this close to me…"

He laughs. "So he is that insecure?"

"Bayede? Insecure?" DK looks at him like he has just said something deeply stupid. "No, my babe. Trust me when I tell you that is not the word for that man."

He keeps quiet but he does not move.

We give him five more minutes. He stays. Making small conversation that nobody is responding to, laughing at things that are not funny, pretending he cannot read the room.

DK looks at me. I look at her.

We both stand up at the same time.

"We are leaving," I say.

"Already?" Senzo stands too.

"Senzo…"

"Just five more minutes…"

"We are leaving," DK says, picking up her bag. "Move."

He steps aside but follows us toward the exit still talking. One of the guards falls in close behind us immediately. Another moves to the front.

We push through the door into the afternoon.

And Nqobizwe is standing right there.

He came himself. Not a guard. Him.

His eyes find me first, checking me quickly, then they move to Senzo behind us and everything in his face changes.

DK grabs my arm. "Oh God," she says quietly.

Senzo sees him and stops walking. He looks at Nqobizwe and then looks at me and then back at Nqobizwe and something flickers across his face. Not fear. Something stupider than fear. Amusement.

Nqobizwe walks past me without a word. He stops in front of Senzo.

"Get in the car," he says to me. Low. Not looking at me.

"Nqobizwe…"

"Get. In. The car. Refilwe."

DK pulls me toward the car. I go because I know that voice.

We get in and close the door.

"Oh my God oh my God oh my God," DK says beside me.

Through the window we watch Nqobizwe and Senzo. Senzo says something. He is smiling. He actually smiles and says something directly into Nqobizwe's face and then laughs.

I close my eyes.

When I open them Nqobizwe has taken one step back.

Then the shot.

Senzo goes down immediately, grabbing his leg, screaming.

DK screams beside me.

I press both hands over my mouth.

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Nqobizwe

My gun is still pointed at Senzo on the ground.

He is holding his leg, writhing, but his mouth is still going. Even now. Even bleeding on the pavement in front of a restaurant with people standing around watching, he is still talking.

He told me Refilwe wants to come back to him. That she is only with me because she has no choice. That I am insecure and threatened by a man she actually loves.

My hand is shaking.

I want to finish this right here. I genuinely want to. But people are watching and phones are out and this has already become more than it should have.

I crouch down to his level.

He flinches. Good.

"Next time it goes to your skull," I say quietly. "Be grateful we are in public." I look at him directly. "Stay away from Refilwe. That is the last time I say it."

"You are going to jail," he says through his teeth. "Attempted murder. I will have you arrested…"

I chuckle. "Good luck with that."

I straighten up and walk to the car.

Inside it is completely silent. Refilwe and DK are not moving. I tell the driver to go.

I call Ayanda.

He picks up immediately. "I was literally about to call you. Shooting in public, Nqobizwe. Really?"

He is angry. He has every right to be. I messed up.

"Can you make sure nothing gets out. Every camera in that area wiped. Now."

He exhales. "Obviously. I am already on it." A pause. "What did he say to you?"

"I lost it. Just fix it Ayanda."

"Calm down. Do not do anything else stupid today."

He ends the call.

We pull into the yard and I get out. I walk inside. Still boiling.

They walk in seconds later. I look at Refilwe.

"Dikeledi, the driver will take you to Sizwe's place," I say without looking away from Refilwe.

DK clears her throat. "Uhm. I can just leave a bit later…"

"Dikeledi," I say. Firm.

"I will just be outside." She disappears through the sliding door toward the pool faster than I have ever seen her move.

I look at Refilwe.

"Woza (come)," I say. "We need to talk."

We walk upstairs.

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We get into the bedroom and I close the door.

"What the hell, Refilwe. Senzo again." I turn to face her.

"Why did you shoot him?" she asks. Her voice is low.

"So you care about him now?"

"What? No. I care about you. Why did you do that? They could arrest you. They could…"

"Did I not tell you to stay away from that boy?" I cut in.

"AND I WAS AWAY FROM HIM." She steps forward. "He walked into a public restaurant and sat down without being invited. What must I do, Nqobizwe? Teleport? We left. DK and I packed up and LEFT. He followed us outside. What exactly did I do wrong?"

"You entertained him…"

"HOW." Her eyes are blazing now. "Say specifically what I did to entertain him. One thing. Say it."

I clench my jaw. I cannot say it because there is nothing specific to say and she knows it and I know it and that makes me angrier.

"Why did the guards not remove him?" I ask.

"It is a public restaurant Nqobizwe. Not your house. You cannot just drag people out of public spaces because they are unwanted."

"Watch me," I say.

"That is exactly the problem," she says. "You watch me. You shoot people. You make decisions about my safety and my life without talking to me first and then you want to call it protection."

I clench my jaw.

"And you were here yesterday angry about Zodwa…" I say. It comes out before I can stop it.

She stares at me.

"Don't," she says. Low and sharp.

"I am just saying…"

"No." She steps forward. "Do not use Zodwa against me right now. Do not do that. Those are two completely different things and you know it."

"Are they?" I say. "Because you want me to communicate and be transparent but you sit in a restaurant with your ex…"

"He sat himself down, Nqobizwe. I did not invite him. I did not call him. I did not want him there." Her voice is rising. "And when he would not leave we got up and walked out. That is not entertaining him. That is me handling a situation that you then came and made ten times worse by shooting someone in the street."

"Don't raise your voice at me, Refilwe." I look at her steadily.

She looks down briefly. Her jaw is tight.

She moves toward the door.

Something in me snaps.

I reach out and grab her arm. Not gently. She stops and looks at my hand on her arm and then slowly looks up at my face.

"We are not done," I say. My voice is too loud. I know it is too loud even as it comes out.

"Let go of me," she says quietly.

"We are still talking…"

"LET GO OF ME, NQOBIZWE."

I release her immediately and step back. I turn away from her and press both hands against the wall and breathe.

The room goes completely silent.

I can hear her breathing behind me. I can hear my own. Neither of us says anything for a long moment.

"I am sorry," I say into the wall. "I should not have grabbed you. That was wrong."

Nothing from her.

I turn around.

She is standing near the door with her arms wrapped around herself. She is looking at me and I see it, not just the anger anymore. Something underneath it that sits worse than the anger.

She is not sure of me right now.

That hits me somewhere I was not prepared for.

I sit on the edge of the bed. Elbows on my knees. Eyes on the floor.

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Narrated

Dikeledi is sitting at the edge of the pool with her feet in the water trying to look calm and failing completely.

She can hear them upstairs. Not the words exactly but the tone.

She picks up her phone and calls Sizwe.

He answers immediately. "Dee…”

"Are you busy?" she asks.

"Never for you. What is wrong?"

"They are fighting upstairs," she says, dropping her voice even though nobody can hear her out here. "Nqobizwe and Refilwe. It is bad Sizwe. Like really bad."

"How bad?"

"Shouting bad. Then quiet bad. The quiet is worse than the shouting." She pauses. "And Sizwe… he shot someone today."

Silence.

"I know," he says carefully.

"In front of us. Senzo. In broad daylight outside the restaurant. Just like that." Her voice drops further. "What if he does something to Refilwe? I cannot leave her here alone…"

"Nqobizwe will not hurt Refilwe," Sizwe says firmly.

"You do not know that…"

"Dk." His voice is steady. "I know that man. He would rather hurt himself than touch her."

"I heard her tell him to let go." she says quietly.

Sizwe goes quiet for a second.

"I am on my way," he says.

She exhales. "Okay."

"Stay outside. Do not go upstairs."

"I am not going upstairs."

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Refilwe

The way Nqobizwe grabbed my arm.

I was not scared because I thought he would hurt me. I know him. I know he would not. But the thought crossed my mind for just a second and that second was enough. Especially after watching him shoot Senzo without blinking.

I am still shaking slightly inside even though I am trying not to show it.

I breathe out and look at him sitting on the edge of the bed with his head down.

I walk toward him slowly.

"You want to talk about Senzo entertaining me," I say, "when you had a woman in this house for two years and said nothing? When I told you how I felt last night and you called me a problem on top of your long day?"

"Don't…"

"No." I do not back down. "We are talking, Nqobizwe. You cannot shoot someone for being near me and then dismiss my feelings when I am hurting. You cannot have it both ways. Pick one."

He stands and looks at me.

"I was told by the guards that he was there," he says quietly. "That he was at your table." He pauses. "And I was already not okay from last night. From the empty bed. From knowing you were down that corridor because of something I did." Another pause. "And then his name came through and I just drove. I did not think. I just drove."

Silence.

"I will kill him, Refilwe." He says it plainly. "I love you so much and if he keeps pushing me I will kill him." He looks at me. "I am sorry for scaring you. I was just angry."

I look at him for a long moment.

"You grabbed me," I say.

"I know." His voice is low. "It will never happen again. I need you to believe that."

I look at him. Still reading him. Still deciding.

"I need you to be my partner," I say. "Not my bodyguard. My partner. Someone who talks to me before acting. Someone who trusts me enough to include me." I pause. "Can you do that?"

"I am trying," he says. "I am not perfect at it. But I am trying and I will keep trying."

I nod slowly.

"And Zodwa," I say.

"I was wrong," he says. "Completely. No version of that where I was right."

"Just say that then," I say. "That is all I needed. Not you telling me I am overreacting. Just, I was wrong."

"I was wrong," he says. Clearly. Nothing cushioning it.

That is all I needed.

I exhale.

"What is going to happen with Senzo?" I ask. "Are you going to be arrested?"

I am genuinely scared about that. More than I am letting on.

He chuckles softly and steps closer. "That will be handled. Do not worry about it." He looks at me steadily. "But know that he is a dead man walking."

I swallow.

He reaches out and pulls me by my waist, rough enough that I bump into his chest. His lips are right there close to mine.

"I love you," he says. "Can we stop fighting now."

I nod. "I agree. I love you."

He kisses me softly.

And then it is not soft anymore.

Next thing our clothes are flying away.

He gets on top of me and the roughness of it takes my breath away but I am not complaining. Not even slightly.

He goes in and out hard and deep. I am screaming his name and he is not stopping. I feel him reaching somewhere deep.

"Zwee…"

"I love you, Fifi. I f*cken love you." He says it through his teeth still going.

"You are so tight, Mama." His breathing is ragged.

He turns me and pulls me to the edge of the bed.

He takes me from behind and I lose my mind completely. I did not think it could get better and then it does.

"Yes… yes… oh baby…"

I do not know how many times I come. He groans and goes faster and faster until I am screaming his name.

"Nqobizwe ahhh…"

"F*ck, Mama… sh*t…ahhhh…"

He finishes and stays inside for a moment, both of us completely still, just breathing.

Then he gets up, goes to the bathroom and comes back with a towel. He wipes me.

He lies down and pulls me on top of his chest. Both of us breathing heavy. The room warm and wrecked around us.

"I am sorry, sthandwa sam," he says into my hair. "I love you so much. I did not mean to scare you today."

"I am sorry too," I say. "We are still learning each other. We should not be so hard on each other."

He kisses my forehead and holds me tighter.

I feel sleep coming before I even close my eyes properly, completely uninvited.

I almost laugh.

Did they really wait for me to finish before deciding to send a message. The audacity.

"Baby," I say, my voice already slow. "The ancestors are calling. I am going under."

"Now?" he says. "Really. Now?"

I do not answer because I am already gone.

Chapter 51

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Refilwe

Queen Nomusa is sitting by the river. She is smiling when I arrive, which is different from the usual urgency she carries when she calls me here.

"Hi," I say.

She stands and comes to me. She places both hands on my stomach gently and looks at me with something warm in her eyes.

"Siyabonga, sisi." (We are grateful.)

I look down at her hands then back at her face. "Thanks for what?"

She just smiles and looks at the river.

After a moment she turns back to me.

"You have to go to KZN," she says. "Thobekile's time is up. Tell them to slaughter a goat at night. The next morning she will be gone." She pauses. "Bury her at night. Not in a casket. Far from the Ngwenya graves. She behaved like a dog. She will be buried like one."

I swallow. That is harsh. But I have learned not to question what comes from this side.

"I have to be there?" I ask.

"Yes. You must be there."

She sighs softly and looks at the water for a moment before turning back to me.

"There is a man after your blood," she says. "He was warned. He chose not to listen. He is determined." She holds my gaze. "You are protected. But we need to move carefully now. You have to be introduced to your father's ancestors. Soon. We need them standing with us to make sure both you and Nqobizwe are fully covered."

I nod slowly.

"Nqobizwe will have to distract that man," she continues. "By killing his youngest son. After Thobekile is gone the son dies. While that man is dealing with his grief your ceremony goes ahead. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say. "But, the son?"

"His father made his choice," she says simply. "When you come against us we do not negotiate. We come fully." She looks at me. "The son dies. The father is distracted. Your ceremony is protected. That is how this works."

I nod again. I do not fully like it but I understand it.

"Is there anything else?" I ask.

She looks at me and that warm smile comes back. Her eyes drop briefly to my stomach again.

She does not say anything more about that.

She just smiles.

And the river moves quietly beside us.

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Nqobizwe

Refilwe is still sleeping. She went under after we make up and did not come back. I watched her for a while before getting up. I am glad we are okay. I am not proud of how today went, the grabbing, the shooting in public, dismissing her last night. I am genuinely trying to be better and I am getting there. Slowly. But I am getting there.

I pull on sweatpants and a vest and head downstairs for water.

I completely forgot about Dikeledi.

She is in the lounge with Sizwe. Both of them look up when I come down the stairs. Then they look at each other. Then back at me.

Something about their faces.

"When did you get here?" I ask Sizwe.

"A while ago," he says carefully.

DK clears her throat and looks at the ceiling.

I look between them. "What?"

"Nothing," DK says. Too quickly.

"Dikeledi."

She presses her lips together. "The walls in this house are very thin, that is all I will say."

Sizwe looks at the wall. Nodding slowly like he is studying the architecture.

"Very thin," he agrees.

I close my eyes briefly.

"We heard everything," DK says. She cannot hold it anymore. "EVERYTHING, Nqobizwe. I thought they were fighting and then…" She waves her hand. "The transition was very fast. Very dramatic."

"She was screaming your name," Sizwe says. Straight face. "Twice."

"Three times," DK corrects. "I counted."

"You counted," I say.

"I was traumatised. Counting helped." She picks up her drink. "I called Sizwe because I thought you were going to kill her. Instead…" She gestures upward. "Anyway. She is clearly fine. Very fine."

I grab my water from the kitchen and walk back to the stairs.

I look at them both.

They look back at me with completely straight faces for exactly two seconds.

Then DK bursts out laughing so hard she spills her drink.

I shake my head and go back upstairs.

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The shower is running when I get back to the bedroom. I strip and walk in.

Refilwe turns when she hears me. Her eyes are still slightly heavy from the episode but she is present. Back.

"You are awake," I say.

"Yeah," she says.

I reach past her and adjust the water temperature. "What did she say?"

She tells me everything. Thobekile. The goat. The burial instructions. Motaung's son. The ceremony with her father's ancestors.

I stand under the water and listen to all of it.

"The son," I say when she finishes.

"That is what she said," Refilwe says. "After Thobekile. Then the son. Then your father introduces me to the Monahengs while Motaung is dealing with what happened."

I nod slowly. I turn it over. It is brutal but it is calculated. Motaung distracted. Refilwe covered from both sides. The ceremony protected.

"You need to take leave from work," I say.

She looks at me. "How long?"

"However long it takes. We leave for KZN as soon as possible." I look at her. "We do this properly. Together."

She nods slowly. "Okay."

"Are you okay with all of it?" I ask. "What she said."

She thinks about it honestly. "I am not okay with all of it," she says. "But I understand it. There is a difference."

"There is," I agree.

She leans her head against my shoulder under the water.

"When do we leave?" she asks.

"Tomorrow," I say. "I will arrange everything tonight."

She nods.

We stand under the water in the quiet for a moment.

•••

Narrated

Senzo is admitted through emergency.

The bullet went clean through his lower leg. Painful. Bloody. Not life threatening. The nurse who wheels him in has seen worse on a Saturday afternoon and does not ask too many questions.

The doctor who comes to assess him is Mbali.

She walks in with her clipboard, eyes on the chart, professional and focused. She looks up when she reaches the bed.

They both stop.

Senzo stares at her. She looks at him for exactly one second then looks back at the chart.

"What happened?" she asks. Her voice is completely even.

"I was shot," he says.

"I can see that. How?"

"Someone shot me." He shifts on the bed and winces. "I need the police. I want to open a case."

"We will get to that," she says. "Let me assess the wound first."

She works efficiently, gloves on, checking the entry and exit point, requesting what she needs from the nurse beside her. Professional. Like he is just another patient.

But Senzo cannot help himself.

"You need to call the police," he says again. "The person who did this is Nqobizwe Ngwenya. The prince. He shot me in broad daylight in front of witnesses because he is jealous. Because he is insecure." He laughs bitterly through the pain. "He is scared I will take Refilwe back. That is all this is."

Mbali's hands do not stop moving.

But something in her face shifts.

Nqobizwe Ngwenya.

She knows that name. She was in KZN not long ago, at the royal house, working as a fill in for the royal doctor. She treated the prince's arm. She met Ayanda there. That same Ayanda who has been calling her every day since. Who brought her flowers. Who is sitting across from her at lunches and making her feel like herself again.

And Refilwe. Senzo's Refilwe. The girl he told her he never stopped loving. The reason he said things were complicated when they were together. That Refilwe is with Nqobizwe.

She puts the pieces together quickly and quietly and does not say a single word about any of it.

"I will have a report filed," she says. "Standard procedure for a gunshot wound."

"I want him arrested," Senzo says. "I want charges. Attempted murder…"

"The report will be filed," she says again. "That is all I can do from here."

She finishes dressing the wound and gives instructions to the nurse. She walks out and does not look back.

In the corridor she leans against the wall for a moment.

Then she takes out her phone and calls Ayanda.

He picks up on the second ring.

"Mbali." His voice is warm.

"Hi." She keeps her voice low. "I need to tell you something."

"Talk to me."

"I just treated a patient. Gunshot wound to the leg." She pauses. "It's… my ex, Senzo"

Silence on the line. Brief but she catches it.

"He is saying Nqobizwe Ngwenya shot him," she says. "And he says it is because of a woman called Refilwe." Another pause. "Ayanda, that is the girl he told me about. The one he said he never stopped loving. She is with Nqobizwe."

"I know," Ayanda says.

She blinks. "You know."

"I know all of it," he says. "Senzo, Refilwe, everything." His voice is steady and calm. "Mbali, I need you to listen to me. Do your job. File the report as required. Do not worry about anything beyond that."

"He is talking about pressing charges…"

"He will not get far with that," Ayanda says simply. "Trust me."

She is quiet for a moment. "You knew he was my ex," she says.

"After the resturant. I only knew him as Refilwe's crazy ex"

She absorbs that. "And you said nothing."

"It was not my place to say at the time," he says. "Are you okay?"

She looks down the corridor at Senzo's room door.

"I am fine," she says. "Just surprised."

"Understandably," he says. "Finish your shift. I will explain everything properly when I see you."

"Okay," she says.

"Mbali."

"Hmm."

"Thank you for calling me."

She almost smiles despite herself. "You are welcome."

She ends the call and straightens up and walks back to the next patient.

•••

Sbu arrives at the hospital an hour after Senzo is settled into the ward.

He pulls the curtain and looks at his friend's leg elevated and bandaged and shakes his head.

"Nqobizwe Ngwenya shot you," he says. Like he is still trying to make the sentence make sense.

"In front of everyone," Senzo says.

"In front of everyone," Sbu repeats. He sits down. "Senzo. I am telling you now as your friend. Drop all of it. Refilwe, the plan, Lerato and Phumi, everything. Drop it."

"No."

"That man shot you in the street and walked away," Sbu says. "Nothing happened to him. No police. No sirens. Nothing. Do you understand what that means? Do you understand the kind of people…"

"He shot me," Senzo says. "Which means I have him. Attempted murder. Assault with a deadly weapon." He looks at Sbu. "I press charges. He goes to court. Maybe he goes to jail." He pauses. "And while he is dealing with all of that, Refilwe is alone."

Sbu stares at him. "You cannot be serious."

"We do not need Lerato and Phumi anymore," Senzo says. "He made it easy for me. I do not need to dig for information or play games. I just have to walk into a police station."

"And then what?" Sbu says. "You think a man like that goes to jail? You think his lawyers do not eat people like us for breakfast?"

Senzo looks at the ceiling. A small smile on his face despite the pain in his leg.

"He will know me," he says quietly.

Sbu looks at his friend for a long moment.

He picks up his bag.

"I am not part of this," he says. "Whatever you are planning next, I am out."

He pulls the curtain back and walks out.

Senzo stays where he is. Leg elevated. Ceiling above him.

•••

Free State

Motaung's man comes in and sits down across from him.

"We found where she works," he says. "Pretoria. A software company. CoreBridge Technologies. Head of development."

Motaung looks at him. Says nothing for a moment.

"She has done well for herself," he says. Not with admiration. Just noting it the way you note something that changes the calculation.

"She has guards everywhere," the man continues. "Close ones. They follow her into the building. Into meetings. Everywhere."

"I know about the guards," Motaung says. He waves his hand. "That is not what worries me."

"So what is the plan?"

Motaung leans back. He thinks about Phiri. About what is sitting on him now that was not there before.

"I have to go to Pretoria," he says. "But not yet. I need to know exactly what I am walking into before I move." He looks at his man. "The prince. His movements. His schedule. Where he is exposed." He pauses. "And the girl. When she is alone. If she is ever alone."

"She is never alone," the man says.

Motaung nods slowly. He stands and walks to the window. The weight of his years shows in each step though he would never admit it.

"There is always a gap," he says quietly. "We find it."

He looks out at the dark street.

"Prepare everything," he says. "We move to Pretoria within the week."

His man leaves without another word.

Motaung stands at the window a moment longer. Then he picks up his jacket and his keys and heads home.

•••

The house is warm when he gets there. Lights on. The smell of food still in the air from dinner.

His wife Puseletso is in the sitting room watching television. She looks up when he comes in and reads his face the way she has been reading it for forty years.

"You ate?" she asks.

"I am fine," he says. He drops into his chair and reaches for the remote.

Then he hears footsteps and looks up.

Bohlokwa.

His last born. Standing in the doorway with that easy smile he has had since he was a child.

Motaung sits forward.

"Mora’ka," he says. (My son.) "When did you arrive?"

"An hour ago," Bohlokwa says, coming to embrace his father. "I tried calling but your phone was off."

Motaung holds his son for a moment longer than usual. Something about seeing him tonight, after everything sitting on his shoulders this week, lands differently.

"Why did you not tell us you were coming?" Puseletso says, already on her feet and heading to the kitchen. "Let me warm something up…"

"Ma I already ate…"

"Sit down," she says. She is already gone.

Bohlokwa laughs and sits across from his father.

"How are you, Ntate?" he asks.

"Old," Motaung says. "But still standing."

"You will outlive all of us," Bohlokwa says.

Motaung looks at his son. This boy knows nothing about what his father does. Has never known. In forty years of operating in the shadows Motaung has kept a wall between his work and this house. His wife does not ask questions he does not answer. His children grew up seeing only a businessman, a community figure, a father who provided everything and asked for little.

That is how he planned it and that is how it has stayed.

"So," Motaung says, settling back. "What brings you home on a Saturday night?"

Bohlokwa grins. He reaches into his jacket pocket and puts his phone on the table. On the screen is a photo. A young woman. Beautiful. Smiling at whoever is taking the picture.

"I proposed," he says. "She said yes."

Motaung stares at the phone. Then at his son.

"When?" he asks.

"This afternoon," Bohlokwa says. "I wanted to tell you in person. Both of you."

Puseletso comes back from the kitchen with a plate and stops when she sees both their faces.

"What happened?" she asks. "What did I miss?"

"Your son is getting married," Motaung says.

Puseletso puts the plate down on the table. She looks at Bohlokwa.

"Modimo." (God.) She puts both hands over her mouth. Then she opens her arms and he stands and she holds him the way only mothers hold their children when something good finally happens.

"Who is she?" she asks when she pulls back. "Tell me everything. Where is she from. What does she do. When do we meet her…”?

"Ma one question at a time…"

"I am calling your aunts," she says, already reaching for her phone. "They have to know tonight. Right now. Thabo will be so jealous his brother is getting married first…"

"Ma please do not call everyone tonight"

She is already dialling.

Bohlokwa looks at his father and shakes his head helplessly.

Motaung laughs. A real one. From somewhere deep that does not get used often enough.

He looks at his son, this boy he raised, this man sitting across from him who has no idea who his father really is and what his father has done and for just a moment the weight of the week lifts completely.

Just for a moment.

Puseletso is in the corridor talking loudly and happily to someone on the phone, already planning things, already excited.

Motaung reaches forward and picks up the phone with Bohlokwa's fiancée on the screen.

"She looks like a good woman," he says.

"She is," Bohlokwa says. "The best."

Motaung nods and puts the phone back down.

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Thabamoya

It is Saturday night and King Serithi is still awake when Refilwe calls.

He picks up immediately.

"Ngwanaka (My child)," he says. "Is everything okay?"

"I am okay, Ntate," she says. "I received a message today. From the ancestors. I wanted to call you straight away."

He sits forward. "Tell me."

She tells him everything. Thobekile first. The goat, the burial, the instructions. Then Motaung's son. Then the ceremony. She says it clearly and completely.

Serithi is quiet when she finishes.

"You leave for KZN when?" he asks.

"Tomorrow," she says. "Nqobizwe is arranging everything tonight."

"Good." He pauses. "When you come back from KZN everything will be ready on my side. I will speak to our people first thing tomorrow morning. The ceremony will be fully prepared and waiting for you the moment you arrive." Another pause. "I also have to visit the Molefe family tomorrow. They have to give you to me traditionally. I owe them three cows." He pauses again. "You will not have to worry about any of it. Just come."

"Okay," she says softly.

"Refilwe."

"Ntate?"

"You called me straight away," he says. "Without being asked. Ke a leboha (Thank you)" A pause. "That means something to me."

She is quiet for a moment.

"You are my father, hanyane, hanyane (Step by step). I will get used to it" she says simply.

He does not respond immediately. She can hear him on the other end collecting himself quietly.

"Travel safely tomorrow," he says finally. His voice is slightly rough at the edges. "Call me when you land."

"I will," she says.

"Good night, my princess."

"Good night, Ntate."

He ends the call.

He sits with the phone in his hand for a moment and smiles.

His princess is warming up to him. And faster than he expected. He thought it would take longer. He thought there would be more walls, more distance, more of the guardedness he saw in her eyes the first time they met.

But she called him tonight without being asked. She said *you are my father* like it was already settled somewhere inside her.

He puts the phone down and looks at it for one more second.

Chapter 52

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