

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

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Dedication

For Munah, Jiddah (Jidderh), and Nana Hauwa. Thank you for being here with me every step of the way. For Lea, for getting up and deciding it was time for a new story.

For women like Ayra who just wanted to be loved and to get back the same amount of love they had to give. You're worth everything good. You're worth the world's love too.

Epigraph

“Nobody wants, my darling. Nobody wants my pain.
Or to be moved by tears, or for me to surrender to them.
Nobody wants, my darling. Nobody wants my pain.
On my pillow, I have no peace. I have bad dreams.
Until the final summer, until the world ends,
My fate is cursed.
This soul has no home, this soul has no tone.
Candles of a black dawn are burning.
My nightmares...”

- Teya Dora, *Džanum*.

Preface: The Federal Republic of Atlantica

Dearest Reader,

It gives me great joy to tell you about the Federal Republic of Atlantica where this tale is set. Don't worry, I won't bore you with too much history. I'll provide the important details and leave you to imagine the rest.

As at the time the countries in Africa began to gain independence from their colonial masters, it was discovered that seven islands sat close to each other on the Gulf of Guinea, a part of the North Atlantic Ocean. If that is too much for you, imagine six islands sitting around a smaller island some miles away from the Nigerian coast of Lagos.

At that time, the islands didn't matter. They were inhabited, unclaimed and left alone. That did not mean some African leaders (especially those in West Africa) didn't want the islands for themselves. After all, every country wants to get bigger; particularly when they no longer had to be at the beck and call of the colonial masters.

One year of Nigeria's independence turned into two and then into three. Suddenly, those islands weren't unclaimed anymore. They were no longer inhabited. No one, not even me, knows who the first people there were but somehow tens turned to hundreds and then the population hit its first thousand. Seeing how much potential these islands had, African leaders and the former colonial masters got ready to fight dirty.

Dear reader, please do not think this was an easy battle for the settlers on these islands were also ready to shed blood and loose lives if need be. They were adamant on not being part of any country; they wanted to be a country on their own. It was a long battle and for a little settlement, those on the island fought hard. Not once did they back down, even when it felt like all hope was going to be lost.

Then, in the 1980s, the battle was won and the islands were grouped as one country; a sovereign state. They named it the Federal Republic of Atlantica, in honour of the ocean they sat on and then they made one of the islands the country's capital. They named the capital Aomi.

You may think it was all sunshine and rainbows from then on. No, gentle reader, it wasn't. You see, the world leaders thought Atlantica wouldn't be able to stand on their own two feet and the African leaders were more than ready to step in and seize whatever they could when the opportunity presented itself. However, to their greatest surprise, the new country developed slowly but surely and the first official leaders made a vow to not allow Atlantica be like the other African countries where corruption had begun to seep deep into the soils, ruining them little by little.

The African countries felt insecure and the western countries felt threatened. After all, a country that's working well wouldn't be easy to exploit. So they used every trick in their book but every attempt they made to thwart Atlantica got thrown back in their faces, hurting them instead and doing nothing except promoting this new country.

Bridges were constructed to link the seven islands together and one after the other, these islands got their names and identities that complimented the overall image the leaders wanted. Atlantica attracted a lot of investors who were ready to work and gain without any ulterior motives. The judiciary system was established and the legal consequences for crimes were grave. The economy, slowly but surely, stabilised and there were enough checks and balances to ensure no one (especially those in power) tried to go astray. Infrastructure popped up one after the other, all in good quality and then there were the security bases that put many African countries to shame.

Since then, Atlantica has thrived and I can tell you it is the only African country that's doing well today. Six out of seven islands are states (including the capital, Aomi) while the smallest island sits in the very middle, housing the country's international airport which is a wonder in itself.

Atlantica houses a variety of cultures and has people from every race. English is the official language and the second most popular language is French. Spanish, Arabic, and Hausa are popular in certain areas too. The country's currency is the Litrin and \$1 is equals to 1.5 Litrins (£). The currency has five notes: £1, £5, £10, £50, and £100. If you visit Atlantica, you should know that you are allowed to transact in Dollars too.

In terms of cuisines, the country takes pride in its seafood centred dishes as well as those made from grains and fruits. The economy? Dear reader, it's beautifully stable. The public and private sectors work seamlessly well and the consumer price index is as favourable as it can get. There are high income levels too. The social class is divided into three; the elite, the middle class, and the lower class which barely exists. The minimum wage of every Atlantican per month is £1,575. If you decide to convert that to Dollars, an Atlantican earns \$1,050 per month. The country exports natural minerals, foodstuff, and armoury. And let me tell you, dear reader, do not joke about Atlantica's armoury for they are better than many you're going to see.

Is there anything else I am yet to say? Ah, yes...I almost forgot. Atlantica is not a place for corrupt individuals to try to seek refuge because culprits who go too far are not forgiven so believe me when I tell you that a lot of politicians do not like to visit for they know there are so many things they

get to go free with in their country that they cannot dare try when on Atlantica's soil. They would regret it.

In summary, dear reader, Atlantica is a country that actually works. It has six islands that sit around a smaller one which houses the country's airport. The capital of the country is Aomi and the presidential house is located in the very middle (Monwict). The other islands are named Okina Bay (home to mini replicated towns from countries all around the world), Nerina (the industrial state which houses the security bases), Nohea (the state of arts and crafts, often referred to as the creative heart of Atlantica), Costa Casa (home to the most beautiful beaches and resorts), Etsumi (the historical home of the country) and finally, Raven Isle which houses the country's airport.

Trust me, dear reader, you will get familiar with these names in due time. For now, I'll leave you with a simple map of the country so you can visualise better.



Now, dear reader, please turn your page over...I have a story to tell you, and I have very little time.

Part 1

Him and I



“Come on, come on. Don’t leave me like this.

I thought I had you figured out.

Something’s gone terribly wrong. You’re all I wanted.

Come on, come on. Don’t leave me like this.

I thought I had you figured out.

Can’t breathe whenever you’re gone. I can’t go back.

I’m haunted.”

- Taylor Swift, *Haunted*.

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Aomi, Atlantica

On Friday July 13, 2013, thirteen year old Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz officially stopped being a junior secondary school student. She became an official member of the senior secondary school class one at Harmony High and like she'd always wanted, she was to be in the arts division.

On that same Friday July 13, Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz fell in love. She didn't plan to fall in love that day but fate doesn't really wait for us to plan, does it?

When the school bus dropped her off at the front gate of the compound her family owned, Ayra happily waved bye at her classmates and opened the passenger gate to let herself in. There were a lot of cars, telling her that there were official visitors for her father.

Already used to such scenarios, she went in through the kitchen door at the back and as quietly as she could, she went upstairs. Her mother was out and on such occasions, her father didn't know she (Ayra) was back until the visitors left.

Knowing she had some time on her hands, Ayra changed out of her school uniform, dumped it in the laundry basket, and then paced the length of her room until she decided to go down to the second living room to watch a movie until her father finished. The guests never came towards the other living room so she did not have to bother about anything.

Her footsteps were light as she descended the stairs and she heard her father's clear laugh as she walked past the closed doors of the main living room. There were other laughs but she didn't recognise them and she wasn't sure she wanted to do so. Only her father's laughter mattered. It was the only one that made her feel warm inside.

She walked past the closed kitchen and past the home office where her father could be found if he wasn't in any of the living rooms or in the room he shared with her mother. The second living room sat on the other side of the house and the nearer she got, the excited she became. There was going to be no school until September and such breaks meant she got to be spoiled rotten. Nothing could beat that and she was ready to start her break with a very good show.

Nothing prepared her for the sight she met in the space she'd assumed would be empty. Momentarily panicking, Ayra rushed behind the nearest curtain and let a near minute pass before she peeked out of her hiding spot; as though she was a thief scared of being caught.

There was a male in the cosy space and he sat on one of the sofas. Ayra had never seen him before. The book he held in his hand had his full attention and the particular sofa he occupied sat in front of the opened windows. There was something about the way the light shrouded him like an angelic halo that did something to Ayra's little heart. She'd never seen someone who paid so much attention to a book, to the extent he had no idea he was being watched by the curious eyes of a new teenager as she'd turned thirteen at the start of that very month.

She acknowledged then that he was a beautiful man. She had no idea where the thought had come from but she knew it was the truth. The man seated in the living room was beautiful and obviously older than she was. Ayra tried to guess his age, wondering if she would be correct if she said he was about twenty. He appeared tall even while sitting and there was grace in his movements as he flipped the page over.

He had light brown skin; almost the shade of smooth honey. His hair was full of curls that were neatly cut low. From where she stood, Ayra couldn't make out the colour of his eyes but she was certain they'd be beautiful too. He had full dark brows, a straight nose that fit his face, lovely shaped lips, and a well-kept stubble beard that framed his jaw.

He wore a cream coloured turtleneck which he'd paired with dark blue trousers. His feet were covered with black socks and he had one leg elegantly crossed over the other. Ayra wondered if she'd be able to pick out what shoe belonged to him on the shoe rack if she could manage to sneak out to the foyer.

He flipped the page again and her attention moved to his hands. She knew if she placed her hands against his, his would definitely be bigger. He had nice hands and she nearly giggled at how absurd it was that she found hands beautiful. She'd never really had such thoughts before.

The plan to watch a show long forgotten, Ayra stood behind that curtain and repeatedly took him all in until she could close her eyes and describe him in detail. To her, he was one of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen. All that was missing was for her to know his name and God, she was curious. She tried guessing but no name she thought of seemed to fit and it frustrated her a little.

Eventually, he finished his book and she watched as he shut it. He put it aside and picked up a watch that had been beside him all along. He put it on, turning his head to look at the family portrait on the wall. For the first time, Ayra was glad her smile in that particular portrait was beautiful with

both her dimples popping out on her cheeks. For some reason she couldn't explain, she wanted him to think she was a beautiful person too.

Her heart leapt to her throat at the sound of approaching footsteps and laughter. She let the curtain completely cover her, listening as the footsteps got even closer. Her father began to speak and she had no doubt he and the men with him had come into that particular room.

The conversations that followed were hearty and when Ayra's curiosity got better of her, she peeped through the small crack she created between the curtains. The male she'd been admiring was on his feet now and the smile on his face as he spoke with her father sent butterflies to her stomach. She was too young to understand what it meant but that didn't mean she didn't love how it felt.

Through the conversations shared, she learned his name was Ibrahim and she loved it for him. She learned his father's name too and that he (his father) was the Atlantican ambassador to South Africa, Salim Fahad. Her name came up briefly in the conversation and when a joke was made about her marrying Ibrahim someday, every single male in the room laughed. Ayra didn't laugh. In that moment, all she could imagine was getting married and having a man like Ibrahim love her in ways similar to how her parents loved each other.

She stayed there until they left and then she ran up to her room to make an entry in her journal, describing Ibrahim in detail. It was the first time she was overly excited to hear about her father's meeting and he told her about Ibrahim. Ayra conveniently paid no attention to the fact that Ibrahim was a decade older than she was and chose to pay attention to everything else, like how he was on his way to becoming one of Atlantica's tech prodigies alongside his friends from his university days.

After Jumm'ah, Ayra stood and offered a two raka'ah nawafil prayer. When she finished, she put her hands together and did what she was taught to do each time she wanted something. She prayed to Allah with all of her heart, telling him that when she was older, she wanted nothing more than to be Ibrahim Fahad's wife.



On Saturday July 4, 2020, three things happened to Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz.

One, she turned twenty and while her best friend, Ibtihaj Oluwatosin Adeola, cried about letting go of their teenage years, Ayra was more than happy to be a "proper adult".

Two, both of them (Ayra and Ibtihaj) officially finished their bachelor's degree, submitting their final dissertation copies at exactly mid-day alongside many other final year students who were more than happy to be done with everything university had to offer although many of them were returning for their master's in a few months.

Third, and the most important, a marriage proposal arrived at the Abdulaziz home for none other than Ayra from the one man she'd been hopelessly in love with all along; a man so many people who were close to her told her to get over because they (Ayra and Ibrahim) were worlds apart with how big he'd become.

When the news got to Ayra, she burst into tears and it was very easy to rush home, to the very living room where it had all began. With tears in her eyes and a heart that threatened to burst in joy, Ayra did the one thing she'd dreamed of so many times.

She said yes to the proposal his family brought on his behalf. After all, she never stopped praying since she was thirteen to be Ibrahim Fahad's wife.

Aomi, Atlantica.

August, 2020.

In the middle of the hundreds who wore black robes, twenty year old Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz stood with a smile on her face while excitement rolled off her in huge waves; excitement that made it hard for her to stand still in her white heels.

“U of A’s Class of 2020, are we ready?!”

The response was a thunderous, unified “yes”. The sports arena of the University of Atlantica was full and each person was on their feet, thousands of cameras held up to capture the moment they’d all been waiting for, some more than others.

“Alright!” The event’s officiator, the ever friendly Dean of Students, stepped back with a smile on her face. “Let’s begin!”

Like the hundreds around her, Ayra reached up to lightly hold the cap on her head. On her left side, her best friend – Ibtiḥaj Oluwatosin Adeola – did the same. Both their smiles were wide and while Ayra had deep dimples on each cheek, Ibtiḥaj didn’t.

“Ladies and gentlemen, 10! 9! 8!”

Most people in the arena – graduating students and family members alike alongside other students enrolled in the university – counted down with the Dean. Smiles got wider, excitement levels rose, some people began clapping with each digit that was called.

“7! 6! 5! 4! 3! 2!”

It was as though the area held its breath as the countdown reached its end. “1! Congratulations!”

The black graduation caps hit the air at the same time and every invited guest in the arena applauded heartily while the sea of balloons held above the ground were released and sparklers went off. Those who’d just officially become graduates hugged each other and squeezed into the reels and shots that captured the beautiful moment.

In the middle of it all, Ayra and Ibtiḥaj smiled widely at the phone held up by one of those who had become their “former course mate”. Once the selfie was captured, Ayra and Ibtiḥaj bent to pick up their fallen caps. When they straightened, they smiled at each other and proceeded to hug themselves with excited screams.

“We did it!” Ibtiḥaj said, pulling back. “Their papa!”

Unable to help herself, Ayra laughed. “God, Ibty, you’re never going to change.”

“*Fi mi silẹ, abeg.*” She linked her arm with Ayra’s. “The day I change is the day I bend.”

Among the friend groups the university walls had seen over the years, Ayra and Ibtiḥaj’s was one of the very best. They were different in more ways than one but they complimented each other well and both ladies were beautiful inside and out.

With a mischievous smile, Ibtiḥaj leaned in and wiggled her brows. “Is our fiancé here?”

Ayra acted as though her heart didn’t do a little jump. Her smile turned bashful while little colour stained both cheeks that had her dimples on full display. “Weren’t you the same person who told me to let go of my feelings back then because men like Ibrahim Fahad didn’t usually end up with women like us?”

Ibtiḥaj nodded without any hesitation. “I did, because I wanted you to face reality. I didn’t want you to get hurt because I didn’t think both of you were actually going to get together.” Her smile widened. “Thankfully, everything’s paying off now. Is he here though?”

Ayra sighed. “I really don’t know. We both saw the news that he was in Nohea earlier this morning for the opening of the branch there so I doubt he’d be back by now.” She then smiled and it was so beautiful. “Besides, I will certainly see him later. We do have the engagement party after all and no groom-to-be in his right mind is going to miss his engagement party, especially when his fiancé planned it from scratch.”

Ibtiḥaj eyed her. “This fiancé thing is getting into your head too much o.”

Ayra laughed again. “I can’t help it, Ibty. I’ve loved this man for as long as I can remember so allow me revel in the fact that my dreams are coming true. I really can’t wait for the world to know we’re engaged.”

“Wait a little more, my dear. We’re almost there.”

“We are.” And Ayra was so excited. “Let’s go find our families”

“Let’s go. I’m hungry abeg. I hope Mummy came with pounded yam and *egusi*. It’s even better if it is *amala* and *enedu*.”

“Ibty!”

“Free me o! I fit deck you!” They began to make their way through the crowd. “Has he finally called you or sent a message?”

Ayra shook her head. “Nope. You and I know he’s a busy man, Ibty. He’ll make up for the lack of contact since I accepted his proposal, I’m sure of it.”

Ibtihaj, like the lovely best friend she was, let it go although there were things she wanted to say. The Lagos girl in her found it weird that a fiancé hadn’t spoken to his future wife since their engagement but then again, Ibrahim Fahad and his squad had founded a company from scratch and they were ranking highly on world tech charts which meant they were always busy.

Ibtihaj sighed as quietly as she could and pushed away her sceptic side. Besides, Ayra knew Ibrahim better. She’d been in love with him for seven years after all; something that never failed to amaze Ibtihaj each time they spoke about it.

It was one thing that was different about them. Ayra was the hopeless romantic and while Ibtihaj loved romance, she believed there were signs that pointed towards the success or failure of a relationship no matter how new it was or how long it’d been going on for. She was the realist. Ayra wasn’t.

Keeping their hands in each other’s, they squeezed their way through the jubilating crowd. They were stopped more than once for photos and videos and there were so many congratulations. Ayra wondered just how many more congratulations she would have personally received if her mates knew she was engaged and knew just who her fiancé was.

“Ayra! Ibty! Over here!”

It was way too easy for the best friends to sight their family members and rush over. Muhsin Abdulaziz easily caught his daughter as she threw herself at him and with a deep laugh, he twirled her around the way he’d always done since she was born.

“Oh my Ayra.” He put her down on her feet and pulled back to look at her with so much love and adoration. “I’m so proud of you.”

Ayra mimicked a hair flip. “You have to be. It’s not easy to get a distinction, you know.”

He laughed and so did she. She then turned to her mother and her expression softened. Salama Abdulfatah-Abdulaziz had tears in her eyes but she was smiling. Like always, she looked elegantly beautiful in a wine

coloured abaya and its accompanying veil. She opened her arms and it was natural for Ayra to step into her mother's embrace. It never stopped feeling safe; never stopped feeling like home.

"*Mabruk*, Leilani." Salama kissed her daughter's veiled head. "I am so, so proud of you."

Ayra's heart could burst. "Thank you, Ummi."

"You're always welcome."

A throat was cleared. "*Shey* we will not hug you *ni*? Salama, allow me hug my other daughter *jor*."

Laughing, mother and daughter pulled apart. Ayra turned to Ibtiḥaj's mother. Falilat Akinoluwa-Adeola looked regal in her *iro* and *buba* sewn with blue lace she'd definitely taken time to pick out. Her *gele*, as it usually was when she was dressed in style, was tied to perfection and Ayra caught the familiar whiff of Falilat's signature perfume when she stepped into the older woman's embrace.

"Congratulations, *omo mi* (*my baby*)."

Falilat said, hugging Ayra tightly while Salama and Muhsin congratulated Ibtiḥaj. "The sky is your starting point. You and Ibtiḥaj will achieve greater heights and success, and every plan of evil in your lives shall backfire."

Ayra, who loved it when Falilat prayed, smiled against the woman's chest. "Ameen, Ameen."

"You two will know happiness and joy and we will gather like this to celebrate more wins and breakthroughs for the both of you. Your lives shall be happy and filled with joy."

"Ameen."

Falilat pulled back, smiling from ear to ear. "Ah, congratulations. All the bachelor *wahala* has finally ended. We will now hear word from the two of you."

Ayra laughed. "True." She turned to Ibtiḥaj's father, Al-Amin, and smiled when he quietly offered his congratulations. "Thank you so much."

Falilat spoke before her husband could offer a reply. "Ah, there is no need to thank us. We are family now." She looked around, searching for a particular male. "Where is that photographer *sef*? They should not annoy me o."

She turned back to Ayra. "Let us take pictures and head out to the gardens. Khadija and Halima are there, setting up a space for us. We came with

enough food and drinks. I even made pounded yam and special *egusi* for you and Ibty. It's not every day two daughters graduate with distinctions."

Ayra got excited. "God, Aunt Falilat, you're the best!"

Falilat blushed comically. "It's nothing too big...*Wó*, there is that photographer now?!"

The photographer was finally sighted and he rushed over while Falilat did her best to not curse him in her native language, Yoruba. Ever since they'd moved from Lagos to Aomi five years back, she'd been making conscious efforts to not be a "*werey*" (her exact words). On some days it was hard with how people like the photographer in front of them frustrated her but she pulled through.

They all took their places and each person smiled widely for the photos that were taken. Muhsin and Al-Amin decided to go with the photographer to get the printed pictures while Falilat and Salama led their daughters outside to the gardens by the university's main parking lot; an expanse of greenery that now had set up tents where celebrating families sat to share goodies with every interested person.

Ibtihaj's sisters, Halima and Khadijah, occupied a spot underneath one of the numerous tents. They'd spread out the mats both families came with and had arranged the coolers of drinks and the warmers of foods, take-away packs and spoons, disposable cups, plates, and serviettes. There were two double-tiered cakes too; one for Ayra and the other for Ibtihaj. Souvenirs – hardcover notepads, pens, and customised mugs – sat in two cartons.

Like their parents, Khadijah and Halima had a lot of congratulations to give Ayra and Ibtihaj and the celebrants were more than happy to ditch their graduation caps and gowns, revealing the beauties they'd worn underneath. While four of them took pictures, Salama and Falilat began attending to students who came over to offer their congratulations. Like each student hoped, they didn't leave the tent empty handed and their smiles stretched from ear to ear.

"Oya o!" Falilat clapped her hands together. "Ayra and Ibty, come and snap *pishur* so that the fashion designer can post two of you on her Instagram. Two of you are so fine!"

Salama nodded, her smile ever so warm. "They are. The dresses get prettier each time you look."

Falilat adjusted her *iro*. "My dear, after all the money we spent, they have to look fine...Halima, *oya!* Snap them." She bent to pick her phone. "Let me even call Al-Amin *sef*. Let him come back with the photographer. Let them

take pictures of Ayra and Ibtihaj so that we can make those little frames and –” She grinned widely when two students walked over. Discarding her phone, she went into host mode and happily pulled them into the tent. “Welcome, my dears!”

Ayra and Ibtihaj, on the other hand, shook their heads fondly at their mothers and proceeded to take the said pictures. They easily found their way to one of the beautiful hedges which had flowers in full bloom. Like they’d done since the first time they met in freshman year, Ayra and Ibtihaj put their arms around each other’s waists and smiled widely at the camera Halima held up.

“This is *déjà vu*, I swear.” Ibtihaj said. “We’re at the exact spot we first met.”

Ayra nodded, a nice smile on her face. “We never looked back after striking this same pose back then.”

“As if you could say no to being friends with someone like me. I’m a spec, my dear.”

Ayra snorted. “Get out.”

Unable to help it, they both burst out laughing. Their dresses – like their mothers said – were beautiful, sewn to perfection by Nigerian based fashion designer, Binta Badmus, who ran the *Bintabadmuslady* Fashion Line. Ayra and Ibtihaj had stumbled upon the fashion line’s IG page by accident and all it took was one glance at the first post on the page for them to know the gowns they wanted. While both dresses cost a lot, the end results were perfect; making them worth every single cent.

Ibtihaj was in an Ankara two-piece which combined pink, pale blue and touches of cream; a blouse – with a surplice neckline and long sleeves with feathers on the flare cuffs – which she tucked into the maxi skirt that flowed to her feet, revealing the pointy toes of the black heels she wore. The complimentary raw silk scarf was elegantly tied around her head by Falilat herself. Like every other outfit Ibtihaj owned, she wore the dress well.

Ayra, on the other hand, was in an A-line dress that combined cream cord lace and Ankara with bold floral prints in yellow, blue (in different shades) and specs of gold. The cord lace was used in sewing the dress’s turtleneck, shoulder cover, sleeves, and the covering from her knees while the Ankara covered every each inch of skin from above her cleavage to right above both knees. Like her best friend, she also had an elegant headpiece which

was tied with cream coloured raw silk and on her feet were white sling-back heels.

Both of them had simple jewellery and flawless make-up that went well with both outfits. They laughed between shots and teased each other the way they'd always done since freshman year. Each person who walked past had to take a moment to admire the scene and no one could honestly blame them. It was a beautiful scene with two lovely ladies.

Ayra, at twenty, stood at five feet and four inches with almond brown skin that was majorly spotless thanks to all her mother's skin routines, hazel doe-like eyes that were an open book to her emotions, a lovely button nose, lips that formed a beautiful heart each time she wasn't smiling, and cheeks blessed with dimples; deep ones that popped out even with her tiniest smiles. Then underneath each veil and cap she wore to school or out of the house were voluminous curls that a lot of saloonists didn't like because of how full it was and how long it took to do even something as simple as cornrows. She was on the thinner side but with proportions that fit her so well.

Ayra didn't have the beauty that demanded attention once she entered a room. She had the soft beauty; the one that made you sit comfortably so you could take your time to admire while feeling safe and all mushy inside.

Ibtihaj, on the other hand, was the taller one, standing at five feet and seven inches at age twenty. Her skin was a cool espresso tone, three shades darker than Ayra's. She had russet brown eyes, a slightly upturned nose, and plump lips that had a natural darker lining. Unlike Ayra, she had more body, with curves in all the right places; each curve gotten from Falilat herself.

Ibtihaj was a dark beauty and God, she knew it. Having a mother like Falilat meant that Ibtihaj's closet had only the best outfits and everyone knew she wore each outfit well; as though the entire world was the runway and she was the main star. The only thing she claimed to lack, especially when compared to Ayra, was hair. Her hair was a nest of tight coils and she never left it loosened. It took too much work in that state.

Ibtihaj glared at her sister. "Halima, is it not okay? *O re mi o (I am tired o).*"

Halima laughed, lowering the camera. "*Ma binu (Sorry).* Oya, let's go and eat. You two have done a lot today."

By the time they reached the tents, both fathers were back and another round of congratulations ensued until Falilat and Salama forced plates of food into their hands. It made them all laugh. More students came over to say hi and both Ayra and Ibtihaj had to take pauses between bites to smile

for pictures and thank them for coming. When the plates had been cleared and put away, Muhsin faced his daughter. “Salim and Fareeda called earlier.”

The mention of her future father and mother in-law had Ayra’s heart racing. Smiling, she moved closer to him. “What did they say?”

“They wanted to congratulate you but I was too far away so they said they’d congratulate you properly tonight. You and Ibtihaj.” He smiled at Ibtihaj who looked his way, clearly surprised. He refocused on Ayra who was smiling a little wider. “They sent flowers to the estate and they told me to tell you they’re apologising on Ibrahim’s behalf. He wanted to make it but there was a delay at Nohea so he’s just returning to Aomi. He would have called but Salim said Ibrahim’s wanted nothing more than for his first conversation with you to be face-to-face and not through a device.”

It should have been illegal for Ayra to have so many flutters in her belly. “I’ll see him tonight In Shaa Allah. It’s not so far anymore.”

Muhsin nodded, grateful – like every day since the proposal came – that she didn’t end up hurt in the end. “In Shaa Allah.” He then decided to be teasing. “We should just get ready to not hear the end of it.”

Ibtihaj, who was glad Ibrahim had a valid reason for not talking with Ayra in the month they’d be engaged, snorted. “Let me better go and buy earpiece.”

Ayra’s cheeks burned and she tried to hide her bashful smile as every other person laughed. “I hate all of you.”

Salama unrolled her sleeves. “We love you too.”

Falilat re-tied her loosening *gele*. “He better come with gifts o. It’s not easy to be engaged to a man like Ibrahim Fahad.” She let her hands drop. “In fact, we must get you a husband soon, Ibt. Come and be leaving my house.”

Al-Amin pulled his daughter closer, chuckling at her expression. “Fali, leave my Ibt. alone.”

Every other person was laughing. Ibtihaj glared at her mother. “It’s not your fault sha. It’s not your fault at all.”

They all laughed again. When more students came over, they switched into host mode and attended to each person. As Ayra helped herself with a slice of cake, she tried to imagine how her first conversation with Ibrahim would go. God knew she couldn’t wait.

02

Plum Boulevard was the biggest residential district in Aomi and it housed a lot of beautiful houses and estates. Haven Estate was one of such beauties and amongst its residents were the Adeolas and Abdulazizs; the Adeolas owning House 47 while the Abdulazizs owned House 72, one of the last units in the gated community.

Each house in the estate was a fully detached duplex with four rooms, five baths, two living rooms, and a home study (library, or even a recreational space if the family so wanted) in individual compounds with fanciful wheeled gates. Every compound had a lovely, wide yard and while most people opted for gazebos, swings and pools, the Abdulazizs were one of those who left the space well-kept and green.

On a usual day, the backyard was a green plain with two short trees, tall yard lights and a stoned pathway in the middle that began from the backdoor of the kitchen and ended at the back fence. However this was not a normal day and the yard had been transformed to fit the status of an engagement party's venue; a party planned by Ayra herself once the Fahads had it suggested.

Round tables that comfortably took six gold panelled Chiavari chairs now sat on both sides of the yard's stoned pathway. A long table sat in a corner, strictly for the buffet dishes to be delivered by the catering company. Each table – meant for guests – was covered with off-white linen that had no wrinkle in sight. In the centre of every table were two floral arrangements that sat on both sides of tall, golden candle holders which held unlit candles. Earth brown placemats sat in front of each chair and on every placemat were symmetrically arranged dinnerware and creatively folded napkins.

There was a little dais stage with a floral arch. According to what Ayra had explained to the planning team that worked for her mother, the stage was for speeches and photos so the arch had to look pretty. The team knew better than to not come through with what she'd asked for. She was their boss's daughter after all and for as long as they'd known her; Ayra was the sweetest soul who deserved everything good.

Overseeing the execution of the event plans was a lady named Iris who'd trained the longest under Salama. She walked around with a clipboard in hand, ensuring everything was in perfect place. Evidently satisfied, she lowered the clipboard and smiled once she'd let out a relieved breath. The event would go well, she was sure of it.

Fishing out her phone from the deep pocket of her dress, she put a call across to the head of the catering team who assured her they were already in the estate; they were just a few houses away. Glad, Iris hung up and she turned around when the backdoor of the house went open.

Salama stepped out, removing her veil to reveal the black cup she wore underneath. She looked around, her steps slowing until she stopped in a spot. “Whoa...”

Iris had never been prouder of her work. She walked over. “Good?”

Salama nodded, her smile small and warm. “Perfect.” She faced Iris. “You keep getting better and better.”

“I learned from the best after all.”

Salama laughed, nodding. “You did, and I’m very proud of you.” She looked around again, her gaze lingering on the floral arch. “That has to be the highlight.”

Iris had to agree. “It is. We made sure to get Leilanis, for good representation.”

Salama walked towards the arch, easily spotting her favourite flower. “They never stop being beautiful.”

“Just like the lady you named after them.”

Salama laughed again. “You’re flattering me and my daughter a lot this evening, Iris.”

Iris grinned. “I am. I’m just really happy. Ayra’s grown up really well and I know you’re proud of her. I know you’re happy too. She is engaged to the best family after all. The Fahads have a very good reputation and there are a million people who can vouch for them.”

Salama nodded. “You’re right. They are a good family and we’ve known them for a long time which makes me content because I know Ayra’s going to be perfectly taken care of. I think I’m more relieved than happy. I have never seen someone love a man so much the way Ayra loves Ibrahim. A lot of times, I prayed for her to not end up being hurt because a union between them seemed so unlikely.”

She sighed and then she smiled, a dimple appearing on her left cheek. “It worked out though so I’m relieved. And before you ask, yes I am happy. I’ll always be happy that she’s happy. Muhsin is happy too. Ayra deserves the world and I’m so glad things are falling into place for her.”

Iris was ready to melt. “You’re always going to be the best mother.”

Salama rolled her eyes while her cheeks darkened. “Iris, I’ll soon throw you out of my house.” She walked away from the arch and got into business mode. “The catering team?”

Iris followed her. “A few houses away.”

“The sound system?”

“Camouflaged as requested. Microphones have been checked and the playlist Ayra curated is ready to be played once the sun sets.”

“And the candles?”

“Ready to be lit. Everything’s in perfect place. The guest bathroom, as requested, has been stocked up and cleaned. The whole house is spotless too.”

Salama nodded. “Perfect. Now, all that’s remaining is for the star of the show to –”

Ayra walked into the yard. “Here I am!” She stopped in her tracks and her eyes widened as she looked around. She gasped a moment later. “Oh my God...”

If perfection had a visualisation to Ayra, it was the sight in front of her. It was no secret Salama could always be counted on to bring ideas to life but this had to be one of Salama’s best and Ayra couldn’t believe the sight in front of her was the same idea she’d drafted out while her mother brushed her hair that fateful evening when the talk of the party had come up.

She took small steps towards Salama and Iris, her mouth refusing to shut as she took in every single thing over and over again. Salama smiled fondly, a hand on her waist. “Good?”

Ayra nodded, still in a daze. “Perfect.” Her entire being lit up when she took in the flower arch. “You got Leilani?”

Iris chuckled. “We had to represent.”

Ayra turned to her. “Thank you so much, Iris.” She turned to Salama. “Thank you too, Ummi.”

They told her she was welcome and when Ayra asked if they thought Ibrahim would like the set-up, Salama rolled her eyes and took her daughter’s hand. “Ayra, you’re the person behind this and if you love it, then everyone else is going to love it. If Ibrahim doesn’t love it, I’ll kill him.”

Ayra laughed. “Ummi, you and I know you’ll do no such thing.”

“You’ll be surprised. We should head in, pray and get a little rest before Maghrib...Oh, there’s Josh.”

The head of the catering team smiled at them and waved before he proceeded to lead his team in, covered buffet trays carried with extra care. Iris went over to the buffet table while Salama turned back to her daughter.

“Let’s go inside, Leilani. Let’s leave them to finish up.” She led them forward, towards the door she’d come out through. “I’m just glad you’re not a fireball of energy yet.”

“Oh, that’s going to happen soon.”

“I have no doubt about it...I’m proud of you, Ayra. I’m happy for you too.”

“Even though I’ve not shut up about being Ibrahim’s wife since I accepted the proposal?”

Salama chuckled, nodding. “Even then. You’re getting your happy ending and while it can get tiring listening to you go on and on about how perfect Ibrahim is, I know it’s you being happy. And that’s how I always want you to be. I always want you to be happy.”

They stopped in front of the stairs and faced each other. Ayra’s expression was soft. “You make me love you more and more every single day, Ummi.”

Muhsin stepped out of the living room, joining them. “That makes two of us.”

Salama laughed. “You two should leave me alone. Come on, let’s head up. There’s so much to do,”

Excitedly, Ayra completed the sentence. “And very little time.”



As soon as Maghrib finished, every light in the yard was turned on and every candle was lit. If the space looked beautiful when the sun was out, it was ethereal now that the sun had set. Calm songs and orchestral pieces played through the speakers, each one picked out carefully by Ayra and curated into one lovely playlist. The buffet table held a variety of dishes, small chops, and drinks; more than enough to go round every invited guest.

Ibtihaj had a nice smile on her face as she stepped into the compound through the open gates, taking everything in. She ascended the entrance stairs and pushed open one of the double entrance doors. The house was a hive of activities and she smiled at every familiar face, easily finding her way up.

Wanting to be annoying, she knocked hard on her best friend's door and happily let herself in. "I don't show o!"

Ayra, who had just stepped out of the bathroom, rolled her eyes. "I'm done with you, I swear."

Ibtihaj grinned. "I love you too." She shut the door and walked over to the loveseat in the cosy room, dumping her bag on the sofa before sitting. "Omo, the house is so busy."

"Tell me about it." Ayra said, walking towards the open wardrobe. In a corner, incense burned in its burner. "Guests are going to start arriving soon."

"Including our almighty fiancé,"

Ayra was glad her back faced the other woman as her cheeks were hot, revealing just how much of a mess she was inside as her emotions battled for the top spot; fear, nervousness, excitement, and eagerness going neck to neck. "Including our almighty fiancé."

Ibtihaj, who knew fully well that Ayra was blushing furiously, leaned forward on the sofa. "Ayra, I swear to God, if this Ibrahim does not meet the standards you've used to describe him eh, I will kill you with my two bare hands. Na this house I go bury you."

Ayra had never turned around so fast. "Ibty, I swear you wouldn't have a reason to murder me. Ibrahim is going to exceed every expectation I've created, trust me." She was clearly swooning. "God, I'm going to see him up close and I'm going to finally talk to him." She sighed dreamily. "This is an honest dream come true."

"God abeg."

"Don't rain on my parade!"

"Yes ma. Oya show me what you finally decided to wear."

Ayra grinned. "Okay!"

Three minutes later, Ayra's outfit was laid out on the bed and Ibtihaj stared at it for a moment before she nodded in approval. "Good, good. I was looking forward to slapping you sha. Thank God you didn't pick out something stupid."

"Ibty, I swear –"

"Come off it, my friend."

"What are you even wearing for the party?"

Ibtihaj was more than happy to grab her bag and pull out her outfit, laying it right beside Ayra's. Both of them then stood side by side, admiring what they'd chosen.

Ayra folded her arms. "We do dress well."

"I agree. When do we get to change?"

"We have to pray Isha first. Ummy said she'll come over to let me know when to start getting ready to head down."

"Oya now." Ibtihaj removed the hijab she'd worn for the walk from her house to Ayra's, and proceeded to make herself comfortable by the window. "Let me just do aproko small. This is why I like your window."

"Oh, Ibt..."

"If you like, don't come and join me."

Ayra did not need to be told twice. Her room window offered one of the best views of the front of the house, allowing her see who went out and who came in. The gates stayed open and it wasn't long before cars began arriving with guests from both families; the Abdulazizs and the Fahads. One could always count on Ibtihaj to be a dramatic spectator.

"Come," Her face was literally pressed against the glass and her eyes were comically wide. "No be Jeep be that? Come, Ayra, isn't that the latest model of the Jeep Wrangler?"

Ayra nodded, just as amazed. "It is. I wonder who's in it."

They got their reply seconds later when the backdoors of the car went open and Ibrahim's parents – Salim and Fareeda – stepped out. Ibtihaj pressed her face even further against the glass, watching as husband and wife walked around the car to hold each other's hand, both in black, moving with grace and poise that so many people would kill to have.

"*Omo, omo, omo.*" Ibtihaj turned to Ayra. "Come, you were not lying when you said these people are classy o. I mean, it's one thing to see how elegant they can be online but in real life! *Omo!*"

Ayra smiled smugly. "I told you so." She turned back to the window, her heart beating faster as she wondered if Ibrahim was close.

"This Ibrahim should do and come abeg. Make I see something."

Ayra couldn't bring herself to voice the fact that she wanted him to come soon too. The knock on the room door startled them and they both turned to see Salama peep in. Like always, she was smiling. "You two might want to pray Isha and get changed. The Fahads are here and Ibrahim's on his

way.” When both of them nodded, she smiled a little wider at Ibtihaj. “Hello, Ibtty.”

“Hello, Aunt Salama. We’ll just do aproko small and then we’ll pray.”

Salama laughed and nodded. “Sure, you do that. Don’t take too long.”

“We won’t.” Ayra promised. “We’ll be down soon.”

Salama nodded again and then she was gone. Ayra and Ibtihaj turned to the window, just as a copper black and heavily tinted Kia Telluride with covered plate numbers drove into the compound, occupying the spot beside the Jeep Wrangler. For some reason, Ayra knew who’d arrived before he even stepped out and her heart became frenetic while her breath hitched and her palms got a little sweaty.

If they were in a movie, everything that happened next would have been shown in slow motion. The backdoor of the Telluride went open and moments later, Ibrahim Fahad was stepping out. Like Ayra had learned over the years, photos and videos did not do Ibrahim justice. He’d become more beautiful than he was the last time they’d been in the same space and it still did things to Ayra’s heart which wasn’t so little anymore.

When he shut the door and Ayra saw just what he was wearing, she knew she needed every ounce of strength to get through the night in one piece because he was after her life and every inch of her sanity.

Beside her, Ibtihaj was amazed. “*Olorun mi...* (My God...)”

If there was one thing the world knew, it was Ibrahim Fahad’s signature fashion style; turtle-necks, comfortably loose trousers, boots, and jackets and coats that cost fortunes. Tonight was different. He’d ditched his signature outfit and decided to go traditional instead.

He wore black; black trousers that complemented the black indo-western Sherwani with golden embroidery that ran from his left shoulder to the hem which stopped right above his knees. His curly hair was longer than Ayra remembered but it framed his face well. His stubble beard was as neat as it always was, carved to perfection.

Both of them watched as Ibrahim joined his parents who now stood with Muhsin and Salama. When he raised his head, looking straight at Ayra’s room window, both Ibtihaj and Ayra jumped back as though they were thieves who’d been caught. Ayra brought a hand to her chest but it did nothing to calm her galloping heart. She felt way too many things at once and she knew it’d take a lot of effort to get every emotion under control by the time they had to head down.

Ibtihaj was already heading towards the bathroom. “Come o, let’s perform ablution and pray. Omo, we need to start heading down. Ayra!”

Ayra moved then. She performed ablution on muscle memory and gladly let Ibtihaj lead the prayer. Once they finished, both women got out of the dresses they wore and proceeded to put on their laid out outfits. No one had to tell Ayra to put in extra effort just so she could look prettier. She’d never wanted to so badly make a good impression.

Both of them wore high neck bodysuits and while Ayra’s was black, Ibtihaj’s was sand brown. They both paired the bodysuit with wide leg trousers; Ayra’s being black as well while Ibtihaj’s was coffee brown, going well with her skin tone. Ibtihaj put on her matching brown, open abaya while Ayra brushed out her hair and pulled it back into a quick bun. She then went ahead to wear her own open abaya which was emerald green in colour.

It was easy for them to move to the dresser with its attached mirror and get started on make-up, both deciding to stick to the basics and not go overboard. Jewellery came next; white earrings and a white serpent bracelet for Ayra, and simple studs, a rose-gold watch and a double ring for Ibtihaj. They then tied their veils as simple turbans; Ayra’s black and Ibtihaj’s brown.

Turning from right to left to be sure she looked alright, Ayra nervously asked “Should I change? It suddenly seems like I’m underdressed.”

“Iffa slap you! You look like a spec, my dear, and if they don’t compliment you, na me and them.”

That was all Ayra needed to hear. They put on their shoes; simple pumps, and then managed to take a few photos before Iris – sent by Salama – came up to whisk them out of the room, down the stairs, and through the kitchen. Ayra only had a minute to breathe and pull herself together before she and Ibtihaj left the safety of the house, stepping right into the yard.

And right there on the stoned pathway, waiting for them, was none other than Ibrahim Fahad in all his glory, standing with his hands behind his back and a small smile on his face with his every bit of his attention trained solely on the woman he was going to marry.

03

It was as though the world around them immediately ceased to exist and while it was a little difficult to breathe, all Ayra could see was Ibrahim. She didn't see anything or anyone else.

It'd been one thing to sneakily admire him at age thirteen and it was another to watch him through the screens over the years. Nothing compared, however, to having him right in front of her in all his glory. Nothing came close and the intensity of it stole the air from her lungs.

She'd always known he was tall but having him so close showed just how tall he was compared to her. He had about seven inches over her but it seemed like so much more. His skin was still the lovely shade of honey-brown and his brows were still full. His nose was still as straight and his lips were still lovely...And then there were his eyes.

Onyx coloured eyes held her hazel ones captive, with depths that could easily drown her. Unlike her eyes which were an open book to her emotions, Ibrahim's eyes were closed off; shrouded with an intense mystery she would kill to unravel right there and right then. His lips moved as his smile widened by the littlest inch and then he spoke, his voice way deeper than she remembered. "Hello, Ayra."

Ayra was ready to melt into the ground. It was a miracle her toes didn't curl and it was another miracle that she didn't stutter when she managed to say "Hi."

Always the one to cause trouble, Ibtihaj loudly cleared her throat. "When you're done sharing love *ehn*, some of us are still here."

That was all it took to bring Ayra back to the present. Ibrahim turned to Ibtihaj, giving her his full attention. "You must be Ibtihaj."

"Yes, and you must be Ibrahim Fahad."

Ayra wanted to push her best friend into the nearest bush. Ibrahim, unfazed, nodded. "I am. It's a pleasure to meet the best friend of Ayra's."

"And it's a pleasure to *finally* meet the man my best friend is engaged to. You've been *very scarce* in the last month sha."

Ayra grabbed her best friend's hand, horrified. "Ibty!"

Ibrahim's calm expression gave way for mild embarrassment and a hint of amusement. "I actually have good reason but I apologise. I'll be making it up to Ayra, and you too, in the coming weeks. Let's just get through this event first."

Ibtihaj regarded him for a moment before she nodded once and turned to her best friend who was murdering her with a glare. She smiled sweetly. “*Oya*, you two should have fun.” She pulled her hand out of Ayra’s. “I will be right behind you.”

“Ibty,” Ayra gritted out. “I swear to God...”

“*Gbe* (move), my friend. Don’t keep your fiancé waiting.”

Ayra turned to Ibrahim, smiling apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” His calm expression was back on and he gestured forward with a hand. “Shall we?”

Ayra nodded, back to being an honest internal mess. “We shall.”

He stayed right beside her, keeping very little space between them and Ayra felt herself go dizzy from the whiffs she caught of his perfume; an exotic concoction of rosewood, cardamom, sandalwood and what she assumed was oud. It was heavenly and she wondered if he’d find it weird if she asked what brand he used. She had a feeling it probably cost a lot. He was known for his luxurious tastes after all.

As they approached their parents who stood with some other guests, Ibrahim quietly said “You look beautiful, Ayra. This shade of green is *definitely* your colour.”

Ayra didn’t think her cheeks got get any hotter but they did and all she could do was manage an extremely bashful smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Ibtihaj, being her usual self, cleared her throat from behind them and then went on to say “wahala o” under her breath, knowing fully well Ayra and Ibrahim heard it. For the second time that night, Ayra was ready to throw her friend into a bush.

Meeting his parents – Salim and Fareeda – was nothing short of beautiful and Ayra let herself get immersed in the beauty of it all. The Fahads heartily greeted Ibtihaj too, leaving the latter surprisingly flustered. Their parents – hers, his, and Ibtihaj’s – standing together and laughing between statements was the perfect picture and Ayra looked forward to seeing more of it in the future.

Salim took it upon himself to lead Ayra through the guests present, making introductions to those she didn’t know and reintroducing her to those she knew one way or the other. Ibrahim stayed right beside her and she loved it so, so much. He didn’t talk much but it wasn’t surprising as she’d learned

over the years that he was a social introvert and the only time he was a ball of energy was with his immediate family or with his circle of friends with whom he'd achieved great things with.

Like always, Ayra told herself that it was just another way in which they fit. He was the quiet one while she was the butterfly ready to make the most of social occasions. As people always say, opposites attract beautifully well.

There were so many congratulations and so many well wishes. One thing Ayra loved was how Ibtihaj wasn't left out as everyone congratulated her too. The engagement party being scheduled for that evening meant Falilat and Al-Amin couldn't throw the party they wanted for their daughter and it'd made Ayra feel guilty until Ibtihaj successfully assured them all that she was going to "make the most of my best friend's engagement". Thankfully, it was working out well.

The event had no clear programme so everyone just had fun, helping themselves with food and drinks. Too nervous to eat much, especially with Ibrahim being so close, Ayra stuck to small chops and a long glass of the virgin fruit punch provided. When Ibrahim stepped aside to talk with some of his father's associates, Ibtihaj sneakily occupied the spot he'd vacated.

She linked her arm with Ayra's. "How do you feel, my dear?"

Ayra pulled her friend to a corner and then she let herself silently squeal. "Oh my God, Ibtty!" She drew in a breath and then let it out. "God, Ibrahim is beautiful."

Ibtihaj did not hide her amusement as she dryly said "Tell me more."

Ayra slapped the other's arm. "I'm serious, you goat!" She rolled her eyes when Ibtihaj laughed. "God, Ibtty. Being next to him in real life beats every dream I've had by a very far margin."

"This love thing seems sweet o."

"Get out!"

Ibtihaj laughed again. "You two look good together *sha*. Even though I'll still do hard-to-get so he can win me over, I won't deny the fact that you two look good side by side."

Warmth spread in Ayra's chest. "Yeah?"

Ibtihaj nodded. "Yeah." She then made a face. "But why is he so quiet? Person *dey* do like ghost."

"He's introverted, Ibtty! I've told you this before."

“I did not think it was going to be this bad *na*. I can count how many words he’s said tonight. Are you sure you can cope with this man? You *ney* like talk like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Ibty, he’s a good listener and he’s definitely going to talk more with me.” Ayra smiled proudly. “I’m about to be his special person.”

Ibtihaj hissed. “Me too, I go love.” She hissed again when Ayra laughed and then she looked around. “I don’t think you noticed but his friends aren’t here.”

Ayra looked around too, realising Ibtihaj was right. “It didn’t even cross my mind.”

“*Omo*, I looked o. I was curious to see how Tobi Enioluwa looks in real life. Those his IG posts are fine.”

Clearly surprised, Ayra turned back to Ibtihaj who shrugged. “*Wetin?* Of course I had to properly know the circle you’re about to enter.” Her eyes narrowed when Ayra began to smile. “Eh en, no just start. I was just checking and he’s the only one that caught my attention. They’re all fine *sha* but him!”

“A crush, Ibty?”

“*Sbo na* alright *m?* Are you mad? You and who is crushing? Instead of you to be wondering why his friends are not here, you’re searching for what is not there. Iffa slap –”

“Ayra?”

They both turned to see Ibrahim standing some feet away. While Ayra’s internal butterflies resumed their flutters, Ibtihaj folded her arms and fully faced him. “You.”

Ibrahim, once again, had his small smile on. “Me...I was hoping to steal Ayra for a bit.”

“To where again?”

“I was hoping to talk to her in private; preferably in the living room, away from the prying eyes of everyone. We do have an overdue discussion after all.”

That had Ayra’s entire attention but Ibtihaj wasn’t done with Ibrahim. Acting nonchalant, she said “Your friends aren’t here.”

“Ah, yes.” Ibrahim blew out a small breath. “They had to miss it because they’re all in different places right now. Bella’s in Italy for a cousin’s wedding while Nathaniel and Anneth are on a couple’s trip in Barbados

which they couldn't cut short because of how much time and money went into it. Tobi's in Nigeria visiting his grandparents and he was supposed to return today but his grandmother's not ready to let him go yet."

"And Jalal?" Ayra curiously asked.

Ibrahim's eyes held pure mischief. "Trust me; you don't want to know where Jalal is right now. All I can tell you is that he's safe and sound and he'll be back tomorrow or next. They actually look forward to meeting both of you and they're putting plans in place for a lunch or dinner date so proper introductions can be made. It'll make up for them missing this event."

Ibtihaj nodded, hiding her amazement as that was the most he'd said since the event began. "Very well." She then smiled. "You can take Ayra away. If you try anything funny *ehn*..."

Ayra face-palmed, embarrassed. "Oh God."

Ibrahim chuckled, having no idea it further messed with Ayra's heart. "I won't. You have my word."

Ibtihaj opened her mouth to make a snarky remark but her mother called out for her and Ayra had never been happier to push her best friend away. She then turned to Ibrahim. "She can be a handful. I'm so sorry."

"Ayra," His smile was much wider. "It's fine. Shall we go in?"

She nodded, applauding her calmness. "Sure."

"Lead the way, please."

She nodded again. "Okay."



Inside the house was soothingly quiet and Ayra loved it.

She led Ibrahim to the second living room, smiling at how different all of it was. Seven years back, she'd been admiring him from behind the curtains and now she was leading him in as his fiancé.

Ibrahim stepped in, looking around the cosy space. "This is different from what I remember the first time I visited."

Ayra kept her smile on as she softly closed the door. "Well, a lot of renovation has been done." The walls had been repainted, the curtains changed, the sofas re-done, and the centre rug switched for another. "Ummi and Baba like to keep their hands busy these days."

Ibrahim stopped in front of the wall that held a new family portrait. "This is different too."

Ayra took small steps forward, stopping right beside him. She nodded. "It is."

The portrait had been taken a few days before she turned twenty; a family photo session held between her exams. In the framed photo, Muhsin sat in the middle of the loveseat while Ayra sat on his left, Salama on his right. They were all captured laughing and Ayra was proud of the fact that she was an absolute beauty in the frozen moment.

"It's beautiful." Ibrahim said, turning his head to look at her the same time she did. "It's very beautiful."

In that moment she wondered if he was talking about the portrait or if he meant she was very beautiful. Her heart told her it was the latter and she gladly accepted it, blushing. Minutes later they sat on opposite sofas, the centre rug and coffee table separating them.

Just like the first time she'd seen him, Ibrahim elegantly crossed one leg over the other. He then rested his clasped hands on his knees. "Hello, Ayra."

Ayra, who did her best to sit as elegantly as he did, gave him a small smile. "Hi."

"Permit me to start by apologising for being a bad fiancé all this time."

"It's fine, Ibrahim, really. I knew you had a valid reason and we were definitely going to see ourselves tonight so it was all good."

"I actually wanted our first conversation to be in person but work was being really demanding, especially with all the new branches we've opened. With all my friends ditching work to have fun, it all fell on my shoulders so it was really difficult to carve out time. I should have let you know instead of the radio silence I gave."

"Ibrahim," Her nerves were going little by little but the butterflies stayed put. "I'm serious. It's okay. You don't have to apologise. We're talking now so..."

He nodded. "We are." He let a moment go by. "I was actually surprised when my dad called and said you'd accepted my proposal. I thought you'd think about it for a little longer. After all, we've hardly spoken since our families got to know each other."

“Well...” Ayra wasn’t sure she was ready to have that conversation but there was no way to go back now so she braced it. “Your reputation precedes you and you’re someone I’ve looked up to for a while now so getting a proposal from you was an honour. There wasn’t really any reason to say no.”

Ibrahim raised a brow; it was only slightly but it was a very lethal move to Ayra’s poor heart. “You’ve looked up to me for a while now? Are you serious?”

Ayra’s entire being was burning. “Can we not talk about that?”

“I think we should.” He leaned forward a little. “I’m definitely intrigued now.”

Her cheeks were too dark and way too hot. “What made you send me a proposal though? I mean, you’re someone who can have any woman but you chose me.”

“We’re not deflecting, Ayra. I’ll come back to your question but I want to know how you’ve looked up to me for a while now. I’m intrigued.”

She wanted to disappear. “Ibrahim, please.”

“Ayra, please.”

Knowing she’d dug her own grave with her two hands, Ayra slowly exhaled. “Well, you’ve made a name for yourself along with your friends and that’s inspiring. That’s worth looking up to.”

“I don’t know why but it feels like there’s more you’re not telling me.”

“Oh God.”

He leaned back, making himself even more comfortable. He was smiling. “Now I know there is more.”

Ayra gave up. “Maybe I’ve also liked you for a while...?”

His smile disappeared. “Are you serious?”

She nodded slowly, still wanting to disappear. She looked away from him, focusing on the floral print on the curtains. Her voice was low when she replied. “Yes.”

For a moment there was silence and then he spoke. “Well that makes me feel a lot better.”

She looked back at him. “Why? It’s pumping your ego?”

He laughed. “God, no. I’m not that kind of person.” He sighed and held her gaze steadily. “I sent a proposal to you because I’ve liked you for a while now, Ayra. I think it’s been nearly a year now. I can trace my feelings back to October last year or thereabout.”

It was Ayra’s turn to be surprised. She couldn’t bring herself to even say anything or ask if he was serious the same way he’d asked her minutes earlier.

A little embarrassed, Ibrahim lowered his gaze to his hands. “I’ve known about our family’s friendship from the very start, Ayra. I was with my father on the first visit here which I’m sure you know about.”

He adjusted the silver watch on his wrist before bringing his gaze back to hers. He was better composed and the rosiness of his cheeks was almost gone. He continued. “I didn’t meet you that day and on the day I opened The Hexad with my friends, I didn’t get to meet you either. I was told you weren’t feeling too well.”

Ayra remembered that day all too well. She’d cried for hours and no one knew she’d been crying over the fact that she’d missed an opportunity to be with him and not because her stomach hurt.

“I think that was the last time I actually really got to hear of you and then I got busy. Over the years it’s been hard for me to explain my feelings so you can imagine how confused I was when I came across your post on my explore page on Instagram and all I wanted to do was get to know you better. Also, your user handle was intriguing. It’s not every day you see a lady whose Instagram handle is a rare flower. A beautiful one at that.”

Ayra dazedly listened, very much in disbelief. Ibrahim went on.

“So, I did a little digging and it wasn’t long before I realised you were the same Ayra Abdulaziz my parents spoke about from time to time; the very daughter of one of my family’s nicest friends. I did want to reach out a lot of times but God knows I always chickened out and when my emotions began to spiral out of control, I spoke to my parents about it. As at that time, they were already saying I had to start planning on settling down so...It just sort of fell into place.”

He cleared his throat. “They were over the moon actually. My parents, I mean. I contemplated coming over to say hi and to just kinda get to know you better but Dad said we should go about everything the traditional way and that I should trust him so I did.” He gave her a sheepish smile. “That does not mean I didn’t freak out when he said they were going to send a

proposal on my behalf. It's a miracle I didn't collapse but don't tell anyone I said that. I'd never hear the end of it."

Unable to help it, Ayra laughed and her heart soared when he joined in. It was another proof that they were beautiful together.

"Really though, it was nerve wrecking." He told her. "And I was getting ready to wait for your response, no matter how long it took, so you can imagine how I felt when I got a call from my dad, telling me my proposal was accepted."

"Were you happy?"

He smiled at her. "What else was there to feel?"

Ayra didn't know what she'd been expecting but the way he'd asked the rhetoric question beat every response she'd expected to hear from him. It was such an Ibrahim thing to say and God, she loved it. She loved it a lot.

"Really," He continued. "What else was there to feel? It felt like I'd been handed the moon and I kept coming up with things to say when we eventually met. I just didn't think it was going to take us this long so..." He shrugged slightly. "Here we are."

Feeling so much at once, Ayra let her head drop and she focused on the serpent bracelet on her wrist. "Wow..."

"That was a lot of offloading, right?"

She nodded. "It was." A little courageous, she raised her head again to look at him. When she found him smiling, she smiled right back and told him the honest truth. "But it was beautiful and it makes me feel really nice, knowing all this time my feelings weren't one sided. So thank you, Ibrahim. Thank you for offloading all of that on me."

Right then, as they smiled at each other, the concept of time ceased to exist and all that mattered was that very moment they were living in; a moment so beautiful like never before. When Fareeda came with Salama to get them to take them back to the yard where guests waited, Ibrahim told his fiancé "I look forward to having you in my life now, Ayra."

And it was very, very easy for Ayra to smile and honestly tell him "Me too, Ibrahim. I look forward to having you in my life now too."

04

The engagement party came to an end a few minutes past 10PM and Ayra didn't head back in until the last car – Ibrahim's – was out of the compound and out of sight.

Her parents laughed in the living room, lost in their bubble, so she let them be and took the stairs up, knowing how everything would play out the moment she entered her room where a particular nosy best friend “patiently” waited after she all but chased her siblings and parents home.

Ibtihaj was on Ayra the second the room door opened. She took Ayra's hand, led her to the loveseat, forced her on the sofa, and then proceeded to sit on the stool she'd moved from the front of the dresser.

“*Oya start.*” Ibtihaj's smile was disturbingly wide and her curiosity was hot. “If you leave out any detail, you and I know the things I can do to you.”

It all hit Ayra then and she buried her face in her hands, barely pushing back a squeal. Ibtihaj rolled her eyes, already used to such reactions. “*God abeg.*” She slapped the other's leg. “*Focus jare!* You're supposed to have started talking.”

“God, Ibtu.” Ayra raised her head. “I've never been more ready to get married to this man. He's perfect!”

“Madam, *shay* you know I was not there when you people were talking? All I know is that when you two came back out to the yard, you were just blushing and the two of you were smiling at each other like those primary school idiots that fall in whatever they think love is.”

“Ibtu, Ibrahim has liked me since last year.”

“Issa liel” Ibtihaj's eyes couldn't get any wider. “Ayra, if you're pulling my leg, I can slap you.”

“I swear to Allah I'm not lying.” Ayra leaned forward, almost at the edge of the sofa. Her eyes shone so brightly. “He said so himself. I may have confessed to liking him but I didn't tell him how long and then he started talking. He's liked me since last year.”

“How?!”

“That's the crazy part.” Ayra was so excited and it was beautiful. “One of my posts came up on his Instagram feed in October and he said at that time all he wanted was to get to know me better so he did a little digging only to realise I'm the same Ayra who is the daughter of his family's friend.”

Ibtihaj blinked and blinked again. “*Omo*.” She moved the stool closer. “Ayra, which *kain* juju be *dat*?”

Ayra laughed. “You’re just an animal, Ibtj.”

“No *na*, serious matter. All this time we’ve been telling you to get over him and Oga Fahad has liked you since! Why didn’t he say anything?”

“He actually told his parents and they were the ones who told him to go about it the traditional way. According to him, he would have reached out and would have gotten to know me better. I prefer how things turned out though. This is much nicer.”

Ibtihaj was still stunned. “*Olorun mi*...Come first, which post did he see?”

Ayra grinned. “Those pictures we took on Nigeria’s independence day. The ones where you dressed up in your cultural clothes and you made sure I dressed up as a Yoruba girl too. He still has the screenshots on his phone. It made everything more real.”

Ibtihaj grinned smugly. “*Shay* you see how big of a blessing I am in your life? And you were making mouth that day, telling me you didn’t want to post it. *Shay* you can see how I am an angel sent to you from Heaven?! See well o!”

Ayra couldn’t stop laughing. “Ibtj, please.”

“I’m serious, my friend. This is very sweet...Ehen, so what else did you two talk about?”

Ayra leaned back, resting against the soft backrest the sofa had. Her smile was smaller and her dimples were as deep as ever. “We just spoke about how the past month has been and what we’ve been up to. He promised we’d be meeting again soon. Then he told me he looks forward to having me in his life from now on.” Warmth rose to her cheeks. “And I told him the same.”

“Thank God you did not say I love you to him. Abeg no talk am until he says it. Am I clear?”

Chuckling, Ayra nodded. “I’ll try my best.”

“Ayra!”

“Yes ma. I won’t tell him until he says it...What if he doesn’t say it? I’ve told you how it is when it comes to his emotions. Even when he’s on TV or stuff, it can be hard for him to say it.”

“*Wó*, he should try. But if it comes to that, and he’s shown you all along what he can’t say in words, then maybe it won’t hurt to take the first step.”

She then glared. “But if you say those words when he has not proven anything, Aomi will be too small for me and you because I will haunt you. You’ll be seeing demon baby that has my face in your sleep.”

“God forbid.”

“Try me and see.”

Ayra rolled her eyes. “I’m done with you.”

Ibtihaj gladly unravelled her turban, tossing the veil on the bed. “So, what’s next?”

Ayra got started on removing her jewellery. “I think they’d fix a date first and then Ibrahim and I can get started on everything else.”

Ibtihaj began removing her jewellery too. “You know we’re starting masters soon. Are you going to wait until we’re done?”

Ayra shot her an incredulous look. “Ibty, I’ve loved this man for seven years of my life and now that I get the chance to finally be with him, you think I’m going to wait for master’s to finish?” She scoffed. “You haven’t seen anything. Besides, no one said I can’t be married while completing a second degree. I just have to steer clear of pregnancies and that’s fine because it’s not as though I ever planned on having kids right away.”

Ibtihaj made a dramatic sound. “This love thing *sha...*”

“I’ll soon slap you.”

They both laughed about it and went on to remove their abayas. They were wiping off the make-up on their faces when the door was softly knocked on. A moment later, Salama and Muhsin were peeping in, asking for permission to enter; something Ayra immediately granted.

The parents sat on the loveseat while Ayra and Ibtihaj – like twins – sat side by side on the bed. Muhsin put his hands together, smiling. “I hope you two had fun.”

“We did.” Ibtihaj replied before Ayra could. “I don’t know about this one because she was busy sharing love,” Salama and Muhsin laughed while Ayra glared. “But I had a lot of fun. And *omo*, the food was sweet. Ah, e sweet die.”

“I’m glad.” Salama said sweetly. “Ayra definitely had fun.”

Muhsin nodded, smiling teasingly at his daughter. “She did. Her fiancé stayed beside her throughout after all.”

Ayra resembled a tomato. “Leave me alone.”

They laughed again. Much calmer, Muhsin got down to why he and Salama were in the room. “Thankfully, the engagement party went well. Alhamdulillah. News about it should hit the web by tonight or tomorrow and the media might focus on you two a lot because you’re always together. The Fahads have promised to keep you two safe. You know how crazy the media can be sometimes.”

Ibtihaj and Ayra nodded soberly. He continued.

“Picking a date is the next step. Ibrahim has said he’s more than ready to get married to you as soon as possible but there’s something to consider, seeing how you’re about to start your master’s programme. We told them we’d get back once we’ve heard from you. We want to know if you’ll be okay getting married while running the programme or if you’d want to wait until you’re done.”

“We’ll support you either way, Leilani.” Salama said. “It’s fully up to you. You’re old enough to make your own decisions and we trust you. We’re always going to trust you.”

Feeling nervous all of a sudden, Ayra exchanged glances with Ibtihaj who smiled supportively. She then turned back to her parents. “I don’t want to wait until I’m done with my programme. I mean, there isn’t any reason to. Like Ibrahim, I also want to get married as soon as possible. I know that means about two to three months from now but still...”

Both of them nodded and she went on. “And I think I can handle being married and running a degree. I don’t plan on having kids immediately so I should be alright.”

Muhsin and Salama nodded again. Muhsin spoke then. “Well, we can get back to the Fahads first thing tomorrow morning. Salim and Fareeda proposed a wedding in December should you chose to get married before finishing the programme and I think that’s a good month. It’ll allow us plan better while you and Ibrahim get to know yourselves more.”

Ayra hid her giddiness nicely. “December’s perfect.”

Salama chuckled, seeing through her daughter. “Oh Leilani...”

Ayra simply grinned, laughing a moment later when Ibtihaj shoved her playfully. A minute and jokes later, Salama and Muhsin were gone. Ibtihaj locked the room door and grabbed her phone, keeping Ayra stuck to her like glue. “Oya o, let’s start looking for possible event locations. December is close o.”

“Ibty, there’s still –”

Ibtihaj was not listening. “In fact, let’s even start with where you’ll be living *sef*. Ibrahim stays in Downtown Aomi *abi?* *Omo*, be ready to be seeing me in your house every day.” She cackled. “Life is so sweet!”

Smiling, Ayra allowed herself get sucked into the madness. Deep inside, she prayed for December to come quickly. The remaining part of the year was going to be perfect, she was sure of it.



On Wednesday August 19th 2020, Ayra and Ibrahim’s wedding was fixed for Saturday, December 26th; the last Saturday of the year. As expected, word got out about one of Atlantica’s most sought after bachelors finally getting hitched and it didn’t take long for local and international media establishments to try and dig out any information about Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz.

A lot of women cried as their crush was getting off the market while a number of men said Ibrahim Fahad was lucky to get a woman as pretty as Ayra. Some were mean, wanting Ibrahim for themselves, and then there were those who wanted to know if Ibtihaj was single because she was “good looking too”.

On that same day, Fareeda Fahad invited Ayra and Ibtihaj for an intimate dinner. As soon as both ladies said they’d love to attend, Fareeda dispatched a driver; telling him to wait until after Maghrib before bringing both ladies over to the Fahad home.

Ibtihaj was more excited than Ayra was. “I’m going to Palm Drive! Their father!”

“Ibty, you better not be this hyped up when we get there.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Ayra. I shall be the calmest woman. You’ll be surprised.”

Ayra rolled her eyes. “I hope so.”

They got ready together at Ibtihaj’s place after praying Maghrib; both opting for maxi dresses with waist sashes and wide sleeves with skirted cuffs. While Ayra wore beige, Ibtihaj wore sage green, and they paired both dresses with cream coloured chiffon veils and shoulder bags with chain straps. They both decided to wear sandals and they ditched make-up and jewellery.

Once they’d said goodbye to Falilat (who was just excited as Ibtihaj) and Al-Amin, they left the house and got into the awaiting vehicle which was chilly, thanks to the air conditioning that had been running. Like every other

vehicle the Fahads owned, it was luxuriously comfortable and it was heavily tinted too. Ibtihaj soaked it all in. “Nice, nice, nice.”

Ayra couldn’t stop smiling. As they left the estate, her phone rang and her butterflies happily flew out of their cages as she accepted the call, bringing the device to her ear a moment later. “Assalam Alaykum. Hi, Ibrahim.”

“Waalaykum Salam.” His voice was deeply smooth, each word perfectly articulated. “Hello, Ayra. How are you?”

“Good.” She was melting. “You?”

“Good too. I’m just getting off work. Mum called and said I should come straight home. She said you’re coming over?”

“Yep. She asked Ibty and me to come for dinner and there was no way we could say no so...”

“Perfect then. I was actually going to call you later but since we’ll be seeing ourselves in a bit, I’ll just wait.”

Ayra’s dimples couldn’t get much deeper as she tried to not smile, especially with how Ibtihaj shamelessly stared at her. “Okay...”

“I’ll see you in a bit then.”

“You will.”

“Bye, Ayra.”

“Bye.”

Ibtihaj turned then to look out of the tinted glass. “God o...I will love too.”

Ayra’s blush deepened. “Leave me alone.”

“You wish.”

They fell quiet after that, taking in everything they drove past. The vehicle drove out of Plum Boulevard and into the Monwict district which was considered the country’s administrative area and also the home of the elite families who came from generations of wealth; families like the Fahads.

The roads got wider and freer and the buildings got more and more elegant. Modernity came together with a touch of history and it was so beautiful that it left both Ayra and Ibtihaj in awe. The car drove past embassies and the parliament house, went past a number of high class businesses and then past the central bank. As it turned onto Palm Drive, one of Aomi’s wealthiest residential areas, Ayra and Ibtihaj caught a glimpse of Aomi *Aere* – the presidential house and offices – which sat in its glory in the distance.

A security check was done and once it was confirmed that they were indeed guests of the Fahads, the vehicle was allowed to proceed into the area. Ayra took everything in like a kid in a candy store. No one could blame her. She'd never visited Palm Drive, only her parents had. Ibtiyahaj was much worse than her best friend and she nearly had her face pressed against the glass just so she wouldn't miss a single detail.

The houses were in huge compounds; each one more luxurious than the last, and there was a lot of greenery which put that of Haven Estate – where both of them lived with their families – to shame. There was a lot of security too. It wasn't long before the car came to a slow stop in front of double gates that gave a peek of what lay on the other side. The best friends held each other's hand and watched, fascinated, as the driver spoke to the security team and then the gates went open, allowing him drive in.

There was no way Ayra could hold her gasp. Ibtiyahaj couldn't hold hers too.

The circular driveway was wide and situated in its very middle was a well mowed front lawn with a few crape myrtle trees planted feet away from each other and a water fountain that worked perfectly well, lit up beautifully. Beyond the driveway was the magnificent architectural structure which was the villa itself; a Palladian mansion with vast classical proportions, a colonnade entrance with the tall columns, and an iconic exterior façade made from hand carved limestone to give an imposing first impression.

There were also a lot of windows; some lit and others dark, and it made them wonder just how many rooms the mansion had. Running the length of both sides of the mansion were well kept hedges and even more trees. The garage sat on the left side of the compound and the doors were closed, denying Ayra and Ibtiyahaj the view of the cars parked inside.

The vehicle came to a stop right in front of the mansion's entryway and once the driver opened the door for them, the best friends got out. They still held onto each other's hands, too in awe to even let go.

"You may go in." The driver told them. "There'll surely be someone to attend to you on the other side."

Ayra and Ibtiyahaj could only nod, staring at the towering structure in front of them. Ayra squeezed her best friend's hand as the driver got back into the car to drive it away from the entrance. "Ibty..."

"I can see, Ayra. I'm looking at it too."

The front doors went open, getting the attention of both ladies, and with a wide smile on her face, Fareeda stepped out. She was regal in navy blue and

her hair – which was uncovered – rested on her right shoulder in a single plait; streaks of grey contrasting with the dark black.

“Ladies, welcome!”

Ayra and Ibtihaj knew better than to keep standing. They put one leg in front of the other, ascended the three front steps, and closed the space between them and Fareeda who was more than happy to pull them into warm embraces and then usher them in.

If they thought the mansion exterior was magnificent, Ayra and Ibtihaj were blown away by the interior which began in the hallway that was as wide as the second living room in Haven Estate’s houses. The ceiling was high with lovely stonemasonry, holding the brightly lit crystal ball chandelier that hung down. Paintings hung on both walls, drawer chests beneath them, resting on tiles that were so clean they shone; displaying carefully curated patterns on the ground.

Unaware of how much of a daze they were in, Fareeda led the way deeper inside. “Come in, ladies. I was just ensuring the table’s set. Since this is the first time you’re both visiting, why don’t I show you around before Salim and Ibrahim arrive?”

Ayra and Ibtihaj gladly nodded and they followed right behind her.

Beyond the hallway was the grand staircase, a curved beauty that gave access to the upper floor and the basement level. There were a lot of doors around the staircase and Fareeda took them from one room to the other, each one more elegant than the last. The main living room was a masterpiece and luxury sat in every corner. The dining room was huge, comfortably taking a glass topped table that sat twenty-two chairs; all of which sat underneath yet another chandelier.

The kitchen was out of the world and Ayra watched alongside her best friend as the cooks cleaned up, finishing whatever was left for the dinner they were about to have. Fareeda led them out of the busy space. “Let’s move on.”

Ibtihaj held onto Ayra’s arm, whispering. “Come, are you sure you’re not marrying a man that’s secretly a prince? Ayra, *na* palace be this o.”

Ayra had nothing to say in reply, not when she was left breathless at it all. She’d always known the Fahads were elite; everyone knew it. However, no speculation of just how much they had did justice to what she was currently seeing and it was the first time she understood what those close to her had meant back then when they told her to get over her feelings because she and Ibrahim were “worlds apart”. They were on two different pedestal

levels and the realisation was scarily humbling. That didn't mean she wasn't still going to love him moving forward. She was going to keep doing so.

The mansion had three floors (two floors above the ground and a basement level), eight bedrooms, ten bathrooms, two kitchens, four reception rooms (Fareeda liked to call them drawing rooms), a study which doubled as an office, a library, and a cinema that took up the entire basement level.

Fareeda then led them out through one of the backdoors and Ayra wondered, once again, if she really knew how wealthy the Fahads were. A wellness centre sat at the back of the mansion; having a gym, a pool, a steam room and a sauna, and a sunken limestone terrace opening that opened out from the pool area into the rear gardens which were just as beautiful as every other part of the property. Then there was the staff quarter for staff members who stayed overnight. It had four bedrooms, four bathrooms, a lounge, and a kitchen.

By the time she led them back in, Ayra and Ibtihaj were ready to collapse underneath their disbelief. Luckily, Fareeda was called into the kitchen and as soon as she was out of sight, both best friends allowed their knees buckle, leaning against the walls for support.

"Oh my God." Ayra breathed. "Oh. My. God."

"See," Ibtihaj said. "I don't care again. Your wedding must big. I must do *owambe*. *Omo!* Ayra, this isn't a mansion. This is a palace and I can argue it out with anyone's unfortunate ancestor. You didn't tell me they were this rich *na!*"

"Do you think I knew it myself? Did you forget that this is my first time here?"

"*Hei*, that's true. *Omo, wahala dey*...What now?"

"What do you mean what now? We're going to have dinner with them." Ayra straightened. "And we're going to do our best to not drool over everything we see. God, this house is beautiful."

"Palace, madam." Ibtihaj straightened too. "Palace o...We're going to do our best to be calm and composed." She nodded twice. "I fit do am."

"We'll be okay."

Ibtihaj nodded again. "Yes, we will be. Come, let's go and find that dining room."

"Yes, let's do that."

Linking their arms once again, they walked forward, looking left and right to take everything in they walked past; going against the “calm and composed” mantra they’d just shared. They were going past the hallway when the front doors went open and they stopped, curiously turning to see who it was. Ayra’s breath hitched.

Ibrahim, yet to notice them, turned around to close the doors he’d walked in through. With his back still facing them, he took off the black coat he wore, revealing a brown knitted turtleneck which he’d tucked into even darker trousers. There were black boots on his feet and his curls were unruly, as though he’d run his hands through them a lot on the way home.

Ayra watched, entranced – as usual – by everything that was Ibrahim Fahad.

With a sigh, he turned around and stopped, clearly surprised to see them both. While Ibtihaj grinned widely and wickedly, Ayra couldn’t bring herself to do much as his eyes met hers; onyx depths holding her captive.

His lips moved slightly, turning into a very small smile. He put his free hand in his pocket while his other arm held his coat, his watch shining when the light hit it. “Hello, Ayra.”

Ayra forced air back into her lungs. “Hi.”

05

Less than a quarter of the long dining table was set for dinner; delicacies served on gold and silver platters. Ibrahim led Ayra and Ibtihaj into the room and right behind them were Fareeda and Salim, who'd arrived a minute after Ibrahim did.

Each person easily found a seat; Salim at the head of the table with Fareeda on his right and Ibrahim right beside her. Ayra and Ibtihaj sat on the opposite side; Ibtihaj right in front of Fareeda and Ayra right in front of her fiancé.

"I literally rushed home when Fareeda said you two were here." Salim said as he unfolded his napkin, as elegantly as ever. He spread it on his laps. "I've been pressing for a family dinner but no one seemed to be paying me any attention."

Ayra smiled warmly but before she could reply, Fareeda spoke. "I wanted to invite them over this weekend," She turned to her son. "But Ibrahim said he has some plans in place already."

Ayra and Ibtihaj turned towards Ibrahim who calmly helped himself with a glass of water, saying "Mum, you really know how to ruin surprises."

Salim laughed while Fareeda grinned. "As I should." She then faced the awaiting staff. "You can start serving, please."

Ibtihaj spoke very quietly as the two staff members moved. "*Omo*."

Ayra had to stop herself from saying "tell me about it". As they were served the entrée dish of Hoisin chicken rolls with dipping sauce, Salim turned to Ayra. "How do you feel about the date we set for the wedding, sweetheart?"

Her smile returned, wider than it had been. "It's perfect. It's the best way to celebrate the last Saturday of the year, and I love the fact that it's the holiday season so everyone can be able to attend without having to worry about getting a leave from work and all of that."

Fareeda turned to her son again. "You should learn from your fiancé, Ibrahim. Look at how well she's described how she feels."

Ibrahim rolled his eyes. "Mum, please. We've gone through this time and time again. It's not like your husband's any better."

Salim chuckled. "Well, I had to learn."

"And so will I." Ibrahim stated. "Let me do it at my own pace."

It was Fareeda's turn to roll her eyes. "You might to do so a little faster."

“Fareeda,” Salim began. “It’s okay.” He then turned to Ibtihaj who’d exchanged amusedly curious looks with Ayra. “What about you, Ibt? How do you feel?”

Ibtihaj’s grin was blinding. “I am very excited! I look forward to it.”

Salim grinned too. “We do too...This is your first time here, right? I don’t recall you two ever walking through these doors.”

Ayra nodded. “It is. We were blown away, honestly. It’s a beautiful property.”

Salim nodded, bringing a roll to his mouth and taking a bite. He didn’t speak until he’d chewed and swallowed. “It is. My parents were in love with mansions like this so they had one of the best companies in England recreate the Dawn Hill at Wentworth. It’s a mansion built in the 1920’s or thereabout.”

Ayra couldn’t hide her amazement. “Wow.”

Salim chuckled. “Wow indeed. It’s come in handy since it officially became mine and Fareeda’s. It’s held a lot of memories too.” He then smiled at both Ayra and Ibtihaj. “And we look forward to making even new ones moving forward.”

Excitement bubbled underneath Ayra’s skin and she did her best to hide it so she didn’t seem too eager to become an official member of their family. Beside her, Ibtihaj had a composed expression but deep inside, she was daydreaming about how she’d have the liberty to tour the property each time the opportunity presented itself.

“I can’t wait to get started on renovating what would be your room here, Ayra.” Fareeda said enthusiastically. “I’ll ensure it’s lovely.”

Nearly frowning, Ayra turned to Ibrahim. “We’ll be living here?”

Ibrahim lowered the glass he’d taken a sip from and shook his head. “No, we won’t. But there will be sleepovers and times when we’ll have to visit for events that’ll be held.”

Both Ayra and Ibtihaj nodded, speaking like the twins they always claimed to be. “Oh...”

“While this man here is a workaholic like his father,” Fareeda said, ignoring the way both men glared. “I look forward to having you two over a lot. You’re both going to be my daughters now so you should know that these doors are always going to open to you two. If anyone tries to say or do

otherwise, do not hesitate to let me know. 'They'll hear from me. Am I clear?'"

With matching smiles and different – but warm – emotions, Ayra and Ibtihaj nodded. The rest of dinner went well with scrumptious meals and hearty conversations. When it was all over, Fareeda happily took Ibtihaj for another tour while Salim retired to his study to make a few calls. Ayra followed Ibrahim and he led her to the back, right to the rear gardens.

They walked in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Then he spoke "I really like the fact that we're getting married before the year runs out."

She stole a glance, her hands in front of her. "Really?"

He nodded. "Do not get me wrong, I was willing to wait until you finished your master's degree if that was what you chose." He stopped and so did she. "But if I'm being very honest, I prefer this arrangement."

They faced each other and her smile was so pretty. "Well, it is said that when a good suitor presents himself, there isn't any need to delay a marriage."

He nodded slowly. "That's very true."

"And I know I'll be able to do it." She held his gaze although it did things to her deep inside. Her butterflies were having a field day. "Running a master's degree and being married to you, I mean."

He gave her one of his small smiles. "I have no doubt that you can. No kids in our first year, right?"

She nodded, colour staining her cheeks at the images that popped up in her head; images she immediately pushed away. "Right. Did you want us to have kids immediately?"

He immediately shook his head, his brows furrowing. "No. I didn't want that."

"Why this reaction?"

His expression relaxed. "I don't..." He sighed. "I love the idea of kids and I do want to have a family someday but I believe two people should get used to being married for at least a year before the kids come along. That way there's stability and they're ready to make changes to fit the kid into their lives."

Ayra honestly felt a little deeper. "You should know that I think the same."

He visibly relaxed even further. "That makes me feel better. I'm sorry if my reaction was controversial. I had a difficult moment trying to explain what I meant."

"It's fine, Ibrahim. I understand."

They resumed walking and she spoke a little later. "Honestly, the property's pretty but it's really, really huge." She kept the last part to herself; the property was also very intimidating.

"Don't tell my parents but I think it's way too big too."

That surprised her and she whipped her head in his direction. "Are you serious?"

He nodded, his hands in his pockets as he led them towards the wellness centre where the pool was. "I am...Most days, like today, only my parents and the staff members are home so most of the rooms are empty and once everyone goes to sleep, it can be eerily silent. I don't like it, which is why I was more than happy to move out when the opportunity presented itself. The bachelor pad is cosier and I don't have to worry about ghosts in my house."

She laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Ibrahim Fahad is scared of ghosts?"

He was trying so hard not to smile. "You'd be very surprised."

She laughed again and he finally smiled. They stopped at the edge of the pool, staring at the clear, blue water. She then faced him, quietly asking "You live at the Windy Gates, right? In Downtown Aomi."

He nodded, once again giving her his full attention. "I do...If you're going to ask if that's where we'll live when we get married, the answer's no." He smiled a little when her cheeks darkened. "The bachelor pads are no place to have a family and I've been a little sick of it lately...Bella and her lover moved recently and they've had nothing but good reviews so I got us an apartment at The Oasis. We'll be staying there when we get married In Shaa Allah."

Ayra's heart did a flip and her stomach dipped. Her eyes became so wide they nearly popped out of their sockets. "I-I'm sorry, what? I don't think I heard you clearly."

His amusement was as visible as the sun on a summer day. "You heard me clearly, Ayra."

"Did you say The Oasis?!"

"I most certainly did."

She sputtered, making hand gestures until she found the right words. She reminded herself to breathe. “We’ll be living in The Oasis?!”

His amusement began to fade. “Do you not like The Oasis?”

“Are you crazy?!” She could barely stand still. “Ibrahim, The Oasis was ranked as one of the most luxurious residential structures in Atlantica, not just Aomi. Every apartment there costs a lot.”

He nodded slowly, as calm as ever. “I am aware. I could also afford it so...”

Ayra’s heart flipped again. “Oh my God.” There was disbelief and excitement; both emotions going neck to neck. “Oh my God...The Oasis.”

“You’ll love it. It’s currently being cleaned out and then they’d get started on furnishing. Everyone’s telling me you should be the one to furnish it but I was hoping to do things differently. I want the finished apartment to be a surprise to you.”

Ayra could only stare at him, wondering just what more he had in store and if she could take it all. She realised then that she’d always dreamt of being his wife. She never put in her head that if she ever became his wife, there were so many things that were going to change; starting with the lifestyle she’ll be moving into.

After Monwict, Downtown Aomi was the second most luxurious area and it crawled with politicians, celebrities and influencers, foreign settlers born into wealth, prodigies like Ibrahim and his friends, and then the rich families who had so much money to spend. Downtown Aomi was the contemporary version of Monwict and every single place there was beautiful as well as freaking expensive. High on the list of the most luxurious properties was the twelve-floored residential building named The Oasis; the same place she was now going to live in a few months.

Ayra couldn’t believe it. She also couldn’t wait to tell Ibtu.

She snapped out of her head when she felt warmth on her left cheek and her eyes widened even further when she realised Ibrahim was now right in front of her, his hand on her cheek. He didn’t break their locked gaze. “Are you okay?”

She wasn’t. Her heart was going haywire and so was every brain circuit. Did she tell him that? No, she did not. She nodded, praying her lungs didn’t give up on her. “Yeah. I was just really amazed at everything.”

“Does this make you uncomfortable? My hand on your cheek, I mean.”

A part of her currently short circuited brain told her to say yes but every other part of her screamed no. His hand on her cheek felt *really* good and God, she felt so safe. She shook her head. “No.”

He smiled then and it wasn’t a small smile. It was a wide smile that nearly had her knees buckling. He was beautiful. He was so, so beautiful. “Good.” He let his hand drop and he took a step back. “I’ve wanted to do that since the engagement party. You’re a very beautiful woman, Ayra, and I’m honoured to have you as my fiancé.”

Dear God, Ayra prayed, be merciful to my heart. Please.

“Mum mentioned me having plans for us this weekend.” He said, saving her from having to think of a reply. “Every member of the squad is back in town and they want to meet you and Ibty on Saturday. It’ll be a dinner at Nathaniel and Anneth’s house; just something small and intimate. It’ll be fun too.”

Her excitement returned in full force and she grinned. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Very. I do look forward to it.”

“I look forward to it too!”

He stared at her for a long moment before he smiled. “Come on, let’s go back in. I’ll text you the details later. For now, let’s go in and pray Isha. Let’s join Ibty too.”

Ayra happily nodded. “Let’s do that.”

An hour later, the same driver who’d brought them drove Ayra and Ibty out of Monwict, back towards Plum Boulevard. He bit back a small smile as he listened to both ladies scream excitedly in the backseat about all that’d happened in the hours they’d spent in the mansion and then make plans for the Saturday dinner date they had with The Hexad Squad which consisted of six of Atlantica’s most sought after individuals.

06

“...so Ibrahim and I have agreed that since September is going to be busy for me with school and all, we’ll take things slowly to just kind of know each other better and also make decisions regarding the type of wedding we want and regarding everything else that’ll come after.”

It was Saturday morning and the Abdulaziz family sat around their dining table, leisurely eating breakfast of rice pudding while filling each other in on the latest developments.

“I think that’s a good plan.” Muhsin said, turning to his wife who nodded in agreement. He turned back to Ayra. “That way, you can finish up registration and documentation before you two provide the framework you’d want us to work with for the wedding and, like you said, for everything that comes after.”

Ayra smiled, nodding after taking yet another spoon of the sweet dish. “Exactly!”

Salama lowered her spoon and used her napkin to clean her hands. “So, how has being engaged been so far?”

“God, Ummi!” Ayra let her head dramatically fall to the table, causing her parents to laugh. “It’s beautiful, honestly.” She picked her head back up. “Ibrahim’s everything I’ve imagined and so much more. I think what I love most is how vocal he is with me. He’s quiet to the whole world but when we’re together, he talks a lot and I love it.”

Her expression turned dreamy and she rested her face on the hand she propped up on the table. “He’s doing better at explaining what he feels too, all for my sake, and it doesn’t get better than that. Also, he’s really attentive and he always ensures I’m comfortable. Honestly, I’m living my best life and I love it so, so much.”

Salama mirrored her daughter’s position; propping up a hand on the table and resting her face on it. “I feel like there’s more.”

Ayra’s expression became sober and she sighed. “It’s just crazy how elite his family actually is. It’s intimidating sometimes, especially when I take a minute to really think about it.” She smiled again. “But I know I’ll be fine.”

Muhsin reached out and put a hand on hers, smiling. “You will be fine. We have no doubt about it. Just keep being yourself.”

“And do not get too swayed by everything.” Salama added. “They’re a very wealthy family and you’re going to see it all come into play when the wedding plans are put into motion. While it’s always nice when a lot of

money and planning goes into a wedding, it's still you who has control over how most of the things should go so don't get swayed by the fact that they're elite. It doesn't matter how expensive things are going to be when they're shown to you; if you don't like it or you're not comfortable, then we don't have to go with any of the provided choices."

"But," Ayra shifted a little uncomfortably. "What if Ibrahim likes the choices? What happens then?"

"You shouldn't love someone more than you love yourself, Ayra." Muhsin said softly. "If Ibrahim loves something and you love it too, then that's fine. But if he loves something and you're not okay with it, you don't have to go through with it. Loving someone doesn't automatically mean loving everything they love, including the things you don't love. Differences are healthy in a relationship."

"As long as they're well communicated." Salama quickly added, smiling when Ayra turned her way. "Always love yourself before loving someone else, Leilani, because on the days that'll be hard, you can only be there for yourself. No one can be there for you if you're not there for yourself."

Muhsin nodded. "Exactly."

Salama rolled her eyes, still smiling. "Don't even start, Muhsin."

"I love you too."

Ayra laughed, feeling really light and really loved. "Don't start being all mushy here...I love you both. Thank you."

Like they always did since she was a kid, both Salama and Muhsin smiled warmly at her and told her she was welcome. The conversation then shifted to the date she and Ibtiyaj had that night with Ibrahim's friends who'd become his second family.

"I'm excited!" Ayra was on the edge of her seat. "This is a big deal for me, Ibty too. God, I can't wait to meet them. I really hope they love me."

"They will love you." Salama assured, picking her spoon. "What's there not to love?"

Ayra blushed furiously. "Ummi..."

"It's true." Muhsin told her, bopping her nose before pulling his hand back. "You're the most lovable person, sweetheart, and so is Ibty. If they don't see that, they're blind."

Ayra blushed even further. Salama chuckled before she asked "So, who do you look forward to meeting most?"

Images of a certain Italian woman filled Ayra's mind and she nearly swooned, her smile wide enough to split her face in two. "Bella...I can't wait to meet Isabella Valentino."



Anneeth and Nathaniel Samson – the only ones married in the Hexad Squad – lived on the crescent shaped residential area that sat between Downtown Aomi and Eastside, a tourist favourite district in Aomi filled with a lot of attractions and recreational areas with a few residential structures here and there.

When the car sent to pick them up came to a stop in front of tall black gates that hid everything beyond it, Ayra and Ibtihaj took little breaths to calm their nerves and excitement. According to Ibrahim, it was going to be a casual and fun-filled dinner so both of them were dressed the part.

Ayra was in a white long sleeved shirt which she'd tucked into the waistband of black, loose and overly comfortable trousers. She'd then worn a long beige knitwear sweater jacket over the shirt and trousers, completing the look with a tortilla coloured veil – which she draped over her head, covering the same coloured cap she wore underneath – and white platform sneakers for added height because she knew every one of Ibrahim's friends was taller than she was.

Ibtihaj, on the other hand, was very comfortable in wide legged boyfriend jeans which she paired with a white, loose, button-down tunic shirt that stopped mid-thigh, a dark brown veil, and denim sneakers. They both took along tote bags which held the necessities; phones, purses, and their little toiletry kits as one could never be too careful.

The gates automatically went open after the driver dialled in and just like the time they visited the Fahad Mansion, Ayra and Ibtihaj were left speechless. A driveway led from the gates to the villa itself which sat deep inside the compound. The driveway was wide with trees on both sides, beyond which were well mowed lawns. The villa was beautiful; a bungalow that perfectly combined stone walls and full glass windows and doors.

Right at the entrance was Ibrahim and he gave both of them a small, warm smile when they got out of the car. Ayra told her heart to be still as it went feral at the sight of Ibrahim in distressed jeans and a turtleneck top with sandals on his feet. He had his hands in his pockets. "You two got here good?"

Ayra nodded, Ibtihaj doing the same beside her. "We did."

“*Omo*,” Ibtihaj stated. “You guys are very classy when it comes to property *sha*.”

Ibrahim chuckled. “We are.” He turned to the driver, thanking him for bringing them safely, and then he turned around. “Come on, everyone’s already inside.”

Both their hands finding each other’s, Ayra and Ibtihaj followed. Beyond the dark front door was the foyer; a wide space with cream tiles and off-white walls. There was a wide circular mirror on one wall and a tall shelf right beside it which held beautifully framed photos of Anneth and Nathaniel as well as a welcome sign that read “*Welcome to Nathaniel & Anneth’s Home. Nathaniel has to be on good behaviour though, or he’ll be kicked out*”. Ayra loved it and it made Ibtihaj burst out laughing. The foyer had two single sofas too and a contemporary chandelier which shone brightly.

As Ibrahim led them into the sleek living room, a male screamed out. “Yo, they’re here! You guys better get the heck out of those rooms. Anneth and Nate, you better not be getting freaky in there!”

Ibtihaj and Ayra exchanged astonished looks before stepping in deeper after Ibrahim who chuckled before he said “Burst our eardrums, Jalal. That’s all you’ve wanted to do anyways since the very first day we all got introduced.”

Ayra’s eyes widened and Ibtihaj’s breath hitched at the male who laughed as he half-hugged Ibrahim. “Get out, Ibrahim, before I embarrass you in front of your fiancé.”

“I dare you. I don’t have much embarrassing moments. You though...”

Pushing his friend away, Jalal Ahmad faced Ayra and Ibtihaj. His smile was breath-taking. “Hello. It’s a pleasure to meet you two. I’m Jalal Ahmad,” He pointed towards Ibrahim. “And I’m that idiot’s best friend. Well, I’m one of them.”

His file opened in Ayra’s head and everything she knew about him got refreshed in her brain’s library. Jalal Ahmad, the only Software Analyst in the group; the same age as Ibrahim, and an Atlantican from Costa Casa with Moroccan blood from his maternal side. He was extremely intelligent, worked his way through systems and applications as though they were abc’s, had a lot of money, and was the life of every party. He was very loud too and he was a beauty; golden skin, cognac eyes, Grecian nose, round lips, and one firm jaw.

Before Ayra could say it was nice to meet him too, Ibtihaj’s mouth opened and the words stumbled out before her brain caught up. “You’re a fine man *sha*.”

A moment passed and then they all laughed, the embarrassment and awkwardness fading away. Jalal wiped away a fake tear. “God, I’m going to love having you around. You’re so –”

He was pushed away and both ladies found themselves staring at a widely smiling Anneth. She squealed and threw her arms around them, pulling Ayra and Ibtihaj into a bone crushing hug. “God, I’m so happy to meet you two!”

Anneth Samson who used to be Anneth Davies until she got married to Nathaniel as soon as he became a certified healthcare professional. She was an Atlantican from Nohea, a year younger than Ibrahim, a computer analyst, and a woman with the best of connections at home and abroad. She was considered the mother of the squad with her big heart and stern attitude when the situation called for it. Like everyone else in the squad, she was brilliant and God, she was beautiful; chestnut brown skin and same shade of eyes, a straight nose, bow shaped lips, a very curvaceous body so many people drooled over, and an enviable afro currently in jumbo box braids. Also, she scented nice, and she hosted the best parties.

She pulled back, her smile still wide. “You guys have no idea how eager I’ve been for your arrival. We’re gonna have so much fun together, I promise.”

“Sweetheart, you’re gonna scare them away at this point. Let them breathe.”

Anneth giggled, turning to the male who stopped right beside her. “Leave me alone.”

He smiled lovingly at her. “I can’t.”

Ayra was ready to melt as she watched Nathaniel Samson peck his wife’s lips before turning to her and Ibtihaj, smiling as he said it was really, really nice to meet them both.

Nathaniel Samson was the only non-tech person in the squad but that didn’t mean he didn’t know how to work his way around computers and applications with how long they’d been around each other. He was a paediatric doctor, a mix of Atlantican blood and that of Madagascar, the oldest in the squad – a year and half older than Ibrahim, the wealthiest in the squad (once generational wealth was out of the picture), and also the tallest. He was the second quietest after Ibrahim but everyone in the world knew he was whipped for his wife. Anneth had him tightly wrapped around her finger.

“Yo...Y’all are making introductions and no one called me? Y’all are snitches, I swear. You’re all crazy.”

It was amazing how well Ibtihaj hid her excitement. Anneth rolled her eyes, clearly enjoying the feel of her husband's arm around her shoulders. "And that would be Tobi, the idiot of the group."

Tobi Enioluwa joined them, lightly slapping Anneth's arm before he turned to Ayra and Ibtihaj. "Sup?"

Ibtihaj squeezing the life out of Ayra's hand was the only thing that stopped her from squealing and it made Ayra want to laugh as Ibty had been vehemently saying she does "not have a crush on Tobi Enioluwa".

Tobi Enioluwa was a year older than Ibrahim, making him the second oldest after Nathaniel, and he was a computer scientist. A Nigerian from Osun, he was one of the best computer scientists who graduated from De Montfort and he went on to become a star in West London before moving to Aomi with the rest of the squad as soon as they all finished schooling. He was tall, smart, stylish, loud and a party lover, and he was almost too handsome for his own good; a man who rocked his dark skin well. Also, he was loyal to his family which was something Ibtihaj really loved.

"Are you done talking to girlfriend number three?" Anneth asked. "I hope she's not fighting with girlfriend number four."

Tobi smirked. "They know better. I already tell them I'm not ready to commit in the long run and that I'm seeing other people but they always get ahead of themselves. They can fight for all they want. I'm only whipped for Number Three, so..."

Ibrahim chuckled. "You're such a playboy."

Tobi mock-bowed. "Glad to be at your service."

Ayra turned to look at Ibtihaj and it took a lot of strength to not burst out laughing. Every admiration Ibtihaj had for Tobi was gone and she looked at him as though he was the worst thing the Earth provided. The friends were too engrossed in their playboy jokes to even notice.

"*Ben fatto*, Jalal. I told you to call me as soon as they arrived."

Ayra felt her world stop. Slowly, she turned and like every time she came across an article, a picture, or a video, her heart skipped at the beauty of the Italian woman named Isabella Valentino.

Isabella "Bella" Valentino was the type of woman that made heads turn when she walked into a room. She was ethereally stunning and she knew it. She had flawlessly long legs and the short romper she wore accentuated them along with her physique that so many people were ready to worship. Her hair was a deep shade of black and it was long. On days like this, it was

straight, and on other days her natural waves were on full display. Her skin always had a tanned shade and she rocked it well. Then there was her face; perfectly carved full brows, stormy grey close-set eyes with lashes that put so many others to shame, a straight nose that barely needed contouring when she wore full make-up, and full lips that had rocked so many shades of lipstick; lips that many men and women always said they wanted to kiss.

Bella was a software engineer like Ibrahim and their similarities didn't stop there. They were the same age, born a day apart from each other (Bella was born first), and they'd both topped their class in each year they'd spent in school. They were the first members of the squad to meet each other and they were the ones who came up with the ideas for most of the applications they'd created over the years. They were also the ones who ran the company and among all six of them, Ibrahim and Bella were the closest. They were so close that they'd been suspected to be together once but Bella had told the world she had a lover; a man she hid very well as he wasn't as popular as they were. Even Ayra, with all her digging, didn't have a clue as to who Bella's lover was.

She pulled Ayra into a hug and it was hard for Ayra to miss the scent of her perfume. She pulled back a little later. "*Dio*, it's so good to meet you, Ayra."

Ayra opened her mouth to say it was so good to meet her too but what came out was "You scent exactly like Ibrahim."

Every member of the squad burst out laughing and Ayra would have exchanged looks with Ibti Haj if the beauty of the scene – especially the beautiful sight of Ibrahim laughing – did not knock the air out of her lungs. Anneth nodded when they were sober. "The biggest perfume thief in this group is Bella and I think Ibrahim's tired of changing his perfumes because of her so they've stuck to this one. We all have actually. He's rubbed off on us and I have no doubt he's going to rub off on you too."

Ayra's cheeks burned as she told Bella "I'm sorry."

Bella waved it off, still laughing. "It's fine." She then hugged Ibti Haj. "You must be Ibty. It's so nice to meet you too."

Ibti Haj, who was as big of an admirer of Bella the way Ayra was, smiled back. Deep inside, she was over the moon. "It's really nice to meet you too."

"Okay!" Anneth clapped her hands, getting their attention. "Allow me to do the official introductions. Guys, this is Ayra Abdulaziz and her best friend, Ibti Haj Adeola." She smiled proudly. "I finally pronounced it right!"

Ayra and Ibtihaj nodded, causing her to smile even wider while the others shook their heads with fond smiles. Anneth ignored them and went on. “Ayra and Ibt, this is the Hexad Squad. I’m Anneth Samson, and this man right here is my lovely husband, Nathaniel. You already know Ibrahim so I’ll skip him. This is Jalal and he’s the life of any party.”

Jalal saluted. “At your service.”

“And this is Tobi, the biggest flirt you’ll ever meet and also the most ruthless heartbreaker.”

Tobi brought a hand to his heart. “You wound me, Anneth.”

The only person who didn’t laugh was Ibtihaj as she quickly eyed him in disgust, wondering why she’d liked him out of everyone in the group. Anneth went on. “And this is Bella, our damsel. She’s the friendliest person and also the most secretive, especially when it comes to that lover of hers that I can’t tell you about yet.”

Bella laughed. “I’m done with you, Anneth.”

“I love you too.”

Ayra smiled so beautifully and her cheeks darkened when Tobi said her dimples were arrows shot at his heart. “It’s really lovely to meet you all.”

“Same here.” Ibtihaj said with a smile of her own. “I’m honoured.”

Anneth beamed as though they’d handed her the sun. She took their hands. “On that note, do come in. I shall gladly take you around. And before I forget, you’re welcome. You’re welcome to mine and Nathaniel’s humble home.”

And with that, she pulled them in.

07

The Samson Villa was designed in the shape of the letter ‘U’ and it was more beautiful inside than it was outside. The villa was built to centre around a pool that was clearly built for ultimate relaxation. It – the villa – had four bedrooms, three bathrooms, one big garage, and lots of greenery in front with half of that size at the back. There was a gym too.

The living room was to die for and so were the kitchen and the master bedroom which Anneth and Nathaniel shared, as long as “we’re not fighting, otherwise he’s sleeping on the couch” (according to the lady of the house herself). It was easy for Ayra and Ibtiḥaj to loosen up and fit right in although it took some time to understand some inside jokes and, in Ibtiḥaj’s case, conveniently learn to ignore certain people as long as they weren’t talking to her.

Dinner was to be eaten by the pool and the table Anneth and Nathaniel had pulled out of the basement store could comfortably take them all. Anneth had covered it with black linen and she made sure every inch of space was covered with cutlery and with well-made dishes that majorly revolved around meat.

“Don’t blame me,” She told Ayra and Ibtiḥaj. “We’re meat lovers in this house and once there’s an opportunity to prepare as much meat as possible, Nate and I are all for it. *Bon Appetite*, and watch the drinks you pick. Some of those floral bottles are actually fruit beer which we – me, Nate, Jalal, and Tobi – love to death.”

Ayra chose to sit beside Ibrahim who’d been talking more since they arrived, and laughing more too. Wanting to be a little freer, she removed her jacket and draped it on the back of her chair. Ibtiḥaj sat on the opposite side of the table, right beside Bella.

“Honestly,” It was Bella. She looked between Ayra and Ibtiḥaj. “You two dress really well.”

Ibtiḥaj smiled proudly. “When you have a mum like mine, it’s impossible to not do so. We don’t dress like you or Anneth though. You guys are the fashionistas.”

Anneth flipped her braids over her shoulder. “Well, we do love to impress. But Bella’s right, you two dress really prettily. And you both like to be comfortable too. Also, I’d love to meet your mum. I’m sure she’s going to be my kind of person.”

Ayra laughed, nodding. “She is. She’ll love you so much.”

Ibtiḥaj grinned. “Exactly.”

Tobi easily opened a beer. "I'd like to meet the mums too." He grinned at Ibtihaj. "Let me know when I can do that. I'm sure she my kind of person too."

Ibtihaj calmly picked up a bottle of water, her eyes trained on the bottle cap. "My mother doesn't like playboys. She doesn't like the men that prove to the world that Yoruba men actually deserve the title Yoruba Demons."

Every other person burst out laughing while Tobi's jaw hit the ground. Ibtihaj smiled sweetly at him, shrugging. "I'm not one to judge anyone's lifestyle but it's the truth."

"God," Nathaniel said between laughs. "I really like her."

Tobi picked his jaw off the ground. "I can be on my best behaviour. I mean, she doesn't have to know about my girlfriends. The world doesn't know much about them so..." He smiled smugly. "I think I'll be fine."

Ibtihaj said nothing but Ayra saw how her best friend poured the water from the bottle into a glass with more force than necessary. It made her laugh quietly. They began passing the dishes around after they recovered from the laughing fit, helping themselves with one thing or the other.

"So, Ayra." It was Jalal. He smiled at her. "This our friend right here has been very stingy with information about you."

Ayra glanced at Ibrahim, surprised. "Are you serious?"

Jalal nodded while Ibrahim said nothing. "Very serious. To be quite frank, we didn't see him settling down anytime soon because he's so addicted to work but lo and behold, he calls us one day and tells us there's a woman who now has his heart."

Bella snorted. "I can remember how all of us were too stunned to speak."

Anneth slapped her husband's arm, laughing. "It was a shock."

Ayra could only listen, amazed at all they were revealing. When she looked at Ibrahim, she found him cutting his meat into smaller slices with a slight rosiness on his cheeks. It went straight to her heart.

"Tell me about it." Jalal told Anneth before turning back to Ayra. "It took us by surprise and then we got curious, y'know? We wanted to know all about you but Engineer Fahad here didn't want us to. We know what we know from snooping around your social media pages."

"And the first thing I told him," Tobi said, "was that you were a very beautiful woman. Ibrahim nearly killed me."

Ibrahim's smile widened a little. "I told you to take your playboy habits away."

Ayra's heart was soaring and she shared a secret glance with Ibtihaj who clearly loved all she was hearing. Bella laughed, picking up her glass of wine. "He was so protective of you but he eventually had to spill. Even then, he didn't spill much, no matter how much we tried to blackmail him. I never thought the day would come when Ibrahim would be this whipped but here we are."

Ibrahim leaned back in his seat. "Go on, guys. Embarrass me."

Anneeth laughed. "Oh, we're going to do that in the coming weeks. For now," She turned to Ayra. "Let's do things the cliché way. So, Ayra, tell us about yourself."

Ayra's cheeks got warmer and warmer as they all focused on her. "Where do I even start from?"

"Anywhere." Jalal replied with the widest smile on his face. "Don't even leave out a tiny detail."

Ayra let a moment pass before she exhaled. With a small smile, she began. "Well, you already know my name but for the sake of making it the starting point of my story, my name is Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz. My father named me Ayra and my mother named me Leilani because of a painting my father got for her while she was pregnant for me. It was a painting of a little baby sleeping comfortably in a blooming Hawaiian Leilani flower and all she wanted was to have a girl who looked like that baby in the painting?"

"And?" Nathaniel asked, ready to melt. "Did you look like that baby?"

Blushing even more, Ayra nodded. "Yes, I did. Ummi – my mum – said my father predicted how I was going to look. My father always tells her he told the artist to paint a baby who looked like her but had some features of his too. So, yeah, I ended up looking like the baby in the painting. The painting is in their room. It's been there ever since and it's one of the things I love so much in the house."

They stared at her as though she was the full moon on a clear night, each one of them listening to her every word. Feeling more courageous, Ayra made herself more comfortable and continued.

"I'm an only child. It's not like my parents didn't want more; it's just that life doesn't always go the way we want it to so they got content with having just me and spoiling me rotten. Don't get me wrong, they could be strict

when the time called for it.” She grinned when they laughed. “I’m Nohean actually.”

Anneth gasped. “Like me!”

Ayra laughed, nodding. “Yes, like you. My extended family’s majorly based there but I have uncles and aunts and cousins all around Atlantica. My early school days were at Aomi Central before I moved to Harmony High for my secondary education because it was closer to home and I really liked how the classes looked. The teachers were nice too.”

Beside her, Ibrahim folded his arms. “I stayed in that Aomi Central my whole life until I graduated and moved on to Leicester.”

Ayra smiled, acting as though she didn’t already know that. When she’d done a background check back then, it had taken every ounce of self-restraint to not ask her parents to move her back to Aomi Central so she could “walk down the same hallways Ibrahim Fahad walked down”.

“I then moved to the University of Atlantica to study International Communication,” She continued. “And I met Ibtly on my very first day in the university gardens.” She smiled at her best friend who smiled back. “We’ve never looked back since then...And now, here we are. I’m Ibrahim’s fiancé and I’m here with his best friends. Oh, Ibtly and I are also planning on returning for our master’s next month but be rest assured that’s not going to stop mine and Ibrahim’s wedding.”

“So,” Jalal was literally on the edge of his seat with curiosity rolling off him in huge waves. “When did liking Ibrahim come into the picture? Because I refuse to believe you agreed to marry this man without liking him. I refuse to believe it.”

Ayra rolled her lips in and knew deep in her heart that there was no way she was going to tell them she’d spent the last seven years of her life loving Ibrahim and knowing everything about him to the extent she now had an encyclopaedia in her head with his name on the front cover.

“Well, well, well...” Anneth’s smile was mischievously devilish. “There’s something you’re not telling us, Ayra. I think that’s *very* juicy information you’re hiding.”

Ayra’s face was as red as the tomatoes on one of the plates on the table. “It’s not been *that* long.”

Ibtihaj didn’t mean to snort but she couldn’t help it and that was all the members of the squad needed to know that there was a lot more to the tale. Even Ibrahim was genuinely curious.

Ayra shook her head. "I'm not saying. All I can tell you is that it hasn't been that long since I started liking him and thankfully, we're now engaged so we got our happy ending."

Bella sipped her wine, smirking a moment later. "We're definitely coming back to this conversation in the future."

Ayra didn't look forward to that, at all. Thankfully, they didn't press and they focused on Ibtiḥaj to hear about her while taking small bites of their meals and small sips of their drinks.

"I'm actually Nigerian." Ibtiḥaj began. "I'm from Lagos and until we moved here about five years ago, I lived in Lagos from the moment I was born. I have two older sisters, who are both married, and right now I'm enjoying the fact that I'm the only child in the house and the fact that Ayra and I live in the same estate so I can go disturb her whenever I want."

They all laughed at that and she grinned.

"My dad getting a job here that paid much more than what he made in Lagos was what brought us here to Atlantica and I got enrolled at the university. I met Ayra on the first day and it turned out we were both studying international communication so we bonded and now we like to act like twin sisters, just born two days apart and from different mothers."

Nathaniel's eyes widened. "Are you serious? You guys are born two days apart?"

Ayra nodded. "Yep. I'm older though."

Ibtiḥaj rolled her eyes. "Yet you'll be acting like *mumu* sometimes."

"Tbty!"

"Did I lie?"

Anneth laughed the loudest and they all joined in. Tobi spoke when they were calmer. "You're Yoruba like me. That's something worth connecting over."

Ibtiḥaj couldn't mask her irritation. "*Shey eleyi o ti ya wery bayi?* (Shey this one is not mad like this?)"

Jalal brought a hand to his chest. "Damn, has Yoruba always been so sexy?"

"Please," Anneth said between laughs at Tobi's stunned expression. "Can someone translate?"

Ayra, who'd heard the phrase a lot and knew exactly what it meant, did her best to hold her laughter. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

Nathaniel was also laughing. “Tobi, you’ve met your match.”

“Enemies to lovers,” Bella said. “I’m all for it.”

Ibtihaj’s face scrunched up further. “*Olorun ma je*.”

“Oh, I know that one.” Anneth said, laughing even more. “It’s God forbid, yeah?”

Laughing, Ayra nodded. “It is.”

Tobi composed himself. “My ego’s bruised but I’m gonna make you fall in love with me, Ibtty. I’m a nice guy and I’ll prove it to you.”

Ibtihaj smiled sweetly. “Let’s wait and see.”

It was nothing short of beautiful after that. They talked, they laughed, and when they finished eating, they cleaned up before heading in. Ibrahim got two bottles of water and joined Ayra on the sectional sofa in the living room while Ibtihaj went with Anneth into one of the rooms, teaching her some Yoruba slangs while avoiding Tobi at all costs. The others were doing one thing or the other.

Ayra took the bottle from him with a small smile. “Thank you.”

He sat right beside her. “You good?”

She nodded immediately, her smile widening. “I am. They’re the best people. I love them.”

“And they love you. They love Ibtty too.”

She blushed adorably. “They have to love Ibtty.”

“They have to love you too. You fit in nicely and that was lovely.”

“Well that makes me happy. Does it make you happy too that I fit right in?”

“What else is there to feel?”

She held his gaze, her heart doing a graceful summersault in her chest. Ibrahim stared right back, that signature small smile on his face. Ayra looked away first for her own sanity. “Right...”

“So, getting to know each other better comes next, right?” He asked calmly. “Along with building how we want our future to be. There’s your registration and documentation too.”

She nodded, looking at him once again. “Yep.”

“I’ll check my schedule and free it up as much as I can so we can have time to do as much as we can throughout September. That way, we can start putting plans in motion for the wedding in October.”

“What kind of wedding do you want?”

He put his unopened bottle on the side stool and made himself more comfortable, folding a leg beneath him. Ayra’s eyes followed his every move and she swallowed with little difficulty while her heart did another flip.

“I want whatever you want, Ayra.” He replied. “I’m okay with whatever you want.”

“That makes me nervous.”

“It shouldn’t. You’ll be calling shots. You’re going to be the queen of my house anyways so...”

She bashfully looked away. “Stop it...”

“I’m serious though.”

She toyed with the fabric of her trousers. “I know. My heart’s just a mushy mess.”

“I don’t think I should apologise for that. Right?”

She let out a small laugh and nodded. “You don’t need to.” She smiled at him. “You don’t have to apologise for that at all.”

“Good.” A quiet moment passed. “There’s something I’ve been thinking of actually.”

Her smile dimmed. “Okay...”

“Do you wanna work? Like, when you’re done with your master’s degree, do you want to work?”

Ayra averted her gaze, putting her also unopened bottle away. “Actually...I’ve not thought much about it.” It was the honest truth. “And to be frank, I don’t think I want to.” She brought her gaze back to his. “I know it’s nice to be independent but honestly, I don’t like the idea of working. I mean, is it so bad to want a life where you’re just taken care of?”

“No.” He said immediately, not once looking away from her. “It’s not. You’re the type of woman who deserves to be spoiled rotten, Ayra, so no, it’s not bad for you to want a life where you’re pampered and treated like a queen.”

Ayra could only stare at him, falling even deeper and deeper.

Ibrahim's hand moved and he placed it on hers, holding on for a moment before pulling back. The contact had her skin burning in a way it'd never done before and a part of her wanted him to take the hand again and hold it until they had to leave.

"I was going to be supportive if you said you wanted to work." He told her. "But I was hoping you wouldn't want to."

"Why?" Her voice was so quiet.

"I'm not trying to say I want you to be overly dependent on me, don't get me wrong." A long moment passed and she saw clearly how he tried to get the words to come together. "The thing is, I'm already a workaholic and I'm trying to work on it because when we get married, I can't just sit in the office for hours on end although there are days when that's unavoidable."

She nodded and he continued. "And then when the kids come along, I don't want a situation where we would have to rely on helps and nannies. Also, before the kids even come into the picture, I want you to get that queen treatment where you can live your best life and have anything you want without having to worry about work demands or the money. I simply want you to enjoy everything while I worry about the long demanding hours and the hustle and bustle that come with a job. That'll stay the same even after the kids come. I don't know if I'm clear enough."

Ayra felt as though she was floating. She nodded, smiling. "You are." God, she loved him. "You are being very clear enough."

"And is that okay with you?"

Okay, for Ayra, was the understatement of the century. Her smile stretched wider. "It's perfect."

Ibrahim's smile started out slowly. "Yeah?"

She nodded with no hesitation. "Yeah. I wouldn't want anything more, Ibrahim. It's perfect."

To her, December couldn't come fast enough. She really couldn't wait to be officially his.

Ibrahim was smiling properly now. "Good."

She smiled right back, hers brighter than his. "Good."

And just like it'd been in the second living room of her home on the night of their engagement party, time stopped existing and only that moment was important. They stared at each other, smiling, and every butterfly in Ayra's

stomach was fluttering at double speed and she didn't want to do anything to stop them.

The beauty of the moment was, unfortunately, ruined when Nathaniel threw a cushion at them. "No one but Anneth and me get to share love in this house. Get out if you wanna get all mushy."

Ayra's cheeks darkened when she realised every single person was now in the space, watching them with small smiles, smirks (in the case of Jalal, Tobi, and Ibtihaj), and knowing looks. Ibrahim sighed, rising to his feet. "You all are starting to annoy me."

Jalal scoffed. "Must be nice to be in love and engaged."

"Tell me about it." Ibtihaj said in full agreement, her eyes on her blushing best friend. "Must be very nice."

Bella fake-gagged. "I cannot get used to this side of Ibrahim."

Tobi snickered. "You better get used to it, Bella, because it's about to get worse. We've seen it happen with Nate and Anneth."

Husband and wife gave him the middle finger while the others laughed. Half an hour later, they were saying goodbyes and each person promised to be in touch and hang out a lot. Tobi tried to flirt with Ibtihaj but thought twice when she shot him a daring look. It made them all laugh again.

Ibrahim personally drove Ayra and Ibtihaj back to Plum Boulevard. As Ibtihaj got out of the car when it stopped in front of her house, she tugged at Ayra's veil. "You better call me when you're home. We have a lot to talk about."

Ayra knew better than to say no. "Sure."

Ibtihaj smiled at Ibrahim. "Goodnight, Ibrahim!"

"Goodnight, Ibtj."

Minutes later, Ayra turned in front of her house's front door to face her fiancé. Ibrahim had his hands in his pockets and his signature small smile on his face. She smiled right back. "I had fun tonight."

"I did too."

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "I really don't want to go inside."

"But we can't stay here all night."

"Yeah..." But she wanted them to. "We can't."

A near minute passed before he spoke. "You should head in, Ayra. I'll text you later."

"Promise?"

He gave her a slight nod. "I promise."

She smiled then. "I'll look forward to it...Goodnight, Ibrahim."

"Goodnight, Ayra."

Smiling at him once more, she opened the door and headed in. Once the door closed, she moved to the security screen and watched him stand on the front porch for a minute longer before turning around and walking away.

"Well, someone clearly had fun."

Startled, Ayra turned around to find her parents wearing matching eerie grins. Undiluted curiosity shone in their eyes and she rolled hers. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough." Salama replied. "So, how did it go?"

Ayra finally let her knees buckle and with a dreamy sigh, she fell to the ground with a lot of dramatics which had her parents laughing in no time. Back in House 47, Ibtihaj hissed as she got out of her outfit and into a bathrobe so she could shower.

"That *werey* named Tobi Enioluwa." She hissed again. "Let me just catch him on the streets. *Ashano* like him. Nonsense and ingredients."

On the expressway leading towards Downtown Aomi, Ibrahim drove straight home.

08

On Thursday September 24, Ayra and Ibtihaj finished classes an hour after Asr. Glad neither of them drove, they booked a Ryde and waited. It didn't take long for the requested car to arrive and the best friends were more than happy to get into the backseat, letting out tired breaths.

"Thunder is supposed to strike those people who say that master's is easier than bachelors." Ibtihaj stated. "They're mad. All of them."

Ayra leaned her head against the cool window glass. "Tell me about it. I'm tired."

"Better no talk that one o. Wedding preparations begin next weekend so you and Ibrahim should better do and wrap up this your knowing each other stage so we can move forward and officially enter owambe season."

Although her eyes stayed closed, Ayra smiled. "Leave me alone, Ibtj."

"You never see anything." Ibtihaj then sighed again and stretched. Once her arms were back down, she made herself very comfortable and shut her eyes. "Don't wake me up until we reach the gate of my house. I swear if you try yourself, your fiancé will pay money just to find your body."

Ayra chuckled. "Yes ma."

Silence descended but it was comfortable. A minute later, Ayra opened her eyes, leaned back in the seat, and stared at the places they leisurely drove past. Her mind went down the usual memory lane of how the month had been so far.

In the first week, she and Ibtihaj had returned to the University of Atlantica to get officially documented as master's students of the institution. It was no way similar to the documentation they'd done at undergraduate level and it wasn't because there were less documents requested and all of that. It was because Ayra was now publicly known as Ibrahim Fahad's fiancé and she went from being just another student to being someone that everyone wanted to talk to and worship. Even the staff members – many of them – were overly nice and Ibtihaj called it hypocrisy in broad daylight.

Her photos were often taken now and more than once a day someone posted it online and it went viral. The Fahads, just like they promised, had security measures in place for her and Ibtihaj so people knew better than to try and get too close. That didn't mean some people weren't intentionally stubborn simply because they wanted traffic on their sites and accounts.

She, Ibtihaj, and The Hexad Squad now spoke a lot and they had a group chat on every social media platform they were on. Ayra loved it so, so much

and she looked forward to when they'd be free at the same time so they could hang out again. The highlight of the group messages were Ibtihaj and Tobi's bickers and Ayra would never say it out loud but she loved how Ibtihaj constantly gave Tobi a run for his money, bruising his ego time and time again while everyone else laughed and told him to leave her alone because she was clearly not interested.

Then there was her relationship with Ibrahim which was blooming beautifully. She was more in love with him than ever, something she didn't think was possible with how much she'd loved him in the last seven years of her life.

They hadn't seen themselves in person since the start of the month with how crazy their schedules had been but they'd stuck to their agreements of getting to know each other better through texts and calls. They texted more than they called though and Ayra did not mind it one bit.

It was so good to learn everything about him, both things she already knew and things she had no idea of; his birthday (December 31st), him being the only child because of his parents' choice to have just one kid, his weight, his height (he stood at five feet and eleven inches, having seven inches over her), his blood group (O-positive), his genotype (AA), the places he'd schooled at (Aomi Central, De Montfort University, and then the University of West London), his career (starting as a student intern at Aveva and then establishing The Hexad with the others), his lifestyle preferences (luxury at its finest), his admirable love for greeneries (he loved forests and getaway locations hidden between trees and vegetation), his favourite colour (shades of brown, particularly the darker tones), his favourite meals (he loved seafood dishes and did not have a favourite drink), and every other thing a person could think of.

For everything she learned (both old and new), she fit herself in and painted them as a very, very compatible couple. She told herself that those born in July like her fit perfectly with those in December. She believed it was fate that they were both only kids who wanted to have more than one kid in the future. Their height difference, to her, was perfect and she would not say it out yet but she was really looking forward to hugging him and having him hold her whenever she wanted, as long as he was free.

She liked that they'd attended different schools (even though she thought differently when she was younger) as it gave them things to talk about since they had different experiences. Their blood groups were compatible as she was AB-positive and she loved that he was AA as her genotype was AS. Her current lifestyle wasn't as luxurious as his but she loved it and she looked forward to both their lives merging. She loved the sea and the

beaches and she said they fit because one could always find greenery around a beach. She loved warm tones and she knew those colours went well with dark brown tones; just another way in which they were perfect, and she loved seafood too. Everything about him, there was a way to fix in something about her and she loved it with all of her heart.

And then there was the fact that she'd come to realise she was the romantic one out of them both. It was something that thrilled her to no end and not even Ibtiḥaj knew just how many plans she'd drawn up to make their marriage as beautiful as possible.

She snapped out of her head and realised they'd gotten to the estate and that the vehicle was close to Ibtiḥaj's house. She turned to the driver and smiled politely out of habit. "House 47 is our first stop, please."

"Alright."

When the car came to a stop, Ayra shoved her best friend. "Wake up and get out."

Ibtiḥaj, as expected, glared. "I don't blame you, Ayra." She hissed and picked up her bag before opening the car door. "I don't blame you at all."

Ayra smiled nicely. "I love you too. I'll talk to you later."

Ibtiḥaj got out. "It's not like you have choice before. I meant what I said o. You and Oga Ibrahim should do and finish abeg so that we can step in. I already have a list of vendors." She grinned. "I can't wait."

Ayra simply rolled her eyes. Minutes later, she was stepping into the foyer of her home and fatigue properly rested on her shoulders then. The sound of approaching footsteps reached her eyes and a moment later, Salama was stepping into the foyer with a smile on her face.

"Hello, sweetheart." She opened up her arms. "How was school today?"

Ayra let herself be hugged, soaking in all the warmth. "Ummi, they lied when they said master's is a breeze when compared to bachelors. They really lied."

Salama chuckled. "I told you but you didn't want to listen." She tightened her embrace. "You'll be okay, sweetheart." She then pulled back. "Falilat was here earlier. She told me to send her greetings."

"Are you serious? I'll hopefully stop by their house tomorrow and say hi. It's been a while."

Salama caressed her daughter's cheek, smiling warmly. "Take your time, Ayra. We all know how busy you and Ibty are. Also, you have a fiancé now so you're extra busy."

Ayra rolled her eyes in a futile attempt to not blush. "Ummi, let's not go down this path again."

Salama laughed. "We should...Speaking of fiancés, a certain Ibrahim Fahad sent a present for his fiancé an hour earlier. The said present is currently in the second living room, waiting to be opened."

That was all it took for Ayra to step back from her mother and then start running to the said space. Every curtain in the second living room was pulled apart, letting natural light in, and right on the top of the coffee table was a black wrapped rectangular box that was slightly bigger than what she'd expected.

Dumping her tote bag on one of the sofas, Ayra took small steps towards the coffee table and finally noticed the black envelope that sat right on the top of the wrapped box. As though she was scared it'll disappear if she wasn't careful, Ayra slowly picked the envelope up. She knew when Salama joined her but she didn't turn around.

She opened the envelope and pulled out the card that lay inside; a card that held The Hexad's logo on the front and a message from Ibrahim at the back. The message had her smiling in no time.

'I cleared my schedule for Saturday because the phone calls and texts are not enough anymore and I want to see you before we step into October. As much as I don't want it, it's going to be a busy month for me and the wedding plans would be drawn up too which means you'll also be busy.

So, let's have dinner at The Phoenix on Saturday. I'll have a driver come pick you up and I hope this outfit fits. I can't wait to see how it looks on you and I can't wait to see you too.

- Ibrahim.'

She read the message again before she slipped the card back in the envelope and put it aside. Going on her knees on the rugged floor, she began to unwrap the box. Salama snorted from behind her. "Ayra, why are you being extra careful? You're never patient with box wrappings."

Ayra really tried to stop her cheeks from reddening. "Leave me alone!"

Salama laughed. "No."

Once the wrapping paper was completely off, Ayra gasped at the signature logo of one of Atlantica's most luxurious female fashion brands; *Lady Bee*.

Salama knelt beside her daughter, just as stunned. “Lady Bee? Wow...Open it, Leilani.” She then laughed. “I’m even more excited than you are.”

With a racing heart and slowly bubbling excitement, Ayra reached out with both hands and lifted the lid of the box, putting it on the space on the rug beside her. She then slowly – and very carefully – pushed aside the protective wrapping, revealing what sat underneath. Her stomach dipped and her heart jumped to her throat. Salama’s eyes couldn’t get any wider. “Oh my God...”

Staring back at both women was a complete outfit that had been professionally folded and arranged to fit the length and width of the box. Very much in disbelief, Ayra reached in and brought them out one after the other.

She pulled out the apple red dress first and unfolded it, spreading it out on the rug. It was an A-line dress – sewn out of silk crepe chiffon – with a turtle neck, an elastic band around the waist, and the loveliest bell sleeves she’d ever seen. Ayra fell deeper in love with Ibrahim as she ran her fingers lightly over the fabric. She loved it; it was something she’d definitely get for herself if she’d gone shopping, and she was yet to try it yet but she had no doubt it’d fit. She was sure she wouldn’t even care if there were slight adjustments that could be made. He got it for her so it was perfect. She was going to argue it out with anyone.

“It’s beautiful.” Salama said quietly. “It’s really beautiful.”

Ayra nodded. “It is.”

“Let’s bring out what’s left.”

Ayra did not need to be told twice. She pulled out the shoes next; black stiletto heels with pointed toes in her exact shoe size. The black veil came out of the box next, then the black shoulder bag, and the little velvet box that held silver earrings and a ring that were obviously expensive.

“I don’t know about you, Leilani,” Salama said. “But this is the best present someone can give. God, he has beautiful tastes.”

“He does.” Ayra agreed. “He really does.” She then grinned. “I’m going to try it on.”

“And I’ll be right behind you.”

They put every single thing in the box and they headed up, Salama remembering to pick her daughter’s tote bag. Ayra changed in record time and everything fit so perfectly with no room for any adjustments. She

smiled at the woman reflected back at her through her mirror. Where she sat on the loveseat, Salama was ready to melt. “You’re so beautiful.”

Ayra’s smile stretched wider. “I do take my looks from you so...”

Salama laughed. “Yes, you do...Twirl for me.”

Ayra was more than happy to do so and she laughed when Salama dramatically acted as though she’d been shot. She then got her phone out of her bag and fired a text to Ibtiḥaj, knowing it would be read immediately. A near minute later, a video call came in from the said best friend. Laughing again, Ayra accepted it and placed the phone on its vanity stand so Ibtiḥaj could see her clearly.

Ibtiḥaj’s eyes widened and the spoon she held fell. “Omo!”

Unable to help it, Ayra doubled over and continued laughing while her heart soared and the flutters in her chest and stomach continued, the feeling never getting old.



The Phoenix, a high-end restaurant in the Eastside district, occupied the entire top floor of a high-rise commercial building. The restaurant’s interior was a beauty to behold as it combined shades of black and gold, adding aesthetically pleasing items that complemented every nook and cranny. The sights of the Atlantic Ocean in the distance the panoramic windows offered was yet another edge it had over other restaurants and it could boast of one of the best menus and customer services in the entire country.

Ayra, feeling more beautiful than ever, smiled at the reception staff who smiled right back. “Hi, good evening. I’m meeting up with Ibrahim Fahad.”

One of the staff members nodded, her smile widening. “He’s expecting you. This way please.”

Ayra nodded and followed. She was led past the general restaurant area which held tables that could comfortably take twos, threes, and fours, and towards the private rooms. The female employee led her to the very last room and knocked once before sliding the door open, revealing Ibrahim who turned away from the window that had an even better view of the ocean.

Ayra told herself to breathe and it nearly proved impossible when he smiled at her. “Ayra.”

She swallowed with slight difficulty. “Ibrahim.”

“Come in.”

Focusing on breathing in and out, Ayra complied and the door slid shut behind her. Putting one leg in front of the other, she walked to the table and gracefully slid into the free seat. Ibrahim did not once look away from her neither did he stop smiling.

Ayra put her bag away and then braced her heart before facing him, taking a minute to take him all in. He was in his signature outfit but in all black. His curls had been trimmed but it still fit him so well, and then there were those eyes of his that never failed to captivate hers.

He propped his elbows up and linked his fingers, resting his chin on them. “You look ethereal, Ayra. This looks way better than I imagined when I made the purchase.”

Ayra wondered if the room got hotter or if it was just her. She swallowed again and did her best to play it cool. “Well, a certain man with good tastes got it so I had to wear it well.”

He laughed very quietly. “And you’re wearing it perfectly.” He said nothing for a moment, just staring right back at her. “But it’s beautiful. And I’m glad I got it for you.”

Her dimples were on full display. “Thank you.”

He put his arms down, folding them. “I don’t think there’s any need for that. I came to the horrifying realization that I’d never gotten you something so I decided to change that. I’ll get you more moving forward.”

She wondered if she’d survive it. “Ibrahim –”

“I did tell you I was ready to treat you like royalty so let me do it. Besides, I can comfortably afford it all so...”

Her heart had been flipping. “Well, I don’t have anything to say to that.”

He smiled once again. “Good...Let’s order drinks?”

She nodded, smiling right back. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

He pressed the button at the side, calling a waiter, and once their drink orders had been taken – a virgin pinā colada for him and a mango mule for her – Ibrahim and Ayra spoke about how their week had gone. Ayra did most of the talking with a smile on her face and he listened, his entire attention on her. They’d both been busy and they were both glad it was the weekend.

“I’m leaving for Italy with Bella and Tobi next week Saturday actually.” Ibrahim told her moments after their drinks arrived. “There’s this conference where new applications are to be uncovered to the public. We

go for such programmes from time to time. It helps us understand where the public's leaning towards and it also helps in getting inspiration because a lot of people in the industry come together and there's a lot to share. There's a lot to be learned too."

Ayra didn't mean to pout but she couldn't help it. "How long would you be gone?"

"About two weeks...I'm sorry. I'm going away for work when we should be starting our wedding plans."

She managed a small smile. "As much as I'd like you to be here with me when the planning starts, I understand you have work and I know how important this is to you." She sighed. "I'll be fine...We will talk, right?"

"You don't even have to ask." A minute passed and he took a few sips of his colada before he asked "What kind of wedding do you want?"

Her smile began small but it stretched slowly into a wide grin as the excitement bubbled. She leaned forward. "Something really unique. I don't want something over the top but it should be big enough and it should be classy. What kind of wedding do you want?"

"The exact one you want." Keeping his eyes on hers, he leaned back in his seat. "I meant it when I said I'm okay with whatever you want, Ayra. I also meant it when I said you'll be the one calling the shots."

"But the wedding should reflect equal parts of both of us."

"And I have no doubt you'll represent me well." He leaned forward again, folding his forearms on the table. His eyes appeared brighter underneath the room's lighting and he finished off his beautiful look with that small smile of his. "You do know me better than anyone else at this point so I have full faith in you, Ayra. I have full faith that you can do this, and I'll be right beside you every step of the way."

Ayra could only stare at him as every part of her so badly wanted to tell him that she loved him. She remembered Ibt'y's words so she pushed the confession back. She would tell him another day, but God she wanted to do it in that very moment. Ibrahim stared right back at her and when he spoke, his voice was softer.

"I want you to pick whatever you like, Ayra, and whatever you want. If you want us to go all out, we will go all out. If we have to shut down Aomi, be rest assured that we will do it so the world can know how lucky I am to be marrying an amazing woman like you."

She smiled, blushing. “There’s no need to shut down Aomi, Ibrahim. I just told you I want something unique and not something over the top.”

“I’m serious, Ayra. If it means bringing the world to a stop just to tell them I’m married to you, I’ll do it, and I’ll kill anyone who tries to stop me.”

She laughed and he smiled wider. She then exhaled softly, nodding a moment later. “Very well, Ibrahim. I’ll make the choices for the both of us until you return, and I’ll do my best to ensure every part of the wedding has traces of the both of us in it.”

“I trust you.”

And I love you, she wanted to say but once again she pushed the words away and said instead “And I trust you too.”

“And when I return, we can go check out what would be our future home. I’m carefully picking out the furniture pieces because I want everything to be perfect and I’m also vetting the list of interior designers because I want to work with only the best of the best. You deserve nothing less so...”

Ayra wondered if he could see just how much she loved him as she softly said “You’re honestly the best thing that happened to me.”

“Trust me, Ayra,” He said even more softly than she did. “I should be the one telling you that. I know we’re going to be fine and I’m really looking forward to the future we’ll share.”

They smiled at each other and then when he asked if they could order their meals, she nodded with a small laugh. “Yes, please.”

An exact hour later, they both stepped into the elevator with smiles on their faces and Ibrahim pressed the ground floor button. Once the doors shut, he turned around and stared at her, putting his hands in the deep pockets of his dark coat. Ayra stared back at him although all she wanted to do was bashfully turn away under the intensity of his gaze; intensity she wasn’t sure she was going to get used to anytime soon.

Once again the concept of time ceased to exist for them and it felt as though even that very moment was slowly sucking them in, making everything fade into nothingness including the mirrored walls of the elevator they were in. Ayra felt the urge to confess again and it pressed down on her chest as she took everything about him in; enchanted by every little detail.

Ibrahim smiled; a smile much smaller than any of the ones he’d given her. He took a small step forward and put his hands on the railing she leaned against, caging her in and wrapping her in the bubble that was all him. His

eyes did not once leave hers and as the elevator ride came to an end, he leaned in and rested his forehead against hers.

“I hear you loud and clear, Ayra.” He said so quietly that she almost missed it. “What else is there to feel?”

09

On the first Saturday of October, the female members of the Fahad family arrived Haven Estate as early as 8:30AM and they went straight to the Abdulaziz home.

Salama, who was clearly not expecting them, was the one to open the door and she barely had time to step away as Ibrahim's aunts and older cousins forced their way in, talking and acting as though they owned the house. Disoriented, Salama turned to the woman closing the entourage.

Fareeda smiled brightly. "Good morning, Salama."

"G-good morning. Fareeda, we weren't expecting you today. You said you were going to reach out with the final date, time, and venue for the first meeting."

Fareeda did not stop smiling as she reached out to pat Salama's shoulders. "The ladies said they wanted it this morning and there's only so much you can say to deter them." She walked in, past Salama. "Impromptu meetings are also fun, Salama, so we'll be fine. Where's my darling Ayra? She should come down so I can introduce her to everyone."

Not okay with how the morning was turning out, Salama closed the front door, left the women to get comfortable in the main living room, and headed back up. Muhsin rolled over on their shared bed when she opened the door. He blinked sleepily. "Who was it?"

She walked to the nightstand and picked up her phone. "The Fahads. Apparently, they want to have the meeting here and now."

He sat up. "What?"

She scrolled through her contacts. "I'm quite surprised too. Fareeda said impromptu meetings are also fun and I don't why but it all feels off." She dialled her close friend's line and brought the phone to her ear. "Can you wake Leilani up? Please."

He nodded, already leaving the bed. "Sure."

As he left the room, the call connected and Salama exhaled in relief. "Falilat, good morning. We have an issue."

In the other room, Ayra flinched in bed when the lights were switched on. Frowning, she raised her head and turned towards the doorway where Muhsin stood. She sat up. "Baba?"

"Hey, sweetheart. You may want to wake up now."

Her frown deepened while a soft throb began in her temple. "Why?"

He walked over to the bed. “Your future family members are here and they want to have the first meeting concerning the meeting this morning. It’s very impromptu and it’s weird but we can’t really send them back now so...”

She was out of the bed the very next moment and Muhsin waited until she was inside the bathroom before he sighed and left the room. As he made his way back to where to his and Salama’s room, he heard the women downstairs laughing and talking, and he knew he had to freshen up and head down to say hi to them and welcome them despite not knowing why they were there so early.

He walked in on Salama getting changed, her face having water droplets that were drying off.

“I called Falilat.” She told him as she adjusted the sleeve of the boubou she now wore. “She said she’ll be here as soon as possible with Ibty. I don’t think any of our siblings would get here quickly but we should let them know what’s happening. Is Ayra up?”

“Yeah, she’s in the bathroom...This is very weird. It’s way unlike them to just pull up a spontaneous meeting when they were the same ones who said they’d get back to us regarding the venue, date, and time.”

She managed to smile at him, grabbing her veil and phone. “Well, let’s just pray it doesn’t get worse. Please freshen up and come say hi downstairs.”

“Sure.”

She pecked his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

In the other room, Ayra was this close to panicking. She had never taken a bath that quickly before and she had her teeth brushed in record time. As she applied oil to her skin, her phone rang and she accepted the call immediately, putting it in speaker mode.

“Ayra.” It was Ibty. “Mummy and I are on the way to your house. We even took the car sef instead of trekking. I don’t understand. Which one is the Fahads are here? This early on a Saturday morning? No be juju be dat?”

Ayra worked on the length of her legs, too in a hurry to revel in the bliss that came with such routines. “I don’t even understand either. I’m just getting dressed and I am so glad you’re coming.”

“We’re almost there. I’ll come up to get you immediately we arrive. That’s okay, shey?”

“It’s perfect, Ibty. Thank you.”

“Abeg, abeg, leave that one first. We’ll be fine.”

The call ended and Ayra moved from her dresser to her wardrobe. It was very easy to pull out a boubou, having no idea her mother currently wore the exact same thing, and its veil. She picked out underwear next and put everything on. Ibtihaj arrived as she finished and the other one wasn’t smiling.

“Me I don’t know what these people are trying to do but it doesn’t make sense. How can you show up in someone’s house this early and be saying you want to have meeting? Uncle Muhsin is downstairs. He’s saying hi.”

Ayra walked over to the dresser and adjusted her veil with the help of the mirror. “Are they a lot?”

“I think so. There are quite a number of cars outside sha.”

“Are you serious?”

“Check your window now.”

Ayra did and she regretted it. Mustering courage, she plastered a smile on her face. With a sigh, Ibtihaj linked her arm with Ayra’s and they headed down. The main living room was filled with the Fahad women, each one elegantly seated. Chairs from the dining room had been brought in to sit those who didn’t get space on the sofa and Ayra smiled nervously as she and Ibtihaj said hello.

The responses they got varied. A few women – like Fareeda – were sincerely happy to see her and Ibtihaj. Some others pretended to be happy with their overly fake smiles and forced laughs while the rest didn’t pretend at all. They looked Ayra up and down, as though she was the prey and they were vultures trying to get their first meal.

Instead of the excitement Ayra always imagined she’d feel when the wedding preparations began, she felt discomfort and underneath that, there was fear. There was no excitement; none at all, and it scared her.

Salama stepped into the room, smiling with the practiced warmth that came with being a host. “Ibty, Ayra, please just find somewhere to sit.” She turned to the others. “Does anyone else need anything? Tea? Coffee? Water? Anything.”

Fareeda beamed, a teacup in hand. “I think we’re good. You should sit so we can get this meeting underway. Where’s Ibty’s mum?”

Falilat stepped in. “I’m right here.”

Space was created on one of the sofas for Salama and Falilat while Ayra and Ibtihaj made themselves comfortable on the Persian rug that covered most of the living room. One of the female Fahads cleared her throat, getting their attention. She put her cup on the side stool and then crossed one leg over the other.

“Ladies, it gives me great honour to chaperone today’s meeting. It’s very impromptu, I know, but we have to understand that such weddings have a lot to be planned and it’s October already. We only have this month, next month, and a little bit of December to put everything in order so we have to hit the ground running.”

“A heads up would have been nice.” Salama said. “We would have been better prepared and our family would have been better represented. Right now we’re outnumbered.”

“That’s why this is just the first meeting, Salama.” Fareeda said. “In Shaa Allah both sides would be very much represented in the coming meetings. This is just for us to have a timeline and to draw up the first list of things we’ll need, vendors we’ll need to contract and things like that. Besides, Ayra’s here and the bride to be being here is more than enough. Don’t you agree?”

Falilat’s expression mirrored her daughter’s. They stared at the Fahads as though they’d lost some of their senses. Salama could only smile tightly while the chaperoning female laughed a little too lightly.

“You’re absolutely right, Fareeda.” She said. “Salama, we’ll be fine. Besides, we’ll be family soon so these impromptu meetings are bound to happen. Anyways, let’s get started.” She turned to Ayra. “Future Mrs Fahad, do you have anything arranged for the wedding yet?”

Disliking the attention on her, Ayra fixed a smile on her face and shook her head. “Not really, no. I do have some ideas of what I want and the people I’d like to work with but I haven’t –”

Another woman, one of those who’d scrutinised her when she came down, cut her off. “Oh for God’s sake. This is the wedding of the year and there’s very little time. It’s a good thing we came today. Only God knows how behind schedule we would have been had we come at an even later date.”

Ibtihaj scoffed. “*Kini gbogbo radarada yi bayi?* (What is all this nonsense?)”

The chaperone pulled out a notepad from her bag. “I have to agree with you, Gigi. It’s a good thing we’re here today and it’s even better that we already made plans ahead. Why don’t we start with the proposed wedding planners, ladies? Then we’ll discuss décor teams and then fashion designers.

I'll begin. I propose we reach out to Giselle. They have been planning the most beautiful events recently."

Another enthusiastically nodded. "I have to agree with you. I attended one recently and it was so lovely."

"What about Kim Harden?" Fareeda suggested. "Her team has been really good too."

And as though the Abdulazizs and Adeolas did not exist in the same space with them, the Fahads went on to discuss what planner was best for the wedding. Ayra, for the first time, felt dumb; as though she no longer had a voice. Each name the Fahads mentioned was more elegant than the last and she'd seen the works of every individual or company suggested. Luxuriously elegant was an understatement in describing those events. They all cost more money than she could imagine and she felt so out of place as she'd honestly wanted her mother – Salama – to handle the event planning with the companies she (Salama) was affiliated with.

The current scenario playing out was the direct opposite of what she'd expected, especially after Ibrahim told her she would be the one calling the shots; the same night he'd indirectly told her he loved her too. She bit the inside of her cheek, feeling the tears coming as she watched – in a somewhat out of body experience – as the Fahads went on and on, laughing between suggestions.

Where she sat, Salama quietly seethed and when it got too much, she threw her politeness aside and cut in. "Excuse. Me."

Every conversation ceased and they all faced her. She sat with her left leg crossed over her right while her clasped hands rested on her knees. Her back as a straight as a rod and her veil slipped back little by little, exposing the flat twists underneath.

"A wedding," She began. "Is a union between two families and I am sure we know that already. In this case, your family and ours are coming together as one and that means that both sides should have a say in every single matter."

"But you will have a say, Salama." Fareeda said. "We were just making suggestions."

"It didn't sound like suggestions." Salama told the other woman. "It sounds as if you all already know what you want and we have to follow suit."

"We were going to give you the chance to make your own suggestions." The chaperone stated.

“Yet you didn’t allow Ayra finish talking when she said she has some ideas and some people she’d want to work with.” Falilat shot back. “Like Salama said, it’s like you already knew what you wanted.”

“It’s the wedding of the year.” One of the Fahads said. “Do you think it’s that easy to marry Ibrahim Fahad? Do you know how many women would die to be in your daughter’s shoes?”

Salama raised a brow. “Excuse me?”

Fareeda, clearly uncomfortable, shifted forward on the sofa she occupied. “Uhm, ladies, why don’t we –?”

“I don’t understand.” Falilat began, frowning. “What do you mean by that statement? Which one is do we know how many women would die to be in Ayra’s shoes? *Sho wa alright ni?* What does that mean?”

Fareeda tried again. “Ladies, let’s –”

“Do you think you are doing us a favour?” Falilat asked, ignoring Fareeda. “You were the ones who brought a wedding proposal and Ayra accepted when she could have rejected it. Now a wedding date is fixed and according to what Ayra told us, Ibrahim told her she’ll be the one calling the shots. We all said we’ll start planning in October and you were supposed to tell us the date, time, and venue for the meeting yet you show up here at an ungodly hour on a Saturday morning, with a list of already picked out vendors and you’re opening your mouth to ask whether we know how many women would die to be in Ayra’s shoes. *Wó, don’t vex me o. Kini gbogbo radarada yi bayi?* What’s all this this early morning?”

“Ladies!” Fareeda finally said. “Why don’t we take a moment to –?”

“Is this the family Ibrahim’s marrying into, Fareeda?” Another Fahad asked. “Because we can honestly do better.”

Ayra wanted nothing more than for the ground to open and swallow her up. It felt like a slap to the face and the momentary silence that followed was loud. Ibtiḥaj was too stunned to even do or say anything else.

Fareeda turned to the woman who’d spoken with wide eyes. “Sabeeha, why on earth would you –?”

Salama rose to her feet. “I think this meeting is clearly a joke and a big mistake. I want you all out of my house, now.”

Fareeda stood too. “Salama –”

Salama held up a hand. “No, Fareeda. In all the years we’ve known each other, I’ve looked up to you as a wonderful friend and recently I’ve been

looking forward to having you as an in-law. However, right now it feels as though I've known just one side of you and now I'm seeing another side and I do not like it one bit. I am not about to allow your family come in with no prior notice, trample on my daughter, and then speak ill of my family. I think we should reconsider this whole engagement and until we decide what we want to do, everything can go to hell for all I care."

Fareeda was way too pale. "Salama –"

"I want you all to leave. Now!"

Ibtihaj stood and pulled her best friend up. "Ayra, come on. Let's not stay here abeg. What nonsense!"

Ayra let herself be led up, flinching at the voices that grew louder and louder. They met Muhsin at the top of the stairs and he frowned at the tears in her eyes. "Ayra?"

"Uncle Muhsin, I think you should go down o. Because my mother, Aunt Salama, and me will soon beat somebody." Ibtihaj told him. "But don't worry, I'll take care of Ayra."

He was heading down a moment later while Ibtihaj led Ayra to the room. Ayra moved to the loveseat and sat while Ibtihaj closed the door and let the rage consume her.

"Are these people mad?! Ayra, are you sure we're not going to reconsider all this? This one is the height of disrespect o. What nonsense! See how they were even judging when you and I went down. God forbid."

Crumbling inside, Ayra buried her face in her hands and focused on breathing in and out just so she didn't burst into tears. Ibtihaj was now pacing, getting even angrier.

"And then Ibrahim's mother! Omo, she seemed like a different person today compared to how sweet she was when we visited their mansion. I mean, we've always known they're on a different level than us but so far they didn't rub it in our faces so we assumed all was well. Hah, we should have kept our minds open because this morning's disrespect is too much. You of all people don't deserve that, Ayra, and honestly it doesn't matter whether or not you love Ibrahim very much because God forbid we allow you marry into a family that would only look down at you. God forbid it."

Ayra raised her head when her phone rang, a tear sliding down her cheek. Ibtihaj's anger immediately disappeared and her chest squeezed. "Ayra..."

"Can you please help me with my phone?"

“Sure.” Ibtihaj walked over to the bed and picked up the ringing phone before she walked back to the loveseat. “It’s Ibrahim.”

Ayra sniffled and breathed in and out before she plastered a smile on her face and accepted the call. “Ibrahim, hi!”

“Ayra.” His voice had an edge she wasn’t used to and it made her stomach drop. “I heard my family’s over at your place right now. Is that true?”

She relaxed a little, holding onto the hope that the edge in his voice wasn’t directed at her. “Yes, it is.”

“Did you all know they were coming?”

“No, we didn’t. Baba literally woke me up from sleep and we had to call Aunt Falilat and Ibtty over.”

“Is my mother there with them?”

“Yes. Ibtty and I left them downstairs though. Things got a little out of hand.”

Ibtihaj scoffed. “A little *keh?*” She ignored Ayra’s look of slight panic. “What? He should know. You heard your mother, Ayra. This entire engagement is going to be reconsidered and I am all for it. The see-finish is too much abeg.”

“I’m on my way there.” Ibrahim told Ayra over the phone. “I told Bella and Tobi to go ahead without me. I’ll catch up with them in Milan.”

Ayra’s heart did its usual flip. “Ibrahim, you don’t –”

“I’m already at your estate gate, Ayra. It’s fine. I’ll leave with enough time to meet up with the opening of the conference. You’re most important right now. I’ll be fine.”

That was all it took for her to start crying. Ibtihaj sighed and sat beside her, pulling her into a side hug while Ibrahim promised to be there soon before he hung up. Ibtihaj sighed again. “It’ll be alright. They’re just mad.”

Ayra held onto those words for dear life. It didn’t long for them to hear the gates go open through the open windows and then a car door went open and slammed shut a moment later. The best friends didn’t move from the sofa until the voices downstairs got a little louder.

Ayra pulled away from Ibtihaj and stood. “Come on, let’s go down.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, smiling a little. “I am.”

They held each other's hand as they left the room and headed down, clearly hearing what was being said with every step they took forward.

"...Ayra and I are the ones getting married, not any of you, and you have no right to try to plan our wedding from scratch when you hardly know what we like. You have no right to be here with no prior notice in the first place!"

"Ibrahim," It was Fareeda. "You should calm down."

Ibtihaj and Ayra reached the doorway of the living room and the latter could barely recognise her fiancé. Ibrahim was livid and it was as clear as day as he faced his mother.

"Mum, you of all people shouldn't have tolerated this. If every other member of the family wanted to move stupidly, you shouldn't have tolerated it. I called Dad to let him know I was heading to Raven Isle, only to hear that you led the family here without any prior notice."

"They didn't give me a choice. What was I supposed to say? No?"

"Are you a child, Mum, that they can toss around? Even if you didn't want to say no, couldn't you call Ayra and her parents and tell them you wanted to come over? What sort of nonsense is that?"

"Ibrahim —"

He stepped back, bringing a hand up to massage his temple. He sighed. "I want everyone from our family gone except you, Mum. And you can be rest assured that this is the last time they'll be part of a meeting that involves my wedding to Ayra."

It was chaos after that but he wasn't having it. When he repeated himself, his voice was icily cold and the women reluctantly began picking up their stuff. Ayra and Ibtihaj stepped aside for them to pass through and they made sure to voice out their disapprovals, making Ayra want to shrink into herself even more. When the last one was out, Fareeda gave her son a look of clear disapproval.

"You're going to cause a rift, Ibrahim. You can't exclude them when they're family and you know they only want the best for this wedding."

"And Ayra's about to be my family so you should know I'd do anything to protect her. You of all people should know that and I am so confused and hurt because you're acting like someone else."

"Ibrahim!"

He turned away from her, towards Salama, Muhsin and Falilat. “I am very sorry this happened. If I had any idea of this meeting, I would have done everything to stop it.”

“It’s fine, Ibrahim.” Salama told him. “We just all need to let off some steam and decide what we want to do moving forward. I meant what I said earlier. There are a lot of things to think about moving forward with all that happened this morning. Ayra means the world to me and I’m not going to let her go into a family that has sides we haven’t seen before.”

It was the first time Ayra saw what resembled panic on Ibrahim’s face and it squeezed her chest to the point of pain.

“We’ll sort things out, I promise.” Ibrahim said, his words unusually rushed. “I can assure you this won’t happen again so please don’t –” He blew out a breath when his voice cracked slightly. “Please don’t call off the engagement. I promise this isn’t going to repeat itself and if Ayra and I have to be the ones to plan the whole thing from scratch with the help of your friends, we’ll do it. Just, *please* don’t call this off.”

Falilat crossed her arms and looked away. “*Eleyii ni opolo* (At least this one has sense).”

Salama opened her mouth but Muhsin squeezed her hand which was in his. “Let Ayra decide. She’s the main character in all of this.”

Ibrahim was the first to turn in her direction and it was the first time Ayra saw his eyes as an open book, revealing his mix of fear and desperation. She turned from him to Fareeda who offered a small smile that Ayra couldn’t bring herself to return. She then turned to Falilat who nodded slightly, her way of saying Ayra could go ahead with whatever choice. Ayra then looked at her parents. Salama was still mad but like Falilat, she was going to support Ayra’s decision. Muhsin was calmer and supportive too.

Ayra then turned to her best friend who did not care that Ibrahim and his mother were in the room. “Omo, it’s up to you o but if they do anyhow, I will carry them to Third Mainland Bridge and throw them into the sea.”

Ayra didn’t want to laugh but Ibtiyah made it so hard. Feeling better, she turned back to Ibrahim. “I don’t think there’s any need to call off the engagement or postpone anything. I think we should wait until Ibrahim returns from Italy to have these meetings and I suggest we have them in smaller groups and in restaurants or cafes and not in our homes. That way, we can pick out those who we want to be there and then they can disseminate the decisions made to the others.”

Salama nodded slowly. "That's fine by me." She turned to Fareeda. "I still think you, Muhsin, Salim, and I need to talk. Al-Amin and Falilat will be there too, because there's a lot we're not going to take and I am not going to sit back should this repeat itself."

Fareeda nodded, her smile tight. "I understand."

Ibrahim exhaled, looking very relieved. "Thank you." He said that to Ayra and then repeated it to every other person in the room. "I'm really grateful."

"Come and be going to Italy, my dear." Ibtihaj told him. "Thank you for standing up for my best friend. At least her long-time love is not in vain."

Ayra's eyes widened. "Ibty!"

Ibtihaj, who had not thought much before speaking, smiled sheepishly. "I don't die. Sorry abeg."

Their parents – Salama, Muhsin, and Falilat – chuckled while Fareeda said she and Ibrahim had to be on their way. Ayra walked her fiancé out and took a double look at the car he'd come with; a Miami Blue Porsche 718 Cayman. She looked at him and he looked away, smiling like a kid caught stealing candy.

"I like my cars, Ayra." He sighed and turned back to her. "Thank you, for not deciding to end the engagement."

As though she could do that when she dreamt about him and her as husband and wife for years. She gave him a small smile. "It's alright."

"And I'm sorry, for everything that happened since you woke up and for everything they said. We'll sort it out on our end and I'll draw clear boundaries. I promise."

Her smile widened. "Thank you, Ibrahim, for coming back for my sake."

"You're about to be my wife, Ayra, so you're coming first before a lot of things. This was the least I could do." He then smiled smugly. "You really do love me, huh?"

She blushed and then she rolled her eyes. "I should hit Ibty's mouth." She then sighed. "I do. I do love you...And I hope you hope you feel the same way or else I'd never show my face again."

He chuckled, leaning in. "Come on, Ayra," Discreetly, as their parents were watching, his hand brushed hers and left fire burning on the very spot he'd touched while her heart threatened to give up on her. His eyes did not once leave hers. "What else is there to feel?"

10

After Ibrahim and Fareeda left, they – Salama, Muhsin, Falilat, Ibtihaj, and Ayra – returned into the house. They cleaned up the living room in silence and then washed all the used cups, coasters, and teas kettles. Once everything was back in its usual position, they helped themselves with tea – and hot chocolate for some – and toasts and then made their way to the dining room.

“I know we should probably move on from what happened earlier,” Ibtihaj said slowly. “But it’s been bothering me. Ibrahim’s mother was like a different person. It was very different from the woman who invited us for dinner when Ayra and Ibrahim’s wedding date was fixed. I don’t know if it’s just me.”

Salama shook her head, her hands wrapped around her warm mug. “It’s not just you. She nearly felt like a stranger earlier and I’ve been thinking about it too...But then again, this is the first time we’re actually sitting down to make decisions that involve both families. In the years Muhsin and I have known her and Salim, our discussions revolved around business and then the usual small talk. So we’ve been on cordial terms all these years and I used that to assure myself that Ayra was going to be fine. Now though...”

Falilat scoffed. “Abeg let’s not even talk about it. My own happiness comes from the fact that Ibrahim can stand up to her for Ayra’s sake. Because if he was a mummy’s boy, na for that parlour I for cancel the wedding. Can you imagine the disrespect?!”

Ayra simply sipped her hot chocolate, choosing to stay quiet while her heart weighed heavily in her chest as the gravity of the morning’s events dawned on her. She’d almost had her engagement to Ibrahim cancelled; her dream of being Mrs Fahad had been this close to going back to what it’d always been – a dream.

“We already said we’d have a meeting with Salim and Fareeda so let’s all relax.” Muhsin said, as calm as ever. “We’ll draw the boundaries and state clearly the things we won’t tolerate moving forward. I have no doubt Ibrahim would do the same on his end. Ayra has agreed to let the engagement stay and so we’ll be pushing forward with the wedding. Let’s focus on supporting her and Ibrahim, no matter the choice they make. At the end of the day they’re the ones getting married so...”

Salama, whose expression was so much softer, faced her daughter and offered a small smile. “I’m really sorry, Leilani. They shouldn’t have trampled on you like that.”

Ayra smiled back. “It’s fine, Ummi. To be frank, I’m a little glad it happened. Yes, it was painful to watch them act the way they did and to listen to the things they said, but I’m slowly seeing that sometimes life won’t work the way it does in my head. I dreamt of every single person loving me and this morning’s event has taught me that maybe I should have kept my mind open. That way it wouldn’t hurt this much.”

Falilat got annoyed all over again. She hissed, lowering her mug with a little more force than what was needed. “They’re mad. *Gbogbo won ti ya wery* (All of them are mad).” She hissed again while the others tried unsuccessfully to hide their smiles. “Instead of them to be grateful that Ayra accepted their proposal, they’re opening their dirty mouths *waaa* to say rubbish. Many women are dying to be in Ayra’s shoes. They should die na! Is it because they have money? Do they know how many men would die to be chosen by Ayra and Ibty? They’re mad!”

This time it was hard for all of them to keep their laughter in and the scene – when they all burst out laughing – was a beautiful sight to behold. They’d never know that in reply to what Falilat said, Ayra said in her head “*I don’t care about the men who’d want to die at my feet, as long as they’re not Ibrahim then they don’t matter*”.

The atmosphere stayed light until they finished eating and although Ibtihaj wanted to stay back with Ayra, she and Falilat had to go to the market to stock up on food supplies. Ayra assured her friend that she’ll be fine and hugged her goodbye. She promised to keep Ibtihaj posted if anything came up. After assuring her parents that she was fine and just tired, she headed up to her room and locked the door.

The silence was welcoming and she revelled in it. She tossed her veil on the dresser stool and then she got in bed, lying on her back so she could stare at the ceiling above her and thank Allah for not letting things escalate to the extent of immediate cancellation of the upcoming wedding and the engagement. As she thought about Ibrahim and how he’d turned back on his way to the airport, she smiled slowly and warmth rose up to her cheeks. She then rolled over and smiled even wider, recalling how he’d stood up to the members of his family including his mother, and then his last words to her; “*What else is there to feel?*”

She loved the words and she loved the way he said them even more. To her, it meant more than the usual “I love you too”. Then there was the way her body came alive each time he touched her. She rolled back to lie on her back and then she raised her hand up, staring at the exact spot where his hand had brushed hers.

She pushed away the doubt that began creeping in. “It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong.” She said quietly. “They’re just simple touches and In Shaa Allah we’ll be married soon. It’s not a big deal.”

Sighing, she let the hand drop and she stared at the ceiling until her phone beeped. It was easy to roll over and pick the device up. Once it was unlocked, she clicked on the new messages and it took her straight to one of the groups the Hexad squad had created for them, her, and Ibtiḥaj. Like always, Ayra’s smile started out slowly and it didn’t stop widening until it was a full blown grin.

Anneth: *Yo, I heard what happened and I’m so sorry, Ayra. You too, Ibty.*

Anneth: *You know what? Why don’t we show these people that we can plan a wedding ourselves? We’ve done it before (for me and my lovely husband) and we can surely do it again. We don’t need them. We’ve gotten the important people (Ibrahim and Ayra) and that’s all that matters. Everyone else can buzz off.*

Anneth: *So, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Anneth Samson and I’m the official wedding planner. Who’s in?*

The replies began coming in immediately and Ayra felt warmth bloom in her chest.

Bella: *You don’t even have to ask. Just let us return from Italy. Aomi won’t know what hit them.*

Jalal: *A chance to plan the wedding of the year? Count me in!*

Tobi: *You don’t even have to ask, Anneth. We’re all in. Also, I get to see Ibty so...*

Ibty: *I’m in, Anneth! This is the best news!*

Ibty: *Oluwatobiloba Enioluwa, please avoid me. Please!*

Unable to help it, Ayra laughed, and then she started typing. A message dropped before she hit send and her heart did another of its usual flips.

Ibrahim: *You guys are honestly the best.*

Smiling, she retyped her message and then clicked send.

Ayra: *I couldn’t have asked for anything better. Thank you so much, guys. I love you, all of you.*

Anneth: *We love you too. Ladies and gents, let’s get this party started!*



On Monday morning, an hour after Ayra and Ibtihaj left for school, Salama and Muhsin went with Al-Amin and Falilat to meet with the Fahads. It was the first time in a while that their mansion was bustling with people and just like it'd been on Saturday morning, the Abdulazizs and Adeolas were clearly outnumbered but they didn't mind.

They made it clear, to Salim and Fareeda, that just because both families had been on good terms for years didn't mean they – the Abdulazizs – would sit back and watch their daughter get disrespected or trampled over. They agreed to the fact that the Fahads were way wealthier than they were but they reminded them that Ayra didn't agree to marry Ibrahim because she wanted his money as they – Muhsin and Salama – had raised her quite comfortably and were more than happy to keep doing so if they saw any more need to cancel the engagement.

Ayra was the main character of the wedding, as well as Ibrahim, and they were not going to allow anyone force their opinions on them or disrespect them the way it was done on Saturday morning.

Salim apologised over and over while the females present – from his family – muttered under their breaths. They knew better than to say it to the faces of Salama, Falilat, Muhsin, and Al-Amin; especially with how badly it itched Falilat to get into a fight with little regards for the consequences that might follow. Fareeda apologised too and by the time goodbyes were being said, both families were majorly on good terms again. However, there were still some reservations that the bride-to-be's side prayed did not turn into something else.

That same evening, Salim and Fareeda called Ayra to personally apologise and also to promise that the journey to the wedding was going to be as smooth as possible. They even sent a flower bouquet and a box of chocolate which Ayra was happy to receive. She assured them that there was no problem while Ibtihaj quietly promised to raise hell if the Fahads tried anything funny.

In the days that followed, Ayra and Ibtihaj focused on their classes and assignments as well as on the groups they had with the other members of the Hexad squad where Anneth dropped wedding inspirations she'd come across on all the social media platforms. Whenever she was alone, Ayra went through the ideas over and over again, coming up with a clearer picture of what she wanted. Each time she imagined how it'd go, she smiled brightly and there were times when she buried her face in her hands to muffle her giggles. She honestly couldn't wait for December.

The day after Ibrahim, Bella, and Tobi returned from Italy, they all met at The Waffle Rail; a cosy café in the Business and Institutional Area which had the best waffles and perfect coffee alongside a wide range breakfast options. They were all dressed casually yet nicely and Ayra was over the moon to see Ibrahim in person again.

Bella faked a gag. “You two are too cute. It makes me sick.”

Nathaniel scoffed. “This could be you and your lover but you two love playing hide and seek.”

The others laughed while she glared. Feeling a little courageous, Ayra asked “Will we get to meet him someday, Bella?”

Bella’s cheeks stained with colour and she looked away, clearly bashful. “Maybe. He’s a little shy but I’m sure we’ll work something out.” She then sighed. “For now he’s out of the country. We met him in Italy.”

Tobi snickered. “And he kept you very busy.”

“Tobi, I will hit you.”

Ibrahim rolled his eyes. “Let’s get started, please.” He then smiled at Ayra. “You’ll meet him one day. Let’s just not force it for now. Like Bella said, he’s really shy. It took him a while to meet us so...”

Nodding, Ayra let it go. On the other side of the table, Ibtihaj was so focused on taking the perfect shot of her waffles and the ice-cream scoops with caramel drizzle that she’d momentarily tuned them out. Ayra had no doubt she’d see the post on Instagram later and like every other post of her best friend, she looked forward to it. Anneth got their attention once she was done ogling at her husband and then she pulled out the biggest notepad Ayra had ever seen.

“So,” Anneth said with a blinding grin. “Let’s get started.”

Each person was really invested and it warmed Ayra’s heart. Soon enough the table had a lot of papers which consisted of venue decors, fashion samples, colour palettes, venue recommendations, summarised planner portfolios, wedding mood boards and so on. They let Ayra voice out her ideas and then they went through the inspirations they had to see what worked and what didn’t. They even had to open Pinterest.

“The floral arches can work at the entrance of whatever venue we choose.” Bella suggested a little later. “Then we can have this suspended floral ceiling in the main venue itself. An outdoor wedding is pretty, no doubt about that, but I think a hall would do more justice to the image we’re having.”

Ayra nodded slowly. "I'm leaning towards the hall idea too. Oh, and I love the idea of the floral arches. I'm sure they'll look beautiful."

Bella flipped her hair, proud of herself. "You're welcome."

"We should get a planner settled and then pick a décor company." Jalal suggested, his third cup of coffee in hand. "That way we can share these ideas with them and get professional advice."

Anneth turned to Ayra. "Do you have anyone in mind, love?"

Ayra nodded, feeling nervous. She hoped they didn't react the way the Fahads did the other day. She swallowed slightly. "I haven't mentioned it yet but my mum's an event planner."

"And she's really good at what she does." Ibtihaj added proudly.

Anneth's jaw was on the floor. "And you've been allowing us rack our heads all this time?!"

Ayra shifted on her seat. "Well..." She sighed. "I don't have any excuse. I've been nervous about bringing it up. I've always wanted to have my mum plan my event and she hasn't said anything about it because I know she wants me to make my own choice even if it's not her but I'd really love her to be the one to plan it. She's really good and she's trained a lot of people too; people who are now doing well on their own."

"Please name one of them." Tobi asked, a puppy expression on his face. "I'm awed."

Ayra smiled nicely. "She was the one who trained Iris McCathy. I'm not sure if you —"

Their eyes widened as Jalal cut her off, pushing his chair back so he could stand. "Iris McCathy literally brought my cousin's wedding to life and we were all there so we know how good she is. If your mother actually trained that woman, then we should be at your house right now, kissing her feet. Your mother is more than good, Ayra, and I'm so going to kill you for keeping this information to yourself."

Ayra laughed, unable to help it. When she looked at Ibrahim, her breath hitched at the sight of him already staring at her as though she'd hung his name on the moon. Anneth clapped her hands, startling Ayra.

"Please, no sharing of love here." Like Jalal, Anneth was now on her feet. "We have Mrs Abdulaziz to plan with so up, up! Let's be on our way."

Ibtihaj was more than happy to lead the way out. Ayra rode with Ibrahim and although the ride was quiet, she didn't mind. They were entering Plum

Boulevard when he asked if the squad planning their wedding was better than how she imagined the planning process would go had their families still pushed through to be involved. She nodded, turning to look at him. “It’s so much better, Ibrahim.”

He glanced her way, turning back to the road almost immediately. His smile started out slow. “I’m glad.”

Salama was the one who opened the front door when they got there and she blinked repeatedly, taken aback. Jalal, who stood at the very front of the small group, grinned. “Hello, Mrs Abdulaziz. My name is Jalal Ahmad. Ma’am, do permit me to say I’m your biggest fan.”

Anneth pushed him away, gladly taking Salama’s hands in hers. Her smile was, as always, bright. “And I’m your assistant wedding planner. Anneth Samson at your service, ma’am.”

Salama caught up quickly and then she laughed, looking so much like her daughter. With a smile and a small nod, she stepped aside. “Come on in. The earlier we can get started, the better.”

They didn’t need to be told twice. Ayra was the last one in and Salama’s smile softened at the sight of her daughter. “Hello, Leilani.”

Ayra smiled back; beautifully bashful and so, so grateful. “Hi.”



It took Salama exactly twenty-four hours to take the ideas they had and whip it into a concrete plan that covered every single detail from inception to execution, even the ones they’d missed. Anneth gushed on about how good Salama was and later that night – when they were on all on a video call – Ayra explained why Salama wasn’t such a big name in the event industry.

“She’s always wanted to be a stay-at-home mum, or at least that’s what she told me. It actually started by accident when she met Baba. A neighbour at their house then had a party and the planner had ditched so she was distraught. Ummy stepped in and saved the day and that neighbour went on to recommend her to so many people. She said it got overwhelming after she had me so she stuck to the little events and realised she actually didn’t mind training others. So, she got trained herself and then went on to get registered to train others who were interested. She’s never looked back since then.”

She smiled fondly. “She’s really content when she’s teaching others and she loves it when they go out to do well. I always tell her she can become a big

shot but Ummi's never really liked a lot of attention so she's happy like this."

Jalal looked ready to melt. "Prepare to have me in your house every day, Ayra. Your mum's amazing."

"Me too." Anneth said. "Prepare to have me too."

Nathaniel sighed. "Babe, you can't be leaving me home alone for too long."

"Better get used to it." Bella said before Anneth could. "This wedding is more important than you."

They all laughed when Nathaniel pretended to collapse in pain. Tobi then smirked. "While Ayra's house is beautiful, I learned Ibty stays some houses away so be prepared to have me over one of these days, Ibty. I'm sure your mum would love me."

Ibtihaj, who'd been smiling, sighed tiredly. "Is it too early for me to start praying for thunder to begin doing press-ups in heaven?"

They all ended up laughing again and it wasn't long before they started saying goodbyes. Ayra smiled shyly when she and Ibrahim were the only ones left. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. There are back to back meetings and since Bella's now fully on wedding planning duty, I have to take up most of the workload. Next tomorrow In Shaa Allah."

"In Shaa Allah."

"You should get some rest, Ayra. You have classes tomorrow."

She groaned. "Don't remind me."

He chuckled. "I won't...Goodnight, Ayra."

There were even more butterflies in her stomach. "Goodnight." She swallowed with very little difficulty. "And I love you."

His smile was lethally dashing. "Right back at you, sweetheart. What else is there to feel?"

11

By the end of October, the wedding plans were fully underway and even the ever unsatisfied members of the Fahad family had to admit that although the wedding was not going to be as big as they wanted, it was still good.

Ayra, with the support of Ibrahim, wanted a simple wedding with just three programmes; the henna party for her and the ladies, the Nikkah, and then the reception which would be the highlight of everything. She wanted both the henna party and Nikkah at her family's house there in Haven Estate so it took time to decide where they wanted the reception to be.

After a lot of deliberation, and subtle jabs from the Fahad women, the main hall of the Aomi International Conference Centre was booked; a large space that could comfortably sit six hundred guests banquet style and take a thousand people conference style. Ayra knew they weren't going to have that much people in attendance despite the popularity of the Fahads so it bothered her that they'd have too much space. Salama assured her daughter that it was better to have enough space to fill with décor than to have very little. Ayra calmed down after that.

Iris and another event décor professional, Kim Harden (suggested by Fareeda), were to work with Salama to bring the plans to life. Once that was settled, Ayra, Ibtihaj, Ibrahim, and the others got started on picking out the other vendors. When they weren't working or in school – in the case of Ayra and Ibtihaj – they met in restaurants, cafes, and even in Anneth and Nathaniel's home to go over lists and suggestions, narrowing down options. They pulled up the first guest list too.

In the first week of November, they had their final list and they had the IVs settled before they got started on reaching out to the other vendors that had been picked. The families vetted the guest list, adding names and removing others. The fashion designers were the tricky part because Ayra wanted to be simple but she knew she also had to be elegant for all three events and she didn't want a situation where someone would outshine her. Then there was a part of her that wanted the Fahads to approve too.

So instead of allowing Falilat take care of all her dresses, just like she and Ibtihaj had always planned, Ayra split it between Falilat and a bridal styling company in Monwict; *The Styling Emporium*. For her first consultation there, she went with Ibtihaj, Bella, and Anneth, and the staff members were very nice and also very professional. She told them she wanted something simple yet elegant and they provided samples that she immediately fell in love with.

By combining designs, they came up with a rough sketch for her that she was happy to say yes to and then they drew up the budget as well as the

timeline they'd have for material sourcing, sewing, fittings and adjustments, and then the delivery of the final product. Still not used to using her fiancé's card which Ibrahim had sent over weeks back, Ayra shyly made a deposit and the head stylist promised they'd get started as soon as possible.

Ibtihaj was on cloud nine. "Normally, I would be telling you to take your materials back to my mother but this is good. I approve." Her smile then vanished. "But if the final product is not worth the thousands we just paid, thunder will strike them."

Ayra laughed. "Ibty, please!"

"I don't talk my own."

Bella and Anneth could only laugh alongside Ayra. With time on their hands, they decided to get lunch at a nearby restaurant. Ibrahim called just as their orders were taken and Ayra didn't know why she did it but she excused herself to take the call. She ended up on the restaurant's terrace which gave a beautiful view of the high class district, her phone by her ear.

"Ibrahim."

"Leilani."

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers while her heart turned to mush. He'd never called her by her middle name and now all she wanted was for him to forget her name was Ayra and call her Leilani for the rest of their lives. It'd never sounded so beautiful and that was saying a lot because Salama pronounced the name exquisitely.

"Did I pronounce it perfectly?" Ibrahim asked when she was quiet for a near minute. "I've been practicing."

Ayra forced herself to keep breathing. She grabbed the railing with her free hand. "You pronounced it perfectly. It took me by surprise."

"Well, you can look forward to me calling you Leilani from time to time... You got the deposit made for your dresses."

She took the conversation steer with widely opened arms. "I did. They're really good and I have no doubt I'll love them. If they disappoint, Ibty's ready to be a firecracker."

That made him laugh. "I have no doubt about it. I'll kill them too... Where are you?"

"At Gerald's. We stopped by to have lunch since we have free time. Where are you?"

“I’m heading towards my fashion designer’s place to get my measurements taken. That’s why I called actually. I wanted you to let me know what you’d love me to wear and in the colours you want.”

The cool breeze did nothing to her warm cheeks. Her smile was small and her dimples deep while her heart, as usual, was frenetic. Her butterflies were a whole different story. “Anything I want...?”

“Yes, Ayra, anything you want. I don’t think you want me in a turtleneck on our wedding day. It’ll never see the end of day if the pictures surface.”

She laughed. “True. Don’t you dare think of wearing a turtleneck for our wedding, Ibrahim. I’ll vehemently deny you.”

“That’s why I want you to pick out what I should wear. You know best what’ll suit me and what would complement all your outfits so...”

Her heart was soaring with golden wings. She hummed as she thought while he listened on the other end of the line. It didn’t take too long for her to decide what she wanted and the mental image she had of him in her desired outfits made her toes curl in her boots. She finally got what she wanted her bridesmaids to wear, especially Ibty. She did her best to stay composed as she was certain Ibtihaj – and probably Anneth and Bella – was staring.

“I want you in something traditional, Ibrahim.” She wasn’t sure she’d survive it but still! “For the Nikkah, I’m wearing white so I’d really love it if you wore a *bahkt* (agbada/babanriga) but in grey. It should have lovely embroidery, please. And full sleeves too. It has to be stunning.”

He laughed. “Of course it has to be. And for the reception?”

She was ready to swoon clearly for the world to see. “Remember what you wore for the engagement party?”

“The indo-western sherwani?”

“Yep, that same style but something even better. A suit would be really nice too. I’m sure your stylist would know what to do and he better not disappoint or Ibtihaj and I would be going to jail for double murder and for arson because we’ll burn the shops down.”

He laughed again, heartily this time, and it did nothing good for her already messy heart. “Very well, Ayra. I’ll get the indo-western sherwani or an elegant suit. What colour?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m yet to decide between shades of purple and blue so until the stylist gets the samples for me to see, I can’t give you a definite answer.”

“I’ll speak with my stylist then and we’ll come up with colours to complement both of your options. Once you’ve made the choice, you can choose mine and then everything will fall into place. Good?”

She grinned. “Perfect!”

“Great! So, I just got here. I need to be back at the office soon so I need to make this quick...Oh yeah. Ayra.”

“Hmm?”

“Next weekend, let’s go to Downtown Aomi.”

Her heartbeat picked back up. “To see our home?”

“Yep. It’s more than ninety per cent ready so you can see it now. There’s no need to delay it for much longer.”

Her smile was so dazzling. “I can’t wait. Ibty can come too, right?”

“You don’t even have to ask. We still have to make honeymoon plans and all of that before the month runs out. We have to discuss intimacy and contraceptives too. So much to do, Ayra, and we really need to make time with our crazy schedules.”

Her cheeks, and nearly every other part of her, were on fire. Images she’d never speak about assaulted her head and she wanted the floor to open up and swallow her. “Ibrahim...”

As though as he knew what she was going through, he chuckled. “We’ll be fine. Let’s just get it settled once and for all. Ah, there are my gifts to you too. I need to get those settled.”

“Take your time.”

“You seem to forget we don’t have that much time anymore but sure...I have to go.”

“Sure.”

“Stay safe, Ayra.”

“You too.”

He hung up and she lowered her phone. She stayed there until her cheeks stopped burning and it took quite a while. When she headed back in and slid into the seat she’d vacated, she tried to act as though nothing was out

of the ordinary while her three friends stared at her with knowing looks. Clearing her throat, Bella picked up her fork. "I'd kill to know what took that long to discuss."

Anneth snickered. "Tell me about it."

Ayra felt the heat creep back up to her cheeks and she resembled a chipmunk stuffing its face with acorns as she tried to hold her smile back. She tried to get everything under control but one look at Ibtihaj turned every effort to dust. Unable to help it, Ayra buried her face in her hands and tried not to squeal.

Bella and Anneth laughed while Ibtihaj watched her best friend act like a movie character. She made a face and looked away. "*Wahala wa fun eni tio shay wedding bayi* (wahala for who is not getting married)." She made a sound and looked away, being the drama queen. "Must be really nice."

Anneth choked and grabbed her glass of water. "I don't know what that means," She said with tears in her eyes. "But I agree."

Beside her, Bella was still laughing while Ayra kept her face buried in her hands, once again wanting the floor to open up and swallow her whole.



The new week flew by; a blur of work, classes, assignments, and presentations. On Saturday morning, Ayra woke up to see her period and nasty cramps kept her in bed until 10AM when Ibtihaj rushed into the room, announcing that there were quite a number of delivery people downstairs alongside female members of the Fahad family.

Wondering what was up, Ayra pulled herself up, got changed and gladly let Ibtihaj lead the way down. The main living room was a beehive of activities and her eyes widened when delivery men brought in box after box in different shapes, sizes and colours; arranging them neatly in a corner that filled up quite quickly. The Fahads present oversaw the entire thing while Salama, Falilat, and two of Ayra's aunts watched on like Ayra and Ibtihaj.

Once the boxes were all in, Fareeda smiled at Ayra. "These are our gifts to you, sweetheart; ours and Ibrahim's. It signifies our promise to keep you as comfortable as you can ever be. You will be a member of our family after all."

Some of the women with her had tight smiles which Ayra couldn't focus on with how stunned she was. Ibtihaj noticed every single thing and she kept her eyes narrowed, hoping no one tried to be unfortunate and ever ready to get crazy if there was need for it.

Ayra slowly turned to her about-to-be mother in law. “*All* of it?”

Fareeda nodded. “All of it. We even thought it was too little but the last thing we wanted was to go overboard. Ibrahim has promised to ensure you don’t lack anything moving forward.”

When Ayra found herself unable to say anything, Fareeda laughed beautifully and stepped forward. She put her hands on Ayra’s shoulders. “This is the least we can do, Ayra, so please accept it in good faith. Everything should fit and should be to your liking but if there’s anything that doesn’t fit or isn’t to your liking, please draw our attention to it. We’ll have it changed right away, okay?”

Ayra dazedly nodded, her voice a mere whisper. “Okay.”

“Ibrahim said you’ll be leaving with him at noon to see your new home?”

Ayra nodded again. “Yes, we are.”

“Good, good. He’s been really secretive with the entire thing so we haven’t seen it either but I have no doubt it’s beautiful. Just like the gifts, if there’s anything you don’t like in the home, don’t hesitate to speak out. You’re going to be the queen of the home so every corner should be a place you love.”

Ayra smiled as she recalled Salama saying the exact same words the night before. “I will. Thank you.”

“I think you can start calling me Mum now.” Fareeda’s eyes shone with mischief. “We do have just a month left after all.”

Ayra laughed, nodding. “You’re right.” Her butterflies left their cages in her stomach. “Thank you, Mum.”

Fareeda beamed. “You’re welcome.”

Ten minutes later, the Fahads were gone and every person in the Abdulaziz home gathered around Ayra, watching as she opened box after box. They each had similar reactions as each box turned out to be better than the last. Everything Ayra was going to need was in there; jewellery, clothes, shoes, bags, toiletries and cosmetics, and even underwear (a box she immediately snapped shut as soon as she saw what it contained). Each item was from one notable brand or the other and trying to do the maths made her dizzy.

Her favourite item was a particular perfume that had been bought in a pack of three; Tom Ford’s Oud Wood which she recognised as the same one Ibrahim used. She appreciated it more than anything as she’d been looking

forward to stealing his simply because she thought it'd be weird if she randomly asked what perfume he used.

“Omo,” It was Falilat. “Money is good. Money is very good.”

Salama chuckled. “Aren’t you the one who said they shouldn’t flaunt it in our faces that they’re richer than us?”

“That only applies to when they’re being arrogant about it, my dear. This one is them ensuring that Ayra is pampered like a princess. It’s different so it’s good.”

Ibtihaj threw an arm around her best friend’s shoulder, smiling. “And even though love made her act like a mumu back then, I’m glad everything’s working out now.” She turned her smile to Ayra who was doing her best to keep glaring. “Ayra deserves everything good.”

Ayra tried really hard to keep glaring. “I’m still going to hit you.”

Ibtihaj laughed. “You’ll never find someone that’ll love you like me so sharrap my dear and let’s go and get ready. We do have to be in Downtown Aomi soon.”

Salama smiled at her daughter. “You should go on to have your bath and get changed. We’ll put everything back in place and then go over the final guest list before you return to ensure we’re not missing anything.”

Ayra smiled back at her mother. “Thank you, Umami.”

“You’re welcome.”



The Oasis, in person, was much more luxurious than Ayra and Ibtihaj ever imagined and no one could blame them for standing in front of the main entrance and staring up at the majorly glass residential building.

“Ayra,” Ibtihaj spoke like someone bewitched. “Ayra, you go dey live here o. You and man, hei!”

Ayra was just as enchanted. “Ibty, it feels like a dream.”

“Make I pinch you? So that you’ll know it’s real.”

“You’re sick.”

Ibtihaj laughed. “You never see anything.” She then looked around. “Where’s – Oh, see Ibrahim!”

Ayra lowered her head and watched Ibrahim step out through the revolving doors that led into the building. He was in blue and black and his hair was

messy but beautiful and the smile he directed their way only made him more dashing.

“Hey.” He stopped right in front of them. “I hope you two got here okay.”

Ayra nodded, giving him a small smile in return. “We did. Ibty drove.”

Ibtihaj smiled proudly when he looked her way and he smiled back before returning his attention to his fiancé. His brows furrowed slightly. “You drive, right? At least that’s what I was told.”

Ibtihaj replied before Ayra could. “Don’t mind this girl. She just likes being a passenger princess. She can drive.”

Ayra nearly stepped on her best-friend’s foot. “Ibty, I swear to God...”

Ibrahim chuckled. “It’s fine. I don’t mind you being my passenger princess.”

Ayra swooned while Ibtihaj pretended to choke. “Abeg, shebi we have an apartment to tour? Let’s go please. This love thing wan wound me.”

Laughing, Ibrahim led the way, telling them the interior designer was already waiting for them. The reception area of The Oasis was a lovely blend of gold finishes and sleek black areas. Ibrahim told both women what they already knew from the research they’d carried out; that the entire lobby floor was for commercial and residential amenities; mini restaurants and bars, a spa, two saloons for both sexes, and a gym. The residence’s swimming pool was on the roof level while the parking lot was underground, each apartment unit having three slots. To get extra slots there was a fine and Ayra realised she actually didn’t know just how many cars Ibrahim had.

The elevator carriage had full mirrored walls and Ayra smiled widely at Ibtihaj’s held up phone while Ibrahim popped into the recording video for a moment and then popped back out. They took the elevator up to the 10th floor and once the doors opened, they got out. The tiles on the corridor were dark, shining nicely under the bright lights. The floor had four apartments, each with the floor number and a letter. Ibrahim led them to apartment 10B and with a smile, he pulled the unlocked door open.

“Welcome home.”

With a rapidly beating heart, Ayra stepped in after him and Ibtihaj followed right behind her. The foyer had them gasping. It was not such a big space but it was perfect enough for Ayra, and then there was the interior; everything she would have put in place had she been the one to design the place.

Three out of four walls were painted warm beige to complement the marble tiles and the last wall, on the left side of the door, had a pattern; wooden slats running the length of a quarter of it and then flowing into the tiled three-quarter area that held the half-circle mirror. There were hanging lights on the slatted side and then there was a floating shelf that held two mini paintings, a vase to be filled with flowers and faux books simply meant for aesthetics.

“Is this good?” Ibrahim asked Ayra.

Gaping, Ayra nodded and Ibtiyah did the same beside her. They turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. A female, dressed smartly in a white suit and a black inner shirt with her hair packed back in a bun and stilettos on her feet, smiled at Ayra and Ibtiyah. “Good day. My name’s Helen Dione and I’m the contracted interior designer of this unit.”

Ayra composed herself and held a hand out which Helen immediately took. Ayra’s smile was polite and pretty. “It’s so nice to meet you, Helen. I’m Ayra Abdulaziz, Ibrahim’s fiancé. I haven’t seen the rest of the unit yet but this foyer is a masterpiece.”

Helen’s smile widened. “I’m glad you love it. Ibrahim said everything had to be perfect so I couldn’t disappoint.”

Ayra glanced at her fiancé who smiled at her and then she turned back to Helen. “Thank you, really. This is Ibtiyah Adeola, she’s my sister from another mother.”

Helen let go of Ayra’s hand to take Ibtiyah’s. Her smile did not waver. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

Ibtiyah smiled back. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

Ibrahim put his hands in his pockets. “Helen would take it from here. I’ll just stay right behind. Helen?”

Helen nodded, still smiling at both women. She gestured inside. “This way, please.”

Beyond the foyer was the living space and there was no way to stop Ayra’s jaw from hitting the ground. It was wide and very, very spacious with beige walls, cream tiles, double height windows and shelves that ran the length of both walls, holding vases placed for aesthetical purposes. A LED TV sat comfortably between both shelves and right above it was a painting which Helen said could be removed to hang up whatever photo Ayra and Ibrahim agreed to have framed after the wedding.

The contemporary chandelier hung down from the middle of the high ceiling, its lights soft and gentle on the eyes. The living room was big enough to take two L-shaped white sectional sofas, a blue single seater, two earth brown seaters, two coffee tables which held vases and little accessories, and side stools which had beautiful lamps on them. The cushions of the sofas alternated between warm shades of cream and patterned blues, and it was beautiful; all of it was beautiful.

Ayra took small steps to the window, taking in the amazing view of the ocean she was presented with. It was calming and she knew she was going to make it her favourite spot. The living room was going to be a favourite place.

“Omo,” Ibtihaj said, pulling Ayra’s attention away from the ocean. “It’s a duplex apartment o. There’s an upper floor.”

Not believing her best friend, Ayra turned around and true to Ibtihaj’s words, there was an upper level; something that wasn’t stated on The Oasis’s website. Helen nodded, her hands in front of her. “It’s the mezzanine level, holding the bedrooms and a family lounge. It’s information the public doesn’t know until an individual is interested in getting a unit. That’s why The Oasis is this high although it only has twelve floors and an underground level.”

Ayra could only exchange stunned looks with her best friend. Helen moved on and they followed. She showed them the guest bathroom, the home office which could double as a study with the way it was furnished, and the laundry room which already had everything set in place.

She then led them towards the left side of the floor, smiling as she said “And this masterpiece is your kitchen.” She opened the door and stepped aside to they could walk in. “It was designed by the Chinese company, Oppolia, and it’s named the Project Vita.”

One could always count on Ibtihaj to be the one with the vocal reactions. “*Olurun mi* (My God)...Wow!”

Ayra felt as though she’d stepped into another world she didn’t know existed. The kitchen was perfect; natural wood accents in different shades and white coming together to create the masterpiece that it was.

The Italian styled kitchen was luxury at its finest. The dark wood cabinets were wall mounted with open wood shelves with hidden light strips in between where Tupperware – beautifully modern – were displayed, arranged perfectly. The kitchen island – which featured a dark waterfall

edge – had white touches and a lot of storage space also with open wood shelves. The island had the cooking area and Ayra loved it.

Ibtihaj was the one who opened cabinet after cabinet, taking in everything they contained with awed curiosity. Some cabinets were empty and she didn't need to be told that they'd be stocked up when the wedding was close. Ayra, on the other, walked over to the dining area in front of full length windows; a reflective marble topped table with six overly comfortable grey chairs. Helen showed her the store room and then pointed out the French door refrigerator that blended in as one of the cabinets.

When she was sure there was nothing else to see, Helen asked "Can we head up now?"

Ayra and Ibtihaj did not need to be asked twice. They nodded and said yes. Back in the living room, Ibrahim stood in front of the double height windows, calmly watching the ocean and the waves that washed up to shore.

11 (Part II)

The upper floor of the unit – the mezzanine level – was three quarters the length of the lower floor and the family lounge was the first area one stepped into once they'd ascended the stairs.

It was a cosy space with tiles that gave the illusion of a wooden floor. It was simply furnished; a sectional sofa with a lot of cushions which sat on a wide rug, a round wooden topped coffee table and then voile curtains on the windows. There was no TV and Ayra preferred it that way. She put it at the back of her head to check online stores for paintings that could add more beauty to the space.

She turned to look at Ibrahim who was focused on his phone. With a small smile, she turned back to Helen and followed when the interior designer moved in the left direction of the floor, Ibtiḥaj right beside her.

"Ibrahim called this Ayra's space." Helen said as she opened the door, letting them step in. "It's a kid's room but he said you're not having kids right away so inside of leaving it bare, we should make it a space for you to find peace in."

Ibtiḥaj fake sobbed. "Love o."

If she wasn't so in love with Ibrahim before, Ayra would have drowned in the love that hit her then. Taking small steps, she stepped deeper inside and looked around.

The room was cosy and it was everything she never knew she wanted; rose gold curtains, a backless lounge sofa with black and pink cushions that took up the entire width of the wall that held that the room's windows, a Persian rug with even more cushions and an adorable coffee table, a shelf for the books she was definitely getting, and then the swing chair that hung in the corner with its own cushions and faux fur throw blanket.

Moved to tears, she turned to look at her fiancé who leaned against the doorframe. She swallowed softly. "Ibrahim..."

"I told you I was going to give you everything. This is the least I can do, Ayra. You deserve this and so much more."

Helen pretended to look around for anything that was out of place while Ibtiḥaj shamelessly watched everything unfold, gratitude in her chest at the thought of Ayra being treated right. Ayra, on the other hand, smiled at him. "Thank you."

Ibrahim smiled back; his usual small smile. "You're welcome."

Helen cleared her throat then. "Right. Let's move on." She led the way out and she then smiled as she opened the opposite door. "And this, Ayra, is your room."

Ayra's smile dropped and her brows furrowed. Once again she turned to Ibrahim. "My room?"

Ibrahim, who had a slight frown on his face, nodded slowly. "Yes, your room...Is something wrong?"

Ayra's brows furrowed further and her frown fully formed. "No, I just —" She frowned even more. "I thought we'd be sharing a room. That's what I always assumed."

"No...We're not sharing a room, Ayra."

She could only stare at him, unable to explain how she felt right there and then. Ibrahim turned to İbtihaj and Helen, his smile tight. "Can we get a minute please?"

Helen nodded while İbtihaj hesitated until Ayra smiled at her, as tightly as Ibrahim had done. Not having any reason to stay back, both women headed towards the other side of the floor. Ibrahim turned back to his fiancé. "Ayra, I never assumed we'd share a room."

"Why? Isn't that supposed to be normal?" She folded her arms. "Couples share a room all their lives."

"No they don't."

"Yes they do."

"Ayra, my parents don't share a room. They have their respective rooms and they only sleep over in the other's room when they feel like it. I thought that's normal for every family."

The fight in her died as realisation dawned. She unfolded her arms and let them fall back to her sides, swallowing softly. "I'm sorry. I just...I just assumed based on what I grew up with. My parents have shared a room all their lives and each person I know does the same so I just assumed that's how it is in every home. I'm sorry."

"No, Ayra, it's fine. I should have discussed it with you. My parents have had different rooms all my life and it's been the same in almost every family I know so I assumed too." He raised his hand to rub the back of his neck. "This puts us in a tight spot now. This room's furnished solely for you and the other's furnished solely for me and to start redecorating now...It'll take lot of time and that'll be more incurred costs."

Ayra let herself think about it. It was different from what she was used to and way different from what she'd imagined a part of their union to be. But then again she'd been taught that marriage brought together two people with different mind-sets and upbringings which was why compromises existed.

She blew out a small breath a little later. At the end of it all, he had put a lot of things in place and she concluded it'd be unfair to have them tear things down. She exhaled again. "It's fine."

Ibrahim raised his head. "Huh?"

"We having separate rooms is fine." She gave him a small smile. "Besides, you said such arrangement gives room for sleepovers." She smiled wider and put her hands behind her, leaning forward slightly. "I think that'll be fun."

He stared at her for a moment before he started smiling, chuckling seconds later. "God, you're amazing." He nodded while she blushed. "Sure, we'll have sleepovers, Ayra. I look forward to them."

She grinned. "Me too."

"Let's get Helen and Ibty so we can continue the tour."

"Yes, let's do that."

Ibtihaj only relaxed fully when Ayra assured her sincerely that she and Ibrahim were fine. Relieved that there was no issue, Helen led them into Ayra's room and like every other part of the house, it was breathtakingly stunning; bringing together shades of beige, brown, gold, and green with a unique chandelier hanging down from above.

The queen sized mattress snugly fit into a beige bedframe with a curved, tufted headboard. There were nightstands on both sides with tall night lamps and at the foot of the bed were two green ottoman stools with gold legs. The bedframe, the nightstands, and the ottoman stools sat on a black and white patterned rug that had touches of brown. The wall behind the bed had curved panels that really brought out the beauty of the bed setting.

A cactus inspired sofa, in a beautiful shade of sage green, sat against a wall and Ayra gasped when she recognised the painting above it. She turned to Ibrahim with wide eyes, disbelief wrapped around her like a cloak.

He smiled shyly. "Well, you clearly loved the painting in your parents' room when you spoke about it on the day you met the squad so I thought I should do something for you."

Ayra couldn't help but say "God, I love you."

Ibtihaj snorted. "When have you ever not done so?"

Ayra ignored her best friend and turned back to the painting on the wall. Majority of the canvas had a Leilani in full bloom, covering the face of a woman who was clearly her. It was different from the painting in her parents' room but she loved it; she loved it so, so much.

Ibtihaj made herself comfortable on the sofa. "Me too, I'll love too one day."

Helen could only chuckle before saying "Let's check out the bathroom and the walk-in closet."

Ibtihaj immediately rose to her feet and Ayra got excited. The walk-in wardrobe had white storage spaces that took up the entirety of two walls. Then a mirror occupied the last wall, a vanity dresser sitting prettily right in front of it. In the middle of the space, right underneath the mini chandelier was a fur rug and an ottoman stool. A velvet, tufted armchair and a small coffee table sat in a corner; a setting fit for a luxurious woman. Ayra adored the space and she looked forward to filling it up.

"Ayra," Ibtihaj told her best friend. "Better make space for my own clothes because if I don't visit you until you get tired of me, then my name is not Ibtihaj Oluwatosin Adeola."

Ayra laughed with Ibrahim and Helen. She then nodded. "Yes ma."

The bathroom was simple and lovely with white walls and golden fixtures; a ladder rack for towels, double sinks on the marbled vanity with a floating wooden shelf underneath, a wide mirror, a tub on the left side and the shower on the right – both behind the glass divider. The floating toilet seat sat by the rack with its controls on the wall.

"Now," Ayra said to her fiancé with a beautiful smile. "Let's go see your room."

Ibrahim smiled back, nodding. "Sure, Ayra. Let's do that."

His room – the master bedroom – was the only one on the other side of the floor and unlike hers, Ibrahim's room was dark in every way possible, stunning Ayra and Ibtihaj to silence. It was beautiful, no doubt, and everything about it screamed Ibrahim Fahad.

He had a sitting area with peanut brown velvet sofa which had tuxedo armrests, a cream centre rug with black borders, and a glass topped coffee table that sat underneath the layered chandelier. The windows had double

curtains; inner white voile curtains and outer brown ones and then there was a painting on the wall that caught Ayra and Ibtihaj's attention. It was that of a woman but it was hard to make out who it was.

Ibrahim stopped right behind his fiancé, nearly resting his chin on her shoulder as he leaned in to whisper "Don't think too hard about who it is. I just saw it and I liked it. Helen also said it fit the theme of the room."

Helen nodded, smiling proudly. "I did."

Ibtihaj, who'd never seen Ibrahim and Ayra in such a close position, had her jaw on the floor. She picked it back up when they moved into the main room itself. The chandelier had hanging bulbs arranged in a beautiful pattern. His bed was a double king with a black high leather headboard which sat in front of the wooden panelled walls. His nightstands were dark brown and so were his tall night lamps. His ottoman stool was green and button tufted, complimenting the grey rug underneath. His windows were full length and there was door between the panels that led out to the wide balcony. Ayra knew then that she was going to be there a lot – especially at night – in order to appreciate the stunning view of Downtown Aomi.

Ibrahim's walk-in closet was larger than Ayra's and way darker. Just like hers, he had a full mirror and his dresser with ottoman stools; two small ones instead of one. His bathroom was a work of art and; double sinks on a floating vanity, a tinted mirror, a floating toilet seat, a wall hung bidet, a shower area behind dark glass, and then the bath area with its floating tub and in-wall recess. His racks were black and the space had more storage compartments than hers. Ayra blushed furiously as she pushed down the sinful images that popped in her head. Behind her, Ibtihaj pushed down a snicker as she knew exactly what her best friend was thinking. Ibrahim, as always, was calm.

At Ayra's request, Helen took them round the place again. Ayra began to see the images clearly; her and him living their best lives and making memories in every part of the unit with a lot of love and laughter. Helen faced her when it was all over. "I hope this is perfect, Ayra?"

Ayra nodded with no hesitation. "It is. It's so perfect, Helen. Thank you."

"Oh please. I had fun working on this project. It's my greatest pleasure."

Ibtihaj went over to stand beside Helen, smiling nicely. "I hope you're not too expensive sha. If I am marrying, I want something like this."

Helen laughed. "When that time comes, do remind me that you're acquainted with Ibrahim. I won't forget you easily but my mind can get

messed up with work sometimes so...I'm sure we can work out a discount."

As she watched her best friend's smile turn evil, Ayra rolled her eyes and turned to Ibrahim who stood beside her. He fully turned to her, smiling in his usual way. His hands returned to his pockets. "I'm glad you love it. I've been nervous ever since the final piece was put in place. I really wanted you to like it."

Her chest was way too warm. "I love it, Ibrahim."

"I'm glad...Maybe we should have had the boxes delivered here instead of your family home. We'll have to move them again from Plum Boulevard here."

She smiled widely. "We'll handle that. Thank you so much. I loved every single thing. I'll use them well."

"I don't doubt that one bit." He took a small step forward, closer to her. "What did you love most though?"

The familiarity of his perfume and the way he looked at her was a mix that threatened to make Ayra lightheaded. She had no doubt he'd catch her but she wasn't ready to fall like that yet. She forced herself to keep breathing, inhaling everything that was him.

"The perfumes." Her voice was breathy and low. "I loved the perfumes."

"I was hoping you would." His voice was as low as hers. "I don't think there's anything better than two people in love with each other scenting the same way. It's comforting and I can't wait for you to start using them. I can't wait to hug you too." Briefly, his gaze dropped to her lips and Ayra saw him swallow as his eyes came back to hers. "And do everything else."

Her heart was too frenetic to even try to rein it back under control. She did her best to keep breathing and God, she wanted to kiss him. It was the first time she felt the urge so strongly. Luckily for her heart – and her sanity, Ibrahim stepped back, breaking the bubble they were wrapped in.

"When do your exams start?"

The topic change was momentarily disorienting. She shook her head slightly to clear it and then she focused on providing a reply to the question he'd asked. "On the 3rd. It'll end on the 9th. Why?"

"I was trying to come with a timeline...We should do our medical tests as soon as you're done and then we can settle what else is left. We still need to talk about intimacy, Ayra. We can't keep delaying it."

Warmth rose to her cheeks. "Ibrahim, we will."

"And then the honeymoon."

"Let's go to Zanzibar," She put her hands together. "I beg you. They have really beautiful resorts."

He nodded. "I'll get in touch with the travel agency then." He then smiled. "You love Zanzibar that much?"

She smiled like a kid in a candy store. "I did some research on honeymoon destinations and I loved what I saw. Are we going to stay here until the new year?"

"I was hoping we could be back before the 31st. Anneth and Nathaniel host the meanest crossover parties and you don't want to miss it for anything."

"Fine then. We'll be back before the 31st. We'll be able to celebrate your birthday too."

"My birthday's nothing special, Ayra."

"Not anymore. I'm here now, Ibrahim, so we're changing that."

He finally smiled, his gaze softening so nicely. "I look forward to it then."

"Yay!"

"And we should tackle intimacy and contraceptives tonight."

Her expression fell. "I don't like you."

He laughed. "Now that's something I don't feel towards you. We'll be fine. The earlier the better, Ayra."

She sighed defeatedly. "Alright. We'll tackle it tonight."

She did not look forward to it one bit. They eventually stepped out of the apartment and Ibtihaj walked away with Helen while Ayra and Ibrahim set up their passcodes and registered their fingerprints in the scanner, Ibrahim overseeing the whole thing. He then led the way two levels down – to the eight floor – where Bella lived. Unfortunately she wasn't in but Ayra was thrilled to know the exact apartment, knowing she was going to be visiting the Italian sweetheart a lot.

When they got to the parking lot in front of the residential building, Helen said goodbye and then she left, promising to be in touch if they needed anything. Ibrahim then faced Ayra. "Should I take you home?"

Ibtihaj grabbed her best friend's arm. "No! E don do! You people have been sharing love since we got here. It is okay." She glared at Ayra. "If you think of allowing me drive back on my own, I will murder you here and I'll ensure they properly dispose of your body."

Ibrahim raised a brow. "Are you threatening my wife, Ibtty?"

Ayra rolled her lips in just so she didn't smile like a lovesick teenager; exactly what she felt like. Ibtihaj scoffed. "It's today that being single pain me pass. No wahala. I'll be someone's wife someday and I will avenge this day, Ibrahim!"

Ibrahim was clearly amused. "I'll look forward to it...Drive safely, please."

"I will."

He turned to Ayra as Ibtihaj started pulling her away. "Stay safe, Leilani."

"You too! See you soon!"

And he stood there until they left in Salama's car which they'd come with, his smile never leaving his face.

December, 2020.

While Ayra and Ibtiḥaj wrote their first semester examinations, their families and the Fahads got things in order. Ayra and Ibrahim's things were moved to their apartment in Downtown Aomi and arranged under Ibrahim's supervision. When he was too busy at work, his mother stood in his stead while Salama and Falilat stood in Ayra's.

Bookings were confirmed over and over to avoid funny stories and contracted vendors knew better than to try and act shady with the responsibilities they were given. Attendances were confirmed and those who would be unable to make it apologised, promising to visit the newly wedded as soon as they could. Party favours for those who would be in attendance were ordered and packaged too. The Fahads, more than once, flaunted their wealth and the Abdulazizs were too focused on getting things together for their daughter to even let it get to them.

On the day they finished their last paper, Ayra and Ibtiḥaj met up with Bella, Anneth, and Jalal at *Cake Heaven*, the contracted confectioner for the event, for cake tasting. Ibrahim was in a meeting with Tobi so Jalal was standing in for him which Ayra appreciated.

She smiled as she and Ibtiḥaj got to where the trio stood. "Hey, guys. I hope we didn't keep you waiting long."

"Oh please," Bella said with a light flick of her wrist. She was stunning in a black halter neck jumpsuit. "As if we'd ever mind. I hope your paper went well."

Ayra nodded alongside Ibtiḥaj. "It did. I'm glad we're done. I can finally focus on getting married."

Jalal laughed. "Oh Ayra." He then smiled at the woman beside her. "Hi, Ibtḥy."

"Hey, Jalal." Ibtiḥaj's smile was just as pretty as his. "I hope you're considering my proposal."

Anneth, Bella, and Ayra looked curiously between the two which made Jalal laugh before he explained what she meant. "She doesn't want to be paired with Tobi for the reception entrance. You know it's just us on the couple team and Ibrahim still hasn't made it clear who is going to be the best man between Tobi and I so..."

Anneth easily linked her arm with Ibtiḥaj's. "That's how he'll pick Nathaniel."

Bella scoffed, linking her own arm with Ayra's. "As if you'd let him. You and Nate are too obsessed with each other."

Anneth smiled proudly. "Sorry you can't relate."

"Don't allow me hit you."

Ayra laughed and cut in. "Let's go inside. We have an appointment."

Jalal nodded. "Yes, let's do that."

The founder of the confectionery business, Fadel, was present and she ensured each person had a plate of every flavour she offered. Ayra found it hard to choose and so did the others so Fadel recommended having different flavours on every tier since it was to be a six-tiered cake. Ayra gladly took her suggestion and then they picked out the flavours they loved, chocolate being a constant flavour in every tier. Fadel then went through the cake's decoration with them so be sure she had it right; white fondant with little accents and then flowers running the length of both sides of the cake.

Ayra nodded yet again, her smile wide. "Exactly."

Fadel smiled back, relieved. "I look forward to working on it. I promise to not disappoint."

As usual, Ibtihaj made her threats and they all ended up laughing. They went through the dessert list with Fadel before they said goodbyes, the ladies promising to meet up the next day for Ayra's final fitting; something she was excitedly looking forward to. Just like she and Ibtihaj agreed, she was the one to drive them home so Ayra unlocked the car doors and they got in.

"God, I'm so glad we're done." Ibtihaj said and then threw her hands up. "We don't enter owambe season!"

Ayra smiled, easing out of the parking lot of the business area where the Cake Heaven was located. She then put the gear in drive and eased down on the pedal, taking them in the direction of Plum Boulevard. "I'm so excited, Ibt."

"Guy, me too! I'm even more excited than you and I'm not the bride. But then again, I'm excited to party while you're just excited to get the title of Mrs Fahad. You're also excited to go on the honeymoon too and just be alone with him. The wedding is just a formality for you."

Ayra's grip on the steering wheel tightened slightly while her cheeks resembled beetroots. "Ibt, please."

“But you and I know it’s true.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to hear you say it out loud.”

Ibtihaj cackled. “You never see anything.” She then sighed, making herself more comfortable in the seat. She turned her head to stare out of the window at the places they drove past. “But on a more serious note, Ayra, I’m happy for you. At the beginning, when we first met, I was so certain you were just being unhealthily delusional and I wanted you to see reason. God knows I couldn’t understand how a sane human could love someone for so long because I know I can’t. But then again we’re all mad in one way or the other.”

Ayra could feel the tears coming. “Ibty...”

Ibtihaj didn’t turn away from the window. “If you cry eh, I will kill you.” She let a moment of silence pass. “I wanted to slap you many times when you went on and on about Ibrahim Fahad. I used to think you were really mad with how much you knew about him and times without number, I prayed for you to not end up getting hurt. You’re a sweet soul, Ayra, and as my best friend, all I wanted...No, all I ever want is for you to be happy. I didn’t want you to hold on to something that would never materialise into reality so that was why I told you time and time again to get over him. But you’re one hopeful person, Ayra. I really want to be like you when I grow up.”

Blinking back her tears, Ayra switched to the easy lane and purposely reduced the vehicle’s speed. Ibtihaj continued. “Sha, we thank God that everything worked out. My ears nearly burst the day Ibrahim’s proposal came and I wanted to beat you when you said you immediately accepted. You remember the way I shook you, right?”

Ayra let out a watery laugh, nodding. “You shook me hard. God, Ibty, it made me dizzy. You kept asking me ‘*Sho wa alright ni?*’”

Ibtihaj snorted, finally turning away from the window. “Your Yoruba is still terrible.”

“And you’re a bad friend for starting this now. Couldn’t you wait until the henna party or something?”

“You know I’m not like the others.”

“True.”

Ibtihaj smiled a little. “You should have seen how brightly you smiled that day, Ayra. I still have the picture I took of you that day and I’m not going to give it to anyone else because you were that beautiful and I am going to

selfishly treasure that moment.” She sighed again. “Then we went an entire month without hearing from Ibrahim and I was just so on edge because it felt wrong. Like, how can you be engaged to someone and not hear from them? You kept saying he was busy and there was so much I wanted to say but thank God I didn’t. Uncle Muhsin’s explanation on the day we graduated put me at ease and I guess that was the first time I actually respected Ibrahim. Lagos men can never.”

Ayra laughed. “You and Lagos men, Ibty.”

“You don’t know the half of it, my dear.” Slowly, the estate came into view. “Sha, Ibrahim has proved to be a good guy so far and I like the fact that I can sleep soundly knowing you’re going to be okay. I have my eyes on his parents and his aunts sha. If they try to do anything funny during the wedding, it’s on sight and I don’t care if I ruin my *komole* doing it.”

“You know you’re weird, right? Anneth and Bella chose to go with silk and satin and you had to use *komole*.”

Ibtihaj smiled proudly. “You can take me away from the Yoruba land but you cannot take the Yoruba out of me. And you should know that we don’t carry last when it comes to events. I’m the chief bridesmaid so I should slay.”

“Watch Tobi pay tribute to his roots too.”

Ibtihaj’s smile dropped immediately. “No just do that rough play.”

Ayra laughed, nodding at the security men who opened the estate’s gates. “It may happen.”

“Omo, he go naked that day. I refuse that! He must wear suits like the others for the reception. He should only wear the *agbada* for the Nikkah but he better not try to outshine Ibrahim.”

“He won’t. I’ll kill him if he does.”

“Better.”

Ayra then smiled appreciatively. “And I’m glad I met you that day in U of A, Ibty. Having you as my best and only friend has been nothing short of a blessing and I’m glad my love for Ibrahim didn’t chase you away.”

“Funny enough it should have o.”

“I’m glad it didn’t.” Ayra smoothly parked in front of the Adeolas’ compound. She then gave Ibtihaj her full attention. “Thank you, for trusting me and for being here every step of the way. I appreciate you, more than you’ll ever know, Ibty, and I want you to know that I’ll always be here

for you. I want you to also know that I love you and all I'll ever want is for you to be happy."

Ibtihaj found herself blinking back tears. "Even more than Ibrahim?"

Ayra playfully glared. "Don't push it. But you do come close."

Ibtihaj laughed. Sniffing, she opened her arms. "Come here jor."

Ayra leaned over the console between the seats and hugged her best friend, patting the other's back. "We'll be okay, Ibtu, I promise."

"I don't doubt it. If Ibrahim tries anything funny, tell me so I can come and beat him. I know marriage is not a bed of roses so on the bad days, know that I always have your back. You're my best friend, Ayra, and my sister from another mother so I'm always going to be here for you. I hope you know – always – that you're worth everything good, Ayra. You're worth the whole world."

Ayra blinked back her own tears. "Isn't it too early for all this?"

"It's good we're saying it now so we don't forget anything when the craziness starts because everything so far has been child's play."

Ayra hugged her best friend tighter. "I love you, Ibtu."

"I love you too, Ayra. In Shaa Allah I'm always going to."

Minutes later, Ayra was walking into her own family's house. Salama was already waiting in the foyer and the expression on her mother's face told Ayra clearly that she – Salama – was going to take her down memory lane the same way Ibtihaj did. They moved to the second living room where Muhsin was waiting. It took less than an hour and half for Ayra to succumb to her tears, comfortably wrapped in her parents' embrace.

Salama kissed her daughter's head, blinking back tears of her own. "We love you, Leilani. In Shaa Allah we're always going to."

Muhsin simply held his daughter tighter, closing his eyes and clearly hearing her saying the words "I love you both too."



Bella, Annet, Salama, Ibtihaj, Falilat, Fareeda, and Gigi – Ibrahim's aunt – sat on the plush sofas in the changing room at The Styling Emporium, waiting eagerly for Ayra's reveal.

The stylist stepped out from behind the curtain, smiling excitedly. "Are we ready?"

Eager nods were the response she got which was more than enough for her to signal at the company's employees who nodded and pulled the curtains apart, revealing Ayra who was in her Nikkah dress; a beautiful vision in white with her curls left loose to fall down her back. They all – except Gigi who just widened her eyes – gasped while Ayra smiled shyly, her hands in front of her.

“Oh my God.” It was Anneth. “Ibrahim's going to have a heart attack.”

Bella nodded, just as dazed. “Tell me about it. He's going to collapse.”

Falilat moved forward on the sofa she occupied, smiling from ear to ear. “Hei, thank God you didn't tell me to sew this for you because this is too good! Turn abeg, let's see the entire gown.”

Ayra complied, her cheeks rosy. Fareeda sighed blissfully. “Ya Allah, you're so beautiful, Ayra.”

Ayra finished her twirl, her cheeks darker and her smile wider. “Thank you.” She looked at her mother who was silent. “Ummi?”

Salama wiped away the tear that slipped when she blinked, laughing lightly. “I'm sorry, I'm just –” She blew out a breath. “I'm just in awe, Leilani. You look amazing.”

Ayra's smile returned. “Thank you!” She rolled her eyes at her frozen best friend. “Ibty!”

Ibtihaj snapped out of it. “Omo, wahala dey. It's like you want to kill everyone on that day. And you opened your mouth waa to say it was going to be just simple.”

Ayra's blush deepened. “The day I'll kill you is coming closer and closer.”

Ibtihaj smiled like a brat, batting her lashes. “You will not do anything, my dear.”

Ayra rolled her eyes while Anneth, Falilat, Bella, and Salama chuckled. Fareeda simply smiled, one leg crossed over the other with her hands together on her knees. Slightly nervous, Ayra turned to Gigi. The female Fahad sat as elegantly as Fareeda but with a straighter back. She gave Ayra a small smile. “It's a lovely dress, Ayra. You'll look lovely on that day.”

Every other person – except Fareeda – let out a relieved breath. Ayra smiled brightly once more. “Thank you, Aunt Gigi.”

“You're welcome.”

Salama turned to the stylist. “Why don't we see her with the headpiece?”

The stylist nodded. “Yes, Mrs Abdulaziz. I’ll get it immediately.”

The headpiece, even when loosely placed, was perfect and they couldn’t shut about it which made Ayra laugh. She was glad the dress turned out better than she’d imagined and she honestly couldn’t wait for Ibrahim to see her in it. Once they were all sure there were no adjustments to be made, Ayra was led to get changed into her reception dress which was even better than the Nikkah’s. Their reactions were even better and she laughed more. Only the sleeves had minor adjustments which were done immediately. Satisfied, Ayra paid the amount left and smiled all the way to the car.

The dresses were wrapped up perfectly, with extra care, and moved to the booth of Salama’s car. Waving goodbye to her mother, Falilat, Fareeda, and Gigi, Ayra and Ibuahaj joined Bella and Anneth as they had to check in with the make-up and henna artists they were to work with. They all got into Anneth’s SUV – a white 2020 Ford Explorer – and were out of the premises in no time.

As they headed towards the Business and Institutional Area, Ayra’s phone beeped with new messages from Ibrahim. The first message was a confirmation message for the booking of their honeymoon suite while the second message was a link that took her to the official site of the resort he’d chosen for them based on her recommendations. As she looked through the amenities and facilities available, Ayra smiled prettily. Like everyone already knew, she really couldn’t wait to be Mrs Ibrahim Fahad.



The Henna Party, which officially began Ibrahim and Ayra’s wedding, was held in the backyard of the Abdulaziz home. Like Ayra asked, it was simple and intimate with only female family members and a few friends in attendance; most of whom had come from one Christmas party or the other.

Salama, alongside Iris and Kim, had outdone themselves; turning the green yard into a jaw-dropping masterpiece with a large open side tent with overhead and side drapes which comfortably took sofas put together to form a nearly complete circle, lots of cushions and throw blankets, round coffee tables on the spread out rug and lights that shone brightly. There were also food and tea carts which held everything from sweet to savoury, providing more than enough to go round for guests present.

Ayra sat in the middle of all the celebrations, her smile nearly permanent as a henna artist worked on her arms while her feet were placed on a stool so the designs could dry. Like everything else, she’d asked for something

simple and the artist did not disappoint as she brought circles, swirls, and floral touches together with dark red paste that popped against Ayra's skin.

The bride was in turquoise blue and gold: an A-line dress which was sewn with a lot of love by Falilat that combined lace, inner lining, and silk. The bodice perfectly fit, sewn to give the illusion of an inner top and outer jacket. The dress then flowed from the waist to the ground while the silk material was used for the balloon sleeves and the dress's train which was perfectly draped at the sides. Her headpiece was cut out from the same silk material and it was tied nicely around her head. She didn't wear make-up but the spa sessions she'd been having were enough to make her glow naturally.

There were a lot of goodwill wishes and a lot of prayers which Ayra appreciated heartily. There was a lot of teasing too which made her cheeks redden and redden until they couldn't do so anymore. When the henna dried and had been washed off, Anneth led the games that had been prepared and Ayra won a lot. Ibtiyah, to everyone's amusement, was a sore loser and she made laugh over and over again.

A little after Isha, the party came to an end, and Anneth was the one who told Ayra that she and Bella would no longer be sleeping over as they'd planned. The bride's smile vanished. "Is everything okay?"

Anneth sighed, nodding. "Yep. Nathaniel just called, saying he's got a little cold and when such happens, he's the biggest baby. Bella's lover just called to say he's around so she has to get him settled because he can also be the biggest baby."

Bella's situation had more of Ayra's attention. She blinked. "Her lover's coming for the wedding?"

Anneth managed a small smile. "He's supposed to so you and Ibtay can meet him but he's saying something about a family situation so he might just be stopping by. I hope you get to meet him though."

Ayra smiled back. "I hope so too." She sighed and hugged Anneth. "Say hi to Nate for me."

"I will." Anneth promised before pulling back, her smile much wider. "And I know I've said this time and time again but you're going to be the most beautiful bride the world has seen."

Ayra blushed way too easily. "Thank you, Anneth."

"You're most welcome."

Upstairs, in Ayra's room, Ibtihaj put the last things in order for the little bridal shower she'd decided to throw because Ayra deserved it. In another room, Salama cried quietly in Falilat's embrace, mentally going through every memory she'd shared with her daughter ever since the little one was put in her arms on the day she was born.

At the Adeola home, Muhsin sat with Al-Amin in the living room, blinking back his tears. In Monwict, in the room he'd occupied growing up, Ibrahim scrolled through the new pictures on his phone; pictures of Ayra at the henna party which Anneth and Bella had secretly taken and sent to him.

When he got to the last photo which was of her laughing, he stared at it for a long minute before he sighed and put his phone to sleep. He then put it on the stool beside the armchair he occupied before looking towards the headless mannequin that held his outfits for the wedding.

As he stared at them, gratitude bloomed in his chest; he was so, so grateful that everything had fallen into place. He couldn't wait to be married.

13

The clock read 3:51AM when Ayra slipped out of bed, being careful enough to not wake Ibtihaj. The mini bridal shower which had only the both of them in attendance had ended at exactly 2AM so Ayra ran on barely two hours of sleep but she didn't mind. She was finally getting married so there was nothing better.

Dressed in one of the cotton pyjama sets she wasn't taking to the new home she'd share with Ibrahim, she stepped into the bathroom and proceeded to make wudhoo. The marble topped vanity was unusually bare and the rack only held two bathrobes and two towels; one for her and the other for her best friend. Everything else was gone and she knew that once the wedding was over, get family would only put in the essentials alongside mini bottles of whatever was needed for when she ever wanted to come home to spend the night or a weekend.

When she finished, she took in her reflection while wearing a small smile on her face. Her hair was loosely packed back with curled tendrils framing her face. Her skin glowed even better under the bright lighting of the bathroom space. Her dimples were as deep as ever and although she had dark circles, her eyes were brighter than they'd ever been. She was the perfect definition of an excited, happy, and content bride and she loved it with all of her heart. She knew the nerves were going to return in a few hours but like she'd been telling herself, they were for greater good.

Once she left the bathroom, she spread out her prayer mat and then put on a hijab. She prayed Tahajjud and elongated her last sujood, thanking Allah repeatedly for giving her the one thing she'd always wanted and then praying for her and Ibrahim to always be happy. She prayed for her parents to not miss her too much and to have fun like the teenagers they once were.

She prayed for Ibtihaj and her parents – Falilat and Al-Amin – to always be happy and blessed as they'd done so much for her. She prayed for the Hexad squad too; for them to always be friends and for Allah to bless them as they'd been the ones to help bring the wedding ideas she had to life alongside every other vendor. She then prayed for the Fahads to be loving, welcoming, and perfect; just like she'd always imagined them to be. She ended the Duas by asking Allah to make the wedding ceremonies go seamlessly just like the henna party had gone. She didn't want anything to wrong.

By the time she completed the entire prayer, it was almost 4:30AM and Ibtihaj was still fast asleep with glitter on her cheeks and a letter B shaped balloon on the left side of her head. Smiling at the sight, Ayra removed her hijab and folded her prayer mat. She put both aside and then put on her

slippers before leaving the room as quietly as possible. The house, once she was out of her room, was buzzing and there was so much going on. Last minute fixtures were put in place under the professional eyes of Iris and Kim, and then there were the aromas that came together as one heavenly scent.

Overnight, the duplex had been decorated with a lot of flowers in shapes and colours, string lights, and drapes. The railings of the stairs and the upper floor now had flowers on them, string lights in-between. Ayra knew if she headed down she'd be unable to recognise both living rooms. The Nikkah was to take place in the main living room and then she and Ibrahim would move to the second living room for photos. As excited as she was to see what it looked like now that both spaces were decorated, she had something to do first.

So she walked forward until she got to her parents' room door. Knocking once, she let herself in and smiled at the sight. Muhsin was putting up his ironed outfits for the day while Salama burned incense in front of Ayra's gown. Both of them smiled back at her and Salama put the burner away before she fully faced her daughter.

"The bride is finally awake."

"Don't be dramatic, Ummi." Ayra crossed the space between them and gladly stepped into the older one's embrace. "I barely slept though."

Salama, who wore a similar pyjama set and had her hair packed the same way as her daughter, smiled a little wider and hugged her daughter a little tighter. "That's normal. It's nothing little make-up can't fix. Is Ibty still asleep?"

"Yep. The bridal shower, if we can even call it that, was crazy and we laughed, cried, and maybe screamed a little. Seeing how busy the house is, I doubt we were heard."

Muhsin chuckled, joining the hug. "I heard you both when I returned from Al-Amin's place but I knew better than to try and step in."

Ayra laughed and Salama did too. They stayed there, hugging and soaking it all in. Ayra then swallowed softly. "I'll be leaving the house today. It won't be the same way I've left every other day."

Salama told herself not to cry. "How do you feel about it?"

"Happy. Genuinely happy because I get the happy ever after I've always wanted...But then again, it's a little sad because this is a home I've known

all my life and now I'm going to another one. I won't be able to just walk a few steps and come in here to annoy you anymore."

Muhsin laughed breathily, trying to rein his tears back. "Salama, I told you that's what she was going to miss."

Salama laughed too. "You really did."

With a soft sigh, Ayra broke the hug and stepped back so she could look at them at the same time. She smiled warmly. "I want you to know that I'm always going to be grateful for the fact that Allah gave you two to me as my parents. I couldn't have asked for a better mother and father. You've loved me with all you had since I was little and I want you to know I appreciate it, all of it."

Muhsin and Salama could only stare, both trying so hard to not burst into tears. Ayra blinked her own tears back as they surfaced and continued. "I want you to also know that I'm still going to be your little Leilani. I'm still going to call and annoy you both and I'm still going to come here to make a scene when my own home gets too boring. You can't get rid of me so easily."

They laughed, nodding. Ayra grinned and a tear slipped which she hastily wiped away with the back of her hand. "And I'm so grateful that you two trusted me. Even when you didn't want me to get hurt because of how huge my feelings were for Ibrahim, you never once made snarky comments or made me feel awful about what I felt. I really appreciate that, Ummi and Baba, and I appreciate it more that you both have been with me every step of the way."

She began to cry and that was her parents' tipping point. She sniffled. "I love you both so, so much and In Shaa Allah, I'm always going to. If you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to call me. You've been there for me all my life so let me be there for you now."

Both Salama and Muhsin nodded, tears streaming down their cheeks. Ayra sniffled again. "And I can assure you that if things get too hard for me, I will call you both, and if I need a break, I will come home. Like I said before, I'm still your little Leilani. That's never going to change In Shaa Allah."

Salama sniffled. "You're all grown up now. God, I still remember how you wailed in the delivery room." She choked on a sob. "You're not so little anymore."

Ayra's laugh was watery. "Ummi, seriously..."

Muhsin laughed too and then he opened up his arms. “Come here, Ayra.”

She hugged him and Salama hugged them. Both of them told Ayra how much they loved her and how the doors were always open for her, no matter the day and time. Ayra closed her eyes, soaking it all in, and sincerely told them that she loved them both too. That was never going to change.



The glass welcome sign was placed on the front porch of the Abdulaziz home, right by the door. It welcomed every single person to the start of Ayra and Ibrahim’s forever and it was so pretty with the swirly calligraphy and the faux vine wrapped around it. Some guests took pictures and then headed in.

Guest favours – medium sized bubble shaped scented candles in transparent boxes with pink bows – were arranged on the table in the foyer which had been covered with white linen. Each cute box had ‘A&I’ printed on it alongside the wedding date with a little thank you message for each guest present.

Beyond the foyer was the hallway that led deeper into the house and little arrows pointed in the direction of the main living room. The hallway held a long table of scrumptious light dishes and drinks; options for guests ranged from sandwiches all the way to traditional sweets and then tea in different flavours all the way to fruit juices and virgin punches. There were also disposable plates, spoons, forks, and cups.

The main living room’s furniture was gone and the wall had been draped with white and baby pink to match the chosen flowers. In the middle of the wide space was a white rug on which sat the floral Nikkah partition with cushions for Ayra, the officiator, and Ibrahim. The guests also had cushions which were arranged orderly; the men to sit behind Ibrahim and the women behind Ayra. Flowers lined the borders of the ceiling and also the borders of the tiled floor. The ACs had been serviced ahead of the Nikkah so they worked perfectly well, keeping the space cool for every person present.

The kitchen, which only a few people were given access into, held even more food; all of which had been packaged properly. The second living room, which guests weren’t allowed into yet, still had most of its furniture pieces but they’d been rearranged to create more space. Like the main living room, the walls of the second living room were draped and there were even more flowers and lights. A floral installation sat in front of one draped wall and right in front of it was the white ottoman meant for Ayra and Ibrahim. On both sides of the set up area for the couple were more flowers and there was a pink draping on the ottoman itself. The position of the couple

area had been checked with the media team who assured Salama, Iris, and Kim that the lighting was just perfect.

While guests arrived, showed their invitations, and made themselves comfortable in the main living room with the nasheeds that softly played, Ayra got ready in her room with Ibtiḥaj and a few of her cousins as Anneth and Bella were yet to arrive despite saying they'd been on their way an hour ago.

Ibtiḥaj, dressed in an elegant jade green abaya and a cream veil wrapped around her head turban style, went on her knees to help Ayra put on her shoes as the make-up artist made a few touches on the bride's face. Trying to not blink too much so as to not smudge her eyeliner, Ayra smiled. "Tbty, thank you for being the world's best friend."

Ibtiḥaj scoffed. "Get out abeg." She finished with the right foot and moved to the left. "This one that Anneth and Bella are still not here."

"I'm sure they'll be here soon. Let's just give them some time."

Satisfied with her work, the make-up artist stepped back and allowed Ayra take in her reflection. The bride smiled almost immediately. "I look stunning."

The artist nodded, letting out a small laugh. "You do. Do you like it or would you like me to change anything else?"

Ayra shook her head, her smile an inch wider. "No, it's perfect. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Finished with her best-friend's feet, Ibtiḥaj moved backwards a little while still on her knees. "Ayra, stand so that we can see if the heels are comfortable or if we'll need to change it for the other ones."

Ayra easily rose to her feet and she moved her weight from one foot to the other. "It feels fine."

Relieved, Ibtiḥaj stood. "Thank God." She then slowly took her best friend in, blinking back tears when she finished. "*Olorun mi*, na my best friend be this. God, Ayra, you're beautiful."

"After calling me an ugly cow last night?"

"I will beat you o."

Ayra laughed. "I'm kidding...Thank you, Ibty. You look really beautiful too."

“Ehen na, I had to play the part.” She sniffled. “Turn around, let me adjust this your headpiece before my mother swears for my destiny. Before she’ll say that I didn’t learn well when she was teaching me.”

Laughing at the mental image, Ayra turned and did as she was asked. She smiled at her reflection and took her time taking in every bit of the woman staring back at her. She was dressed exactly how she wanted; simple but with a touch of elegance.

Her dress, like she’d always dreamed, was white and it fit in every place. It had a high neck, long simple sleeves, and a bodice that hugged her upper body but with the right amount of allowance to allow her comfortably breathe and stuff her stomach if she wanted to. It – the bodice – had been hand embroidered with carefully picked out stones which came together to make vine designs that gathered at the waist and then blended into the tulle skirt the dress had which flowed to the ground and twirled in a princess-y way if she did something as simple as a half turn.

Her headpiece was a perfectly tied turban with a rhinestone leaf bridal headband that ran the length between both her ears. The headband matched her small pendant earrings. She’d skipped out on the necklace as the details on her dress would overshadow it. Satisfied with the final look of the turban, Ibtihaj joined hands with the make-up artist and they attached the veil which flowed out nicely behind Ayra while her cousins cooed and took pictures.

Finished, Ibtihaj stepped back and sniffled again. “God, na party I wan party. Where are all these tears coming from?”

Ayra laughed with the others, turning when the door went open. She grinned at the two women who gasped with wide eyes. “You’re here.”

Anneth immediately teared up. “Ayra, God...You look...”

Bella finished up the sentence. “*Bastardamente bella* (bastardly beautiful).”

Ayra blushed, her make-up unable to hide just how rosy her cheeks became. “Thank you. You two were meant to be here ages ago though.”

Anneth, who was in a blush pink strapless ruffled maxi dress with her hair in a single braid designed with flower pins, smiled at Ayra’s cousins and crossed the space between her and the bride, Bella right behind her. “Girl, my jacket sleeve ripped so I tossed it in the backseat when Bella and I couldn’t make it work...God, Ayra, you look amazing. Ibtty, are you trying to kill us all?”

Ibtihaj flipped imaginary hair. “I have to slay.”

Bella nodded, laughing. She was in a dusty rose off-the-shoulder mesh dress with a thigh high side slit. Her hair was in its wavy glory, some locks brushed back. “You do.” She then turned back to Ayra. “You look amazing, Ayra...Oh, before I forget, Serkan says hi. He couldn’t stay unfortunately but he gave me his gift.”

Ibtihaj and Ayra spoke at the same time. “Is that *him*?!”

Suddenly bashful, Bella blushed and nodded while Anneth grinned like a little devil beside her. Seeing how every single person in the room had their attention piqued, Bella stepped closer to Ibtihaj and Ayra and rapidly whispered “He has to go to Turkey because his cousin’s not feeling too fine so I’ll have to introduce you to him via video call sometime, that’s if he doesn’t end up coming back to Aomi before the year runs out. His name is Serkan Yilmaz and yes he’s Turkish. That’s all you two need to know for now.”

Ayra smiled softly, her chest was too warm despite the cool air of the room. She was grateful. “Thank you, Bella, for trusting us with that information.”

Ibtihaj dramatically made the motion of zipping her mouth shut. “If I say a word to anyone else about this, make I bend.”

They all laughed and then Anneth took Ayra’s hands in hers. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you married!”

Ibrahim’s arrival was punctuated with cheers and a few ululations here and there. Ayra and the squad of women in her room moved to the windows and they watched as the Fahads got out of the vehicles, led by Fareeda and Salim who looked picture perfect in traditional wears, in colours that complemented each other. When the Hexad Squad men – Jalal, Nathaniel, and Tobi – got out of the second to the last vehicle in the convoy, there was a collective sharp intake of breaths in Ayra’s room. The men were in kaftans sewn immaculately in different shades and no one could deny they looked good as they laughed with the groom who was still in the car.

It took a long minute before Ibrahim stepped out and Ayra realised then that she needed to pray to survive the day. When she’d asked him to get a bakht sewn in a shade of grey, she’d known his stylist would deliver. She just didn’t put it in her head that Ibrahim would be a walking masterpiece.

The bakht – which Ibtihaj never failed to call Agbada because she didn’t see the need for Atlantica to have a new name for the same style that was popular in Nigeria – was in a lead grey shade; the inner kaftan with its long sleeves, the trousers that covered every inch of his legs, and the outer layer which was the bakht itself were sewn to perfection. The bakht’s embroidery

and the details on the cap that sat comfortably on his head? Stunning. Ibrahim had never looked better and Ayra found so much joy in the fact that he was about to be her husband.

She didn't hear the others compliment him neither did she laugh with the others when Anneth and Bella made a show about fanning their faces with their hands. She didn't even hear Ibtihaj say that Tobi was acting too cocky for someone who was "just the best man because he went to go and overdo his reception outfit". Ayra stared at the man she was about to get married to, watching with a smile on her face as he smiled widely – and brightly – for the cameras and recorders pointed at him, Jalal, Tobi, and Nathaniel.

Once they were led into the house, Ayra stepped back from the window while the nerves hit in full force. She knew what was coming next but the soft knock on her door still had her jumping in fright. The door went open to reveal Salama who was in an abaya like most women but in dove grey. She smiled at every person as she stepped in, leaving Falilat and some of Ayra's aunts in the doorway.

When she stopped in front of her daughter, her smile softened and her eyes became a little glassy. She was reining her tears in well and she hoped it stayed that way. Exhaling softly, she smiled a little wider. "Shall we, Leilani?"

Ayra smiled, pushing her nerves down to the best of her ability. "We shall, Ummi."

Everyone present – with a few phones held up – watched (and recorded) as mother and daughter linked their arms, nearly split images of each other with beautiful, deep dimples on their cheeks when they smiled. They both breathed in and out and then they took the steps forward, those in the doorway clearing the way for them. With each step that took them closer to where everyone else waited, Ayra told herself to breathe.

After all she was one step closer to her long-time dream.

13 (Part II)

Ayra's entrance into the living room had people gasping softly and she smiled a little with the rosiest of cheeks. Most of those who had a good view of her were women. Only a few men got a good view and like she'd already planned, she gave them very little attention.

Salama led her to the other side of the floral partition and Ayra's heart decided then to pick up its beating pace as she drilled it into her head that Ibrahim was right on the other side. Once her daughter was comfortably seated on the cushion, Salama smiled and stepped back, easily finding her own cushion which sat beside Falilat's. Ibtihaj, Bella, Anneth, and Ayra's cousins who'd all been up with her easily found their spots and sat as comfortably as they could.

Breathing in and out, Ayra raised her head. Through the little gap between the flowers she got a glimpse of Ibrahim and found him staring back at her, a smile on his face; a smile meant solely for her. Blushing further and being unable to bring the flutters in her stomach to a stop, Ayra smiled back. The officiator – an imam at the National Mosque – cleared his throat as he sat, getting the attention of everyone in the room, including the bride and groom. Saying Bismillah, he began the ceremony.

Ayra couldn't remember the one time her heart had beat so fast. She listened with the galloping organ in her chest as the Imam spoke about the reason they were gathered and how marriage was a sacred union that bound two lives together for eternity unless – which he prayed against – something happened along the line that caused both people involved to separate. His voice was soothing and it was easy for everyone present to listen. He spoke about the beauty of a union and how both people involved were to do everything possible to please each other with Allah's pleasure as the main focus in whatever they were doing as one always had to put Allah first, no matter what.

When he finished, he asked for those giving their children away in marriage. On Ibrahim's side, Salim and one of Ibrahim's uncles – Assad – moved forward. On Ayra's side, Muhsin and his brother – Harun – stepped forward. The imam asked for their consents, especially Muhsin and Harun, to join Ayra and Ibrahim in matrimony and both sides gave it with firm nods. Satisfied, the Imam turned to Ibrahim and went on to ask if Ibrahim if he wanted to take Ayra as his wife; to care for her, to protect her, to be a shield and a pillar of support for her, to provide for her, to love her, to be patient with her, to guide her at times when she strayed, and then to forgive her when she made mistakes.

Ibrahim's reply echoed in the room. "Yes."

Ayra released a breath she didn't know she was holding. Behind her, most of the women present did the same thing. The Imam then turned to Ayra and asked her the same thing. She swallowed and nodded, her voice a soft – but firm – whisper when she replied. “Yes.”

There were more relieved breaths and some whispered Alhamdulillah. The Imam went on to complete the formalities, advising both Ayra and Ibrahim as they had stepped into a new phase of their lives. He prayed for the couple and those present happily said Ameen. The Nikkah certificate was then signed and with a beautiful smile on her face, Ayra signed last. She made sure her signature was extra pretty.

She'd barely let go of the pen when a weight was thrown on her and she nearly fell. She laughed, hugging her best friend back. “Ibty, do you have to be dramatic right now?”

“I must hug you before you go and hug man.” Ibtihaj tightened her embrace. “Barakallah, Ayra. May Allah bless your union.”

“Ameen, Ibty. Thank you, for everything.”

“And like I said yesterday, if you forget me because of man, I'll kill you and throw you over the bridge leading towards Raven Isle so that the sharks can feast on your remains and erase every evidence.”

Ayra laughed, pulling back. “Yes ma.” She sensed movement on the other side of the partition so she pushed Ibtihaj away. “Shoo! Lemme meet my husband.”

Ibtihaj glared but moved back. “I don't blame you. Me too I'll get husband one day.”

“Until that day comes.”

Ibtihaj opened her mouth to reply but then the floral partition parted and there Ibrahim was with a dashing smile on his face. As the nasheeds resumed playing, Ayra found it easy to tune everyone out and focus on the man who gracefully went on his knees right in front of her. Flashes went off as cameras and smartphones captured the scene but neither the bride nor groom cared much as they stared at each other, smiles on both their faces.

Ibrahim moved even closer, his smile and expression softening. “Ayra.”

Ayra told herself to keep breathing. “Ibrahim.”

He stared at her for a moment longer before he opened his arms. “Come here please.”

She didn't need to be asked twice. She moved from her seating position to her knees and stepped into the one embrace she'd looked forward to for years; one she'd tried imagining over and over again. Her imaginations did no justice to the reality of being hugged by Ibrahim. Strong arms went around her, holding her against a firm chest and soft fabric. As usual, his perfume was like a slice of heaven and him burying his face in the crook of her neck was dizzying but perfect. All of it was perfect.

He held her and she held him, taking in everything she felt at once. She was on cloud nine, maybe even higher, and there was nothing that could bring her down. She was sure of it. Her eyes widened and she gasped softly when he kissed her neck before pulling back, his smile returning as he took her hands in his, squeezing softly. "Hello, Mrs Fahad."

She could not hold his gaze for a moment longer so she let her head bashfully drop while her cheeks got hotter and hotter. "Hi."

There were teases, there were cheers, and there were prayers. Eventually, Ayra and Ibrahim rose to their feet and faced the guests who'd come to celebrate with them. He held her beside him, an arm around her waist; an arm Ayra did her best to not think too much about. They couldn't stop smiling and when they were asked to move to the second living room for pictures, Ayra let Ibrahim lead the way forward with her hand still in his while the other hand lifted the hem of her dress just so she wouldn't trip and embarrass herself. She knew if she turned around, she'd see Ibtiyah adjusting the train that flowed out behind her and she was once again extremely grateful for having Ibtiyah in her life.

Ibrahim blinked as they stepped into the decorated space. "Oh wow...This is stunning."

Ayra had to agree with him. "It is."

He then smiled at her, his eyes brighter than ever. "And you look ethereal, Ayra. I was too blown away to mention that earlier."

It was safe to say her heart died and had to be resuscitated. Behind them, Ibtiyah hissed. "Abeg some of us are still single o."

They laughed, finding their places when the media team stepped in. Ayra sat beside Ibrahim and they smiled for the photos that were taken, each one turning out better than the last. Those present couldn't deny that they were a beautiful couple, especially when seated side by side in front of the floral backdrop that fit the drapes and flowers arranged on both sides of the ottoman.

There were so many hugs, so many kisses on the cheeks, so many goodwill messages, and so many prayers. The Hexad Squad then all got together – with Ibtihaj – for pictures with the new couple, laughing at the end of the photo session when Ibtihaj threatened to murder Tobi in cold blood if he tried to put his arm around her again.

Anneth then hugged Ayra. “Welcome, officially, to the squad! I mean, the name can’t change for a lot of reasons but welcome.”

Ayra laughed, nodding over the other’s shoulder. “I understand, Anneth.” She then pulled back. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Oh please. It’s nothing.” Anneth then grinned and hugged Ibrahim who laughed and hugged her back. “Engineer Fahad, you’re married.”

Ibrahim laughed again. “I am!”

Ibrahim hugged his female friends; Ayra had always known that because it was something they did publicly regardless of the number of cameras pointed their way. However, it had taken some getting used to experiencing it in person and one thing she was grateful for was how Ibrahim never pushed physical touches on her; just the little innocent ones he stole here and there. Besides, she trusted him so all was fine.

She snapped out of her head when Bella hugged her, the Italian squeezing the life out of her. “*Congratulazioni!* I’m so happy!” She then pulled back, her smile wide. “Like Anneth said, welcome to the squad. I know we’ve had fun all this time but we’re about to have more fun.”

Ayra smiled widely too. “I look forward to it. Thank you so much, Bella.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.” She then stepped forward to whisper “By the door, he’s wearing black.”

Not understanding, Ayra turned and her eyes widened when it clicked. Bella’s lover, Serkan Yilmaz – who looked regal in a simple black Turkish sherwani – raised the glass of fruit punch in his hand as a toast, shot her a two finger salute, winked at Bella, and then he was gone; as though he’d never been there. Although she’d only seen him for less than a minute, Ayra had to say it.

“Your man is fine!”

Bella giggled like a lovesick teen, bringing a hand to her mouth. “Tell me about it. Don’t let Ibrahim kill me please. He can be very jealous.”

Thankfully, Ibrahim was being kept occupied by the men and Anneth so Ayra gave Bella her full attention. "I thought you said he wasn't going to make it."

"He said his flight was delayed so he turned around before he left Aomi. He said the least he could do was attend the Nikkah and I'm glad he did. I'm glad you got to meet him too. Well, you just saw him but still."

"Ibty didn't meet him though." Ayra knew her best friend was somewhere in the crowd. "She'll flip."

Bella laughed. "She will. I'll introduce her to Serkan soon."

"Well, I look forward to a proper introduction and –"

Ibrahim joined them, easily pulling Ayra to him as though it was something he'd done all his life. "Don't talk about another man when I'm here. Ayra, we literally just got married."

She blushed furiously. "It just happened."

Bella just rolled her eyes and then gave Ibrahim a half hug. "Engineer Fahad, you're married! Oh, I'm so going to have a camera ready whenever we're together. After all, the world's yet to see the side of you that's whipped for your wife."

"Bella, I swear to God –"

Their parents joined them so the conversation came to an abrupt close. Salama teared up as she offered her congratulations and Ibrahim hugged her, patting her back with a warm smile until she was calmer. Just like his son hugged, Salim held Ayra to his chest and stated that he was so glad she was officially his daughter too. Fareeda's hug was warm and she promised Ayra that being a new member of the Fahad family was going to be nothing short of pleasant. The Fahads present were cordial and Ayra was glad.

When Zuhr came by, the group began to disperse, knowing they were going to meet in a few hours at the Aomi International Conference Centre for the reception after which Ayra would be conveyed to her new home where Ibrahim would meet her waiting for him.

Ibrahim's hand found his wife's before he faced her. His smile was beautiful. "I'll see you later?"

She nodded, smiling back and loving how her hand fit in his. "In Shaa Allah."

In a corner of the room, Tobi yelled as Ibtiyah smacked his back. Ibrahim chuckled, not once looking away from the woman he married. "You don't think they'll kill themselves tonight, right?"

Ayra laughed. "Toby loves her reputation but if Tobi decides he wants to be unfortunate, there's only so much I can do."

Ibrahim smiled a little wider. "We'll keep them apart."

"Yeah," Ayra felt drunk on everything that was Ibrahim Fahad. "We will."

A near minute passed before he leaned in and kissed the corner of her mouth, sending her heart to the ICU so it could be resuscitated once again. "Stay safe, Ayra."

"You too." She told herself to keep breathing as he took a small step back. "I love you."

His smile turned into a smirk. "Me too, sweetheart. What else is there to feel?"



The security at the Aomi International Conference Centre was as tight as it could be. Apart from the fact that there were quite a number of notable individuals attending the wedding reception such as the president of Atlantica, the Fahads had made it quite clear that nothing was to go wrong.

The cars that drove into the venue had their IVs checked and confirmed before they were led to designated parking spots to prevent minor accidents or avoidable traffic when the event came to an end. Once guests left their cars, ascended the front steps of the conference centre, and passed through the main doors, they stepped into the fairytale beauty that was the wedding reception of Ayra and Ibrahim. Like every other event, Salama, Kim and Iris had outdone themselves and every single person was stunned.

The extremely wide hallway that stretched from the main doors of the conference centre to the double doors of the main hall was covered with a beige rug that was extremely soft underneath the feet of guests. Wide and tall arches stood steadily with flowers on them and huge light balls between them, lighting up the path to the hall itself.

Beyond the double doors that granted entrance into the main hall was the photo area where a floral shop was created on one side and a reflective cube with walled mirrors on the other. Photographers and videographers present worked their magic and all of it was beautiful. Once their photos had been taken, guests were allowed to check the seating chart put up and then go past the photo area.

What was a plain hall on a normal day with a thick carpeted floor had been turned into a slice of paradise, divided into two by the vinyl covered isle that shone underneath the lights. Drapes which were slightly skirted covered the walls and also covered the ceiling where the lights were mounted, converging in the very middle where the extremely wide circular floral arrangement with hanging lights and mini chandeliers suspended perfectly; hanging balanced all around. The dance floor, a wide circle, was directly underneath the suspended flowers and lights.

On both sides of the aisle – and the dance floor – were round tables with reflective tops and thick, sturdy legs; some tables bigger than others and those at the back sitting on the elevated stairs platform so the guests placed there could get a good view of everything that happened without any inconveniences. The smallest tables had six cushioned chairs with gold legs around them while the biggest tables took as many as twenty chairs comfortably with more than enough space for each guest to move around as much as they wanted to; something Salama loved so much. Every table had decorations in the middle; expertly arranged flowers mostly in pink shades and touches of green, tall candle holders with candles that were lit, and then some had little flute vases that held double or triple flowers in front of one chair or the other.

The dinnerware was set immaculately in front of each chair, napkins triangularly folded on the top of each dinner set with each guest having one glass and one champagne flute, and a mini sealed jug filled with chilled water; a favour from one of Aomi's best bottling companies. Each guest had a menu too, local and intercontinental dishes printed clearly for them to pick from.

Then there was the raised platform with its stairs for Ibrahim and Ayra. Six stairs in the first flight led to the landing where the two-seater settee sofa sat with its curved arm and its cushions alongside the coffee table. Beyond the landing was another flight of six steps and then the LED walls that served as the backdrop, alternating between soft colours and patterns. The middle wall hid the entrance door for Ayra and Ibrahim.

On both sides of the entire raised platform were faux pillars with even more flowers and wall mounted lights that turned from side to side. The cake table sat on the right side of the platform, the six tiered cake displayed in all its glory. On the left of the platform, working in their designated areas, were the DJ and the technical crew who ensured everything flowed seamlessly.

Guests easily found their seats and those who didn't easily find theirs turned to the suited assistants for help. Each person was dressed to

elegantly outshine the other. There had been no stated dress or colour code so every person wore what they thought was best, English wears and traditional wears blending like paint on a canvas. It was way too easy to point out the Fahads as the dresses, suits, shoes, and jewellery pieces they adorned flaunted just how wealthy they were and how wealthy they'd always been. They all knew better than to try to make a scene. It was not going to end well, at all.

The hall filled quite easily and there was lovely chatter as people met long-time friends and made introductions while songs calmly played. Those who did not see the need for little talk simply sat and did one thing or the other to while away time. It wasn't long before the Atlantican President arrived with his wife, the Vice-President and his wife, alongside a few ministers. Fareeda and Salim were the ones to welcome them in and lead them towards the table they were to share, leaving the seats reserved for Muhsin, Salama, Falilat, and Al-Amin empty as they were yet to arrive due to a little mishap at the house after the Nikkah.

Once the presidential entourage was seated alongside the parents of the groom, the lights dimmed while a single spotlight shone brightly on the man who now stood on his designated stage. He smiled, dressed in a midnight black three piece suit, and then he brought the microphone he held in one hand to his mouth while his other hand, which held the programme cards, stayed behind him.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, do permit me to welcome you to the wedding reception of Ayra and Ibrahim Fahad. My name is Ali Farsi and I'll be your host for tonight.”

Outside, the groom's entourage of heavily tinted vehicles arrived and were directed to the back entrance. In the only limo in the entourage, Ibrahim adjusted his cufflinks while breathing in and out, praying and hoping the event went well.

At Haven Estate, Ayra held up the hem of her dress as she descended the stairs with her female entourage behind her led by none other than Ibtihaj who looked so much like her mother in the *iro* and off-shouldered *buba* sewn out of nectar motif *komole* fabric in the honey-hazel brown shade, her *gele* tied to immaculate perfection with silver jewellery adorning her ears, neck and wrists while silver heels adorned both her feet. When they got to the foyer, Ayra smiled at her parents and Ibtihaj's, her heart warming when she saw just how proud they looked.

Muhsin stepped forward, holding out his arm while Falilat sang Yoruba praises for both her daughter and Ayra. “Shall we, Leilani?”

Ayra, smiling wider, nodded and linked her arm with his. "We shall, Baba."

"You look beautiful, Ayra."

"You don't look so bad yourself."

He laughed. "I had to look the part." He turned to his wife and held out his other arm which she easily linked hers with. "I couldn't let anyone outshine my wife and I."

Salama rolled her eyes although colour stained her cheeks. "Please let's go."

Both Ayra and Muhsin laughed but did as she asked. Behind them, Ibtihaj linked her arms with her parents' and they followed suit. Behind them were Anneth and Bella who both looked stunning in crepe trumpet gowns that had cowl-necks, wide straps and front slits that went above the knees, and silver heels on both their feet with silver jewellery on their ears and wrists. Only Anneth wore a necklace while Bella's neck stayed bare, beautiful collarbones on full display. While Bella's hair was a sleek ponytail with a lock left to fall forward and frame the left side of her face, Anneth's was in a sleek classic chignon with a middle parting. Their make-ups, as always, were flawless and they were going to turn heads; everyone knew that.

They got into their designated vehicles and Ayra breathed in and out. Ibtihaj, who was to ride with her best friend, ensured her parents were comfortable in their car before she got in with Ayra. She took Ayra's hand and smiled, squeezing warmly. "Let's finish this with a bang."

Ayra grinned, nodding. "Let's do that."

"And if anyone tries anything funny, tell me. Thunder will strike them."

Ayra laughed and nodded again. "Yes ma'am."

"I love you, Ayra."

"I love you too."

14

When the bridal entourage arrived at the conference centre, the cars were led to the parking area where the groom's entourage waited with the groom himself. Apart from Tobi who wore a cream coloured *aghada* (*bakht*) and its cap, every other male was in a suit; cream shawl lapelled tux suits, black classic oxford shirts tucked into the bands of their black trousers, bow ties, shining black and brown shoes, and watches alongside other jewellery pieces which cost more than people liked to think about unless you were in the friendship circle.

The men smiled when those in the vehicles got out. There were hugs and complements. Ibrahim was the one who opened Ayra's door and he smiled lazily as he took her all in, a swirl of emotions in his dark eyes. He then leaned forward. "You look dashing."

Ayra wanted her cheeks to stop being so hot but it was hard. She smiled back at him, appearing calm and composed while her body had flutters everywhere. "And you look amazing. This definitely beats every image I had."

"So it's good enough?"

"It's perfect, Ibrahim. It's perfect and it fits you."

He leaned in even further, doing more damage to her heart with his face right in front of hers. "And you should know that this dress won't look good on someone who isn't you. You're literally the main star tonight, Ayra."

Her cheeks got darker and while she was tempted to avert her gaze, she chose to stubbornly keep her eyes on his. Ibtihaj cleared her throat very loudly. "Abeg some of us that are single are still here o."

Ayra's eyes widened as she'd actually forgotten that Ibtihaj was right beside her while Ibrahim laughed, looking away from his wife. He smiled warmly at the other woman. "Hello, Ibtj."

She grinned. "Hi. You look really good."

"Not as good as you though."

Ibtihaj's smile turned smug. "It's me, of course. Don't worry, I'll let you and everyone else admire my mother's work of art by doing three-sixty when we get down. We are getting down now *abi*?"

He nodded. "We are." Ibrahim then turned back to Ayra and held out a hand. "Mrs Fahad, shall we?"

Ayra was slowly turning to mush. She nodded, putting her hand in his. “Sure.”

He helped her down and their friends cheered like the excited people they were. Ayra and Ibtihaj’s families told them they’d be inside and once Ayra, Ibtihaj, and the others nodded, they said goodbyes and headed in. Bella whipped out a Polaroid camera from her bag and held it up at Ayra and Ibrahim.

“Say cheese, Engineer and Mrs Fahad.”

She didn’t have to ask them twice. Ibrahim easily wrapped a steady arm around Ayra’s waist, pulling her close to him, and they both shot wide sincere smiles at the camera; a perfect moment Bella captured.

Ibrahim’s suit was charcoal black; a mushroom patterned jacquard jacket with notch lapels where silver accessories sat comfortably. His inner shirt – a classic Oxford just like his friends – was white with black buttons and his bowtie sat nicely at the collar. The black trousers covered every inch of his long legs and black leather Balmoral ankle high boots covered his socked feet, not one single spec of dirt on the shoes exterior. His cufflinks were silver and they matched his watch and the single ring he wore; a ring that would complement the one he was yet to give her.

Ayra, on the other hand, was in the razzmic berry shade of purple and silver. Her dress – a tulle ball gown – was the most sophisticated one she’d worn since the wedding festivities began. The neck was high and the sleeves were long. There was a thin band around the waist and then the tulle skirt puffed out and flowed to her feet. The dress was intricately beaded and stoned and there was no doubt she was going to be so pretty underneath the lights of the hall. Her headpiece was tied the same way as the one she’d worn for the Nikkah but instead of white, this was silver and on it was a crystal double bridal headband. Her earrings were simple teardrops and she wore no necklace while bracelets adorned both wrists and simple block heeled shoes were on her feet.

Bella grinned at the polaroid that was printed immediately. “This is beautiful. Maybe I should be a photographer tonight.”

Nathaniel laughed, his arm around Anneth’s waist. “Maybe you should. I’m sure you’ll have a *lot* of fun.”

“Fuck you.”

A glare from Ibtihaj stopped Tobi from approaching her and he smiled widely. “Ibty, come on. We’re the next important people after the bride and groom.”

“Don’t allow me slap you.”

Iris, thankfully, joined them before things could escalate and she led them to a waiting room where the photo team waited to capture Ayra and Ibrahim as they’d been unable to do that before both the bride and groom left their respective houses. The squad and Ibtiḥaj were mean teasers which made Ibrahim and Ayra laugh a lot as they followed the instructions the photographers provided for one position or the other.

It wasn’t long before Kim joined Iris and split the group into two, Iris leading Ayra and Ibrahim to the back of the LED wall that sat behind the raised platform stage meant for the both of them while Kim led Tobi, Ibtiḥaj, Jalal, Bella, Nathaniel, and Anneth to the hall’s main doors where they were to come in from. Guests who arrived at that moment were directed to the side doors as the programme had officially begun with the Vice President of the country giving the opening prayer.

The squad and Ibtiḥaj – the couple’s squad as they called themselves – took their places in twos. Anneth and Nathaniel were at the front, Jalal and Bella behind them, and then Tobi and Ibtiḥaj at the rear. Jalal adjusted Bella’s strap at her request before he turned to give Ibtiḥaj a cheeky smile.

“You look really, really good, Ibty.”

She did a twirl for him, showing him and the others just how beautiful her outfit was. “Thank you, thank you. If you want something like this, do patronise my mother. She sews unisex outfits so you’re in safe hands.”

Tobi appeared wounded. “Why won’t you smile at me like that?”

Her smile disappeared and she folded her arms. “Come, why are you obsessed with me? Did you see me in your dream?”

Anneth and her husband were trying to not laugh and were failing. Bella snorted. “Ask him please.”

Jalal shook his head, chuckling. “You don’t want to know the answer to that question, Ibty.”

Tobi smirked, adjusting the arms of his *agbada*. “Why? Do you want to appear in my dreams?”

Ibtiḥaj had never looked so irritated. “*Olorun ma je! Mo ta ika e da nu.* (God forbid. I rebuke it).”

It was hard for the others – who had picked up bits of Yoruba from the bickers – to not laugh at that and they knew better than to not do so quietly

as their entrance was coming up. Tobi's smirk did not disappear. "Do you know how many people would die to have me dream about them?"

"Why won't they die for you to dream about them when they don't have sense?" She rolled her eyes and faced forward. "I kept praying for Jalal to be my partner but you just had to go and copy me."

Jalal grinned at her. "There's always going to be another party."

She grinned back. "Exactly!"

Tobi faced forward, now smiling. "And I'll be there to ruin your plans. You've not seen anything."

Ibtihaj ignored him and kept smiling at Jalal who chuckled and turned around. Slightly out of breath, Bella, Nathaniel and Anneth straightened and regained composure as the officiator welcomed them in. Tyra Chantey's *Sweet Talk* began to play and guests looked towards the main doors that went open, a moment passing before Anneth and Nathaniel stepped in together.

Behind the LED wall where they were to walk in from, Ayra inhaled and exhaled nervously. She looked down when Ibrahim laced his fingers with hers, squeezing ever so softly. She raised her head and he smiled at her. "Nervous?"

She did not even bother to deny it. She nodded. "Very."

He squeezed her hand again, his smile widening by the tiniest inch. "We'll be fine. We'll just go out there and end everything well."

"You don't seem nervous."

"I am actually." He confessed. "I just know how to hide it. It's come from years of practice. I'm not a fan of crowds but it's a part of the work that I unfortunately can't do without."

She blurted out the first thing that came to her head. "You're talking more these days, Ibrahim."

"Only with you and the squad, but mainly with only you. I guess love does that to someone."

The nervousness disappeared and she smiled while her heart danced and her cheeks darkened, her dimples so, so deep. She fell even more in love with him, further solidifying the fact that when it came to Ibrahim Fahad, she was a woman hopelessly in love. Now, though, she was not just any other woman; she was his wife and it brought her great joy.

As the officiator announced that they were about to welcome the bride and groom, Ibrahim stepped forward, tipped Ayra's chin up and planted a soft – and very chaste – kiss on her lips, pulling back before she could do anything apart from widen her eyes. He stared at her lips which were a pale pink lined with a darker pink shade for a moment longer than what was safe for her heart before he brought his eyes back to hers. His dark eyes seemed a little darker and Ayra swallowed the small lump in her throat.

“Let's get this ceremony over with.” He said quietly, his voice unusually deep. “And then we'll get back to that. Deal?”

Maximillian's *Beautiful Scars* began to play, signifying their entrance, and Ayra nodded once. She barely heard her own voice as the led wall slid to the side, revealing them bit by bit. “Deal.”

Smiling and stealing one more kiss, Ibrahim faced forward and Ayra pulled herself in record time as they were fully revealed to the sea of guests in the bright hall. Hand in hand, she and Ibrahim shared small smiles and then they stepped out of the shadows, walking in sync. The sparklers on both sides of the platform went off as they ascended the stairs, Ibrahim being extra careful with his wife so she didn't trip over her dress's hem. Ayra glowed so beautifully underneath all the lights and a lot of people present took photos.

Once they got to the bottom of the stairs, Ayra linked her arm with Ibrahim's and they headed to the dance floor together, smiling at guests who sat on both sides. The song was repeated and in the middle of the entire hall – with the lights and dry ice machines working their magic – Ayra and Ibrahim swayed together with their gazes locked and smiles on their faces. The cameras never stopped flashing and most guests never stopped smiling.

When the dance ended, Ibrahim led Ayra back to the raised platform while the couple squad found their reserved table, Ibtihaj and Tobi getting the most attention which Tobi bragged about until Ibtihaj got fed up and slapped him with her feathered fan. He shut his mouth but he didn't stop smirking. Ibtihaj, for her own peace and enjoyment, ignored him and went into full owambe mood. On the loveseat, Ibrahim and Ayra sat comfortably with her hand held securely in his.

The event kicked off after that. Speeches – kept short for time's sake – were presented, most making guests laugh while some – like Ibtihaj's and Muhsin's – made guests tear up. Other speeches – such as the President's – left people awed as he spoke with captivating eloquence. Drinks were served alongside starters, soft instrumental pieces playing through the

speakers. Games came next and the squad went all out, keeping guests and the couple entertained as they went neck to neck, acting as though they didn't know each other before the event as competitive sides came out. Jalal emerged the winner, earning himself an all paid trip to Lisbon courtesy of Ibrahim. Ibtihaj was a sore loser but she brightened when she was presented her gift as the runner-up; a portable camera and its photo printer.

Ayra faced her husband. "Did you know she was going to come second?"

Ibrahim nodded, not looking away from the middle of the hall where Ibtihaj stuck her tongue out at Tobi who simply shook his head and turned away. "I had an idea. It was either going to be her or Anneth. Bella doesn't like to stress much and Nathaniel loves his wife too much to not let her win. Tobi is very useless when it comes to such."

Ayra laughed. "You're such a bad friend."

He smiled nicely. "It's the truth."

The couple game came next, to prove who knew the other person better, and Ayra won proudly to the amazement of so many present as they couldn't wrap their heads around just how much information she had about Ibrahim. Not caring about the hundreds of eyes on them, Ibrahim kissed his wife's cheek. "I tell everyone who's willing to listen that no one knows me as good as you do but they tell me I'm just whipped. Thanks for proving them wrong."

Ayra was floating on genuine happy clouds. "You're welcome!"

The cake cutting came next as guests were served the main dishes. Ayra and Ibrahim chose to skip the cliché act of feeding each other and no one held it against them. It wasn't long before Ibrahim once again led Ayra to the dance floor for their dance. The radio edit of Justin Timberlake's *Mirrors* played and Ibrahim held both of Ayra's hands as they swayed gently, the world around them fading into nothingness as time froze with only that moment being important.

"Still nervous, sweetheart?" he asked.

Ayra shook her head, her eyes shining so brightly. "Nope. I feel really happy right now and I'm content too. I'm exactly where I want to be."

"I'm right where I want to be too."

Her chest was a garden for flowers of warmth. "Yeah?"

He nodded, the lights around them only highlighting just how handsome he was. "Yeah. I'm married to a beautifully amazing woman and I'm dancing

with her while the world watches. It can't get better than that, Ayra. So yes, I am right where I want to be. I'm always where I want to be when I'm with you."

"If you keep going like that, people won't be able to differentiate me from the tomatoes on their plates."

He laughed, throwing his head back while she fell deeper and deeper. "God, Ayra." His laugh died to a smile. "I don't care about them. I love it a lot when you blush. It makes you even beautiful and then there are your dimples. God!"

Ayra was melting. "Ibrahim, please!"

He could only laugh again. Their bubble burst when guests were allowed to join them and the songs slowly moved from the calm ones Ayra and Ibrahim had picked to more upbeat ones that Tobi and Ibti Haj had gladly picked out. It had infuriated Ibti Haj so much that Tobi had good taste in songs and she purposely didn't tell him that his choices were good so that "his already big head would not blow". Ayra laughed over it for the entire day.

Heels were swapped for flats and jackets were removed alongside ties as they let loose, not caring about the people present and those who kept up with the event online through the pictures and videos uploaded. One by one, guests – especially the older ones – began to say their goodbyes. Gifts were dropped in a particular room in the hall and every person was gifted a bag of guest favours Ayra had taken time to pick out.

The music was paused briefly for Jalal's vote of thanks on Ibrahim's behalf and Ibti Haj's closing duas. When the songs came back, they were even louder and Ibti Haj was at the forefront of the craze. Money guns were pulled out and crisp notes in diverse currencies filled the air, littering the vinyl covered floor while the lights alternated between colours at a rapid speed with more sparklers going off.

Eventually things winded down and slowly the event came to an end. Ibrahim led a laughing Ayra out, the entire squad right behind. Their excitement still high as they all knew what came next. Ibrahim helped Ayra into the car she'd come in and on the other side, Jalal was helping Ibti Haj in. Not caring about anything, Ibrahim kissed Ayra and the people they loved so much cheered which led to Ayra's cheeks becoming so hot. Smiling against her lips, Ibrahim pulled back.

"I'll see you soon, Ayra?"

She nodded, dizzy. "In Shaa Allah."

“Don’t kill my heart the way you’ve done throughout today.”

She laughed. “I won’t.”

“Love you, more than you know.”

Her heart flipped and screeched and all she could do was stare at him. Smiling so dashing, he stepped back and shut the door, waving at her as the car began to move forward. Dazed, Ayra turned in her seat so she fully faced forward. Beside her, Ibtihaj snickered. “Wahala for who is not in love o.”

At the parking lot they were leaving behind, Ibrahim shielded himself as his friends hit him, teasing him with all they had.



Ayra’s box was merlot red and the driver easily lifted it off the ground and placed it in the booth of the Hyundai Palisade with tinted glasses and covered number plates. Isha had long been prayed and the Abdulazizs were saying goodbye to their daughter as she was to be conveyed to her new home where she would wait alone for her husband.

Ayra, who was in a simple cream A-line dress with balloon sleeves and a cape with a deep hood, sniffled before hugging Salama. The older one wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter, sniffing.

“I love you, Leilani. I want you to never doubt that, okay?”

Ayra blinked back a fresh wave of tears. “Okay.”

“And if anything comes up, like we’ve told you since the wedding preparations began, do not hesitate to call. These doors will always be open for you, I promise.”

Ayra didn’t trust herself to not break down if she spoke so she simply hugged her mother for a minute longer before pulling back and moving on to hug Muhsin. His words were similar to Salama’s and he wiped away his daughter’s tears when they slipped. Falilat’s hug and prayers tipped Ayra dangerously over the edge and she ended up crying a little before pulling back.

Al-Amin smiled and squeezed her shoulders gently. “Be safe, Ayra. May you always be happy.”

Ayra sniffled. “Ameen.”

She hugged her uncles, cousins, and aunts. She then faced Ibtihaj who had changed into a forest green boubou, the accompanying veil draped loosely over her head. Ibtihaj swallowed, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. “I want

to follow you sha, but these Fahad women look like they can beat me and I'm too emotional to try and fight."

Ayra let out a watery laugh. "You're not serious." She opened up her arms. "Come here, Ibtty."

Ibtihaj hugged her to near extent of bone crushing. The Yoruba female sniffled over her best friend's shoulder. "Text me when you get there."

"I will."

"And I'll call you first thing tomorrow morning. Let me not go and disturb whatever Oga Ibrahim has in store for both of you."

Ayra's stomach dipped slightly. "You're mad."

Ibtihaj managed to snicker. "You never see anything." She then sniffled. "I love you, Ayra. And I am going to continuously remind you that I'm here for you. In Shaa Allah I'll always be here for you." She then pulled back, smiling. "And when I find the man that can settle with me that is a *werey*, you better be ready to rock *komole* and dance o because all the things I did for you today cannot be in vain."

Ayra laughed again. "Let's meet him first." She hugged Ibtihaj once more. "I love you, Ibtty."

"I love you too."

Minutes later, Ayra's hood was drawn over her head and two of Ibrahim's aunts led her out of the house and into one of the awaiting vehicles. It wasn't long before the vehicles were moving, taking Ayra from the house she'd lived in all her life to one she was going to be living for the rest of her life. The ride was quiet and she focused on breathing in and out. Journalists had stationed themselves in front of The Oasis so cameras flashed continuously as the cars found their way to the parking lot.

Ayra was helped down from the car and all the way to the tenth floor, she was accompanied by the members of her new family. Fareeda stood in the foyer of Ayra's new home and she warmly welcomed the younger one in. incense burned in the living room which Ayra found it soothing as Fareeda led her to one of the sectional sofas. As tradition requested, they fed her some sweets and milk and then made Duas for her. Once they'd welcomed her once again, they assured her Ibrahim was on his way and then they left, the door clicking shut behind them.

Left all alone, Ayra pulled her hood back and allowed herself breathe in and out repeatedly. She then looked around the wide space, her smile small and pretty. She was nervous but again there was excitement that slowly bubbled

at the thought of Ibrahim coming home to her. She let a number of scenarios play out in her head as to how everything would go and each mental image was better than the last. When she finished fantasising, she picked up her phone and met a message from him at the very top of her notifications.

Ibrahim: *I'm on my way! I can't wait to see you. I don't think I've ever been this excited.*

Smiling like the lover she was, Ayra quickly sent a reply.

Ayra: *I can't wait to see you too! And while I'm nervous, I'm also quite excited.*

The message delivered but it wasn't read so she told herself he was on his way, probably preoccupied with something. The seconds became minutes and one minute rolled into another. She kept breathing in and out, anticipating his arrival. When half an hour went by, she told herself that there was probably traffic as it was Boxing Day and Aomi could be crowded with the number of people that go out to have fun.

When an hour passed, she sent another message, asking where he was. The message, just like the first, delivered but it didn't show that it was read. At the two hour mark, Ayra really got worried. She called him and it went straight to his voicemail. Without thinking twice, she called Anneth and got the same thing; led to voicemail. She called every other member of the squad but they were all unreachable.

That's when she began to panic. She kept calling Ibrahim, calling the others too, and it kept going to voicemail. She dropped messages in their inboxes, her fingers flying over her keyboard, but every message got delivered. No one got read.

When the clock struck midnight, a thought settled in her mind and made her heart drop to the pit of her stomach.

Ibrahim Fahad wasn't coming to her that night, and she had no idea why.

15

At 4:53AM, Ayra decided it was time to call someone who wasn't Ibrahim or the other members of the Hexad Squad.

She'd done it all; left countless messages and calls, gone into full blown panic, cried, surfed through news stations and gossip sites to be sure there had been no accident, and then prayed Tahajjud in that very living room because she was too scared of heading up to her room without him arriving first. She should have called someone from her family or his in the last hours but for some reason, she couldn't. She didn't understand it either but now, she was ready to call the first person that came to mind; Ibtihaj.

She was already pulling up her best friend's contact when the front door beeped with the familiar sound of the passcode being inputted. It echoed in the living space and she froze with her phone in both her hands. The door clicked open and very slowly, she turned in the direction of the foyer, her heart coming up to her throat and tears prickling her eyes. A moment later, a slightly dishevelled Ibrahim stepped into the living space, a very apologetic expression on his face. "Ayra..."

The other members of the squad stepped in behind him, all of them changed out of the outfits they'd worn to the reception and also looking as dishevelled as Ibrahim, especially Tobi. They all looked apologetic too. It hit Ayra at once; the relief that Ibrahim and the others were fine and then the fatigue from being awake since the previous morning, right before she'd gotten married. Unable to help it, she burst into tears and Ibrahim pulled her to him, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

"I'm so sorry, Ayra." One hand moved up to cup the back of her head while his other arm stayed around her middle. "I'm really, really sorry."

Ayra let her phone fall, not caring if the screen broke or not, and then she grabbed fistfuls of his kaftan, crying harder. Ibrahim did not stop apologising, holding her against him until her sobs lessened and became tiny sniffles. When the relief faded away, it left blooming rage in its place and she pushed back, glaring at him.

"Where were you?!"

Ibrahim took a small step forward, trying to hold her again. "Ayra —"

"Do you have any idea how scared I was?! You told me you were on your way and then it was radio silence from you. Radio silence from all of you! I called, I texted, I left voicemails!" Her voice broke as the tears resurfaced. "How could you...? Ibrahim, do you have any idea just how scared I was?"

His hand fell back to his side. "I'm really sorry. We all are."

“Where were you, Ibrahim? Where were all of you?”

He shut his eyes for a brief moment and exhaled slowly. When she repeated her question, he sighed. “We were at Raven Isle.”

Ayra had never been so confused. “W-what?”

Behind Ibrahim, Jalal stepped forward. “Something came up and we had to rush out of Aomi. We’re really sorry, Ayra.”

Ayra looked from him back to her husband who looked even more apologetic. Her brows were furrowed. “I...I don’t understand. Why did you have to go all the way to the airport at such a late hour?”

Ibrahim sighed again, rubbing a hand over his face. “It’s going to make us sound like the worst people.”

Her hands balled into loose fists. “You do know you have to tell me, right?”

He nodded immediately. “I know.” He sighed again. “There are a number of projects the company has worked on this year and in order to make time for our wedding, we did our best to wrap everything up by the start of this month. There’s an app we’re trying to launch at an international level rather than starting here in Atlantica and then expanding. With such a large scale launch, there are a lot of companies involved and the major stakeholders have to sign before we can push forward.”

Ayra nodded slowly, doing her best to follow. “Okay...”

“We were down to five major figures left to sign the go-ahead contract as at the time we went to Italy in October. Four out of the five signed and the last one has been a headache since then. He has a lot of influence in North America so he’s like a puzzle piece you can’t do without. He’s been making a fuss about signing and we made it clear that if by Christmas he hasn’t signed, we were going to replace him with someone else. It was a threat just to try to speed things forward but unfortunately, it didn’t do much damage.”

He blew out a breath. “After the reception, I got changed to head back here at Anneth and Nathaniel’s house because my parents’ house at Monwict was too full and I didn’t like it. I had barely left the house when this stakeholder called Jalal, stating that he’s in Raven Isle and if we don’t all show up before his plane leaves, he’s going to leave the contract in the waiting lounge, unsigned.”

He stepped forward and held her arms gently; as though she was a thing that could crack and break with the slightest pressure. “We panicked and we...We just had to leave and I should have called but I’m so, so sorry. We

literally realised only Anneth brought along a phone when we were halfway gone and it wasn't the one with your phone number. I have your contact memorised but I don't do well under pressure so I kept mixing up your digits and Ibty's."

There were tears in his eyes now. "I'm very sorry, Ayra. You have no idea just how sorry I am. This wasn't how I expected this night to go. We didn't expect it to go this way at all."

Bella stepped forward, nervously fiddling her fingers. "We're really sorry, Ayra. We didn't want any of this to happen."

Anneth nodded, stepping forward too. "It was the worst timing and we all feel awful about it. We're really, really sorry, Ayra, and we promise to make it up to you whatever way you want us to."

Ayra tried to push down the urge to cry again but it was too hard so she simply gave in, allowing Ibrahim hug her once more so she could cry against his chest. She heard him tell the others thank you and that they could leave. He promised to contact them later and she barely heard their apologies before they left, the door locks automatically clicking into place when the door shut behind them.

Ayra cried in her husband's arms until there were no more tears to shed. Only then did she pull back slightly to look at him and it was funny how his own tears broke her heart that'd been so panicked earlier. She sniffled, reaching up to caress his cheeks. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, managing to give her a small smile. "I will be. Are you okay?"

"I was so scared earlier but right now I'm just glad all of you are fine...Please don't do that again."

"I won't, I promise."

"Did he sign the contract?"

He nodded again, exhaling. "He did. He had signed it since October. He just wanted to be a demanding pain in the neck."

"Are you just going to let him get it away with it?"

"Of course not." He reached up to hold her hands that were on his cheeks. "We've already alerted our legal team. We're going to sue him and we're having him replaced."

"But I thought you said he's really influential?"

"The other person we have in mind isn't as influential as this man is but he'll do. At least he won't take me away from my wife at the very moment

when I was supposed to be coming home to her.” He sighed and turned his head, kissing the inside of her left palm. “I’m really sorry, Ayra. You have no idea how sorry I am. You have no idea how sorry I’m always going to be.”

The rage she felt was gone and she was just tired of everything. She sighed, letting her hands drop before she leaned against him and found peace in the sound of his beating heart. “I’m just glad you’re alright, Ibrahim. I’m really, really relieved.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’ll be fine.”

They stayed there for a little while and then he began attacking her face with little kisses which made her laugh. “Ibrahim, stop.”

He didn’t and she only laughed harder which made him laugh too. Feeling much better, she pulled away from him completely with a smile on her face. She finally took him all in. He was in an olive green kaftan that stopped at his knees and trousers that got to his ankles. His shoes were brown and while he did not have on a cap, his curly hair was unruly and she imagined him running his hands through the curls in frustration. In a way she wasn’t used to, the mental image made her throat go dry and she had to swallow and avert her gaze.

Ibrahim bent and picked up her phone which, thankfully, did not crack or break. He straightened. “That’s one heck of a case and screen guard.”

She smiled again. “You can thank Ibty. She’s really picky when it comes to phone protection and I’m glad.”

His eyes met hers. “You didn’t call anyone else apart from the others and me?”

She shook her head, her smile now a ghost. “I couldn’t bring myself to do so until I finished praying Tahajjud. I don’t know why either. I just focused on calling you six and then ensuring there was no news of any accident. I was about calling Ibty when you came in. Perfect timing by the way. She would have panicked and I know she would have left home immediately.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her smile reappeared. “Ibrahim, it’s fine. You’re fine and you’re here now and your application is going to be launched. What application is it by the way?”

He put her phone on the coffee table closer to them and then pulled out his phone from his pocket, placing it right beside hers. He fully faced her. “We called it Little Walker. It’s for pregnant women and new mothers to track both their health and their baby’s. It has emergency services too and that would differ from city to city as every city has its own emergency patterns and all of that. That’s the basic summary but yeah, that’s it.”

“It’s beautiful.”

A corner of his lips lifted. “Yeah?”

She nodded, her dimples pretty on both cheeks when she smiled wider. “Yes. I mean, there are a lot of already existing applications for babies and mothers but I’m sure yours is going to be really nice since it is launching on such a big scale. I’m proud of you, Ibrahim.” A thought then crossed her mind and she blushed a little. “When we eventually decide on having a baby, I’ll use it too.”

His smile fully formed then. “I’ll make an application just for you.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious?!”

He nodded, his smile stretching. “It’s the least I can do for you, Ayra. Besides, you deserve it.”

She grinned. “That just made me love you a little more. You better not go back on that.”

“You have my word.” He then took her hand. “Come on, let’s do this the right way.”

“What do you mean?”

In reply, he led her to the front door, unlocked it and then led her out of the apartment. Still confused, Ayra turned the same time he did and they faced the open door. Before she could ask what he was doing, Ibrahim let go of her hand and carried her bridal style which earned him a small yelp from her. Her arms went around his neck out of reflex and her mind blanked when he looked down at her, mere inches between their faces. His eyes were an open book in that moment and she saw the mix of admiration and what she was sure was love. It made her heart beat a little faster.

Ibrahim smiled, placed a feather like kiss on her forehead, and then he recited two Duas: the Dua for returning home and then the Dua the groom offered for his bride after marriage. For Ayra, all she could do was fall deeper and deeper. Her heart was as warm as her cheeks and she couldn’t stop smiling. With Bismillah, Ibrahim crossed the threshold and then kicked the door close. He walked past the foyer with her still in his arms and he

didn't put her down until he reached the sectional sofa that had the double height windows some feet behind it.

The sofa was soft beneath her and her cheeks darkened when he knelt in front of her, his hands finding hers once again. He smiled so beautifully. "Welcome home, Ayra."

She was melting and the same time she felt like she was floating. It was the best thing. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry it's hours late."

"Oh, that's fine. I prefer this, honestly."

He opened his mouth to reply but both their phones beeped, announcing that it was Fajr time. He turned from the phones on the table back to her. "Let's pray?"

"Sure, let's do that."

They ended up going upstairs, with him taking her box for her, and they made wudhoo in their respective rooms before meeting in the family lounge where they prayed together. She couldn't remember being the first prayer of the day ever being so perfect and she revelled in it. Her stomach grumbled just as they finished their Duas and she wanted to die of embarrassment as he laughed.

"In my defence," She told him, "I barely ate yesterday and I stayed awake throughout the night with just sweets and milk in my stomach."

"I'll make breakfast for us." He moved even closer to her. "God, you're beautiful."

"Ibrahim, there has to be a limit to how much someone can blush in a period of time and I should be dangerously close to that limit."

"But you are beautiful, and I told you already, I love it when you blush."

She had to bring a hand up to cover her mouth as she laughed. "Ibrahim, please!"

"So we'll have breakfast and we'll rest. We do have to leave for Zanzibar in a few hours and I don't think we'd enjoy the flight without getting adequate rest. I'm this close to passing out."

"I can imagine. That plan sounds fine...Are we resting in our respective rooms?"

"What do you want us to do?"

Heat crept to every part of her being as his gaze flicked between her lips and her eyes. She swallowed yet again that morning. “I won’t mind sharing a bed with you.”

He smiled, the space between them getting shorter and shorter as he leaned in. “I won’t mind it either. Cuddling with you sounds like the perfect way to start our new life together...Ayra, I need to kiss you before I lose my mind.”

She could only nod and that was all he needed to cup her face firmly yet softly as his lips met hers. It started out as chaste as the first kiss they’d shared the previous day until he took it a little further and all she could do was melt into him, letting him lead while everything about her turned to a pile of mush. He kissed her until there was need for air and then he pulled back, both of them inhaling so their respiratory systems didn’t give up on them.

Ibrahim traced her swollen lower lip with a thumb and he leaned in to kiss her again. Her stomach protested and they smiled into the kiss before they pulled back, laughing. His head dropped to her shoulder. “We should get breakfast.”

Ayra was dizzy and every part of her was buzzing. She nodded anyways. “We should.”

He raised his head, stealing one more kiss before he stood, pulling her up a moment later. “We can always get back to that. After all we do have a honeymoon and there are a lot of things I want to do with you.”

Her cheeks would always betray her and it was brief but she felt a little sting in the spot where she’d been administered the contraceptive shot a week earlier at the University of Atlantica Teaching Hospital. The sting was gone as soon as it came so she didn’t dwell on it. Her mind then went to the outfits she’d packed for the short honeymoon with help from Ibtihaj, Salama and Falilat, and she blushed even deeper.

Laughing, Ibrahim pecked her cheek. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get breakfast.”

Her hand in his, Ayra let him lead her downstairs. Beyond her bashfulness and little nervousness, there was excitement. She couldn’t wait to get to Zanzibar.

16

For Ayra, The Ocean Suite of the Royal Zanzibar Beach Resort was one word: Magnificent. She loved every part of it.

The hundred square meters space had a king sized bed with actual four posters, an ottoman stool and two nightstands with tall night lamps, a sitting area with a loveseat and two one-seaters, a luxuriously furnished bathroom with a floating bathtub and a rain shower, and a private terrace which gave a lovely view of the Indian Ocean. There was also an in-room safe, a mini fridge stocked with drinks and chocolates on Ibrahim's request, a wall mounted TV, and a double wardrobe that could comfortably take their boxes whether they unpacked or not.

The hotelier who'd accompanied them to the suite smiled warmly, his hands behind him. "We hope you have a lovely stay here, Engineer and Mrs Fahad. Do let us know if there's anything you would like to have or anything you'd like us to change."

Ibrahim nodded, his arm around Ayra's shoulders. "We will. Thank you."

"You're most welcome."

Once the male left, Ayra stepped away from her husband and giddily looked around again, her grin child-like. "God, Ibrahim. It looked so beautiful online but this...This is way better."

He sat on the ottoman stool in front of the bed that had been laid to perfection, the pillows arranged nicely, and two blanket swans sitting in the middle of the flower petals that formed a heart. "I'm glad you liked it. It stood out from all the resorts you and Ibty recommended. Also, I preferred this to the Royal Suite."

"I prefer it too." She went around again, personally loving the cake, champagne and flowers they'd been gifted as a welcome present since they were on their honeymoon. "It's really beautiful. If the resort is this pretty so late at night, I can't wait to see how it is during the day."

He took off his sandals and then moved to remove his watch. "We'll have to rest a bit, pray Fajr, and then rest a little more before we can think about breakfast and touring. Besides, we have four full days here and five nights. That's plenty enough time to explore."

He stood and she walked over to where he was, blushing as usual when he pulled her close. She smiled nicely. "True...You look really good in vacation wear."

Ibrahim – dressed in beach shorts, a figure hugging top, and the sandals which he'd removed before standing – smiled at her. "Well we're on vacation and I wasn't ready to wear my usual outfits for the flight. This was more comfortable."

And she wasn't going to tell him that she'd gladly ogled at him when his attention had been on something else. She kept smiling and so did he. He then reached up to unwrap her veil slowly.

"We need to call the others to let them know we've arrived safely. But, before we do that," He pulled the veil away, revealing her hair which had been pulled into a single braid which she'd folded. "I caught a glimpse of this earlier and I just had to see the entire thing. God, Ayra. I tell myself there are levels to this thing called beauty and you keep showing me that there are even more levels to it."

Ayra gladly melted in his arms. He tossed the veil on the bed and went on to free the braid. "Can I loosen it?"

She nodded, her heart racing while flutters tripled in every possible part of her. "You can."

And he did, sneakily massaging her scalp briefly. It took everything in her to not moan blissfully and she knew through the glint in his eyes that he knew what she was trying not to do. It only made her cheeks redder. When her curls were free, he ran his fingers through them and there was no way she could miss the admiration on his face as he said "You have really beautiful hair, Ayra."

"So do you." She'd run her fingers softly through his curls earlier when they were still in Aomi and he'd fallen asleep after they'd eaten breakfast. "Yours is beautiful too."

"Not like yours though."

"Let's not argue."

He let his hand leave her hair and she pouted like a child deprived of sweets. That made him smile again. "We'll get back to that. We need to call the others."

"Yeah, we need to do so."

They both made no effort to move and it made them smile widely. He repeated what he said and so did she but they still didn't move. They stayed standing in front of the bed, his arms around her waist and her hands on his chest; one of the numerous fantasies she'd had about them brought to

life which made her very, very happy. His smile slowly disappearing, Ibrahim leaned in. “Ayra.”

She swallowed softly, her voice low and breathy. “Ibrahim.”

And then he was kissing her. Ever since they’d prayed their first Fajr together back in Aomi, he’d been touchy and it did so many things to her; things she loved despite not being familiar with. He’d kissed her in so many ways and she was still yet to decide just which way she loved but this particular kiss...This one was taking the crown.

Her arms moved to his shoulders and she pushed herself to her toes, wanting more of everything he was willing to give and Ibrahim didn’t disappoint. He broke the kiss for only a moment so they could breathe and then his lips were on hers again, his arms keeping her steady. When they eventually pulled apart, they were both breathing hard and her lips tingled nicely.

Ibrahim let his forehead drop to hers, blowing out a soft breath. “We really need to call everyone. I think we can keep ourselves from doing anything beyond kissing and making out for a little longer, yeah?”

She nodded and it felt like a lie. “I think we can.”

“Good.” He pulled himself away from her reluctantly. “Let’s make those phone calls.”

She nodded again. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

They stepped away from each other and got their phones from the bags that had been their carry-ons on the plane. She sat on the loveseat in the sitting area while he stepped out to the terrace. She called her parents first, then Ibtihaj’s, and then Ibtihaj herself.

“Madam,” Ibtihaj said as soon as she picked up. “Shey you’re alright? I told you clearly to let me know when you got to your new house and to let me know how everything goes. Is it now you’re getting to your new house!?”

Ayra laughed, feeling a little guilty. She didn’t want to tell Ibtihaj or anyone else that she’d spent her first night married panicking and in tears. “Sorry ma. I got side-tracked and I just got a moment to actually make the phone calls.”

“Side-tracked keh?” Ibtihaj gasped outrageously. “Ayra, you don dey do bad thing!?”

“Ibty!”

“What do you want me to think? I was going to call you earlier but Mummy went ahead to put pictures in my head that I had to cast and bind. I mean, I know you said you and him agreed to have sex in Zanzibar but this lust of a thing can be very funny so I did not want to take chances.”

Ayra was glad Ibrahim couldn't hear a thing. She glanced his way and found him laughing as he paced the length of the terrace, his other hand in the pocket of his beach shorts. She looked away for the sake of her heart and mind that were teetering towards dangerous territories.

“Ibrahim and I were resting ahead of our flight. That's all.”

“Lie will kill you there. Ayra, say it with your full chest that you two already rested. Man that was ready to chop your face during and after the reception.”

Ayra's cheeks were burning. “Ibty, leave me alone. I just called to let you know that we've arrived safely in Zanzibar. Why aren't you sleeping?”

“Madam, your wedding madness is still going on online. I've been watching reels and scrolling through posts. I'm a star myself. People have been praising my outfits.” She then hissed. “It's just annoying how they're pairing me with Tobi and saying that Bella and Jalal look good together too.”

Ayra smiled. “Well, I know Tobi is annoying and he's definitely not the man for you but both your outfits killed it. You two being paired together only made it better. Outside that, they shouldn't pair you two together. I can't have you with a man that calls women by the number of girlfriends he has when he meets them. You deserve much more than that.”

“Thank you o! This is why you are my best friend. I'll find someone sha. I already have a lot of DMs to handle.”

“Yay! Soon we'll be planning your own wedding and I'll be ready to go all out for you too.”

“Amen o! Oya, before Oga Ibrahim will come and say I'm hogging his wife, come and be going. Ensure you wear something very, *very* provocative for your first time o.”

“Ibty, I swear to God –”

Ibtihaj cackled. “Bye, bye.”

The call ended and Ayra could only roll her eyes. She considered calling the members of the squad but thought against it as she didn't know if they were all awake or which one would be talking to Ibrahim. She chose to send them messages instead, telling them that she and Ibrahim were in Zanzibar

safely and they were alright. She also told them they didn't need to be apologising anymore for having to rush down to Raven Isle while she was left all alone. Just like with Ibrahim, she was glad they were alright.

Ibrahim stepped in just as she was finishing Bella's message and she smiled when he went around the loveseat and kissed her hair. She hit send and then looked up at him. He smiled back. "I'll freshen up first."

"Sure."

"And then we can sleep for an hour or two before we pray Fajr."

"Let's pray Tahajjud before we sleep."

He nodded, still smiling. "Whatever you want us to do, Ayra."

Her smile softened. "I love you."

"Right back at you, sweetheart." He pecked her forehead and she savoured it. "What else is there to feel?"



They slept through the entire day, only waking up at intervals to use the restroom, pray and then eat the meals they had delivered from the resort's restaurants.

After Isha, she happily sat on his laps on the seat he occupied on the terrace and they watched the calm sea together, the sounds of waves crashing a soothing melody. He traced a random shape on her arm. "You seem lost in thought."

She smiled a little. "It's just beautiful."

"The sea?"

She nodded. "Yeah, among other things." A moment of silence passed. "I used to dream about this a lot. I used to imagine you and me married and together like this and I love how so many fantasies have been coming to life."

"Just how long have you liked me for?"

She cleared her throat, deflecting. "Do you think there's anything going on in the —"

He chuckled, his other arm going around her middle to stop her from escaping. "We're not getting off topic, Ayra. I already told you the exact moment I fell for you so you have to tell me too."

"I don't want to."

“Please. I really, really want to know.”

She was glad her back rested against his front so he couldn't easily see her face that burned. She let herself feel a moment of embarrassment before she vaguely replied. “I was a teenager.”

“So we're talking about two, three years back?”

Her face burned even more. “Maybe...”

“Wait.” He leaned sideways to look at her properly with wide eyes. “Even further back?”

“Ibrahim, we can talk about something else.”

His eyes were even wider. “Ayra, just how old were you?”

She wanted to disappear. She shut her eyes, knowing there was no going back. “I was thirteen.”

“I'm sorry, what?” His brows furrowed. “I don't think I met you when you were thirteen.”

She opened her eyes with a small sigh. “You didn't. Let's just say you were in the room I wanted to make use of and well...”

His brows furrowed further and his eyes had an astonished glint. “You have to tell me this story. You're telling me you were in your parents' house the day I came with my father and his colleagues?”

She nodded, facing her fate. “I was. It had been the last day of school and I was excited to come home to meet Baba but I saw the cars and I knew he was busy so I went up to change out of my uniform. Then I decided to come down to watch a movie in the second living room since Baba's guests hardly came that way. You were there and I don't know why but I panicked and I ran behind the closest curtain.”

“Are you serious?”

She nodded again, the embarrassment fading away little by little as she watched his astonishment grow. “I am. You are a really captivating person, Ibrahim, and I totally forgot what I'd come down for. I found it amazing that someone could be so captivated with the book he was reading to the extent he didn't know he was being watched.”

His brows were relaxed and he gave her a small smile. “It was a thriller I'd taken from Mum's shelf. It was really good and I wanted to finish it before the meeting with your father ended...But are you serious? You've loved me since then?”

Her cheeks coloured. “Well, I knew I felt unfamiliar things that thirteen year old me couldn’t fathom but I was definitely curious about you so I listened attentively to what Baba said when he spoke about you and trust me, he said everything good. I would later come to learn what my feelings meant and I prayed for the best,” She omitted a lot and then shrugged. “And here we are.”

He was quiet for a stretched moment and then his expression softened ever so beautifully. “I should have met you sooner.”

Her heart did its signature flip. “Yeah?”

He nodded with no hesitation. “Yeah. I really should have met you sooner so I could give you back every inch of love you had for me.”

Her love for him was a deep, deep hole and she’d fallen even deeper with his words. Imagining them meeting earlier had her feeling all warm and buttery. She had to look away from him, her gaze falling to her hands. “Well, this still worked out so...Alhamdulillah either way.”

He kissed her shoulder which was covered by the boubou she wore. “I’ll make it up to you for the rest of our lives together, I promise.”

She only blushed deeper and he chuckled before turning her face towards him so he could kiss her softly, knowing she was going to melt into him like she always did. Ayra did exactly that and when he pulled back she kept her eyes closed for a second longer before she opened them, meeting his darker ones. She saw the question in his eyes and she had to swallow while her heart found it as a perfect type to run its treadmill.

“I...” She blew out a small breath. “I need to get prepped first.” She managed to smile. “I know we’ve showered and all but I’d feel better wearing something else. Then I’m all yours.”

He smiled too, nodding. “Take your time. I’ll wait. And if you don’t want to go all the way, I’ll wait till you’re ready. Okay?”

With how she felt as though she’d combust soon, Ayra wasn’t sure she was going to withdraw her consent until they’d done every single thing they could. She nodded anyways, her smile a little wider. “Okay.”

They left the terrace a minute later and she should have gone to pick out what she wanted to wear before heading to the bathroom to get changed but Ibrahim hadn’t kissed her enough yet and he did so until she had to reluctantly step away from him, knowing she’d never get changed if she let him go on.

She grabbed the first lingerie set her in her box that her hand came in contact with and all but ran into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her. She dumped the chosen outfit on the vanity and fanned herself with her hands, trying to cool off the heat that affected every single part of her body. It didn't work and she ended up splashing water on her face, tempted to take yet another shower although they'd taken their baths – separately – between Maghrib and Isha. Breathing in and out until she was much calmer, she opened the cotton bag that held the lingerie she'd chosen and her eyes should have popped out of their sockets with how wide it was.

Staring right back at her was a black silk robe which had lace on the sleeves and the back, and a waist sash. There was nothing else; absolutely nothing to wear underneath. Ayra bit back a groan. It was one of the three robes she'd packed for the trip and she had planned to wear them when she was more comfortable with showing so much skin to Ibrahim. Now though...her plans were going to have to change because she didn't trust herself to go back in there.

It wasn't easy to resign herself to the night's fate but she did, accepting the fact that she was really going to leave the bathroom with nothing but a silk robe. With a sigh, she got started on getting ready. She brushed her teeth extra-carefully and then removed her boubou, folding it neatly and then putting her underwear right on top of it once they were off. She pulled the robe out of its bag and with another sigh, she put it on. It was soft and cool against her skin and she actually liked it. The waist sash was so long it went around her waist twice before she knotted it in a loose bow. She stared at her reflection for a moment, turning from left to right, until she was nervously satisfied.

She then brushed her hair out and left it loose to fall past her shoulders. The perfumes came next and she spritzed a little here and there, feeling more and more confident with each passing second. When she finished with every single thing, she stared at her reflection. The woman who stared back was beautiful and innocently tempting. She blew out a long breath, prayed for everything to go well because she had only the extensive research she'd done to rely on and not any previous experience. She didn't want anything to go wrong and she knew better than to let her nervousness get the best of her.

Gathering every ounce of courage, she walked to the door and pulled it open. Her eyes widened when she found Ibrahim on the other side, his hand raised as he'd been about to knock. He blinked, his hand falling back to his head. "You were taking quite too..." His gaze slid downwards and his eyes widened slightly. "Long."

Ayra, her eyes still wide, let her eyes slide downwards and it shouldn't have been possible but her eyes got even wider. Her husband was shirtless, revealing a well-toned torso and the full length of his slightly muscular arms. His waist downwards was covered with a pair of loose, black trousers and his feet were bare. She brought her line of sight back to his face the same time he brought her line of sight back to his.

Ayra couldn't breathe properly and judging from her husband's expression, he seemed to be going through the exact same thing. Ibrahim forced out a shaky breath. "Leilani."

The room was hotter, she was sure of it. She said the first thing that came to mind without much thought. "Hi...?"

"God," He sounded so pained. "You're not going to kill me."

And then he pulled her towards him, his mouth coming down on hers with an urgency she could barely brace herself for. She'd thought he kissed her in every way possible but this was proving her wrong. Ibrahim kissed her as though he was on the brink of death and she was the only thing that could fully bring him back to life, and she had to hold onto him for dear life while he reached up to cup the back of her neck.

He broke the kiss so they could both breathe for a near minute and then he was kissing her again, blinding moving backwards with her. Ayra let herself get swept by everything, following his lead as he was clearly certain of what he was doing. His hands staring to roam drove her mad and when he lifted her up, she naturally wrapped her legs around his waist while her hands moved to toy with his hair which was more than enough to push Ibrahim to near insanity.

He let her hold him as he moved his mouth from hers to her neck while his hands worked on her robe's sash, discarding it once it had come undone before opening her robe which the sash had held together. His hands on her bare skin had her gasping, her hands tugging at his hair. She watched as he lowered his gaze, taking in all of her that was on display to him and it was a lot for her to feel.

He carried her to the bed and got her out of the robe in record speed, as though the fabric had offended him and he didn't want to rip it. His desire was as clear as day alongside his self-restraint that was hanging by a very thin thread. Ayra felt drunk as she took him in as he was a very open book in that very moment.

Ibrahim inhaled deeply and exhaled before he got on the bed, his knees on both her sides, caging her in. He then leaned in, his arms holding him above her. “Let me know if it gets too much or if you want us to stop.”

She could only nod and he went on to show her just how much he appreciated the body she had while she tried to be a little quiet; a fight she eventually gave up on because he wasn’t giving her a chance to be quiet, at all. He took his time and she barely recognised her voice when she let out a breathless plea which he completely understood. The feel of him inside her a little later was momentarily too much for Ayra and her nails dug into his biceps until she adjusted.

He kissed her hairline. “You good?”

She nodded, blowing out a breath. “I am now.”

Nodding, he took things slowly until she was completely comfortable and then he picked up the pace, Ayra falling into the rhythm he’d set. The climax – for both of them, especially for her – was breathtakingly convulsive and they milked each other until there was nothing left to give. Blissfully exhausted, Ibrahim fell beside her, caught his breath for a moment and then pulled her against him.

Ayra was certain her brain was fried and she trembled slightly, noticing a few seconds later that he was slightly trembling too. He kissed her hair. “You good, love?”

“Yeah.” She still couldn’t recognise her voice. “I just need a moment.”

He kissed her hair again. “Take your time...That was beautiful.”

Beautiful, to Ayra, was an understatement. That had been...she didn’t even have the world for it but it was out of the world and she’d loved every bit of it. As the bliss slowly came down, her body began to feel as though it was floating. She let her eyes flutter close, vaguely felt him move.

“Ayra?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to get warm water and a towel to clean you up, okay?”

She nodded, settling deeper into the pillow that felt like clouds in the haze she was still in. Ibrahim chuckled, pulling away from her and then getting off the bed. As she slipped into unconsciousness, a part of her wondered how he’d been so good; whether he’d done as much research as she had or...if he’d gotten intimate with someone before.

By the time she'd wake up, the thought would be gone and she won't come back to it again because there'd be no reason to do so.



In the days they spent in Zanzibar, they shared their activities into two; indoor activities and outdoor activities. Ayra loved both but she was a little more biased towards all they did indoors; things she'd never explicitly share. Things that left her satiated in ways she didn't know were possible to the extent that she could barely move for a little while afterwards.

When it came to their outdoor activities, they did it all; they toured the resort, patronised the restaurants and spa, engaged in water sports, had a romantic beach dinner and a movie viewing once they finished eating, had floating breakfast in the pool while catching the sunrise, and then experiencing the Swahili culture during the local tour of Zanzibar.

The day of their departure – December 31st – was Ibrahim's birthday and Ayra woke him up from his post-Fajr nap with a confetti cannon she'd gotten from their tour of Zanzibar. It startled him, nearly sending him off the bed, and when she burst out laughing, realisation dawned on him and he buried his face in the pillows with a groan.

"Ayra," His voice was muffled. "You scared me."

"Happy Birthday! I had to do something for you before we leave. It's little but still..."

She sat beside him on the bed and he rolled over, looking so beautiful even while it was clear that he was still a little sleepy. He returned her bright smile with a small smile of his. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to." She looked towards the table in the sitting area. "There's a bento cake and all." She turned back to him and with rosy cheeks, she held out her left hand. On her palm was an eggplant purple box. "I made this for you. I got you turtlenecks in the colours you don't already have but those are back in Aomi. I made sure to bring this along."

He sat up, the duvet falling and exposing his bare torso. "Ayra..."

"It's not much, like I said, but I like to think it's the thought that counts." She blushed deeper when he took the box from her. "It's very hard to think of what to give you when you are rich enough to afford anything."

His smile was back. "I'd love anything from you, Ayra. You're my greatest gift."

"Ibrahim, stop!"

His smile widened. "I'm serious."

She slouched a little, nervous flutters in her stomach. "You should open it."

He did as she asked. Sitting pretty in the velvet box were three bead bracelets in black and black, black and silver, and black and gold. She'd taken her time to make them when she was alone before the wedding and if she had to toot her own horn, she'd brag that they came out perfectly well.

Ibrahim's expression softened. "Ayra, you made these?"

She nodded, her smile small while her dimples were so deep and lovely. "I did. I learned with YouTube and TikTok tutorials but I did...Do you like them?"

In reply, he took them out of the box and put them on; the black and black, and the black and silver on his right wrist while the black and gold was put on his left. "I love them." He raised his head to look at her. "Thank you. This has to be my best birthday present ever."

She bashfully looked away. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is." He moved closer and cupped her cheeks. "Thank you, Ayra. I'll use them well, I promise."

She saw it coming but her flutters doubled when he kissed her softly and lazily, taking his sweet time. They smiled against each other's lips before pulling back and then he pushed the duvet away, getting out of bed. "Since I'm not going to be able to go back to sleep before we leave, let's get started on that cake."

She laughed and got off the bed too. "Sure. Let's do that."

His hand found hers and he squeezed as gently as ever. "Thank you, Ayra."

Her heart soared and her smile shone. "You're welcome."



Anneth and Nathaniel's home was like a clubhouse; bright, packed, and buzzing with overflowing excitement. Ayra couldn't believe it was the same house she'd come to over and over again before she and Ibrahim had gotten married.

The New Year party was already in full swing when she and Ibrahim arrived and she let him hold her hand and lead the way through the partying crowd filled with people she didn't know personally. She missed her best friend like crazy. Ibtiyah's grandparents were visiting and so Ibtiyah couldn't make it as her grandmother wanted to spoil her like crazy, ensuring the young one

was in her line of sight at all times. She – Ibtiyah – promised to visit Ayra as soon as she could and Ayra couldn't wait.

Bella was the first one to spot Ayra and Ibrahim and she rushed over with a wide smile. To Ayra, Bella looked dazzling in leather trousers that hugged her legs like second skin, a crop top with ruffled sleeves, boots that stopped above her ankles, make-up that highlighted every perfect feature on her face, and curls that were left in their wild glory.

She – Bella – hugged Ibrahim first. “Birthday boy! Be rest assured we’re celebrating you in exactly ten minutes, right before the countdown begins.”

Ibrahim shook his head, hugging her back. “You guys need to stop doing this.”

Bella pulled back, slapping his chest. “Party pooper.” She then turned to Ayra and hugged her tightly. “Ayra, my darling! I have missed you so, so much.”

Ayra laughed, hugging Bella back and finding soothing that she, Bella, and Ibrahim used the same perfume. “I have missed you too!” She pulled back, smiling. “Happy Belated Birthday, Bella. I hope you got my present.”

“Yes! I loved it. That dress is so, so soft and I’m so going to rock it in the new year. Ibty’s gown was so beautiful too and I can’t wait to also rock that...” She then looked around. “Where’s Ibty by the way?”

Ayra’s smile didn’t waver. “Her grandparents are in town so she couldn’t make it.”

“Oh...” Bella’s smile returned. “Well, we’ll have fun with her another day.” She then took Ayra’s hand in one of hers and took Ibrahim’s in her other one. “Come on, everyone’s waiting for you two. Let’s do the introductions.”

She led them deeper into the full house, towards the other members of the squad who were more than excited to have them back from Zanzibar. Like Bella said, they paused the party to celebrate Ibrahim who looked ready to disappear as everyone present cheered loudly. There were cakes and a lot of gifts and quite a number of people coming forward to talk to Ibrahim and Bella, about things Ayra didn’t have a clue of. She tried to keep up but it was hard so she helped herself with a bottle of soda, sipping from it as they conversed.

It wasn’t long before Annet announced they had to go out to begin the countdown. Ayra stayed beside Ibrahim, his arm comforting around her shoulders, as they headed out with the others. The excitement got to her as

the countdown began and she chanted along with them with a wide smile on her face. As soon the clock struck midnight, the sky lit up with fireworks; those Nathaniel had purchased and those lit by others in the area and all around Aomi.

Ibrahim turned his wife towards him, smiling. “Happy New Year, Ayra.”

“Happy New Year, Ibrahim.”

Like the couples all around them, Ibrahim kissed her and Ayra gladly pushed herself up to the tip of her toes, wrapping her arms around his neck as she kissed him back while knowing deep in her heart that 2021 was going to be her best year yet as he was now in her life and their love story was only beginning.

She couldn’t wait to get started on bringing every fantasy she had to life with him. They had forever to stay together after all.

“...a gentle reminder that you need to continuously work hand in hand with your supervisors a lot this semester so you can get your thesis out of the way as soon as possible. It’ll do you a lot of good...That’ll be all for today. I’ll see you next week.”

As soon as the professor left the class, Ayra let her head fall to the top of the table with a groan. Beside her, Ibtihaj rolled her eyes as she got her things together. “Stand up, my friend. I want to go home and eat Amala. Mummy made ewedu.”

Ayra sat up. “I’m not jealous. I’m going home to make a surprise dinner for my husband.”

Ibtihaj zipped her bag shut. “Does that mean Oga Fahad is finally coming home early today?”

Ayra nodded, getting excited at the mere thought of it. “He is. I texted his secretary earlier and she confirmed it.” She put her notepad in her bag, smiling from ear to ear. “Finally!”

“Finally o. Because I was this close to shaking you and putting it in your head that you need to talk to him. It’s too early for you to be lonely in this marriage because he’s working long hours at the office.”

“I’m not lonely though. I mean, he comes home at night and –”

Ibtihaj had a brow raised. “He comes home late, when you’re either asleep or about to sleep.”

“But he still comes home and I see him in the mornings.” Ayra didn’t stop smiling. “So I’m not lonely.”

“Ayra. When you used to dream about getting married to this man, you had dreams about him being home a lot and both of you having fun together as long as you’re both free. It’s been almost an exact month since you two got married and you can count on one hand how many times you two have had dinner together because Ibro is working long hours as if he’s still a bachelor.”

“Don’t call him Ibro. His name is Ibrahim.”

“Ayra, I will slap you o!”

Ayra sighed, rolling her eyes. “Ibty. This is a phase and things are going to fall into place soon. There’s a lot of work to settle at the company because all of them were majorly inactive in order to put things in place for the wedding. Sure, this first month is nothing close to what I imagined it’ll be

but I know this is a phase and it'll pass." Her smile returned, a little smaller. "It'll all be fine. Trust the process."

Ibtihaj stared at her for a long moment. "Sometimes I want to be as optimistic as you are but omo!" She then sighed. "I'll trust the process but if anything doesn't seem right, I'll shake you to thy kingdom come."

Ayra laughed, nodding. "Sure, you do that. Besides, Ibrahim's coming home early tonight. That's a good start."

"True. That's a —"

Ayra's phone vibrating on the desk cut her off. They both looked at the device, Ibrahim's name flashing across the screen alongside the emojis she'd saved his contact with. Smiling wider, she picked the phone and accepted the call.

"Ibrahim, hi!"

"Hey..."

It took a second to realise his background was familiarly noisy. Ayra's smile dimmed and the excitement that had bubbled slowly faded away. She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. "Ibrahim, where are you?"

"At the airport..." He blew out a breath. "Something came up so the squad and I have to leave town for a week."

Ayra's heart dropped and her chest squeezed. When Ibtihaj raised her brow again, Ayra looked away, focusing on her bag instead. "Where are you guys going?"

"Geneva. There's this tech summit we were hoping to attend but there was little to no information about it so we agreed we'd find more about it after the wedding craze and when the workload had reduced." He exhaled again. "However, we found out today that they sent an invite before last year ran out and we're to make our first presentation about Little Walker so this is a big deal for us."

Ayra understood but that didn't mean it didn't hurt a lot. She smiled tightly although he wasn't there. "I understand. You all should have a safe flight."

Ibtihaj's brow rose even higher and she looked at her best friend bewilderedly. Over the line a flight announcement was made before Ibrahim spoke. "That's our flight. Did we have any plans, sweetheart?"

"Nah." Her chest squeezed again and it was painful. "I just wanted to surprise you with dinner but we can reschedule."

"I'll make it up to you, Ayra. Once everything falls into place and my schedule's freer, I'll make it up to you."

"I'll look forward to that. Let me know when you land and be rest assured I'll watch the summit or at least get the highlights."

He laughed and it went to her heart, healing it. "I know you would. Stay safe, Ayra."

"You too. I love you."

"Like always, sweetheart, what else is there to feel? Say hi to Ibty for me."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

Ibtihaj opened her mouth once the phone was lowered but Ayra beat her to it. "Do you want to spend the week at my place, Ibty? I think I could use your company around."

Ibtihaj slammed her mouth shut and a moment passed before she sighed. "What's going on?"

"There's a tech summit and they can't miss it so they'll be away for a week." Her smile was small. "He's going to make it up to me once his schedule's free. I don't want to dwell on it so you better say that you'll stay with me throughout the week or I will kidnap you and make your grandparents pay ransom."

Ibtihaj laughed; she had to. "You've gotten better with your threats."

Ayra's smile widened and it turned sweet. "I learn well from you."

"And yes, my dear, I will spend the week with you. Who can say no to staying a week in Downtown Aomi? You'll have to drive me to the estate sha so I can pack my stuff."

Ayra nodded, rising to her feet. "Sure. I'll even use the opportunity to say hi to your parents and mine. It's been a while."

Ibtihaj stood too. "Are you okay, Ayra? Like, are you really okay or do you want me to go to Raven Isle to beat Oga Ibro?"

Ayra rolled her eyes, still smiling. "Ibty, I swear I'm fine. I'll be good as new by the time we're heading towards Plum Boulevard. And I told you not to call him that!"

Ibtihaj laughed, nodding. "Yes ma." She picked up her bag. "Let's go?"

Ayra nodded. "Yeah, let's go."



Like she promised, Ayra kept up with the summit and she could brag to anyone willing to listen that the Hexad Squad made one of the best presentations. Having Ibtihaj watch it with her made it even better and although Ibtihaj had a dislike for Tobi and his playboy ways, she couldn't deny the fact that he was a good presenter, standing on the stage with Ibrahim and Bella while Anneth and Jalal managed the transitions, graphics, and displays.

When the summit ended, she was so excited to prepare for their return – especially Ibrahim's – but they broke her heart by extending the trip by one more week because they had to have meetings with world known companies and individuals who had collaboration deals which were going to be very profitable to The Hexad. Not wanting to dwell on how disappointed and heartbroken she was, Ayra focused on starting her dissertation while Ibtihaj played the role of the caring best friend even though she wanted to get Ibrahim's head and slam it against the nearest wall.

On the last day of January, an invitation was delivered to the apartment, shortly after Ibtihaj finally returned home to Plum Boulevard. Thanking the male from the reception team who'd brought it up, Ayra stepped into the apartment, closed the door and only examined the envelope in her hands once the locks had clicked into place.

The envelope was blood red, sealed with gold wax that matched the golden designs on the edges. She walked back to the living room, loving the feel of the envelope in her hands. She sat on the edge of the first sectional and carefully broke the sealed wax, opening the envelope. Inside, sitting prettily, was a cream coloured minimalistic – yet regal – card with both her name and Ibrahim's.

The card invited them to a Bridgerton themed party on Valentine's Day at the diamond ballroom of the Lushville Hotel in Monwict. It – the card – stated that it was allowed to bring a plus-one and Ayra had no doubt she was going to invite Ibtihaj.

Smiling, she began thinking about what she could wear as she read the words on the invite again. Her smile disappeared when she heard the inputting of the passcode on the apartment's keypad. Knowing Ibrahim was not supposed to be back until the next day, Ayra put the card and the envelope aside and stood, wondering if Ibtihaj was back because she forgot something.

She was almost at the foyer when the door opened and she stopped in her tracks, tempted to pinch herself to ensure she wasn't dreaming. Ibrahim smiled sheepishly and made his way in. "Hi...I was hoping you'd be out although it's a Sunday so I could make dinner to surprise you."

Her chest warmed rapidly. "Ibrahim...How...You're supposed to be back tomorrow."

He closed the door behind him, let go of his box's hand, and then gave her his full attention. "I lied actually. I wanted to surprise you but having you home is good too." He opened his arms, his smile widening. "Come here, sweetheart."

He didn't need to tell her twice. She jumped on him and he caught her easily, laughing lowly; a sound that resonated deeply in his chest where her head rested against. She hugged him tightly, still surprised but so, so glad that he was finally home. She'd missed him, more than anyone knew.

He kissed her hair that was in cornrows. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." She pulled back and glared. "I'm still a little mad that you had to extend the trip."

"It was all for greater good, I promise." He kissed her lips. "And I'm free this week so let's do everything we couldn't do ever since we got back to our daily schedules."

She beamed. "Are you serious?!"

He nodded. "I am...What were you doing before I returned? It seems like you were excited."

"Oh, yes! An invitation came today for a Bridgerton themed party on Valentine's Day. They said we can bring a plus one."

"And that's Ibtly."

She beamed even more. "Yes! Is that okay with you?"

"Ayra, everything you do is okay with me." He kissed her again. "Besides, Ibtly's always good company so I know we'll be fine."

She giggled when he kissed her yet again. "She really is good company. You better make it up to her because I know she's ready to bash your head against a wall for being such a workaholic this past month."

He sighed heavily. "I'll do that." He removed his coat. "Right now, though, I have other plans and it involves more action, less talking, and you out of that dress because it's driving me mad."

And who was she to say no? They made up for the weeks they'd spent apart and...it was a lot. When it was all said and done and they were both exhausted, Ayra poked his chest with a finger, putting on her sternest look. "You better not go back on what you said in the foyer. You're not going to work this week. If you do, I'll be really mad."

Clearly amused, Ibrahim nodded. "I won't, I promise. You'll be leaving me at home though. You have classes almost every day."

She smiled like a spoilt brat. "It's payback time. Miss me as much as I missed you and think of things to do until I get back from school each day."

He sighed. "That's going to be hard." A moment passed. "Well, I guess I'll go disturb Bella when I get bored. I'll disturb her until she throws me out."

Ayra laughed. "God, Ibrahim. Yeah, you can do that and if she throws you out, I'll act as though I don't know both of you because I'm going to side with you and I'm not ready for drama."

"You love me so you obviously have to side with me. Bella can do whatever she likes."

"I love both of you though."

"You love me more, don't argue."

She laughed. "I do...That reminds me, I haven't still been into Bella's apartment. Each time I want to visit, she's always out or it skips my mind."

"Should we freshen up and head down now?"

She shook her head. "Nah, I want to lay here in bed with you and just stay like this. I can always visit another day. I'll just call ahead."

"Sure." He kissed her neck, softly biting into the flesh which caused her to barely bite back a moan. "I'm so glad I'm home."

Ayra's hands went into his hair, her eyes shut as she allowed him do with her what he deemed fit. "I'm so glad you're home too."

She couldn't wait to let Ibtihaj know that Ibrahim had the week free which meant there was no reason for her – Ibtihaj – to murder Ibrahim as he'd promised to make up for everything they – he and Ayra – had missed.



The diamond ballroom of Lushville Hotels had been transformed, taking invited guests who were dressed for the occasion back to the regency era. Ayra and Ibtihaj, arm in arm, took a moment to take it all in, awed beyond

imagination; the fashion of the ladies, dukes, princes, princess, duchesses, viscounts, viscountesses, and then the kings and queens present, the dynamic theatrical vignettes and even the soundtrack that tied it all together – music presented by a live orchestral group who were also dressed to impress. It was perfect and everyone present knew the planning committee had nailed exactly what they were going for.

Ayra breathed in and out and then squared her shoulders, standing even straighter. “Let’s go in?”

Beside her, Ibtihaj nodded. “Let’s go in.”

They did just that, blending into the world of beauty and laughter. Ayra was in a maxi dress from ASOS; a white shirred mixed broderie tiered dress with lace inserts. Elbow length gloves covered her arms and a simple turban was wrapped around her head while pumps covered her feet. She had a bead bag and a fan too, her jewellery and make-up minimal.

Ibtihaj, on the other hand, was in a floral blush frock and frill maxi dress which had long sleeves, saving her the stress of wearing gloves. She also had a turban on her head and she’d gone the extra mile to add a hat. Her jewellery was nothing minimal but her make-up was and like her best friend, she had a bead bag, a fan, and pumps on her feet.

They exchanged greetings with guests present and when Ibtihaj bolted to use the bathroom, Ayra found a quiet corner. She got her phone out of her bag, pulled up Ibrahim’s contact and dialled. It rang for a little while before she got directed to his voicemail. She hung up and tried again.

They’d spent the morning together, munching on the cupcakes he’d surprised her with while watching a movie. After Zuhr, his attention was needed at the office so he left. He didn’t promise he’d be back before the party but he did say he’d try his best to meet up alongside the others. Ayra and Ibtihaj had waited a little, hoping he’d return before Maghrib but when he didn’t, they got changed, prayed and then came over to the hotel.

With a sigh, she sent a text and waited until Ibtihaj returned. It didn’t take long and the first thing Ibtihaj asked was “How far?”

“He’s not picking up. He’s probably leaving the company or maybe he’s even getting dressed. He did say he’d do his best to meet up.”

“He should hurry up sha. We already came late so...The others are coming too, *shey?*”

Ayra nodded, putting her phone back in the bag. “Yep.” She smiled excitedly. “I can’t wait to see what they wear. I mean, I know what

Ibrahim's wearing since I picked it out but the others have been secretive with theirs."

"They better slay. We cannot be fine for nothing."

Ayra laughed. "True. Come on, let's find the host."

"Let's do that."

They found the host and she was lovely woman, her husband calm and collected beside her. She introduced Ayra and Ibtihaj to many other people who were more than happy to engage in small talk. When they asked where Ibrahim was, Ayra told them with a polite smile that work held him back and that he was going to be with them soon alongside the other members of the squad. Ibtihaj, for her friend's sake, said the same thing too when she was asked.

However, the deeper they got into the party, the more Ayra felt as though her wedding night was repeating itself. Ibrahim didn't read or reply her texts and at some point, his calls even stopped going through. Ibtihaj, who'd tried to contact the others, faced the same thing. Her texts went unanswered and calls went to voicemail.

As the woman who dressed as Lady Whistledown gave her speech, Ibtihaj faced Ayra who'd stopped smiling. "I don't think they're coming."

Ayra said nothing but Ibtihaj saw how Ayra tried to act as though she wasn't hurt and she hated it. She put her hand on the Ayra's. "Should we leave?"

Ayra managed a small smile but it was so fake, it didn't reach her eyes. "I think we should. We should say goodbye to the host."

"And if they ask about Ibrahim?"

"We'll tell them he couldn't end up making it. He needs to have an explanation. He was very excited to be here."

"Well," Ibtihaj wanted to find him and slap him to the Atlantic Ocean. "For your sake, I hope that's the case." She pushed her chair back and stood. "Come on, let's go. I know you'll be dropping me home first but you should keep me updated."

Ayra nodded, standing too. "I will."

They said goodbyes, each person saying that they were leaving early but understanding that both women – as they'd lied – had things to do. They – Ayra and Ibtihaj – were both given bags filled with goodies and they smiled for pictures before they said goodbyes once again and left. The driver – one

of those from The Oasis – was on standby and he drove them towards Haven Estate. Ibtihaj worriedly glanced at her unusually quiet best friend. “Ayra.”

“I’ll be fine. I just want to hear why he missed it.”

Ibtihaj could only nod, her mind reeling too. They dropped her off and Ayra got the chance to say hi to Salama and Muhsin who wondered why Ibrahim wasn’t with her. She laughed, lying through her teeth that Ibrahim had missed the party because something came up at work but that he was going to make it up to her. They bought it and they let her go.

On the way back to Downtown Aomi, her phone beeped with a new notification. She clicked on it and it took her straight to Instagram, to a new post made on The Hexad Squad account; one that had been inactive for a few months.

In the new post, the squad stood in front of a full wall mirror, all with smiles on their faces, their arms around each other’s shoulders while Anneth – who stood in the middle – held the phone up. Ayra recognised their location. It was Kingstone, a new restaurant in the Business and Institutional Area that a lot of people were talking about. With a heart that was sinking deeper and deeper, Ayra looked away from the picture, down to the caption.

the_hexad_squad: *It’s been a while! You end a day like this with a good meal, good music, and strong friendship. Happy Valentine’s Day, y’all. Wishing you lots and lots of love.*

Back at Haven Estate, Ibtihaj stared at the post and she gripped the phone tighter, seeing red.

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Ayra was standing on the other side of the door when Ibrahim finally returned home. She was still in her dress but the make-up and every other accessory was gone. Her arms were folded and she had no smile on her face.

Ibrahim took her in and cursed. “Shit, there was the Bridgerton party.”

She couldn’t help the scoff that slipped past her lips. “Seriously, Ibrahim? That’s what you’re going to say? There was the Bridgerton party?”

“Ayra, I’m sorry.”

“I think I deserve more than that.”

He stepped in, letting the door fall shut behind him. “Ayra —”

Her brows furrowed when she caught a whiff of a smell she despised. “Is that alcohol? Ibrahim, please tell me you didn’t drink.”

“I didn’t.” He said it immediately. “I didn’t drink.”

Her heart was plummeting. “You reek of alcohol.”

He ran his hands through his hair, nearly pulling at the curls. “I swear I didn’t drink. Tobi clumsily spilled his drink on me while going after this lady at the restaurant. I didn’t drink. You can call the others and ask. I don’t drink, Ayra. You know that.”

Her heart kept sinking. “So where were you? I called you over and over.” Her voice rose. “I sent you countless texts. You never called back, never responded, and didn’t leave any message to say you were no longer coming and I have to come across a post on IG shortly after leaving the party that you and the others went out to have fun?! Seriously, Ibrahim?!”

“Ayra —”

She reached up to massage her temple that began to softly throb. Despite knowing the answer, she asked “Where were you?”

He let his head drop, blowing out a breath. “Kingstone.”

“Why couldn’t I reach you?”

“My phone was on DND.”

“And the party?”

His voice dropped. “I forgot.”

She stilled and then her hand dropped. She felt too much at that moment and she nearly stumbled back at how it all hit her at once. Underneath all the emotions was her inner self who was struggling to come up with an excuse for him because the Ibrahim she knew and loved didn't just forget stuff, especially something that was *not* on short notice.

"You forgot?" She could barely hear herself as her voice was a whisper. "Ibrahim, how —"

"I know it'll seem like I'm lying but I swear, I forgot. I also swear that I'm telling you the truth. The meeting stretched and then we had to have another one because something came up with Little Walker that needed to be settled as soon as possible because we're finalising the launch dates and all of that. The party was the last thing on my mind, I swear. It was the last thing on all our minds because we were exhausted."

He paused briefly to breathe and then he continued. "When we finished, we ended up picking Nathaniel up from work because his car broke down and he was just tired and frustrated. Then there was this little accident with a patient of his and we had to help. One thing led to the other and it was a whole lot and we all wanted to cheer up so we decided to head to Kingstone. My phone was on DND since I got to the office and I haven't looked at it since then."

"And the others? Someone had to have seen our calls and messages."

"The others have their phones on DND too and they are wasted, Ayra. I'm the only sober person and I'm so sorry all of this happened while you were waiting for me. I fucked up and I'm going to make it up to you and Ibtý. I'm really sorry, Ayra."

Her vision blurred with tears. "That's not making any sense. How could you forget so easily? We were excited for this. All of us were. However, only I and Ibtý show up while you go with the others to experience Kingstone and then proceed to have more fun to the extent that they all get wasted and you get doused in alcohol."

His face was contoured in pain. "Ayra, I'm sorry. I swear I am and I'm going to make it up to you."

"How?" A tear slid down her face. "How are you going to do that?"

"I don't know how right now but I'll fix this. By tomorrow morning, I swear I'll fix it. Please trust me. I messed up and I'm so, so sorry. I don't mind apologising for as long as you want me to. I'm really sorry, Ayra."

She wanted to hit him. She also wanted to hug him and kiss him. She wanted to be mad but her resolves were breaking and all she wanted to do was have him hold her. He'd been making up for all they'd missed in January so she knew he'd definitely make up for this too but it still hurt.

Ibrahim took a step forward. "Ayra..."

She stepped back. "You should get out of that shirt and then get a shower. I don't like the stench of alcohol and Tobi's definitely hearing from me." She turned around and walked into the house. "I'll be in my room."

He didn't try to stop her and she hated it and loved it at the same time. She went straight to her room and called Ibūhaj who was livid.

"I just spoke to that *ōdē* named Tobi." Ibūhaj said. "He's drunk like the *ōdē* he is! Can you imagine what that baboon told me? That they forgot." She laughed dryly. "Na juju be dat? Is Ibrahim finally home?"

Ayra sat on the loveseat. "He just came in. He explained everything."

"Please tell me the explanation makes sense because I want to commit mass murder."

Ayra rested against the backrest, sighing. "It does actually make sense but I don't want to think about it because I'm feeling too much at once. He's promised to make it up to me."

"Better don't forgive him easily. Ah an, what kind of nonsense is that? Ayra, don't let love blind you this time. He needs to plead. Which one is they forgot? What next is he going to forget? That you two are married?"

Ayra sat up straight, a stab of fear hitting her square in the chest. "Ibty, don't say that. Take it back. God forbid."

"God forbid, my dear. Let's hope it doesn't get to that level."

"In Shaa Allah it won't." She was never going to let it happen. "They forgot and Allah knows best but I trust Ibrahim and he's going to make it up to you and me so let's see how it all plays out."

Ibūhaj groaned. "Ayra...This man needs to grovel. How can he miss a whole Bridergton party?"

"Let's not let this drain us further. I'm in my room now and I told him to get showered. I just want to sleep. I can deal with him tomorrow."

"I hope he didn't drink."

"Nope, he is very sober. Tobi spilled alcohol on him though."

Ibtihaj hissed. “Ödž. That man is too foolish. Thank God Ibrahim didn’t drink sha because if you had chosen to overlook that, I would have slapped you to the extent that you’ll meet your ancestors the way Avatar met those former Avatars.”

Ayra had to laugh. “Ibty, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my dear. Sleep well o. Let that man be very apologetic. They’re not well, all of them.”

Ayra said goodbye again and then she hung up. She sat for a moment longer, breathing in and out to clear her head before she stood and stripped. She dumped the clothes she’d worn in the laundry basket and then stepped into the bathroom.

The shower spray blessed her skin with warm water and she soaked it in for minutes, letting it wash everything away. Her eyes flew open when she felt his presence behind her. She didn’t turn around, watching as he reached for her soap and sponge that sat on the wall rack. A near minute later, the soap bar was back in place and softly, he began to wash her up, starting from her left side and moving to the right.

“I’m sorry, Ayra.”

Her heart and brain went into war for the first time when it came to him; her heart demanded she forgave him while her brain surprisingly said he could go to hell for one night, sounding so much like Ibtihaj. Ibrahim continued washing her up, kissing the back of her head. “I’m really, really, really sorry.”

Her heart and brain kept fighting and her heart – which she listened to even when everyone else told her not to – won. Sighing, she turned around as he turned the shower on so the lather on her body could wash off. His remorse was as clear as day and it was crazy how she felt a little guilty.

She sighed again. “You have a lot of making up to do. Not just you, everyone else. And not just to me, Ibty too.”

He nodded with no hesitation. “I’ll make it up to both you, I promise. The others would too. I’ll make sure of it...I’m really sorry, Ayra.”

“You’re married to me, Ibrahim, so I need to be able to get through to you even when your phone’s on DND.”

“I’ve adjusted the settings already and I’ve placed an order for another one which I’ll use strictly for you and Ibty.”

It was impressive how she hid the fact that she'd swooned. "And you can't get excited with me over a party, assure me that you'll be there, and then not show up. It doesn't work that way and it should never happen again."

"I promise it won't."

"Good."

"Am I forgiven?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Let's see how you make up for tonight first. That'll determine when you get forgiven."

He gulped, nodding a moment later. "I guess I deserve that...I'm really sorry, Ayra."

She sighed, hugging him and finding her usual solace in the rhythm of his beating heart. "I know."

They stayed in the bathroom until she began to fall asleep against him. He carried her out, got her skin oiled, and then helped her into a silk nightdress that brushed her knees. She fell asleep with him holding her and when they woke up to pray Fajr, she found it hard to keep her eyes open. She went back to sleep immediately they finished and hours later, she woke up to an empty room.

Frowning, she got out of bed and left the room. The family lounge and his room were empty. She heard voices coming from the lower floor so she put on the first dress she came across, covered her hair with a cap, ensured she was presentable and then headed down. She stopped in her tracks at the entrance to the living room, her heart jumping to her throat.

The living room had been redone and staring back at her was a mini-replica of the Bridgerton party she'd attended with Ibtihaj the previous night. Standing in the middle of it all were the members of the squad, all dressed as one character or the other, with apologetic smiles and expressions on their faces. Sitting on one of the chairs was Ibtihaj. She had a scowl on her face but she took small bites of the cupcake she held. The scene was so funny to Ayra.

"I am still very angry at them," Ibtihaj told her best friend, her scowl deepening. "But they brought a limo to pick me up and they promised me free food and my mother said that we should not waste food." She then glared at Tobi. "I still think he's an *ödë* sha."

Ayra burst out laughing and her heart jumped when Ibrahim walked over, dressed perfectly as the legendary Duke of Hastings. He took her hand in

his, smiling warmly. "I promised to make it up to you with them. They're all hung-over but they know better than to not be here."

Ayra did her best to not smile but it was hard. "I do deserve it. Ibtly too."

He nodded. "You do...Love you, Ayra."

She smiled then. "I love you too."

The others rushed over, pouring thousands on apologies on her which made her smile until she couldn't smile any wider. She ended up laughing when Bella and Anneth began showering her with warm kisses.

Ibtihaj, who'd been profusely apologised to already, watched everything play out. She knew Ayra was going to forgive them and move on from it but she – Ibtihaj – knew better than to just sweep it all under the rug. She was going to be attentive until she was convinced she's only being paranoid over nothing. Ayra deserved the whole world and she was going to make sure no one hurt her or gave her less than she deserved.

She loved Ayra that much.



The weekend following that of Valentine's, Ayra and Ibrahim decided to have lunch with her parents and dinner with his.

Muhsin and Salama were overly excited to have them over and Ayra let herself get hugged and showered with kisses by her mother in the foyer. Laughing, Muhsin led Ibrahim into the house, leaving the two women alone.

Salama stepped back and cupped her daughter's face. "You look so good, Leilani."

"You saw me last week, after the party."

"And I have missed you since then."

Ayra hugged her again. "I have missed you too."

"Liar."

Ayra smiled against the older woman's chest, saying nothing. They eventually left the foyer and joined the men in the second living room. Ayra sat beside her husband while Salama sat beside hers and the conversations flowed easily; what they'd been up to and how they'd been. When Salama and Muhsin asked how married life was going for them so far, Ayra and Ibrahim exchanged looks with smiles on their faces before turning back to the older ones.

“It’s nice.” Ayra replied. “We’re still settling into everything, especially with our schedules but it’s going well.”

Ibrahim nodded, crossing one leg over the other. “It’s the best thing.”

Salama looked between the both of them. “And there are no problems, right?”

Ayra shook her head. “Nope. We’ve had little issues but we’ve settled them.” She smiled at Ibrahim, recalling how the past week had been nothing short of beautiful with all the gifts he’d showered her with. “He’s really good at making up for things he’d missed.”

Ibrahim lowered his head, clearly a little shy. “Well, we were told to not let issues drag between us so...”

Ayra only smiled wider. Salama and Muhsin, who felt like the third and fourth wheels, cleared their throats to remind the lovebirds that they were still there. They all ended up laughing about it and then they proceeded to the yard where the table had been set as the weather was just perfect for an outdoor meal. Ayra stuffed her stomach, assuring Ibrahim she’d still be able to eat plenty for dinner.

“Better not throw up later.”

She nodded, helping herself with the chocolate rice pudding. “Sure.”

Salama could only smile, glad the both of them were alright. They stayed until Asr and then dropped the fruit basket they’d come with despite Salama and Muhsin stating they didn’t have to. Goodbyes were said and then Ibrahim and Ayra headed to the Adeola home to say hi. Falilat was over the moon to have them over and they – Ayra and Ibrahim – had to drill it into her head that they weren’t staying long when she started putting things in place to prepare a meal for them. She only let it go when they promised to visit another day.

Ibtihaj, when she came down, stuck to her friend’s side and she glared at Ibrahim. “Oga Fahad.”

He smiled sweetly. “Hello, Ibtty. I’m sorry about last week.”

Ayra rolled her eyes. “Ibtty, let it go. They made up for it.”

“Leave me abeg. It’s up to me to decide when he and all of them can stop apologising.”

Ibrahim chuckled. “I don’t mind. The others don’t do.”

Ayra spoke before Ibtihaj could. “I mind.” She faced her best friend. “They’re sorry. They made it up to us too with a party that was even better

than the one we attended and they've been apologising. It's okay, Ibt. Come on."

Ibtihaj sighed. "Be lucky I love you."

Ayra hugged her, smiling widely. "I love you."

Over her best friend's shoulder, Ibtihaj shot Ibrahim the "I've got my eyes on you" sign and he simply smiled, his hands behind his back. Five minutes later, they were on their way to Monwict. Ibrahim's hand moved from the steering wheel to take one of Ayra's, pulling her attention away from the tinted window glass.

He smiled, his eyes on the road. "We'll be launching Little Walker worldwide in the first week of April."

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious?!"

He nodded. "I am. We're still yet to fix a definite date but first week of April it is. The errors have been dealt with and Atlantica's version is ready to launch but we have to be sure all other countries have their own versions ready before the launch date and we can do that throughout March."

She read into his words and pouted slightly. "Is that your way of saying you'll be busy?"

He nodded again. "Unfortunately. It also means we'll be traveling a lot too." He glanced her way as they approached Palm Drive. "I'm sorry."

She turned to the road, sighing. "It's fine. You have work to do." She sighed again. "Besides, I'll be working on my dissertation so I know I'll be fine." She then smiled. "I'll disturb Ibt."

He laughed. "I have no doubt that you would...I hope she doesn't hold us missing the party against us for much longer."

She squeezed his hand that held hers, her smile widening. "That's just how she is. She's cool with you all but she doesn't want to say it yet. She'll come around very soon, I promise, and then we'll have fun." She then made a face as she realised. "We actually haven't all hung out together to have fun this year. You, me, Ibt, and the squad."

His brows furrowed and he had to pause the conversation to clear with security. Upon recognition, they were granted access. Ibrahim returned to the conversation. "We haven't?"

"Yep. We've all been busy, you guys more than Ibt and I, and we were supposed to hang out during the party but that didn't work out and then during the one we had to make up for the one you all missed, they were

hangover so we didn't have as much fun as we would have had on a normal day. It was still fun though."

His frown became apparent. "Huh...We'll definitely have to change that. Let's just get Little Walker out of the way."

She nodded. "Sure, let's do that."

"Thank you, Ayra."

"You're welcome."

The Fahads – Salim, Fareeda, and a number of Ibrahim's uncles and aunts who were visiting (which Ibrahim and Ayra had no prior knowledge of) – were waiting for them in one of the reception rooms. While Salim and Fareeda were very excited to have them over, only a number of the uncles and aunts present were politely happy to see Ayra. They were happier to see Ibrahim and Ayra did her best to not let it get to her.

Dinner was fully Japanese and Ayra was glad she'd stuffed her stomach at her parents place because while the meals the Fahads had prepared were good, the dinner atmosphere wasn't as nice as she'd imagined it would be. The conversations revolved around politics and tech and she was only included in very little. So, she focused on her food, taking little portions of what was offered. When the table was cleared and the conversation continued, she found peace in Ibrahim holding her hand and did her best to push down the feeling of being an outsider.

She shouldn't have been so happy when Ibrahim said they really, really had to leave but she was and she did her best to not seem like it so it didn't come off as rude. Goodbyes were said and with a promise to visit another time, she and Ibrahim left. On the way home, she sighed. "Well, that went well."

"Sorry, the conversations are hard to stop when the house is full. I hope you didn't feel left out."

She shook her head, his apology washing away everything she'd earlier felt and leaving her feeling all fluttery inside. "It's fine. Nothing I can't handle."

"I'm glad."

They had their baths when they got home, made out for a little while in the living room, and then decided to watch Malcolm & Marie as it was on both their watch lists. Halfway through, Ayra fell asleep and when Ibrahim tucked her in bed later, she half consciously opened her eyes.

"You're sleeping here, right?"

“I need to go down for a bit. I’ll be back in like an hour or so.”

She frowned adorably. “Why?”

“Bella’s running an application and she just texted, asking if it’s alright for me to come down and check through some codes. I would have postponed it to tomorrow morning but I want to have the whole of tomorrow with you.”

She smiled at that, snuggling deeper into the pillows. “Don’t stay long.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I won’t.”

“I love you.”

“Right back at you, sweetheart.” He got off the bed, standing. “What else is there to feel?”

19

Just as Ibrahim said, The Hexad got busier than ever with the upcoming release of Little Walker and the application created a worldwide buzz that made Ayra really proud of her husband and their friends. Ibtihaj was impressed too.

If there was something Ayra loved, it was the fact that on some days, Ibrahim made an effort to come home early just to spend an hour or two with her before retiring to the home office to continue working. On some days, when he had an issue he couldn't handle alone, he went down to Bella's place or Bella came up to their place and Ayra let them be. She usually stayed in her space during such times, working on her own dissertation and going through notes while being happy that her husband was home or close-by.

March 4th was a Thursday and all her classes were cancelled for one reason or the other. Glad to have enough time on her hands, she called Ibtihaj because although Ibrahim didn't go to work, he was at Bella's place as they had some coding to do before they booked tickets for their Saturday trip to Argentina with the others – except Nathaniel who was very busy at the hospital.

“Omo, I wanted to call you too.” Ibtihaj said when Ayra requested they hung out. “But Mummy said I need to come with her to the market.” She hissed. “If I knew sef, I wouldn't have shouted that I don't have class today. Sorry, dear. Let's reschedule.”

“No problem.” Ayra smiled as she took in the view from the living room. “I'll see you at school tomorrow?”

“Yep. Don't get too bored before tomorrow.”

“I won't. Enjoy your market trip.”

“Ayra, I swear to God –”

Laughing, Ayra hung up. She stood there for a minute longer before a plan came together, causing her to grin. After all, she was free and Bella was home which meant she could finally visit and get a tour of the Italian beauty's home. She rushed up to her room and grabbed an open abaya which she wore over her vest and jeans. Using a cap to cover her hair, she changed her home slippers for flip-flops and then left the house, remembering to grab her phone from where she'd left it in the living room.

The short ride down to the eighth floor was nice and Ayra had a skip in her step as she walked over to Unit 8C. She happily rang the doorbell and

smiled at the security camera. She smiled wider when a familiar chuckle reached her ears and then the door went open. Ayra grinned. "Hi!"

Bella, dressed in a waffle knit tee and tie waist shorts lounge set from Shein with her hair in a messy bun and fuzzy slippers on her feet, grinned right back. "Hi! Don't tell me you're missing Ibrahim already. Should I kick him out and send him back up with you?"

Ayra shook her head, laughing. "No, you don't have to do that. I'm here for you actually."

Bella's expression brightened. "Really?"

"Yep! I'm free since my classes were cancelled and this is the first time I'm not busy or tired when you're home so I came for my long overdue tour of Isabella Valentino's home."

Bella laughed. "It's really an overdue tour." She then stepped aside, opening the door wider. "Come in then. *Benvenuto a casa mia e del mio amante* (Welcome to mine and my lover's home)."

Ayra giggled as she stepped in. "I'm going to pretend I understood all of that."

"I'm telling you welcome."

"Well, that wasn't far from..." Ayra's eyes widened as she took in the foyer. "Whoa."

Bella's foyer was the exact same size as Ayra and Ibrahim's but her walls were white while every accessory was black, all of which went well with the tiled floors that illusionised wood. A round, black framed mirror sat on the left wall and right below it was a minimalist Scandinavian console table with thin, black legs. The table held a Tyler table lamp, a black vase with faux flowers, an empty grey vase, a big jarred scented candle, and a tiny basket for keys. Underneath the table was a black basket that held woollen scarves, beanies, and nicely rolled socks.

On the opposite wall was a framed photo of a male and female silhouette. The male had an arm around the female's shoulders and she leaned into him. It was a beautiful picture and Ayra couldn't help but smile as she asked "You and Serkan?"

Bella nodded, smiling too. "Me and Serkan."

"It's pretty."

"Thank you. Come on, let's go in."

They crossed the foyer and stepped into the living room. Like their apartment, Bella's had a really nice view. The only difference was that she saw more of Downtown Aomi than the ocean. The space, just like the foyer, was painted white and the double height curtains were black. Her sectional sofa was black too and it was an extra-long 'U' with a lot of cushions in different colours which matched the camouflaged rug that covered most of the tiled floor. The coffee table was a cute cube and so were the side stools. Right above the huge LED TV was yet another picture of Bella and Serkan and it pulled Ayra in.

The photo was dark, highlighting the sunset in the distance. Only Bella turned to smile at the camera while Serkan's back was all Ayra could see. His hair was long, full, and curly and it was captured being ruffled by the wind. Dressed in knee length shorts and an extra loose top, he seemed familiar and Ayra told herself it was because she'd seen him on the day of the Nikkah.

She faced Bella. "Has he come to Aomi since the day of the Nikkah?"

Bella blew out a breath. "He hasn't. He's lucky I love him because I'm this close to telling them at the reception that I no longer know a man named Serkan Yildraz."

Ayra laughed. "You know you can't do that."

"Unfortunately." She then smiled fondly at the photo. "This photo was taken at Cape Town and I wanted to keep it in the album we came back with but he wanted us to have it framed...Sometimes, I hate that I have to hide him but I really don't want people prying. They should learn to mind their business."

Ayra, who barely felt the craziness of being tracked by the media because of the protection the Fahads provided right from the start, felt her chest squeeze. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine how it must feel."

Bella sobered. "Nah, it's fine. I know what I signed up for so..." She then turned, heading towards the left side of the house. "Come on. Let's surprise Ibrahim."

Bella took Ayra to the home office that doubled as a study and the latter's jaw had to hit the ground. Ibrahim, who'd been working behind one of the set up computers, pushed his chair back, clearly surprised. "Ayra?"

Ayra was too stunned to even hear him. Bella laughed, walking over. "She's here for her overdue tour and I'm taking her round." She put her hands on the desk and leaned forward, staring at the rows of codes displayed on the screen. "Fixed it?"

Ibrahim nodded, moving his chair closer to the desk. “Yeah. Remind me to kill Tobi. He was trying to be sneaky and ended up missing a line. Fixed it.” He then looked at his wife who took small steps around, still stunned. He chuckled. “Oh Ayra.”

Bella’s home office was a tech person’s dream. She had four workstations set up in every corner with the latest computers and appliances. The wall shelves were lined with books and magazine files and then there was a whiteboard which had calculations Ayra knew better than to try to unscramble. There were small paintings on the wall and it took Ayra a moment to realise that some of the paintings were of Bella and the others of Serkan – paintings that hid his identity well by blurring his face or by being shadowy or with flowers and butterflies.

Ayra finally turned towards Ibrahim and she blushed when she saw the amused look on his face. She walked over. “Hi.”

He let her plant herself on his laps. “Hi...You looked like a kid in a candy store.”

“Can you blame me?” She turned to Bella who had her arms folded with a smile on her face. “Your home office is beautiful.” She turned back to Ibrahim. “I can see why you come down here to work. If I was into everything you guys do, I’d come down here to work too.”

Bella unfolded her arms and poked Ibrahim’s head playfully. “I keep telling him to set up your home office like this so I can come up more but he just keeps stalling.”

Ibrahim rolled his eyes. “My home office is fine as it is.”

“Sure.” Bella said. “Keep telling yourself that. You know when Serkan returns, you’ll be working from your own office.”

That got Ayra’s attention. “Serkan’s into tech too?”

Bella nodded. “Yep. He’s a software developer and two of these workstations are his.” She pointed at them. “That one and that one. Once he’s in here, it’s a lot to take him out.”

Ibrahim pushed her away and focused on Ayra. “You good?”

She nodded. “I am! I wanted to hang out with Ibty but she isn’t free so I decided to come down for my overdue tour since we’re all home and I’m neither tired nor busy. So far, I’m blown out of my mind. Ibrahim, Bella’s house is so beautiful. It’s tempting me to get some changes made at our place.”

His smile vanished. “No.”

“But –”

“No, no, no.” He wasn’t having it. “Our house is perfect and very cosy. I don’t want white walls and black accessories. Let Serkan and Bella deal with that alone.”

Bella slapped the back of his head. “My house is perfect!”

Ibrahim wasn’t fazed by her hit. He didn’t look away from Ayra. “Our home is perfect the way it is so let’s leave it that way, okay?”

Like the lover she was, Ayra nodded with a stunning smile. “Okay.” She glanced at the screen, tried to make sense of the codes, and gave up. She turned back to Bella. “Let’s continue the tour, Bella.”

Bella nodded. “Let’s do that.”

Ayra kissed Ibrahim’s cheek before getting off his laps. “We’ll back soon.”

He nodded, smiling at her. “Take your time.”

Acting as though she was sick of them sharing love in front of her, Bella grabbed Ayra’s hand and pulled her out, slamming the door behind them. Giggling, Ayra let Bella lead the way. The kitchen was divine with off-white walls, high gloss metallic champagne cabinets, and the countertops and backsplash that were black sintered stone with dramatic gold veins. Instead of a dining table, there was a modernised breakfast nook with two stools that had wired legs.

The laundry room was cosy and Ayra happily headed up behind Bella. The family lounge was a cosy space with two cushioned hammock chairs and a projector screen on the wall to stand in place of a television. Unlike their own apartment, Bella’s apartment only had two rooms and she explained one was for Serkan while the other was for her even though they slept in whatever room they liked. Both rooms had similar designs; three white walls and the wall behind the bedframes being dark grey, blackout curtains, extra soft rugs, nightstands and night lamps, walk-in closets that held both their clothes, loveseats with cushions and then the balconies that had raffia chairs.

When the tour ended, Ayra curiously asked “How long have you and Serkan been together?”

Bella smiled, leading the way back to the family lounge. They each sat on a hammock chair. “Oh, we go way back. It’s been more than a decade. We should be celebrating thirteen years of being together this year.”

Ayra's eyes were wide. "Are you serious?"

Bella laughed. "I am. I only made the information about me having a lover public because no one wanted to stop asking and it got annoying. Serkan and I got way back to Leicester."

"He attended the same university with you guys."

"He did. We were course mates but he was the quiet one. I can't tell you what led to the other but we got together and I liked the fact that there was no pressure to tell anyone. By the time the squad found out, Serkan and I were deeply and crazily in love with each other and even they couldn't understand how I'd managed to keep it under wraps. It was a very long time before they even got to meet him."

Ayra was stunned. "Wow."

Bella laughed again. "It's crazy, I know, but I wouldn't go back to change anything. Having someone love me for me is amazing and knowing that this is someone the world has no idea about is thrilling. Also, he's the best person and I couldn't have asked for someone better."

"But," Ayra hesitantly asked. "If you've been together that long, why haven't you two gotten married?"

Bella looked away, her smile sad. "His parents don't approve."

Ayra's chest squeezed. "Are you serious?"

Bella nodded. "I am. His parents are Muslim and they want a Muslim woman for him so..." She shrugged. "We broke up because of it at some point because they really wanted him to get married to someone else but the heart wants what it wants so we ended up coming back to each other."

Ayra could only stay quiet. Bella then shook her head and brightened once again. She turned to Ayra, her smile beautiful. "So we're just living our best lives without committing. I have a feeling we'll be getting to that soon, even if we have to do it secretly, but until that time comes, I'm happy to be with him, to be spoiled rotten by him, and also to be loved by him. The sex is a big bonus too."

Ayra nearly choked. "Bella!"

Bella smiled smugly. "Well, I don't try to hide it. He's great."

"I'm not talking about that with you."

They ended up laughing. When the laughter died down to small smiles, Ayra spoke. "You're really strong, Bella. Both of you are. I'm rooting for you too. In Shaa Allah things would work out."

“Amen. Now, let’s –”

“Yo, Isabella! Ibrahim Fahad!”

Ayra frowned. “Is that Anneth?”

“Ayra, I heard you’re here too!” It was Jalal. “Where are all of you?!”

Ayra turned to Bella who was now on her feet with a grin on her face. “They know your passcode?”

Bella nodded. “They do. They know the passcode of every apartment I move into.” Colour stained her cheeks. “Let’s just say a few years back, I partied too much and ended up passing out when I got home. They didn’t hear from me so they broke down the door and since then...”

Ayra stood, as curious as a cat. “Now, I want to hear that story.”

Bella laughed. “I’ll share it with you. I promise...Come on, let’s go down. If they’re all here, it means they brought food and I’m ready to bet on everything I own that it’s Chinese.”

Ayra grinned, taking Bella’s hand. “Perfect! Thank you, for opening up to me.”

Bella didn’t stop grinning as she gave the other’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re most welcome.”



Throughout March, Ayra kept her busy with schoolwork and Ibtihaj just so she didn’t miss Ibrahim like crazy as he and the other members of the squad were out of the country more than they were in it, putting everything in perfect place for Little Walker which was even more anticipated than Ink – their first application which changed the political landscape – had been.

Party invitations came open after the other and while Ayra politely attended some, she declined others because she didn’t feel nice attending them without Ibrahim. Each time she declined a party invitation, Ibtihaj sighed and said “This marriage thing sef”. Each time, Ayra laughed and Ibtihaj ended up laughing too.

By the start of April, both of them were four chapters into their dissertations and they were more than eager to just get it over with. Talks of future plans began coming up at school and since Ayra didn’t have to bother about working, she didn’t give it much attention. She simply chose to support whatever Ibtihaj chose to do and Ibtihaj was determined to take her time to think it through. One thing was clear though; both women did

not have the motivation or plans to move forward for a Ph.D. as the master's degree had sucked them dry.

On Monday April 5th, Little Walker was officially launched. While the squad had made plans to be back in Atlantica in time for the launch, they ended up launching it in New York. The statistics were crazy and the press conference was even crazier. Ayra gladly watched the entire livestream and when reporters asked who the squad wanted to thank most, Ibrahim – who was usually quiet during such conferences – called Ayra's name.

"She's been a very supportive wife since we got married," He said, sitting as elegantly as ever. "And she's been a motivation for so many things so it's only right that I let the world know just how grateful I am to have her."

The conference host smiled teasingly. "Does that mean Mrs Fahad would be using the Little Walker app consistently very soon?"

Every member of the squad laughed as Ibrahim's cheeks darkened. Form the living room where she watched everything, Ayra blushed too.

"No." Ibrahim said in reply. "Not very soon because there are still some things Ayra and I have to finish. But when that time comes, she's not going to use only Little Walker. I promised to customise an application for her and I'm not going back on that promise. There are plans on ground already."

It was safe to say the world swooned and he was named Husband of the Year alongside Nathaniel who'd come all the way to New York despite his schedule to be part of the launch. It made Ayra wish she'd gone too. Ibtihaj took the first cab she could find to Downtown Aomi as soon as the press conference finished. Immediately Ayra opened the door, Ibtihaj grabbed her and shook her.

"You! You didn't tell me that Oga Fahad was making plans to make a special app for you!"

Ayra's eyes widened. "I didn't?"

"Will I be here if you did?!"

Ayra smiled then. "I see you're no longer acting as though you're mad at them."

Ibtihaj stopped shaking her best friend. Clearing her throat, she looked around the foyer as though she'd never been there before. "I never said I didn't stop being mad at them. I'm just being attentive so that the next time they fuck up, I will kill them."

Ayra laughed. "They're not going to fuck up again, I promise." She then hugged the other woman. "Thank you, for being the best friend ever."

Smiling, Ibtihaj happily hugged her best friend back. "Anytime, Ayra. There's only very little I won't do for you."

Ayra grinned over the other's shoulder. "I love you, Ibtty."

"I love you too."

On Wednesday, Ayra woke up extra happy as it was the return date for Ibrahim and the others and they'd assured her over and over again that they weren't pushing back their flight for anything. They really wanted to come home, they said, and she was over the moon.

She took a long bath, not feeling guilty about skipping class, and then settled on wearing a dress she had never worn before. It was a Hope & Ivy lace trim wrap maxi dress in mink floral with long sleeves that covered her arms. She pulled her hair back into a sleek bun, covered it with a cap and then draped a black veil over her head, pinning it in place so it didn't slip. She then put on strap heels, gold bracelets, and applied subtle make-up before she put her things in a bag.

Five minutes later, she was out of the apartment, heading down to the lobby. Outside the main doors, the driver waited in front of Ibrahim's new Telluride with a polite smile on his face.

"Hello, Mrs Fahad."

She smiled back, just as politely. "Hi, Tom."

He opened the backdoor for her. "Raven Isle?"

She nodded and got in. "Raven Isle." Before he could shut the door, she added "We'll stop at a flower shop on the way, please. I have to get a bouquet."

His smile did not waver. "Not a problem at all."

"Thank you, Tom."

"You're welcome, Mrs Fahad."

They did stop at a flower shop and Ayra ensured she got a very big bouquet of lilies and carnations which she had to use both hands to carry. She smiled throughout the drive to Raven Isle and by the time they got to the airport, the flight tracker stated the squad's flight was ten minutes away from landing.

There were reporters present and once they recognised her, they began taking photos and throwing questions. Thankfully, the airport security jumped into action and held the reporters back while Ayra was led to the plane's gate to await their arrival. It took a few minutes for the plane to land and it was hard to stand still when excitement and nervousness balled into one as she waited for the passengers of the plane to begin walking through the arrival gates.

Behind her, cameras were flashing but she didn't care. She just wanted to see Ibrahim. It wasn't long before she sighted them and Annet – who was the first one to notice Ayra – grinned, unlocked her phone, and held it up, slowing down so Ibrahim could walk past her.

It was though Ayra was falling in love with him all over again as she watched him approach in what felt like the slowest minute in history. He was on the phone and he noticed her a moment later than the others. His smile started out slowly until it became wide and breath-taking, taking her heart straight to the ICU. To Ayra, the world became muted and all that mattered was him. She forced herself to walk forward and they met in the middle of their little path with him putting his phone in the pocket of his blue coat.

He was still smiling and the cameras were still flashing. "You came."

She nodded, smiling too. "I did. I wanted to be the one to welcome you." She held out the bouquet. "Congratulations on Little Walker's official launch and success. I am very, very proud of you, Ibrahim."

He took the bouquet, stared at it for a moment with his smile and expression softening, and then he moved it to his left hand, holding it at his left side. Pulling her closer with his right hand and not caring about the fact that there were so many eyes – and cameras – on them, Ibrahim kissed her softly and Ayra, like always, melted into him, smiling against his lips.

When he pulled back, his eyes were so bright. "This is the best return I've had."

"I'm glad." She then laughed. "I hope the others don't kill me. I didn't come with another bouquet."

He laughed too. "They wouldn't dare. Besides, I'll protect you."

And like every other thing that concerned the both of them, Ayra did not doubt it one bit.

20

Ramadan began on April 12th and Ayra loved it because apart from the fact that it was her first Ramadan as Mrs Fahad, Ibrahim had less workload so he was at home more. What she didn't like, however, was that school got busier and she was the one who now spent long hours outside the house; leaving early in the morning after forcing herself up from the post-Sahur and Fajr nap, and then returning at least an hour after Asr.

Ibrahim made her feel better by being the sweetest person and it was impossible for her to not fall deeper in love with him. He took care of Sahurs and Iftars and on days when he couldn't, he took her out. He listened to her rant about how annoying school was being and he shared in her annoyance too until she couldn't help but start laughing. He helped her complete her dissertation and he ran hers and Ibtihaj's responses on his system, creating the infographics they needed. He was perfect and Ayra revelled in it, glad she'd seen their first months as a phase when he was too busy and wasn't home a lot. They'd gone through the phase and she was ecstatic about it.

Eid-el-Fitr was in May and it fell on a Thursday, right after she and Ibtihaj rounded up their works and sent it for final editing and approval so they could make the last corrections and then proceed to get it printed and hard-bounded. Eid was lovely and Ayra had lots of fun with Ibrahim, both of them spending the first half of the day at Haven Estate with her family and Ibtihaj's before moving to the Fahad Mansion for the Eid dinner. After that, they headed to Jalal's villa in the Eastside district for a party that brought the young elites of Atlantica together with enough fun, music, food and drinks to go round more than twice.

When they returned home in the early hours of Friday morning, Ayra let herself get sated by Ibrahim and then they performed ghusl, prayed Fajr, and were asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillows on Ibrahim's bed. They stayed indoors the entire weekend and she loved every second; he made sure of it.

Once the Eid bliss died, work and school resumed and slowly, both of them fell back into the phase Ayra was glad they'd come out of during Ramadan. On her end, her final exams and defence were around the corner. On his end, there was a new application idea and they – the Hexad squad – were more than excited to get started as it was proposed to help tourists and locals keep with the new recreational spots and activities in Atlantica with each state having its own version. So, both of them were out of the house in the early hours of the day and they didn't return until long after Asr was prayed; Ayra returning most of the time earlier than Ibrahim did.

Like she told herself the first time, she convinced herself once again that it was all a phase and she couldn't wait for them to be out of it.

For Ibtihaj, it was nice to see that Ayra was happy. She was still watchful of the squad but she'd let most of her guard down as they'd been on their best behaviour since the missed Bridgerton party. She still didn't like the fact that Ayra was the one who initiated conversations most of the time with Ibrahim but her best friend was happy and that made Ibtihaj happy. School stress kept them from hanging out as much as she would have loved so they could have their heart-to-hearts but she – Ibtihaj – knew they'd make up for it once they were done with everything and she honestly couldn't wait.

It wasn't long before May gave way for June, bringing along with it the final exams for the masters' students of the University of Atlantica. Coffee became Ayra's best friend. To keep herself awake once Ibrahim was home, she spoke to him about the most random things or made him her student so she could explain all she'd read. He never once complained and she always rewarded him with a sweet kiss. The papers were a lot of work and on the day they wrote the final paper, she was more than happy to hand over her booklet to the examiner and pull herself out of the examination hall to wait for her best friend who was still answering question number four.

The courtyard was littered with students who stood in groups to check if they'd written the right answers and Ayra was too tired to even care so she simply smiled at them and found a seat for herself. She put her bag on the table and then held her head in her hands, hoping the throbbing stopped or at least reduced. She needed to sleep and she couldn't wait to get home to do just that. She needed a massage too and she'd never been more grateful for the spas The Oasis had. But she had to sleep first.

A little while passed before Ibtihaj joined her, slamming her bag on the top of the table. "We're done!" Her grin was wide and blinding as she occupied the opposite chair. "We deserve a weekend in the best hotel suite and if we have to break our savings, so be it."

Ayra smiled warmly. "I can afford it for the both of us."

"Oya, rub it in my face that Ibro gives you more money than you hardly use on a monthly basis. Rub it in my face o."

Ayra laughed. "Get out...How was the paper?"

“Wó, my dear, thank God we’re done. I’m not going to do school anything after this. *Olorun ma je*. God forbid. Let me even go and think about what I want to do after this sef.”

Ayra folded her arms on the table. “I was going to ask by next week if you’d thought of something.”

“I’ve been looking through some companies but I’m yet to shortlist them sha... You that you’re not going to work, have you thought about what you want to be doing in that house?”

Ayra shook her head. “Not yet. I just want to sleep first and get the excess caffeine out of my system. There’s no rush and –”

Her phone rang and she fished out of her bag, smiling when she saw Ibrahim was the one calling. Ibti haj rolled her eyes but smiled anyways because of how pretty her best friend looked. Ayra accepted the call and brought the phone to her ear. “Ibrahim.”

“Hey, sweetheart. You done?”

“Yep. We just finished and we’re in the courtyard.”

“How was it?”

“Alhamdulillah. I’m just glad it’s over and I’m even happier that we’ll be graduating next month instead of August like other years. This school has drained me.”

He chuckled, making her usual butterflies flutter in her belly. “I can imagine.”

Her cheeks were rosy. “You still at the office?”

“Nope... I’m in the parking lot of the University of Atlantica, ready to pick up my wife and her best friend. I’ve been here for half an hour now.”

Her eyes widened and she couldn’t stop her gasp. She caught the clear curiosity on Ibti haj’s face. “You’re joking!”

He chuckled again. “I’m serious. A few people just recognised me and seeing how they ran back in, I’m sure they’re heading your way.” He sighed. “I made a reservation for you and Ibty at the newly opened Six Seasons at Eastside. It’s a four days and five nights’ staycation in the Ocean-View Villa. You two don’t have to pack anything, I’ve taken care of it all. All you two have to do is come out here so I can drive you to your home for the next four days and five nights. The exam season has been tough on you so you deserve to be pampered. Both of you deserve it.”

Ayra hung up, grabbed her bag and stood. Ibtihaj could only stare, confused and curious. “Ayra, what’s –”

Ayra walked around the table and pulled her best friend up. “We’re about to get that staycation you asked for.”

“I no understand wetin you dey –”

Ayra was already breaking into a run, pulling Ibtihaj with her. “You’ll understand in a bit, I promise!”

Some colleagues met them on the way and excitedly told Ayra that Ibrahim was in the parking lot. Ayra thanked them and kept running while Ibtihaj put two and two together in record time. Just as he’d said, Ibrahim was in the parking lot, leaning against the hood of his car. He smiled at the sight of them and Ayra fell all over again.

When they got over, she barely gave him any room to speak. She pushed Ibtihaj into the backseat, got into the front seat and then excitedly said “Ibrahim, let’s go!”

He could only laugh before nodding and getting behind the wheel. “Alright, sweetheart, we’re going.” He smiled at the woman in the back through the rear-view mirror. “Hi, Ibtj.”

Ibtihaj, who was doing a good job at hiding just how excited she was, gave him a small smile and a nod. “Hello, Ibro.”

Ayra turned in her seat to glare. “I told you to stop calling him that.”

Ibtihaj smiled smugly. “He doesn’t mind it.”

Ibrahim laughed, putting the car in reverse. “I really don’t.”

As he drove them out of the campus, Ayra filled her best friend in. Totally forgetting she was supposed to act as though she wasn’t so excited, Ibtihaj joined Ayra in excitedly squealing while Ibrahim smiled beautifully as he kept driving.

Six Seasons was the Atlantican subsidiary resort of the popular Four Seasons and it was built just by Eastside’s beach. It was smaller than the usual Four Seasons resorts but it was stunning and the views were everything to write home about. It was also as expensive as it was beautiful but it was nothing Ibrahim Fahad couldn’t handle.

They easily got checked in and the entire walk to their villa, Ayra and Ibtihaj held each other like overly excited children while Ibrahim followed five paces behind. The Ocean-View villa was amazing and it had everything to make their staycation an experience; two queen sized beds with the softest

pillows and cushions, a full bathroom with a deep soaking tub and double vanity sinks with lighted mirrors, an outdoor shower, a sun deck, a veranda, and an infinity edge pool. There was also a seventy-five inch HD TV with unlimited entertainment and the resort manager – who'd personally been on ground to welcome them – let both women know they could get a DVD/CD player on request.

In the walk in wardrobe and its attached dressing area were two small boxes with their names; the black for Ibtiḥaj and the white for Ayra. When they faced Ibrahim, he shrugged as though it was no big deal. "I did tell you I'd handled everything."

That was all it took for Ayra to run over and jump on him while Ibtiḥaj simply smiled widely. Five minutes later, he was ready to leave and Ayra chose to walk him back to the parking lot.

"Don't worry about me and have fun with Ibty, okay? Like I said earlier, both of you deserve it."

Her smile was so beautiful. "Thank you, Ibrahim."

With a smile, he stole an innocent kiss. "You're welcome. I'll see you on Monday In Shaa Allah."

She put her hands behind her, excitedly shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "You will, In Shaa Allah. Don't miss me too much."

He smiled cheekily, opening the car door. "I'll try my best. Monday better come soon enough."

Her smile widened. "I love you, Ibrahim."

"Love you too, Leilani. What else is there to feel?"

And no one could blame her for how rosy her cheeks got. Back in the villa, Ibtiḥaj happily called her mother to tell her she wasn't coming home and that she was going to have the time of her life, all thanks to her husband's best friend who she was still going to keep an eye on no matter what.



Throughout the staycation, Ibtiḥaj ensured Ayra didn't call Ibrahim even once and each time Ayra opened her mouth to talk about just how much she loved him, Ibtiḥaj hit her with a pillow and refused to listen until Ayra shut up and spoke about something else.

Ibtiḥaj did it so they could talk about themselves the way they'd always done before Ibrahim proposed and it was so beautiful to just be Ayra and Ibtiḥaj, two best friends who had each other's back no matter what. They

went over memories and laughed about the most absurd experiences and then they did everything they'd always wanted to do; couple dinners, couple spa sessions, swimming under the starlit sky, enjoying the outdoor shower, sipping wine while relaxing in bubble baths, and then lazing away on expensively laid beds while watching movie after movie in nothing but bathrobes and furry slippers.

On their last night, they sat by the edge of the pool, their legs in the cool water while the breeze stayed chilly against their skin. Ayra sighed remorsefully. "Why does this have to end?"

Ibtihaj snorted. "See me thinking you'll be very happy to return to your husband."

Ayra smiled, looking up at the star filled sky. "I am excited to go back to him but I loved our moments here."

"You can now tell me thank you for making you shut up each time you wanted to talk about him."

"Get out."

Ibtihaj laughed. "You wish. You're stuck with me, babe. I'm not going anywhere."

Ayra's smile widened. "I wouldn't want it any other way."

They stayed in silence for a few minutes before Ibtihaj quietly spoke. "I've decided what I want to do when we graduate."

Ayra turned away from the stars, surprised. "You have?"

Ibtihaj nodded, her gaze on the water. "I decided this morning. When you went back to sleep after Subhi, I came across this ad. It's for The Gateways. They're searching for remote communication officers and the job description is beautiful. I know I'll love it and since it's remote, I don't have to worry about idiots working in the same office with me. The pay is mad too."

Ayra's eyes were like saucers. "Ibty!"

Ibtihaj finally smiled. "It's a big company, abi?"

Ayra, who knew just how huge the travel and tourism company was, nodded eagerly. "It is! And you're just the right person for the job!"

Ibtihaj got shy. "Stop it."

Ayra slapped her best friend's arm. "I'm serious!" She then hurried to her feet. "Oh my days. Stand up, Ibty! We need to send that application right now."

"I never do my CV o."

Ayra wasn't listening to any excuses. She pulled Ibtihaj up and then dragged her into the villa. Glad they both had their tablets with them, they made themselves comfortable on the beds they'd joined together and got started on all they had to do. They created Ibtihaj's CV from scratch and Ayra had never been prouder to flaunt her best friend's ability, selling her as the perfect candidate.

Ibtihaj's cheeks were on fire as she read all that was written, all facts that could easily be backed with more than enough evidence. "God abeg."

Ayra simply smiled even wider. Once they finished, they proceeded to The Gateways's official application site and filled in the requested information. An impromptu test popped up at the end and although she'd not known about such, Ibtihaj – with Ayra's help – answered each question well. Once the confirmation email was received, The Gateways stating they'd received the application, Ayra hugged her best friend.

"You're going to get it, Ibty. If they don't see how good you are, then they're very stupid."

Ibtihaj laughed against Ayra's chest. "I should be the one doing the cursing."

"We are birds of the same feather after all."

"You that is a delulu queen."

Ayra blushed. "Leave me alone." She hugged the other even tighter. "Khair In Shaa Allah."

"In Shaa Allah." Ibtihaj let herself get hugged for a moment longer before she pulled back, her expression serious. "Let's talk about what you want to do."

"I'm going to be a full time house wife, Ibty, you know that."

"I still think you should do something. You should keep yourself busy."

"Something like what?"

Ibtihaj shrugged. "Content creation, anything. You're good with those vlogs stuff just like I'm good with my food photography. We both have a lot of followers now thanks to your marriage to Ibrahim so you have the audience. You can make those reels and shorts and before you know it, the

paid partnerships would start coming in. I really think you should consider it. You'll be keeping yourself busy when Ibrahim's not there and you'll be making money too." She then wiggled her brows. "Money is always the nicest part."

Ayra laughed. "True...I'll think about it, I promise. Between now and graduation, I'll think about it. You also know I have to talk with Ibrahim too because our engagement is almost a year old and the discussion of kids needs to be had."

"Ah, that's true." Ibtiḥaj's smile was naughty. "You're going to be doing even more bad things up and down now. As if all you've done is not already enough."

"Ibty, I swear to God –"

"Thank God we don't have explicit conversations." Ibtiḥaj pointed a finger. "Because I'm sure both of you can sometimes behave like rabbits in heat season. Especially you! With how clingy and physical you always are when you're about to be on your period."

Ayra's face was a ripened tomato. "I'm neither going to confirm nor deny. We're not having this conversation."

"I don't even want to have it." Ibtiḥaj grabbed a pillow. "Are you ready to have kids now though?"

Ayra shook her head. "Surprisingly, no. I'm so happy with just him and I know a kid would be great but I don't really feel ready for it. I'm not even so crazy about it yet."

"You should tell him. You shouldn't have a kid when you don't feel ready for it. I know no one can be very ready for kids but at least you should be excited about the thought of finally trying to have one."

Ayra nodded. "That's true. I'm just glad no one's asking and there's no pressure."

"If anyone tries to be unfortunate, send them my family's way. They will know *emi ni omobinrin* Falilat (They will know I am Falilat's daughter)."

Ayra laughed. "At this point, I should start claiming I am half Yoruba."

Ibtiḥaj nodded excitedly. "You should." She then tossed the pillow aside and pulled Ayra close, hugging her like a mother hugged her daughter. She kissed her best friend's head. "When the time eventually comes, I know you're going to be the best mother, just like Aunt Salama was the best mother to you. And just like my mother was the best aunt from another

mother to you, I'll be the best aunt your children could ever ask for, and I'll spoil them rotten. They will come second sha because I will spoil you rotten first. I promise. May Allah spare our lives."

Ayra, who'd been moved to tears, sniffled. "Ameen...Thank you, Ibty. Your kids aren't going to find an aunt better than me."

"I know that. Just don't carry your delulu spirit enter my future house abeg."

Ayra laughed tearily. "I'll try my best."

Ibtihaj kissed her best friend's head again. "I love you, Leilani. In Shaa Allah, I'm always going to love you."

"I love you too, Oluwatosin." Ayra wrapped her arms tightly around Ibtihaj's middle. "In Shaa Allah I'm always going to love you."

July, 2021.

At 1:30AM in the early hours of Sunday July 4th, Ayra was startled awake by the sound of a confetti gun going off. She nearly fell off the bed, scared to death, but familiar strong arms caught her at the last minute and Ibrahim's laughter got through her scare haze a moment later.

She blinked until the fear faded away, leaving surprise in its place. Her heart then began to race and her smile started out slowly. "Ibrahim?"

Ibrahim, who'd been away from Atlantica since she and Ibtihaj's staycation in June for meeting after meeting and conference after conference, smiled when he stopped laughing. "Hello, sweetheart. Happy Birthday. I'm an hour and a half late but it's good enough, don't you think?"

She wanted to cry. "You're here."

"I am." He smiled even wider. "I made it clear at every country that the squad and me had to get things wrapped up before July 3rd because there was no way we were going to miss your birthday. I've been jumping from one flight to the other since morning but it paid off. I'm here now."

A small laugh bubbled out of her and she hugged him, breathing his familiar scent in and finding a lot of peace in it. "God, I missed you."

He kissed her hairline softly. "I missed you too...Happy Birthday, Ayra."

She smiled against his chest, extremely happy he'd returned because she assumed she'd be spending her first birthday while being married alone. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome." He then pulled back. "Your cake and present are downstairs in the living room. I would have said we open it tomorrow after Fajr but I'm exhausted and I don't want to spend the whole day sleeping, only to give you the present and have you blow out your candles when we're about to leave for the little party the squad's throwing."

She beamed. "You guys are throwing me a party?"

He looked at her as though she was crazy. "Are we not supposed to? You're important to us, Ayra, so it's only right that you get a party the same way every other person on the squad gets a party."

Her face was radiant as she got out of bed. "I'm going to pee and then we'll head down, okay?"

He nodded, smiling right back at her. "Okay."

The trip to the bathroom revealed her period had made its monthly appearance so she got changed and then they headed down. Sitting on one of the coffee tables was a strawberry shaped cake that scarily looked real and on the ground, sitting prettily was a box wrapped in fuchsia pink paper with a white bow.

Ayra turned to her husband, her expression extremely soft. “Ibrahim...”

“I wanted them to make a Leilani cake but they said it was going to be a lot of work on such quick notice so I told them to go with the strawberry instead because it reminded me of Valentine’s morning when we had chocolate coated strawberries. The cake better taste nice. It was expensive.”

Unable to help it, she laughed while he simply smiled. He got a candle and lit it and she made a wish before blowing out the candlelight. He then got them plates, forks, and a knife from the kitchen. Just like she loved her cakes to be, the cake had three layers with whipped cream in-between and she loved how moist it was as well as how heavenly it tasted.

Once she’d taken one too many bites and had thanked him over and over, she put the plate and fork aside and then pulled the box closer. Now that she was seated on the ground, the box seemed bigger and she nervously glanced his way. “Ibrahim, what’s in here?”

He simply smiled, his forearms on his knees as he leaned forward while comfortably sitting on the sectional. “Why don’t you open it?”

Still nervous, she turned back to the box, said a quick prayer, and then lifted the lid. Her eyes proceeded to nearly pop out of their sockets. Staring right back at her was a pink Polaroid camera and a digital to analogue Polaroid photo printer. She slowly reached into the box and picked them up, turning – still with wide eyes – to Ibrahim. He smiled boyishly. “I may have seen you scrolling through Polaroid cameras when you took a break from reading during exams so...”

“Oh my God...” She knew how much they cost and the fact that she’d planned to give them to herself as a graduation gift, yet he’d beat her to it. “Ibrahim...”

“There’s another box to open, sweetheart.”

She put the camera and photo printer aside before she pulled out the black box left inside. She faced him in disbelief, a feeling of *déjà vu* hitting as she recalled how a similar box had been delivered to her parents’ house when they were still engaged. “Ibrahim, tell me it’s not what I think it is.”

“Then I won’t say anything.”

Feeling giddy, Ayra opened the box and pushed aside the protective covering. Her gasp was soft as she took in the baby pink dress neatly folded within, yet another bottle of the perfume they both used since they'd gotten married sitting nicely at the side of the box.

Ayra fell even more in love with him. "Ibrahim..."

"You should try it on."

She didn't need to be told twice. She stood and removed her nightdress with him watching before pulling the dress out of the box and putting it on. It was sheer perfection and the fabric was extremely soft against her skin, making her love it even more. The romantic tulle dress had fully off-shoulder balloon sleeves which were attached to a skirted bodice that cinched at the waist, decorated with silver flowers, before flowing out in a full skirt to the ground. Giving into childish excitement, she twirled and watched fascinatedly as the dress twirled with her.

Laughing, she faced Ibrahim and her breath hitched at his expression. He stared at her as though he'd never seen something or someone so beautiful; as though he'd witnessed a creation and he didn't want to witness any more creations because hers was perfection and nothing could come close.

Blood rushed to her cheeks so quickly that it made her a little dizzy. Her voice was a whisper in the quietness of the wide space. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I don't think you have any idea how big of a perfection you are right now, Ayra." He whispered in reply. "I'm no painter but God knows if I could create masterpieces with the strokes of brushes against canvas, I'd have captured the radiance and happiness coming off you in waves."

Her cheeks got even hotter. "Ibrahim..."

He pushed himself off the sofa and crossed the space between them. "There's just one thing missing." He reached up and freed her curls from the messy bun they were in, letting them fall past her exposed shoulders. "There." His eyes met hers and held them. "Perfect."

Ayra could only stare at him and he stared right back, the concept of time ceasing – once again when it came to them – to exist. He reached up to caress her cheek, smiling when she leaned into his touch. "Today's going to be beautiful, Ayra."

"It is... Thank you."

"I should be the one thanking you."

She raised a brow. “You’re the one who gave me presents and made sure you got here to celebrate with me. You’re part of those going to throw me a party later.”

“And exactly a year ago, you said yes to my proposal. We got engaged a year ago, Ayra. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

The truth in his words made her knees buckle and he easily caught her, holding her against him. The memories of that day hit her like a truck and she let out a small laugh. “It’s been a year already.”

“It has. It’s scary how time flies. It’s my best year though. I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.”

She smiled at him. “Me too, Ibrahim.” She pushed herself to the tip of her toes and wrapped her arms loosely around his neck. “I would never trade it for anything else.”

She kissed him and he reciprocated, holding her even tighter. When they broke apart, she giggled. “God, I can’t wait for Ibty to see what I got. Her birthday’s the day after tomorrow and I’m even more excited than she is.”

His expression changed and he cleared his throat. “About that...”

Bit by bit and piece by piece, her warmth, happiness, and excitement died. Dread slowly filled up the spaces as she knew that look all too well. She shook her head. “Ibrahim, please don’t tell me you’re travelling again.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

It felt as though she’d been taken from a blissful warm bath and then dumped in ice cold water. She pulled away from him, shaking her head. “No...”

“Ayra —”

“You’ve been away since the second to the last week of June, Ibrahim, and you just got back. You can’t start leaving again.”

“I’m not supposed to be back yet, Ayra, but I couldn’t miss your birthday. I had to break everything so the squad and I could be back. We wanted to stay until Ibty’s but it’s impossible. Our schedule’s way too tight and we had to choose between you and Ibty, and I’m more loyal to you than I am to Ibty. You’re my wife, Ayra, and I have to celebrate you. I love Ibty as a good friend but I need you to understand. *Please.*”

Her emotions swirled into a ball in her chest and she blinked her tears back when they surfaced. “It’s not about the birthday right now, Ibrahim. I’ve missed you every single day since you left and I’m so happy to have you

back but you're breaking my heart right now. You're going to leave and I have no idea when you're going to be back."

"I'm going to back soon. I didn't want this to happen, Ayra, but with applications such as *Ink* needing major updates and apps like *Hello Atlantica* needing to be discussed thoroughly to ensure we're not missing anything, there's only very little time to rest. We're packed, Ayra, and I'm so sorry."

A tear slid down her cheek. "Ibrahim, Eid is this month."

"In Shaa Allah I won't miss it."

"My graduation is this month. We don't have a date yet but they've promised results and the IVs would be out tomorrow morning. Ibrahim, you can't start travelling now." Her voice broke and so did her restraint against her tears. "You *shouldn't* start travelling now."

He could pull her back into his embrace and kiss her hair. "We'll wrap things up as quickly as we can, Ayra. Trust me."

It would...No, it should have been easy for her to trust him as she loved him so much but the missed Bridgerton party which she thought she'd put behind her popped back into her head alongside how busy he'd been since Eid. She tried to push the thoughts down but it proved difficult so she gave in to her tears and cried against his chest, her arms around his middle.

When she returned home back in June after she and Ibtihaj's staycation, she'd been excited to talk to him about how their future would look like but he'd been in Bella's place and when she headed down to meet them, he'd told her the squad had to leave for New York for a series of meeting. She expected him back in a few days, just like he'd said, but one week went by and meetings kept popping up in the squad's schedule alongside conferences which moved them from one city to the other.

She always missed him when he travelled but for some reason, this had been the worst and he'd been hard to get a hold of on the phone. Each time she managed to get an opportunity, it felt as though it wasn't enough. Now she'd gotten so excited that he was back for her birthday and to stay but he was saying the exact opposite and it scared her to death because he wasn't giving her a definite return date.

She wanted him back before Eid as she knew hers and Ibtihaj's graduation would fall either before or after the festive season and she couldn't have him miss the last academic graduation she planned on having. He'd already missed her first. He *couldn't* miss this one. If he did, it'd break her in ways she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

She cried until there were no more tears to shed and not once did he let her go. Not once did he stop apologising. Sniffling, she stepped away from him, feeling so drained. She used the back of her hands to clean the tear trails away. Ibrahim looked as though he'd been stabbed and the knife had been twisted in his chest. "Ayra –"

She busied herself with putting the camera and photo printer back into the box and then covering the box. She covered the dress's box too and put it aside.

"Ayra, I'm sorry."

The tears resurfaced and she did her best to keep them back while cursing her hormones. She picked the cake and her nightdress and then headed in the direction of the kitchen. Ibrahim followed her. "Ayra, please."

She put the cake in the fridge and closed it before she faced him. "Promise me."

His brows furrowed. "What?"

"Promise me that you'll be here by Eid. Promise me you won't miss Eid and you won't miss my graduation."

"Ayra –"

Her chest squeezed painfully. "Promise me!"

Ibrahim stared at her for a moment later and then he nodded. "I promise, Ayra. I promise to be back in time for Eid and your graduation."

She held onto his promise with both hands and choked over a sob, her breakdown wrecking her body whole in a way it'd never done before. She didn't fight when he made the space between them disappear, pulling her – yet again – into his embrace. He eventually carried her up and had a bath with her before helping her get changed and then tucking her in bed, lying beside her a near minute later once the lights were switched off.

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Sleep began pulling her under and she knew he'd either stay awake a little longer to pray Fajr or nap a bit before prayer. Funny enough, under all she felt, she felt guilty at the fact that they were supposed to be happily staying awake together while snacking on the cake and talking about all that'd happened in the time they'd been in different continents.

As she gave into the darkness, she murmured that she loved him and she was sure she heard him say he loved her too.

Ayra's birthday party was held in Tobi's place; a six roomed duplexed villa on the other end of Downtown Aomi. Although she was grateful, Ayra didn't enjoy the party.

Firstly, she didn't know a lot of those who were invited to celebrate with her. Secondly, Ibtihaj couldn't make it as she was sporting malaria symptoms so she'd gotten checked and was resting. Thirdly, the fact that Ibrahim and the other members of the squad were leaving first thing the next morning saddened like never before. It was hard to get excited with that gloom hanging over her head despite the fact that Ibrahim stayed beside her throughout, not letting go for any reason.

He left with Bella the next morning after Fajr and Ayra didn't see them off to the parking lot, breaking down in the privacy of her bathroom instead. At exactly 8AM, the University of Atlantica released their results for the completed session and unlike how happy she thought she'd be, Ayra felt bittersweet as she stared at her and Ibtihaj's names on the list of postgraduate students graduating with honorary distinctions. The graduation IV was released next, the event set for Saturday July 24th. Ayra sent it to her parents and then sent it to Ibrahim, knowing he'd see it when he landed in Prague.

A while later, when she'd pieced herself back together, she left The Oasis with her signature smile and went all the way to Plum Boulevard to see her parents who were excited over her results and the upcoming graduation. She then headed to the Adeola home to visit Ibtihaj and sleepover because she wanted to be there when the clock struck midnight, welcoming her best friend to the age of twenty-one.

Ibtihaj, who was recovering nicely, saw through Ayra's act easily and she hid her anger well, grateful for the fact that she was a safe space for Ayra to come to, no matter the day or time. She was always going to be grateful for it so she took it upon herself to ensure Ayra felt better and it didn't take long. By Maghrib, Ayra was laughing beautifully and heartily and Ibtihaj was glad her best friend was barely thinking of her "good for nothing husband".

No one had to tell Ibtihaj she was going to have a word with Ibrahim whether Ayra liked it or not. It was getting too much and she was really tired of her best friend's reality being way too different from the fantasies she'd had. Sure, Ibtihaj always thought Ayra fantasied about Ibrahim too much but then she'd never expected Ayra to actually end up with Ibrahim and now that they'd ended up together, there were absolutely no reason for Ayra's happiness to be a roller coaster that kept going up and down. Ibtihaj saw no reason, at all.

On the morning of July 6th, The Gateways' email was Ibtiḥaj's first birthday present as they provided her employment contract on what Ayra called a golden platter. Ayra was over the moon and she screamed until Al-Amin and Falilat rushed into the room. When they read the email, they joined Ayra and once the disbelief wore off, Ibtiḥaj screamed the loudest.

They ended up calling Salama and Muhsin over and they all had breakfast in the yard, Falilat bringing out two cakes instead of one because she and Salama had felt bad for not being able to celebrate Ayra's birthday with her. Ibtiḥaj eyed her tearful friend. "If you cry here, it's me and you."

Ayra laughed and sniffled. "I won't...Thank you so much, Aunt Falilat. You too, Ummi."

They told her it was fine. Like they always did since the first time they met, Ayra and Ibtiḥaj held hands while their parents sang the birthday song for them and then they made their wishes, blowing out the candles on both cakes with their hands still held. Gifts came next and Ibtiḥaj screamed when she unwrapped Ayra's gift to her.

"*Yā Mogbe!*"

Ayra smiled so beautifully. "You're going to be working now and you need something portable to carry around. I've always wanted to get one for you and this year seemed like the best time so...Also, this model had a lot of nice reviews."

Ibtiḥaj, who felt everything from surprise to unlimited gratitude, teared up as she traced the edge of the box in her hands; a box that held a black convertible HP Elite Dragonfly G9 2-in-1 laptop. She sniffled and raised her head. "Ayra..."

"You just told me not to cry. If you cry!"

Ibtiḥaj put the box on the table and hugged Ayra as though her life depended on it. Laughing, Ayra hugged her too. Minutes later, Ayra was the one gasping as she unwrapped the box that held Puro Sound Labs' *PuroQuiets* headphones in black and blue; something they'd seen on Instagram and she – Ayra – had mentioned that she liked.

Smiling, she looked at Ibtiḥaj who smiled right back. "You liked it. So it's only right that you got it."

"I really love you, Ibty."

"I love you too."

Falilat clapped her hands. “We’re still here o. *Éjor*, don’t be sharing love without us.”

They all laughed about it and thank yous were given by the celebrants. They then talked about the upcoming graduation; what they wanted as souvenirs, what they wanted to wear, and how it was going to go. Ayra put it at the back of her mind to send the invite to her in-laws too and she assured her parents and Ibtihaj’s – although she sadly didn’t fully believe it herself – that Ibrahim and the squad were going to be there.

Beside her, Ibtihaj had a small and sad smile on her face as she stared at the box of her new laptop. She told herself that if Ibrahim didn’t show up, there was nothing that was going to stop her from killing him, whether he promised to make it up to Ayra or not.

After all, enough was enough.

22

Ibrahim Fahad – and the other members of The Hexad squad – did not make it back for Eid. What should have been a happy day for Ayra with all the plans she'd been making since Eid-el-Fitr was spent in tears.

She only smiled when she got to Plum Boulevard in the evening to celebrate with her family and Ibtihaj's while ditching the Fahad's Eid dinner. No one in the Fahad family called to ask what was wrong and Ayra ignored it although it hurt a lot. At some point, she ignored the texts from the squad too because their apologies weren't enough and she hated how she couldn't even hold on to Ibrahim's promise that he'll be there in time for her graduation; just as he'd promised – and failed – to be home in time for Eid.

Ibtihaj was livid and she made sure she let each member of the Hexad squad know – via text because she couldn't reach them over the phone – just how mad and disappointed she was. She then told Ibrahim that if he didn't show up at their graduation and he broke Ayra even further, she was never going to forgive him.

Salama knew something was wrong with Ayra but she couldn't force it out of her daughter so she let it go, allowing her husband – Muhsin – convince her that Ayra would reach out when she was ready to.

On the 22nd of July, their graduation fits arrived. A second time, they'd patronised Binta Badmus – *Bintabadmuslady* – and she didn't disappoint; once again using pink and white (ivory, to be precise) to make dresses for both of them. This time, Ayra was to be in hot pink while Ibtihaj was to be in ivory.

Both dresses, just as they'd asked, were the same just in different colours: silk effortlessly sewn into elegant bodices with long sleeves that joined with a maxi skirt that flowed down to an inch below their ankles so as to not completely cover their shoes. The accompanying veils were cut out from premium jersey fabric in both colours; hot pink and ivory. Glad that the dresses fit, Ayra and Ibtihaj went shopping for accessories.

On their way back, Ibtihaj's hand found Ayra's and she gently squeezed. "You good?"

Ayra managed to smile, nodding. "In Shaa Allah I will be."

"Let's forget about Ibrahim and the squad until after the graduation, okay?" Ibtihaj squeezed her best friend's hand again. "If you weren't married to him, you would still be graduating and you would be over the moon because our efforts weren't in vain. You had plans for this degree even

before his proposal came so do not allow him and the squad take away the happiness of hard work paying off. We're graduating with honours, Ayra, and we deserve to be happy. He doesn't get to take that away from you. He *shouldn't* take that from you so don't let him. Okay?"

With tears in her eyes, Ayra nodded. She engraved the words in her mind. "Okay."

"We'll be fine, love. We're going to be alright, I promise."

On the 23rd, Ayra resent the graduation invite to her in-laws, reminding them that the event was the very next day. After Jumm'ah, Salim called and once they'd exchanged greetings, he let the bomb drop.

"Fareeda and I have to be in Cape Town tonight so we'll have to rain check tomorrow, sweetheart. It's not something we can postpone and there's no way we'd make it back in time to even catch the end of the ceremony. I'm sorry, love. Why don't we have a dinner or lunch to celebrate when we get back?"

Ayra, feeling weak underneath the heavy baggage of disappointments she'd gotten the entire month, leaned against the nearest wall in the kitchen. She used every ounce of power to push the tears back. "Sure," She lied. "I'll look forward to it. Have a safe flight, Dad. Say hi to Mum for me."

"I will. Congratulations. I'm proud of you."

For the first time in her life, Ayra wanted to be rude to him but she pushed it down, told him thank you, and then hung up. Ibrahim's text came in almost immediately.

Ibrahim: *We're getting ready to leave Sao Paulo. There's a layover in Paris and we haven't gotten a quicker flight that'll leave as soon as we land at CDG but we're working on it. We'll take a private plane if we need to, okay? What happened during Eid won't happen this time, we'll make sure of it. I'll be with you soon.*

Unable to take anything more, Ayra switched off her phone. She prayed Asr and sent a message to Ibithaj on Instagram through her tablet, stating that she wanted to sleep until Maghrib so her phone was turned off. Ibithaj understood so she replied telling Ayra to rest well.

Ayra slept until Maghrib, woke up to pray, eat, and then pray Isha before switching on her phone, putting it on DND and then returning to bed where she immediately fell back into sleep. Fajr came quicker than she expected it to and she prayed to Allah for strength to get through the day. She then picked up her phone and the top messages were from Ibrahim. Flights had been delayed from Paris because of bad weather but they were

getting ready to leave. Knowing the flight took about six hours and it was already almost 6AM, Ayra repeated Ibtiḥaj's words in her head like a mantra; she'd worked hard for the degree and she deserved to be happy now that she was graduating. No one, including Ibrahim, had the right to take it from her.

She got up, arranged the room, laid the bed, and then proceeded to have her bath, taking extra time to pamper herself as it'd been ages since she did so. Oiling her skin was easy and when it came to picking out the perfume she wanted to use, her hand hovered above Tom Ford's for a moment. Reminding herself that the day was hers, she moved her hand to the left and picked up the pink bottle of Chanel Chance; a fragrance she'd barely used because of how much she loved scenting like Ibrahim and also Bella.

By 8:30, she was in a silk robe which covered her underwear. With her hair in a loose ponytail, she headed down and opened the door for a grinning Ibtiḥaj who'd come with her stuff. Ayra smiled back. "Someone's very excited."

"And someone looks happy, thank God." Ibtiḥaj hugged her and sniffed a moment later. "You finally sprayed your own perfume."

Ayra blushed a little. "Today is my day. Sorry, *our* day. And we should make the most of it."

Ibtiḥaj pulled back, smiling proudly. "Exactly! That's the spirit. Oya, let's go and do our make-up. We don't have time." She followed Ayra who led the way back up. "Mummy said if she gets to the arena before us, we're dead."

Ayra laughed. "They won't. We'll make sure of it."

They got ready in her room and it was the first time in a very long while that they didn't speak about Ibrahim; as though they were living in another dimension where he wasn't a part of their lives. Instead, they spoke about how the ceremony would go, who they looked forward to seeing, the outfits they could look forward to, and then the awards. They spoke about food too.

They kept their make-ups simple – simpler than it had been during their bachelors graduation – and then they put their hair in sleek, low buns; Ayra's bun fuller and buggier than Ibtiḥaj's as her hair was way longer. They then put on their dresses, Ibtiḥaj doing so carefully so the ivory fabric didn't get stained. They tied each other's waist sash and then they got started on putting on every other thing; tying the jersey veils as layered turbans on their head, putting drop down pearl earrings on their ears, wearing pearl necklaces on their necks and chain bracelets on their wrists, and then

adoring their feet with pointed toe high-heeled pumps; Ayra's being white while Ibtihaj's was black. While Ayra spritzed a little perfume here and there, Ibtihaj sprayed as though there was no tomorrow.

"My enemies must choke and die." She said when Ayra coughed. "They must choke and die. I made it, their father!"

Ayra could only laugh. When every necessity was put into the sling bags they'd chosen to go with, they headed down and blessed the foyer mirror with a lot of pictures. Once Falilat sent a threatening message to Ibtihaj, both of them laughed and hurried out of the apartment. The underground parking lot was brightly lit as always and Ayra's resolve cracked as she unlocked the doors to one of Ibrahim's cars and slipped in. It scented like him and moving the seat forward to accommodate the differences in their height brought a lot of memories to her head; both of them in the car with his hand in hers while he easily maneuvered down streets with his other hand on the steering wheel.

Ibtihaj put on her seatbelt. "Oya o. Let them not do the procession without us."

Ayra snapped out of her head and rolled her eyes, smiling. "They wouldn't dare."

By the time they got to the University of Atlantica, it was five minutes past 10AM and the parking lots were full. She had to cross-park and then they were hurrying towards the administrative building to get their allocated gowns and caps before rushing to join the others who'd begun forming lines.

"Ayra!" It was one of their mates who sported a grin on her face. "We were just talking about you."

Ayra, who put one arm into the sleeve of the black academic gown, curiously faced the other. "Really?" She put her other arm in the other sleeve. "What about?"

Another mate replied. "We were wondering whether or not your husband would be here. The whole school's been talking about getting a chance to have The Hexad Squad in the campus premises." She leaned forward, her eyes bright with unhidden curiosity and a little mischief. "They are coming, right?"

Ayra could only stare at her mates, her cap held with both her hands. Her chest slowly constricted and all the efforts she'd made to be happy seemed to be crumbling to dust. Ibtihaj stepped in, smiling with faux sincerity. "If he comes, that's nice. If he doesn't, that's nice too. I mean, you know

Ibrahim Fahad and the members of the squad are public figures and they've been on the news lately so you should know that they've been busy. We should focus on the ceremony going well rather than on whether or not he'll be here. He's not the one graduating. Ayra is."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt for a husband to show up for his wife." One said. "I even heard he didn't even show up for her first graduation."

Ayra held the cap tighter and forced a smile on her face. "Ibrahim was unfortunately busy then and he's unfortunately busy now. Like Ibty said, if he shows up, then it's going to be amazing. If he doesn't, it's alright too. Missing one or two ceremonies doesn't mean we're going to miss out on everything else." Her words seemed to mock her. "The squad's busy so..."

Not waiting for them to reply, she put on her cap and turned around. That did not stop the whispers from reaching her ears.

"Do you think the rumours are true? People said their marriage is crazy. I mean, Ibrahim works long hours and then he doesn't show up for events with her."

"I think he's just really, really busy as she said. Come on, we've seen pictures of them having fun; she, him, and the other members of the squad. I don't think their marriage is anything crazy or shady. She knew what she was getting herself into. He's always been a workaholic after all."

"I really looked forward to seeing him though."

"Same here. I particularly looked forward to seeing him, Isabella Valentino, and Anneth Samson."

"Do you think Ayra's going to go for PhD here? If she does, then he'll probably —"

Ibtihaj snapped. "*Tori Olorun* (Because of God), it's okay!" The whispering immediately ceased and she looked from one person to the other. "If you want to know whether or not their marriage is crazy or shady, I can give you the contact address of The Hexad so you can schedule a meeting with Ibrahim and ask him yourself. I'm sure you'll meet Bella and the others there too."

She hissed. "We're about to be called in. Instead of you all to be ready to throw your caps, you're talking about what does not concern you. It's okay. If you must gossip, don't do it here when Ayra and I are still with you people. Ah an!"

Ayra grabbed her best friend's hand. "Ibty, it's okay. Just ignore them."

Ibtihaj eyed the others and hissed again. Only a few people spoke after that and it wasn't long before the graduates were ushered in. It was easy for Ayra and Ibtihaj to return their parents' smiles once they noticed them; each one – especially Falilat – dressed to fit the grandeur of the occasion. Once they found their seats, Ayra focused on breathing in and out. Minutes later, the ceremony began.

Speeches were given and memory lanes were walked down as the university celebrated one feat or the other. Bachelor degrees were then conferred and Ayra cheered with a nostalgic smile on her face as she watched the new graduates cheer with all their might. Individual awards were then presented to the bachelors' before the event moved to the postgraduates. Degrees were conferred and they cheered. Individual awards were then presented.

“The University of Atlantica Award for Consecutive Academic Excellence is hereby presented to a master's degree holder in International Communication; Ms Ibtihaj Oluwatosin Adeola.”

Ayra cheered with sincere happiness and pride. In the sea of guests, Falilat was on her feet, cheering and telling anyone who cared to listen that Ibtihaj was her daughter. Ibtihaj, clearly surprised as they'd not expected to receive any award apart from the Chancellor's Honorary Certificates, rose to her feet and walked on stage. Ayra captured the moment with a very beautiful smile on her face, dimples on full display.

“The University of Atlantica Award for Consecutive Academic Excellence, once again, is hereby presented to another master's degree holder in International Communication.” The registrar, who was the event's officiator, smiled at the guests. “After all, they do say birds of the same feather flocked together.”

Where they sat, Salama's hand found Muhsin's and they both squeezed at the same time. On her seat, Ayra's heart jumped to her throat while Ibtihaj returned with a wild grin.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” The registrar continued. “This award is presented to Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz.”

The cheer was loud, Ibtihaj ensuring she was the loudest. Following her – Ibtihaj's – lead, people rose to their feet, still applauding for Ayra who made her way over to the stage where the Deputy Vice Chancellor – a woman with a lovely smile – stood with the award.

Ayra, blinking back tears, hugged the older woman who laughed and hugged her right back. Once they pulled back, the award was presented and cameras flashed while the registrar presented a backstory to guests.

“Ayra Abdulaziz and Ibtihaj Adeola have appeared on the Chancellor’s honour’s list every semester without fail since September, 2016. On the transcripts of both women, the lowest grade you would find is a B and it is scantily scattered in the ten semesters – including their just concluded master’s programme – they have spent here in the U of A...We are proud to present this award to them and should they ever decide to take up the offer, the university has employment slots open to them no matter what.”

Ayra, with the crowd still cheering, returned to her seat and hugged Ibtihaj who buzzed with so much energy. When they pulled apart, they turned to their parents who still clapped; all of them with proud smiles and bright faces. Ayra’s smile wavered as she remembered how she’d dreamt about having Ibrahim sitting right beside her father, cheering for her as proudly as they currently did alongside the other members of the squad.

It clicked in her head then that it was past six hours which meant he should have landed, probably on his way to Aomi from Raven Isle. He wasn’t going to make it in time, that much was clear, and it hurt even more than him missing Eid did.

She kept a practiced smile on her face throughout the remainder of the event and when it all ended, she threw her cap with the level of energy one could find in a sick child. She kept smiling when Ibtihaj threw an arm around her shoulder, both of them cheering with the others. She kept smiling when she was squeezed into photos with those she knew and those she didn’t. She kept smiling when she politely told those who asked that Ibrahim couldn’t make it because something came up. She kept smiling when they got to where their parents stood. She smiled throughout the photo session with her parents, Ibtihaj, Falilat, and Al-Amin with a photographer that was nicer than the one at their bachelors’ graduation. She kept smiling when they headed out to the gardens and she recreated photos with Ibtihaj before they joined their parents to attend to those who came over to offer their congratulations.

Ayra smiled through it all and when Salama suggested they had an intimate dinner at Kingstone, the same restaurant Ibrahim had been at with the others on the night of the Bridgerton party, Ayra shook her head. “Let’s do it tomorrow please. I’m really, really tired.”

Ibtihaj nodded in agreement. “Tomorrow’s better.”

Salama had never looked so worried. “Leilani, are you sure you’re alright?”

Ayra nodded, still smiling. “I will be, In Shaa Allah. Please don’t worry too much, Ummi. I’ll be fine.”

Thanks to Ibtihaj, they didn't push it. They promised to meet the next day and Ayra said goodbye to them, heading towards Ibrahim's car which she'd come with. They all watched her go and then Falilat sighed. "I hope she's alright o. This one that none of the Fahads showed up. They should not hurt this girl, *tori olorun*. It won't be funny o."

Salama could only watch with a heavy heart as Ayra got into Ibrahim's car and drove off a near minute later. Beside her, Muhsin stood with his heart heavy too. Ibtihaj stepped away and angrily sent a message to Ibrahim.

Ibtihaj: *I told you I wasn't going to forgive you if you missed this and you did. Well done, Engineer Fahad. Well done.*

Please leave my friend alone to go to sleep when she gets home. Do not tell her how you're going to make it up to her or any other sweet nonsense that you'll normally put in her head. Thank you, Ibrahim, for making Ayra sad on such a happy day. Thank you for making my family and hers worried too.

If I'd known this was how things were going to go, I would have stopped her from marrying you. At least I wouldn't watch her slowly fade into someone I'm starting to not recognise. If you're not going to man up and stop making promises you can't keep or spending so much time at work while she stays home alone, then please let her go. Her being divorced is going to be better than continuing on the road she's on, even though she may not see it now.

I really liked you, Ibrahim, because you made her happy. Thanks for fucking it all up.

Twenty minutes later, Ayra was locking the doors of the vehicle. Her bag hanging from her shoulder, her award in one hand and her bouquets in another, she headed up. She blew out a breath when she got to the front door of the apartment she loved from the moment she'd stepped in with Ibtihaj the first time.

With another exhale, she moved her award to the arm with the bouquets and scanned her fingerprint. The door unlocked and she pulled it open, stopping in her tracks when she saw who was on the other side. Ibrahim, just like her, had stopped in his tracks, his arms halfway in the sleeves of a white tuxedo jacket. On a normal day, she would have gushed over how good he looked with his hair slicked back, a crisp black button down tucked into black pant trousers, black shoes on his feet, and his jacket being the only pop of colour. However, this wasn't a normal day and he'd ruined it. He'd ruined it all.

Too exhausted, Ayra stepped in and let the door shut behind her. She held his gaze for a second longer, hated the emotions swirling in his eyes, and then walked past him. Ibrahim turned around and went with her. "Ayra –"

“I am honestly too tired to even talk to you, Ibrahim.” She stopped by the steps and faced him. “I’m way too tired for even a mere conversation with you so please, do us both a favour and let me be tonight.”

“Ayra, please. I’m going to make it up to you, I promise.”

A humourless laugh slipped past her lips. “I’d like to see you try, Ibrahim. I’d really like to see you try.”

She turned around and ascended four steps before she stopped and looked over her shoulder. “And you should stop promising me things. I can’t trust you anymore and I’m not going to be stupid to fall for one more promise of yours. You’ve done enough in this month alone, Ibrahim, and I’m just really tired.”

“Ayra —”

Not wanting to hear anything else, she walked on and for the very first time in her life when it came to him, she didn’t look back.

23

Unlike what she'd thought, Ayra slept deeply and dreamlessly throughout the night, exhaustion – mental and physical – seeping away from her body with every hour that went by. She woke up just as the Adhan for Fajr went off on her phone, wondering how and why she'd missed the Tahajjud alarm.

She laid on her side for a minute longer, staring at the wall, before she sighed, pushed the duvet back and sat up, the Dua for waking up slipping past her lips as a whisper. When she turned her head, a scream nearly tore out of her throat.

Still in the pant trousers he'd worn when she came back from the graduation and a white vest, Ibrahim sat on her cactus shaped sofa, his hands together and his head hung low. His curls were messy, as though he'd run his hands through them all night, and Ayra hoped – which was very ironic seeing that she was still supposed to be mad at him – that he'd actually slept.

“Ibrahim?”

He raised his head, dark circles prominent underneath his eyes and exhaustion as clear as day on every part of him. “You’re awake.”

She moved her legs from the bed to the cool floor, a small frown on her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I just...” He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “I couldn’t stay in my room. I couldn’t sleep or do anything while knowing you’re so mad at me and so disappointed that you couldn’t even scream or yell at me yesterday so I came here...I knew you’d be asleep and I knew you wouldn’t want to talk and I didn’t plan on waking you up. I just...”

He blew out another breath and ran a hand through his hair, letting her know he'd actually run his hand through the curls she loved all night long. “I just couldn’t be away so I came in and I made sure to not disturb you.”

“You sat there all night.”

“I did. It’s the least I could, Ayra. I’m so, so sorry. I know I’ll be sorry for a long, long time and I don’t mind, Ayra. I’m really sorry and I’m going to make it up to you for as long as I can.”

In that moment, Ayra wondered if it was normal to still be mad and disappointed yet feel so guilty that her not talking to him kept him up all night when he'd been crossing continents just to meet up with her graduation. She hated that he made promises he didn't keep, that was set in

stone. She also hated that she didn't enjoy a day she'd looked forward to because he didn't show up in time for it all, leaving her drained. She hated those... Yet, her heart ached at the fact that he didn't sleep while she did; that he sat there all night simply because she didn't yell at him the way someone who was stood up more than once would.

Her emotions battling against each other – courtesy of her heart and brain being at war yet again – were confusing and she wasn't sure she was ready to unravel it all. She also wondered if it was how her parents felt each time they fought and Salama would come down to get Muhsin who'd been sleeping on the couch. Those times she – Ayra – knew her mother was still mad at her father, yet she'd taken care of him as she was concerned for his well-being.

It was confusing and it was too early to deal with all of it. So, Ayra looked away from Ibrahim and pushed herself up to her feet, her voice low when she said "It's time for Fajr, Ibrahim."

"Leilani –"

That was her undoing but she fought against it because she knew she couldn't melt into him although her heart wanted to. She *couldn't* melt into him that easily. "Let's pray first, Ibrahim. Everything else can come after Fajr."

She didn't look his way but his sigh reached her ears. A moment later, he was on his feet. "I'll wait for you in the family lounge." He then stepped forward and kissed her hair, his hand brushing her back which made her treacherous heart want to burst into tears because she'd missed his little touches. "I'm really sorry, Ayra. You have no idea just how sorry I am."

And then he was gone. She shed a few tears as she made wudhoo but pulled herself back together before leaving the bathroom. She then put on her hijab and left the room, joining him in the family lounge. Prayer was peaceful but a little sad for her as it'd been a while for her to pray behind him and normally, when they – he and the squad – returned from trips, they usually prayed in his room or if he was being clingy, they prayed in hers.

Once they finished supplicating, none of them moved and she knew they'd need to have the conversation then and there. It was necessary. When he turned on his mat so he could sit facing her, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Why?"

Ibrahim looked as though he'd been stabbed over and over. "Ayra –"

"Why did you promise to be here when you knew you wouldn't make it?"

“I was going to try my best, I swear it. I planned on freeing my schedule for Eid and your graduation and I did try but –”

“But you couldn’t.” Her chest was back to squeezing painfully. “You kept promising.”

“And I swear to you, I kept trying. You can ask every single person, Ayra, I kept trying.”

“You didn’t try hard enough.” Her voice broke as the tears surfaced, the pain fresh. “You didn’t really try hard enough, Ibrahim, because if you did, you would have been here. You *should* have been here. You *promised*.”

“And I’m very, very sorry.”

She hurriedly wiped away the tear that slipped. “Do you even know how Eid went for me? I stayed in this very spot, praying and holding on to the last shreds of hope that you’d walk in, no matter how late. I went to the Eid ground alone. I came back and watched them sacrifice the ram alone. I had to put the catering team in charge of the meat distribution because I couldn’t do it. I cried a lot, Ibrahim, all because you couldn’t make it. All because you made a promise and broke it.”

His eyes were glassy with tears. “Ayra –”

“I don’t even understand why you kept booking your flights so late. Your Eid flight was to leave mere hours before midnight and you were to land after the Eid prayer or so but it was cancelled and you couldn’t get another flight so you had to fall back into the schedule because there were meetings that couldn’t be moved.”

A tear slid down his cheek. “Ayra...”

“And then my graduation. Why didn’t you leave earlier? Why? Just why, Ibrahim?” She finally began to cry. “Why?”

He moved closer, pulling her to him. “I’m so sorry, Ayra. I’m really sorry.”

“You can’t make promises and break them. You shouldn’t make promises and break them because of work.” She cried against his chest. “I know work is important you but so am I. I’m your wife, Ibrahim, and I wouldn’t bat a lid before doing everything to be there with you – physically or virtually – on your big days so all I want from you is to do the same.” She cried harder. “That’s all I’m asking from you.”

He hugged her tighter, crying too. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ibty’s really, really mad at you. My parents are worried but I keep telling them I’m fine so you really need to stop letting me down, Ibrahim. I can’t

be fine if you keep doing this. I can't be fine if you keep making promises I can't trust. I can't –" She choked over a sob. "I can't keep doing this."

"I won't do it anymore, Ayra, I promise." He softly kissed her head. "I know you can't trust my promises anymore but I'm going to make it up to you and I'm going to do everything possible to build that trust back. I'm not going to let you down again, I promise. I'm already working on it and I'm going to tell you everything. I'm so sorry, Ayra. I'm really sorry, sweetheart."

They cried until there were no more tears to shed but they didn't let go. Much, much calmer, Ibrahim began rubbing soothing circles on Ayra's back while she leaned against him, listening to the familiar beat of his heart. Outside, the sun was rising over Aomi and the other parts of the country.

"I have a gift for you." He said quietly. "It's for both of us actually and I was doing everything possible to beat time and circumstances so I could give it to you while you were still in the celebratory mood of the graduation ceremony."

Ayra said nothing. She simply listened and he continued. "It's a trip to Santorini, Greece. It's a weeklong vacation at the Katikies Hotel and I wanted it to be a sort of mini-honeymoon. I'm sorry I ruined yesterday before I could even give it to you...I'm still going to take you there and I hope you agree, sweetheart."

"You can't do things wrong and then spend lavishly, Ibrahim." There was a part of her, however, that wanted it so badly. A trip to a beautiful village in Greece; just the both of them. "You can't do that."

"I'm just..." He took a moment. "I don't know how to do this, Ayra, and I have to admit it now. All my life, for as long as I can remember, I've built everything around work and the few times I go out with the squad, it still feels like relaxed work dinners because we talk about contracts and whatnot. Then you came along and I didn't create the balance like I assumed I did. Each time I let you down should have been a wake-up call but I kept jumping back into the routines I was used to instead of making my way around them for you. And I'm so sorry."

She sniffled, blinking back fresh tears and he continued.

"The day of Eid, when we couldn't catch another flight no matter what, I realised the gravity of everything and it hurt. I couldn't reach you and I don't blame you for not wanting to talk to me and then Ibty sent so many texts to all of us and it broke me in more ways than one, Ayra. I hated that I'd hurt you and I hated that I'd hurt Ibty too and I'm going to make it up

to her but I have to make it up to you first. And then later at night, Mum called and asked about you because she didn't see you at the party and I told them you probably went over to your family's place to celebrate. I asked why she didn't call you herself and she said she would. Please tell me she did."

Ayra's chest squeezed again. "She didn't. No one called to ask and it hurt so much, Ibrahim."

"Oh God." He held her even tighter. "I am so sorry, Ayra...I made up my mind that day to put things in order so we could finish up, meet your graduation and then while the squad implement the new changes, you and I could be in Santorini so I could do everything to start making up for lost time. I made the reservations after the day of Eid and I should have told you that I was doing everything possible to make the changes that should have been in place a long time ago but I just thought that if I promised to catch up with the graduation, it'll be enough. I assumed it'll be enough and that I could explain everything I'd been up to. But it wasn't, Ayra, and I'm so sorry I didn't realise that sooner."

She pulled back to look at him and she nearly wished she didn't because her heart broke; not for her, but for him. In the years she'd known him and in the time they'd been together, she'd never seen him look so hurt, broken, and apologetic at the same time. He'd never been like this and it hurt her, maybe been a little more than he'd hurt her by not showing up when he said he would.

"We finished up our meetings and I was so happy when we got to Paris on time because it was easy to get another flight to Atlantica and as at then it seemed like I'll at least be in the country before you have to leave for the ceremony and we'll catch up but then the weather got so bad and flights were grounded and..." His voice broke. "Ayra, I'm so sorry."

Her chest squeezed again and all that went through her mind was that she wanted him to stop crying. She wasn't sure she even still had it in her to be mad with him or disappointed. She just wanted him to stop crying.

"We got here too late and I still wanted to believe we could make it, no matter how late it was. Showing up at the campus late to me was better than not showing up at all but it seemed like every circumstance was against us and we didn't. And then just before you arrived, Ibtu texted me as I was getting changed and I swear, Ayra, I was so scared. I was scared and then I was so disappointed in myself because you've been the best wife I could ever ask for but all I've done is let you down to the extent that your best

friend was wishing she could turn back time to stop you from marrying me. I've never hated myself as much as I did yesterday, Ayra. I'm so sorry."

Whatever was left of her battered heart dropped. "Ibty said that?"

He shook his head, blowing out a breath, and while fighting back her own tears, Ayra reached up to wipe his tears away with both her hands. He exhaled again. "Those weren't her exact words but yeah, that was the message. She'd already sent a text after Eid, telling me she wouldn't forgive me if I missed the graduation because it was going to hurt you but I did and...Ayra, I'm so sorry."

She shook her head, her heart getting even more battered where it was. "No, Ibrahim, no..."

"She told me to leave you alone to go to sleep when you got home and that I shouldn't tell you I was going to make it up to you. That was exactly what I was going to do but here she was telling me I shouldn't do that and I just...I couldn't...Ayra, I'm sorry."

"Ibty's looking out for me. She's always looking out for me and I would have done the same for her."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. I know how you two are. I know how inseparable you two are, so all I could think about was whether or not you were going to leave me when your best friend was saying she would have stopped you from marrying me if she knew this is how things were going to go."

His hands came up to hold hers which were on his cheeks. "All I could picture was you asking me for a divorce as soon as I got home because if your best friend could wish that, then I couldn't bring myself to imagine what was going through your mind. I was so scared, Ayra. I fucked up and I was ready to do everything to acknowledge that fact and grovel even if I had to do so on my knees. I can't lose you, Ayra. I really can't and I'm so sorry all I've done is to slowly take your light away from you. I hate that I did that and I'm promising you that I'm never going to do that again so just please —"

She closed the space between them and kissed him, praying he shut up before he spiralled in a way she'd never seen; something she was scared she wouldn't be able to take. It took Ibrahim a long moment to respond to the kiss and pull her even closer. The kiss was innocently soft, tainted with their tears, but perfect. It was perfect.

When she pulled back, she watched him swallow before opening his eyes; dark ones holding hers like they always have. This time though, there was a vulnerability that clawed painfully at her heart.

“I’m not leaving you, Ibrahim.” She said softly, holding his face in her hands. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m worried for me because you being continuously away has taken a toll on me due to the fact that I’ve missed you so, so much and she said what she said because she’s looking out for me but it doesn’t mean I’m leaving because I’m not.”

“Are you sure? Please don’t leave, Ayra. I swear, I’ll do everything you want. Just please, don’t leave.”

She gave him the smallest smile she had. “I’m not leaving, I swear it. I love you. I’ve always loved you. It’s just that this marriage hasn’t gone the way I always thought it’d go and it hurt. I always imagined a bed of roses and constant fluffy stuff and while I knew you were a workaholic, I didn’t think it’d been so bad but it is and it’s just been a lot because I haven’t adjusted as well as I should have and then you kept letting me down and leaving at times when I just wanted to have you for a little longer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are. You’ve apologised more than a hundred times since you left so I know you are. But, I want you to know that I was really hurt and I was really sad because I had so much to do with you during Eid and yesterday but you weren’t there and the promises you made weren’t fulfilled which meant the trust I had in you was broken more than once.”

“I’m going to do everything to build it back, no matter how long it takes, Ayra.”

Her smile widened a little as she wiped away a tear that slid down his left cheek. “I know you will. You always do...However, I’m glad you just said all of that because as at last night I didn’t want to hear you say you wanted to make it up to me.”

“You made it clear last night. I’m sorry.”

She wiped away yet another tear of his. “It’s fine...Ibrahim, we can’t keep going like this. We have to make a few changes so we can both be happy because I can’t keep up with you being away for long periods of time and then not being able to trust you when you say you’ll be back on so and so date. It’s draining and it makes me really sad and that’s not how I imagined our marriage would be.”

“We’ll make those changes, I promise. I already spoke with the others and –” His face scrunched up as though he was in pain and then he reached up to massage his temple. “I already spoke with the others and we...Ouch.”

Fear clawed at her chest as she watched him lower his head, bringing up his other hand to massage his other temple. “Ibrahim?”

“I need to sleep.” He massaged his temples for a moment longer before he raised his head. “As I was saying. I already spoke with the others and – Oh shit, my head.”

She stood and with all her might, she pulled him up. “You need to sleep.” She walked in the direction of his room, taking him with her. “We can talk later.”

“But I’m not done apologising yet, Ayra.”

She didn’t want to hear it. “And you can’t do that while on the verge of a collapse.” She walked into his room and led him straight to be bed, helping him in and under the duvet. She then sat beside him. “We can talk later, Ibrahim. You need to sleep first.”

“I’m sorry, Ayra.” He slowly relaxed, his lids drooping. His hand found hers and he squeezed softly, his words slurring. “Please let’s go to Santorini. I’ll make it up to you for the rest of my life, I promise.”

She watched as he slowly slipped into sleep, his hold on her hand staying strong. With her emotions being a ball in her chest, she reached up to push his curls away from his forehead. As she leaned in to kiss his forehead, he spoke quietly. “I love you, *Sengilim*.”

Her heart jumped to her throat. She had no idea what the endearment meant and she put it at the back of her mind to look it up once she got her phone. She smiled with her lips on his forehead, whispering back “I love you too.”

Five minutes later, she stood by his window, texting her parents with her phone on one hand and papers she’d seen on the top of his coffee table in the other hand; papers that confirmed their flight to Greece and back, alongside the reservation of their suite in the Katikies Hotel – all the papers having “Engineer and Mrs Ibrahim Fahad”.

As she clicked on send, telling her parents she was bringing Ibrahim for the dinner they were holding for her and Ibty, she found peace in the fact that the trip – or mini honeymoon as he’d called it – was exactly what they needed. After all, they had to talk and make important changes and there

was nowhere better than the privacy of a luxurious hotel suite thousands of miles away from home.

They were going to be okay, she knew it. They just had to work out things first. She couldn't wait to do them all so she could put the phase behind them and move onto whatever fate had in store for them next.

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Ibtihaj stopped pacing in front of Kingstone's entrance when the blue Chevrolet Corvette pulled in the parking lot, occupying the spot between the Adeolas' Sienna and the Abdulazizs' Rav4. A brow of hers went up when both doors of the Corvette went open, Ibrahim and Ayra stepping out a moment later. A deep breath was the only thing that stopped Ibtihaj from swearing in Yoruba at the tall man her friend ended up being married to.

At the car, Ayra shut the door and caught up with Ibrahim, her hand naturally seeking his. She returned the small smile he gave her and then they headed towards her best friend who had her arms folded, her brow still sky-high. Ayra's smile widened. "Ibty!"

Ibtihaj couldn't help but smile back. "Ayra... You look happy."

"Well, I'm working on it. There's still a lot to talk about but I'm a little better."

Hoping and praying that her best friend had not succumbed to the charms of her beloved husband, Ibtihaj turned to Ibrahim and her smile dropped. "Ibrahim Fahad."

Ibrahim had the decency to look ashamed. "I'm sorry."

She held up a hand. "I really don't want to hear it right now." She let her hand go back to the other, folded across her chest. "I should have you know that I meant what I said. I'm not forgiving you and please let your friends know that they're blocked until further notice. The only reason I haven't blocked you too is because Ayra's still married to you and I need to be able to get through to you should you decide to be a *werey* again."

Ayra's heart dropped. "Ibty."

Ibtihaj ignored her, refusing to turn away from Ibrahim who stared back at her as calmly as he always did. "And I also meant it when I said you should send Ayra back to us if you're not going to man up. I'm not going to allow my best friend spend the rest of her life crying simply because you couldn't decide if she was more important or if your career is."

"We're not separating, Ibty." Ibrahim told her. "I know I'm... No, I know I've been wrong and I'm going to do everything I can to make it right."

She eyed him. "I'd like to see you try." She then unfolded her hands. "Anyways, I've got my eyes on you and the squad, Ibrahim Fahad. For now, you should go in and assure everyone that you didn't do anything wrong because there are a lot of questions regarding why you didn't show

up and why your family didn't too." She then smiled at Ayra. "I'll just talk to Ayra for a bit."

Ayra didn't smile back and Ibtihaj did not care. She watched as husband and wife promised to see each other inside and when Ibrahim was gone, Ibtihaj spoke before Ayra could.

"Yes, I sent him that message and I don't care if he got hurt because of it. I'm not apologising for it either. And yes, I believe he should divorce you if he's not going to stop being the same person who's hurting you after promising to love you and make you happy. And yes, I blocked the others because they want to kill me with sorrys and *mio feh gbo rura* (I don't want to hear it). Oya, go ahead and tell me that I shouldn't have done that and I will say it again that I do not regret it and I will not apologise for it because your happiness means the most to be and all of them are mad, especially that Tobi with his head like –"

Ayra hugged her. "You talk too much."

Ibtihaj easily melted into the hug. "Iffa slap you."

Ayra laughed, pulling back. "I love you either way...Ibrahim told me about the message you sent and yes, you did hurt him and seeing him hurt made me hurt too."

"Ehn?!" Ibtihaj wagged a finger at Ayra's face. "*Walai* if you tell me you forgave him because of small cry that he cried, I will –"

"I didn't forgive him so easily. He's going to make up for it. I just..." Ayra sighed. "It just made me understand my parents each time they fought and my mum came down to get my dad from the sofa he was sleeping on. I hated the fact that Ibrahim was hurting and he explained everything to me. Look, he didn't do things the right way and he's acknowledged that. I've also told him clearly that we can't continue this way with him being more at work than at home."

Ibtihaj smiled proudly. "You're finally having sense."

"You're mad!" Ayra's cheeks were hot. "He said he's already put some things in place and we should have spoken about it but he collapsed out of exhaustion as soon as we reached his bed and he's been getting his energy back since."

"You should have sha left him alone to continue sleeping instead of bringing him along."

"Ibty!"

“I’m telling you the truth.”

Ayra rolled her eyes. “Anyways, the important thing is that we’ve communicated and I’ve assured him that I’m not leaving. It hasn’t gotten to that level yet.”

“I hope it never gets there, for your sake and not his.”

“Ameen. Now, as I was saying, we’ve communicated and we’re going to keep communicating. He made us reservations in this lovely hotel in Santorini so I want us to get there and –”

“Santo kini?” Ibtihaj’s brows were furrowed. “Come, is that not an island in Greece?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Ayra, this man wants to throw lavish gifts at you again to change your mind that –”

“I thought so too but he didn’t book it yesterday or the day before. He booked it since after Eid and he wanted to give it to me as a graduation gift but he couldn’t make it.”

“And you believed him?! Just like that?! *Shey* you know men *dey* lie sha?”

“I saw the papers in his room and everything is according to what he said. He booked it right after Eid and the flights are for tomorrow In Shaa Allah.”

Ibtihaj’s expression relaxed and she nodded slowly. “Well, I’m glad there was evidence and I’m glad they did not go and put on your *mumu* button.”

“Ibty!”

“Na you know, my dear. I know how much you love him and I don’t want him or anyone to take advantage of it so I’m glad you’re putting your foot down on the fact that things have to change. Don’t stop putting your foot down until things actually change o. You’ve been accommodating enough abeg.” She hissed. “It’s still vexing me but I’ll be level headed now because of what you’ve said. I’m still going to keep my eyes on him and the squad. If anything seems fishy, I’m going to spark and no one would be able to stop me from doing whatever it takes to protect you even if it means taking you away from them.”

Ayra smiled brightly. “Sure, do that. Thank you, Ibty, for always looking out for me.”

Ibtihaj smiled back easily. “You’re welcome...Ah, this one that I’m making plenty money. It’s like I’ll just happily be the rich aunt to your kids when they eventually come.”

Ayra’s smile dimmed. “We still haven’t spoken about that.”

Ibtihaj rolled her eyes, annoyed. “God abeg! You know what? It’s good you people are going to Santorini sef. If you like, go and be having sex like rabbits instead of talking. That’s how people ended up with pregnancies.”

“I’m on the shot!”

“It’s not a hundred percent effective, right?”

“It’s been effective so far.”

“That’s not the point, Ayra...Talk more instead of being intimate. I’m not saying you should be celibate, especially with how long he’s been away, but get those conversations out of the way first and then you can both be the rabbits in heat.”

Ayra’s face got even redder. “I hate you.”

Ibtihaj laughed and took her best friend’s hand. “You and I know that’s a lie. I love you. Let’s go inside abeg.”

“Sure.”

“Have the others been disturbing you with messages and sorrys?”

“Yep. I had to tell them it’s fine so they could stop but I’m putting a foot down with them too.”

“Thank God o. Ayra’s getting sense. I’ll keep them blocked until further notice sha.”

“I’m done with you, Ibtj.”

“I love you too.”

At the table both of them were approaching, Salama smiled at Ibrahim while her hand stayed in Muhsin’s. She – Salama – was glad Ayra was going to be okay now that Ibrahim was promising to set things right. She only prayed that things got better and for her daughter to smile widely and laugh heartily like she always did. That was all she wanted.

When both ladies got to the table and easily slid into their seats, Ibtihaj turned to Ibrahim while Ayra spoke to her parents and Ibtihaj’s with a sincerely wide smile on her face. As she watched Ibrahim stare at his wife with a warm smile, Ibtihaj further cemented the fact that she was going to watch him and the squad like a hawk and no matter what they did to make

things right or how much they apologised, she wasn't going to let her guard down.

One wrong move, she promised herself, and she was getting Ayra out no matter what it took or how much she had to sacrifice.



Oia, a coastal town on the north-western tip of the Greek Aegean island; Santorini, had to be the most picturesque place Ayra had been to with whitewashed houses carved into rugged cliff-tops and the vast water filled caldera from the volcanic eruption that occurred during the Minoan civilization.

The Katikies Hotel was one of the luxury accommodation providers built into the caldera and it was easy for Ayra to fall in love with it from the very first step they took with the hotel guide. The atmosphere screamed warmth and romance, further solidifying the fact that the getaway was exactly what she and Ibrahim needed. They were yet to finish off the deep conversations but she wasn't in a hurry. She was just grateful that in that moment, they were as fine as they could be.

They checked in at the reception and were led to their suite. Ayra was left stunned.

The honeymoon suite with the plunge pool, as it was called, had a living room which was separated from the bedroom; expansive windows with soft cotton curtains that swayed with the winds; a bathroom with a jetted bathtub; an open air dining area; sun decks; a veranda which offered breath-taking views of the caldera; and a private plunge pool. It was, in summary, perfect and Ayra didn't want anything else.

She looked around again, leaving Ibrahim to speak with the hotelier who was ensuring everything was perfect for them. When the hotelier left, Ayra faced her husband. "Ibrahim, this is so beautiful."

He sat on the armrest of the loveseat in the living room, a small smile on his face. "I'm glad you like it." A moment passed before he spoke again. "I'm really sorry, Ayra."

Her smile shrunk. With a sigh, she walked over and he let her get between his legs, her arms on his shoulders. Her smile warmed then. "It's okay."

"It's not."

"Well it will be okay. We're going to be good, Ibrahim. I have no doubt about that, so please stop apologising for now. Let's just freshen up, pray, and —"

“And talk. I don’t think I’m going to be settled until we talk.”

She stared at him for a near minute before she nodded her head. “Okay, Ibrahim. We’ll freshen up, pray, and then we’ll talk.”

He pulled her closer then, wrapping his arms around her middle and resting his head against her stomach. “Thank you, Ayra.”

Her hands went to his hair and she recalled the term of endearment he’d sleepily uttered the previous morning. *Sevgilim*: a Turkish term of endearment which was often translated to “my darling”. She’d wanted to mention it to him but the moments hadn’t felt right so she decided to wait until it did. She loved it, especially the way he pronounced it and she looked forward to hearing it more often from him.

According to the plan they’d made, they freshened up (her before him) and then they prayed. Although they were both tired when they finished supplicating, they faced each other – still on their prayer mats – so they could talk and get things out of the way in order to make the most of the week they had to spend on the island.

A quiet minute passed before Ibrahim began, speaking softly. “We’re expanding the management team for the company both within and outside Atlantica. It’s the first step we’re taking so we, especially me, can make it up to you.”

Ayra pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around her drawn up legs. “What does that entail?”

“Since the company was established, the squad and I have been very wary with who manages the affairs of the company with us. The bigger the company grew and the more we branched out, there was need for a bigger management board but the company’s always been dear to our hearts so we got only a fourth of the needed number to keep up with the growth. Because of that, most of the work always came back to us, especially Bella and me, and that’s why we’ve spent long hours all this time and that’s why we’re always travelling. Instead of delegating these tasks to competent hands, we took it all on our shoulders and if we want to create a balance that’s healthy for you and me, we’re going to have to expand the management team so we have more hands to deck to seamlessly run things even when the others and I aren’t there.”

Ayra’s smile was small but adorable especially with the dimples on both cheeks. “And that’ll decrease the workload you all have and give you more hours to be home, with me.”

He nodded, giving her a similar smile. “Yes. It’s long overdue and I’m sorry we both had to have a strain in our relationship for me to see that.”

“It’s alright, Ibrahim...The expansion isn’t going to happen immediately though, right? Or do you already have the people you want to fill in the spot?”

He shook his head. “As much as I want it to happen immediately so I can spend every hour making it up to you, it’s going to be a scheme that rolls out in the coming months. We’ll have to decide what new positions we’re creating and then draw up the descriptions and the requirements before we open up the application portal. Then we’ll conduct interviews and set up trainings so the people coming in can understand how the company works and the level of quality we’re looking for.”

Her chest squeezed a little. “You’ll still be busy for a little while.”

“But it’s for greater good, love.” He moved forward, towards her. “I promise. Once we get to the interview stage and we’ve picked who we want, we’ll leave it for the recruitment team to handle and I’ll be there at home for more hours each day and for weekends for months. When everyone’s fully into their roles, I won’t have to go to work every day and I won’t have to travel as much and it’ll be you and me, doing everything and anything you want.”

Like a plant breaking through the surface of the earth, warmth sprouted in her heart and it slowly began to spread. “I’d really like that, Ibrahim. All I ever wanted, even before we got married, was to have you at home and do everything possible with you.”

“And we’ll do them. I know the trust we have is on very shaky foundation right now but I’m going to make it right.”

Then and there, she knew deep inside that she didn’t doubt it. She wasn’t overlooking all that had happened and completely tossing it aside but in that moment, he was sincere and she couldn’t doubt anything. She sighed softly. “What else?”

“During this unfortunately busy period that’s left, the squad and I have agreed that we’ll work from about 8AM to 4 or 5PM each day.” He smiled a little wider when her face lit up. “I have to come back home to you. Serkan’s coming back to Aomi so Bella has to go back to him while Nathaniel’s also cutting down on his workload so he can be with Anneth. Jalal and Tobi will definitely find something to do with the free time they have and I really don’t care what it is. All I care about is the fact that I’ll be coming home to you and we can have dinner together early or go on date

nights because it's been a while. We can go for drives too or just lounge in the area. We can do anything, Ayra. As long as I'll be with you."

The mental images she had were beautiful; the ones she'd always had before his proposal came but this time, they were so much clearer and they were very feasible.

"And on some days," Ibrahim continued. "We won't go into the office if it's not an emergency. We're still working on the applications but there's no rule that says we can't also work well from home. Besides, Bella's living in the same place as both of us so we can work together while Jalal, Tobi, and Anneeth can easily meet up and tackle what's left. We're trying to be more flexible, Ayra, and it's all for you. You deserve it and so much more and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I'm going to keep promising that to you."

She had to laugh, tears slowly welling up in her eyes. "You guys are doing a lot for me."

"You deserve everything, Ayra. I promised to treat you like a queen and I've failed at that quite a lot this year so I need to get back on track and ensure I don't fail you anymore. I need to get back on track with Ibty too because I don't want anything to further ruin the balance we all had."

Her expression – and her smile – softened. "If she sees you proving yourself, she's going to come around. It was a really tough period, Ibrahim, and she's not going to forget that easily but you clearly making it up to me is going to be enough for her and she'll come around."

"And I'll work hard. I promise I'll work hard."

"I know you would." She didn't doubt that too. "And I'm glad you're making these changes because I don't think anything would be better than having you home with me. I also don't think anything would be better for the others than having more time to spend with their partners too. Also, having more time would give us all the opportunities to hang out as much as we should because it's been really long since we had lunch or even dinner together. You all being so busy has been a lot and I honestly can't wait for the changes to roll out."

She then sighed. "I'll be patient while you all do what needs to be done. I'm content with the fact that you now all have clearly defined work hours. That's more than enough for me. And we're going to do everything; dinners together, late night drives, movies, lounging, date nights. We're going to do all of it."

He nodded, sitting right in front of her with his feet touching hers and his knees drawn up to his own chest the way hers were. His smile was boyishly beautiful. “We’ll do all of it.”

Ayra felt it all melt away; all she’d felt when he was away and when he let her down. She understood what people meant when they said it was easy to forgive those you love. She was definitely forgiving him in that moment. She was falling quite deeper in love with him too.

“And,” She said. “We’ll talk about what we’re going to do from here on because I’m done with school now and I know I’m going to be living the baby girl lifestyle –” She smiled widely when he laughed. “But we need to talk about everything else; what we want to do together, our goals, kids, all of it.”

He nodded again. “Sure.”

“And I’ll let you know at this point that Ibty’s working now. She’s working for The Gateways.”

His eyes nearly popped out of their sockets with how wide they became. “Are you serious?!”

She nodded, pride for Ibtiyah running through her veins. “I am. There’s a lot we have to discuss, Ibrahim, and I’m so glad we’re here on this lovely island together with lots of time to catch up on everything.”

His smile disappeared and his expression momentarily clouded before it cleared. With a sigh, he reached out and took her hands in his. He stared at them for a near minute before he brought his eyes to hers and the vulnerability she saw in them tugged a little painfully at her heart.

He gave her a shaky smile. “We’re good, Ayra, right?”

Her smile was softly small and she nodded, allowing him squeeze her hands lovingly; like he always did. “We are.” She told him sincerely. “In Shaa Allah it’ll only get better from here.”

“In Shaa Allah.” He brought her hands to his lips and kissed the back of each one. “Thank you, for being the best person I could be married to.”

It was way too easy for Ayra to blush as he kissed the back of her hands again. “Thank you too, for also being the best person I could be married to.”

“Nah, I’m the one to do more of the thanking. And I’m sorry, for everything.”

She stared at him for a moment before the words slipped past her lips with so much ease. “I love you, Ibrahim.”

When he smiled with a little cockiness, she knew what was coming and her blush deepened while those butterflies with his name written on their wings erupted in her stomach, fluttering with all their might. After all, it’d been a while since she’d heard the words.

“Come on, sweetheart. What else is there to feel?”

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Ayra and Ibrahim did not do anything else until they'd caught up on everything that'd happened in each other's life. It took them the first two days in Santorini to get that done as there was a lot to catch up on and a lot to talk about as to the future of their marriage.

They celebrated the little wins they had in their time apart and when Ayra said Ibtiyah recommended content creation for her to go into now that she didn't have to go to school anymore, Ibrahim was all for it and his support was everything Ayra never knew she actually needed.

He chuckled when she blushed, her dimples deep. Leaning forward, he placed a soft kiss on her lips. "Let me know everything you need when you're ready to get started and you can be rest assured I'll personally scout every store in Aomi to be sure we get nothing but the very best."

She giggled like a giddy child. "Okay!"

They spoke about kids; both of them agreeing they still weren't ready to have little versions of themselves although their marriage was slowly inching towards a year. They agreed to come back to the discussion by their first year anniversary to know what the other person felt and until then, they were still going to take contraceptives very seriously.

They set out goals for themselves; communication goals as a couple, periodical games that came with rewards such as date nights or trips to the most beautiful cities in the world, days to just be with each other...All of it. They made an agreement to sign up for couple therapy if things ever got to the point where they were – once again – growing apart because one person wasn't satisfied and was hurting because of the actions of the other person. As they made that agreement, Ibrahim apologised over and over and when Ayra got tired, she kissed him until he shut his mouth and kept the remaining apologies to himself.

Once all of that was put behind them and they were both freer and happier, they went on to enjoy all Santorini had to offer. They went on the Santorini Classic Catamaran cruise which offered the island's sights from the water, went on a private tailor made half-day tour, went on a luxurious cruise ride on the caldera where they were served full Greek meals and drinks, caught sunrises and sunsets, visited wineries for tastings...They did it all. When they weren't outside, they did a lot indoors and they ended up going at each other once clothes were off the same way Ibtiyah always described: like rabbits in heat season, but Ayra loved every single moment. She loved the pillow talks they had once they were done too.

Like everything else, the trip came to an end and she didn't look forward to heading back to Aomi one bit; something that made Ibrahim laugh heartily. On their last night, she sat by the edge of the pool while he lazily swam. Inside the suite, their boxes were packed and the outfits they were to wear for their morning flight were already laid out. Their passports and plane tickets were in their carry-on bags.

Ayra sighed, her small pout returning as Ibrahim swam her way. "I really don't want to go home."

He easily got out of the water, sitting beside her with very little space between them. "We can always come back. Once my schedule's clear and you're good with it, we can always come back. Just not to this hotel."

She looked at him. "Why?"

His smile was warm. "We should try out other ones. What if there's one that's better? We won't know if we decide to remain here." He turned back to the pool. "Also, there are other islands we can explore. I'm not against us coming back here to Oia but let's get the full Greek experience before we start returning to places we've visited before."

She smiled then, toying with her legs in the water. "I'm going to look forward to that. Hurry up and free up your schedule."

He laughed. "I will."

They sat in companionable silence for a little while before he sighed, speaking a little quietly. "I'm so grateful you chose to come here with me, Ayra. I don't know how things would have gone had you said you didn't want to come here or even anywhere else with me."

Her smile shrunk until it was a mere ghost. "Let's not think about that." She faced him the same time he faced her. "We're good now and we're going to be good from now on In Shaa Allah." She then smiled cheekily. "You just have to be on your best behaviour. You need to earn a lot of brownie points."

He chuckled, nodding a moment later. "I do need to earn a lot of those points and I need to be on my best behaviour. After all, I have a Yoruba woman who's ready to let hell loose on my head and on the others should we stray from the right path...Also, I can't lose you so I need to ensure I never give you a reason to feel like you can't stay with me anymore. It'll kill me."

Her chest squeezed slightly. "Ibrahim..."

“You’re a very important part of my life, Ayra. You’re extremely important to me and I don’t want to ruin what we have for anything. So I will be on my best behaviour and I’ll do everything to earn those brownie points from you and Ibty too. I promise. I’ve been making a lot of promises since last week and I’m going to fulfil them. I’m going to do everything I promise you.”

Ayra realised yet again – since they’d landed on the island – that there was no way she didn’t already fully trust him almost like she did before. All she hoped for was for things to remain as blissful as they had been throughout the week when they returned to Aomi. That was all she wanted.

He smiled at her and she smiled right back, content with every single thing and flowing with all the love she had for him; all the love she’d had for him for so, so long. When he wrapped a cool arm around her shoulders, she easily leaned into him and they sat there, staring at the caldera in the distance, the top of the water dazzling underneath the beautiful moon.

A few minutes later, Ibrahim turned his head and kissed her forehead. “Love you, Ayra.”

He kissed her forehead again and she closed her eyes, savouring the feel of his lips against her skin. She smiled nicely. “I love you too.”



August 11th was a Wednesday and every newly graduated student of the University of Atlantica, both undergraduate and postgraduate, was asked to come in as from 11AM to pick up their transcripts, certificates, and result statements.

At 10AM on that very day, Ibrahim got a message that his attention was needed at the office. He turned apologetically to his wife as he was supposed to be the one to drive her and Ibtihaj down to the university campus and then bring them back since he had a free day.

Ayra, who’d read the message too, smiled brightly at him. “It’s alright, Ibrahim. It’s probably very important so they need you there. I’ll drive, pick Ibty up, and then head to campus.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, her smile unwavering. “I’m very sure. You go ahead. I’ve got this.”

He stole a quick kiss. “You’re the best, Ayra.”

She could only laugh. He was gone in minutes and she sent a quiet prayer up to the heavens, thanking Allah for pulling Ibrahim out of the house as she had some plans she wanted to execute without him being around to catch her.

Since they'd returned from Santorini, he'd been the sweetest person and so had the other members of the squad who were still apologising to Ibtiḥaj who still had them blocked while she – Ibtiḥaj – watched Ibrahim like a hawk despite Ayra saying that was well.

Like he promised, he no longer worked extremely long hours and she barely did anything around the house when he was in because he “didn't want her to be stressed” when he was more than capable of doing things for both of them himself. In the two weeks they'd been back in Aomi, he'd prepared the best of meals, left little gifts, and listened to every plan she had for the content creation trials she wanted to have. He made adjustments whenever he could do.

Now, she wanted to reward him with a surprise late lunch – or dinner depending on the time they returned and she got things done – as a way of saying thank you. She had it all planned out. She just needed him gone and now that her prayers had been answered, she only prayed the meeting stretched on for a little longer so that by the time he returned, she was at least halfway gone with preparations.

Rushing to the room that now had the cute door tag that read “Ayra's Corner”, she pulled out the carton she'd hidden behind the shelf. Opening it, she pulled out a newly purchased camcorder which was small enough to easily blend with the wall; exactly why she'd chosen it. Ensuring it was fully charged, she went back down and pulled a chair from the kitchen all the way to the foyer. Praying she didn't fall, she hung the camera up a little above the mirror, smiling proudly as it fit in quite nicely. She was very sure he wasn't going to notice it and she put it at the back of her mind to turn it on once she returned from the university.

She returned the chair to the kitchen once she finished setting up the camera and she then arranged every needed food item alongside cutlery on the island for easier access once she returned and was ready to get started. Satisfied with everything, she got changed and grabbed the keys to Ibrahim's new Cadillac CT5, excited at the mere thought of driving it out. He'd asked if she wanted a car but she'd told him no. She wasn't ready to have hers yet; not when she could cruise all of his. When she was ready, she was going to tell him; she promised him that.

She got to Haven Estate at exactly 11AM. Before picking Ibtihaj, she made a stop at her parents' house. Only Salama was in. Muhsin had a get together with some old friends and according to Salama, he'd been very, very excited to go.

"Well," Ayra told her mother. "I'm glad he's having fun. You should go out and have some fun too so it doesn't seem like you're getting cheated."

Salama laughed. "Oh please. I'm very content here with my tea and my novels. There's an upcoming bridal shower too that I have to plan so that's keeping me excited." She then smiled lovingly. "And I love the fact that you're happily glowing, Leilani. I was so worried last month but I'm glad Ibrahim's keeping to his promise to ensure the future's better than the past."

Ayra swooned as she thought back to all he'd been doing. She smiled idiotically. "He is keeping to his promise, Ummi."

Salama rolled her eyes. "Always Ibrahim Fahad's greatest lover girl, Leilani."

Ayra grinned proudly. "Exactly!"

"Have you been able to reach Fareeda and Salim though? We tried calling to say hi some days back but it wasn't going through."

Ayra's grin slipped off her face and she shook her head. "I haven't spoken to them since before Ibrahim and I left for Santorini. I don't think they're back from Cape Town because they said we'd have lunch once they returned."

Salama nodded, frowning slightly. "There's no problem then." Her expression brightened as her smile returned. "You should hurry up and get Ibty before she walks over to tell me how you've become tardy. She'll blame it on Ibrahim."

Ayra laughed, stepping forward to hug her mother. "I'm done with Ibty." She savoured the older woman's warmth. "I love you, Ummi."

"I love you too, Leilani. Please take care of yourself."

"I will, I promise. Take care of yourself too."

"I will, Leilani. I promise."

By the time Ayra got to the Adeola home, Ibtihaj was standing outside the gate, tapping her foot impatiently. Ayra wound the tinted window glass down and smiled innocently. "Hello, my love."

"Waka!" Ibtihaj rolled her eyes while Ayra laughed. She walked around the car and got into the passenger seat. "Shey this is 10:45 in your village?"

“I got side-tracked at home. I want to surprise Ibrahim with a thank you lunch or dinner depending on the time we get home and I get things done.”

Ibtihaj put on her seatbelt. “Thank you for what again? What has he done that he hasn’t been doing before?”

“He’s been really sweet, Ibty, and I want to do this for him.”

“So, I’ve not been really sweet, is that it?”

Ayra risked a glance as she drove them out of the estate and towards the Business and Institutional Area. “What’s gotten into you today, Ibty? It’s not even noon yet.”

Ibtihaj groaned dramatically. “Guy...I had a lovely morning as the meeting with my team went really well and they loved the idea I pitched for the promotion of the mnw packages we have for African countries. They really loved it.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you! Anyway, after the meeting finished, I went online. Guess who’s using his third abi fourth IG account to text me? Tobi!”

Ayra’s eyes widened. “No!”

“Yes! He’s been irritating me since morning. He was apologising at first and then he started calling me his love. *Olorun ma je*. God forbid!” She shuddered. “*Tueh!*”

Ayra laughed and Ibtihaj rolled her eyes. When she calmed down, Ayra spoke. “Don’t you think it’s time to unblock them, Ibty? I mean, they’ve been apologising and it’s nearly been a month now. They’re really sorry and I know you’ll watch them like a hawk the way you’ve been watching Ibrahim.”

Ibtihaj folded her arms. “Free me abeg. I shall continue watching Ibrahim and I will decide when I’ll unblock them. In the meantime, lemme humour that *ódé*. That’s how the stupid man posted on his story about this new babe he’s checking out.”

“I don’t think Tobi’s ever going to change.”

“You’re even having small hope for him. God forbid.” Ibtihaj then looked around the car. “Omo, when you said Ibrahim got a new car, I didn’t think it would be this fine.” She glared at her best friend. “Instead of you to ask him to spend money on you and get you one sexy car, you said you’re not ready.”

Ayra smiled at the security men at the front gate and then drove them into the university. “But I’m not ready yet. His cars are beautiful, Ibty, and even you can’t deny it.”

Ibtihaj’s frown was enough to tell everyone she didn’t like the fact that Ayra was right. She squeezed her face. “That’s what annoys me. Ibrahim has nice taste and I don’t like it. See as car fine!”

Ayra laughed. “I’m done with you.”

“Anyways, any word from your in-laws?”

“Nah, not yet.” Ayra found a place to park and she killed the engine once the car was in place. “Like I told Ummy, they’re probably still in Cape Town. We’ll have a meal with them once they return.”

“Omo. It is well.”

“It is, Ibty. Come on, let’s get our documents. I have a surprise to plan for my husband.”

“Ifa slap you!”

Ayra laughed with all her heart. It was easy for them to get their documents from the exam and records office and they made a few stops to say hi to some of their past lecturers and professors. It was then revealed to Ayra that following she and Ibtihaj’s graduation, Ibrahim made a donation to the institution in both their names.

“He said we should keep it a secret.” The Dean said, smiling mischievously. “But I have a big mouth and I had to spill it to you two... You have a lovely man, Ayra. I hope you two always stay together.”

Ayra’s heart soared and she thanked the dean while Ibtihaj took the new piece of information in, clearly surprised. The drive back to Plum Boulevard was spent singing along to the classic songs that played on the radio and once the car stopped in front of the Adeola home, Ibtihaj got out and leaned forward to talk to her friend through the rolled down window.

“Have fun, Ayra.” She said. “And better don’t tell him I said thank you because I most certainly did not. I did not send him message but it was a nice offer sha.”

Ayra rolled her eyes, fighting against her smile. “Yes, Ibty. I won’t tell him you said thank you at all.”

“Better! Don’t burn yourself o because you want to try new dish. I will not follow you to hospital. I did not send you message.”

Ayra laughed. “Ibty, go in.”

Ibtihaj grinned. “I will.” She straightened. “Call me if anything comes up.”

“I will, I promise.”

“I love you, Ayra.”

“I love you too.”

Half an hour later, Ayra was walking into hers and Ibrahim’s home, glad that he was not yet back. She put her documents in the new file she’d gotten and then got changed from the dress she’d worn out to a pair of comfortable jean shorts and one of his tops which she’d “borrowed” with no intentions to return.

She ensured the house was neat before she proceeded to the kitchen, leaving the door open. She’d originally decided to have music play as she worked but she changed her mind and out the phone to charge instead, forgetting to turn off her DND setting. With a warm heart and excitement bubbling inside her, she got to work while imagining the thousand ways Ibrahim would react once he returned. She only prayed he stayed back at work for a little longer.

She was about to get started on the sauce when she heard the tell-tale tune of the passcode being inputted. Momentarily panicking, she wondered what she’d do as she was no way close to being ready to welcome him. Wiping her hands clean with a towel, she went with the first plan that came to mind; hiding by the entrance from the foyer into the living room and surprising him by jumping on his back.

Smiling devilishly with flutters in her stomach at the thought of him laughing when she jumped on his back, she slipped out of the kitchen just as the passcode beeped, telling her and him that he’d entered the wrong thing; something that had only happened once when they’d returned from Santorini – simply because he’d been too busy kissing her.

As the passcode got inputted again, Ayra leaned flat against the wall and waited, her heart racing. This time, he got the passcode right and the door went open. A soft thud reached her ears a moment later and wondering what had happened or what he’d dropped, Ayra peeped like the criminal she felt like.

And that was the biggest mistake she’d ever make in all her life.

Her smile dropped. Her heart dropped too. In that moment, her entire world felt like a glass house at which someone had thrown a large stone, leading to cracks that spread at an alarming rate; cracks that were aimed at destroying the perfect structure.

In the foyer, yet to know that they were being watched, Ibrahim had his hands roaming down the body of another woman, his lips locked on hers. Her hands were in his hair, pulling at his curls the same way Ayra always did yet differently.

Ayra watched, frozen, as Ibrahim pulled back to stare at the other woman briefly, unfazed by the way she glared at him, before he kissed her again. When his lips moved from her lips to her neck, she let out a small moan and called the one name Ayra knew; a name she knew belonged to a man with a different face.

“Serkan.”

With Ibrahim’s face no longer obstructing the other woman’s, Ayra recognised the deep black curls. She recognised the straight nose that didn’t need contouring when the face had full make up on, the body shape that drove men and women wild, the voice, the hands; everything. And that was the final nail to the coffin.

Because right there in the foyer Ayra had loved from the moment she first stepped in, her husband – Ibrahim Fahad – kissed Isabella Valentino in way Ayra couldn’t remember ever being kissed by him.

As though a timer had gone off, Ayra’s world blew into too many fragments that didn’t seem as though they would ever be pieced back together and the hypothetical glass house came crashing down.

In the corner where it’d been set up, the camcorder captured everything with two and a half battery bars left as Ayra had mistakenly put it on while setting it up.

And she’d never turned it off.

Part 2

People We Know & People We Don't



“We used to be close but people can go from people you know to people
you don't,

And what hurts the most is people can go from people you know to people
you don't.

From people you know...To people you don't.”

- Selena Gomez, *People We Know*

26

On the day she accepted his marriage proposal and on the day they actually got married, Ayra was certain she and Ibrahim were always going to live in pure bliss.

While the months they'd spent as husband and wife weren't exactly what she'd dreamed, she'd never envisioned that a day would come when she'd stand on the other side of the wall that separated the foyer from the living room, her hands brought up to her mouth to stop any sound from slipping while tears streamed down her cheeks as she listened to Ibrahim bring Bella to an earth-shattering orgasm with just his hands in the foyer of the place she – Ayra – had learned to call home.

In her chest, her heart was a battered organ that had exploded and she wasn't sure there was anything else that could hurt her more than the discovery of Ibrahim being unfaithful. She didn't even want to try wondering how long it had been going on for. She was scared about what she'd find. Nothing else could hurt her like this. Nothing came close.

In the foyer, Ibrahim held the woman he loved with his face buried in the crook of her neck as she came down from the blissful high. She left her hands in his hair, trying to catch her breath, while he focused on restraining himself, the bulge in his trousers nearly painful. As much as he wanted to take her there and then and pour out every single emotion he felt, he knew he had to wait. Until they cleared up the issue between them, he was going to keep himself under control that came with years of practice.

The minutes ticked by and when Bella's hands moved from his hair, Ibrahim knew what was coming next. More than a decade of being together had taught him more than enough. He easily caught her right hand which had been on its way to his face. A moment later, he caught her left hand too and when she struggled, asking to be let go, he sighed against her neck and pulled back.

Like every single time he saw her, he was reminded that she was too beautiful to be real; even when she glared at him, her eyes ablaze as fury and fading lust clashed against each other. She was mad at him and he knew she had every right to be.

The conversation they were to have was a little overdue as she'd made it impossible for him to try to reach her. If it was to go on for any longer, they were both going to blow the way they'd once done years back; something none of them – including the other members of the squad – ever wanted to relive.

“I hate you.” Bella gritted out, trying to wriggle her hands free. “I really hate you.”

Ibrahim sighed again and pinned her hands to her side, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry, *Sevgilim*.”

She laughed humourlessly. “Of course you have to be. When I’m done with you, I’m going to kill Jalal because *non aveva diritto a chiamarti in ufficio* (he had no business calling you to the office). Let go of me!”

Ibrahim stayed calm. “*Sapeva che dovevo parlarti* (he knew I had to talk to you).”

Bella’s eyes blazed even more. “Fuck you.”

“Oh we’ll be getting to that very soon.” When she glared at him with more intensity, he exhaled slowly before letting go of her hands. “Bella –”

She shoved him and it only moved him back a bit while rage consumed her whole. “You took her to Santorini!”

“Bella –”

“No, Serkan, you should listen to me! We made plans to go to Santorini to celebrate thirteen years of being together and we both took time out to ensure this trip was perfect! I spent two weeks picking out that suite for you and me and yet who went there? Who went there, Ibrahim?!”

He briefly tucked his tongue in his cheek, telling himself not to get frustrated even in the slightest. “You knew I had no other choice.”

Bella didn’t want to hear it and her glare told him everything she wasn’t vocally saying. He held her glare with his calm gaze. “You know, just like everyone else, that I had no other choice, Bella. This wasn’t like any other time when I could say the right words and Ayra would yield so we all knew we had to act fast. It was too late to get reservations booked and I had to use ours because if I hadn’t, we’d be in an even deeper mess now. You know that. Anneth, Tobi, Jalal, and Nathaniel also know that. And you also know how sorry I am; how sorry I’ve been.”

She hated the fact that her lower lip wobbled then, her rage simmering down to almost nothing. She hated it even more that she couldn’t stop the tears from slowly welling up in her eyes. Ibrahim felt as though a knife had been pushed deep into his chest and unlike every time he had to pretend that he was hurt in front of the woman he married, the pain he felt in that moment was real.

He closed the little space between them, his hands moving to her arms. “*Sevgilim* –”

She looked away. “I shouldn’t be like this. I hate that it affects me this much.”

His chest twisted painfully. “I’m really, really sorry, Bella.” He pulled her against him and kissed her hair. “I really didn’t want to go there with her but when we saw that this wasn’t going to be like those other times when we could easily make it up to her and Ibty, it was the only option. I’ve made sure to apologise to you every single hour since then, Bella.”

She sniffled against his chest. “I hate her so much right now. I’ve always hated her but right now, it’s twice the usual amount. I hate that stupid Ibty even more.”

He spoke with no hesitation. “I know.”

“This was supposed to be easy yet here we are, trying to maintain cordial relationships with a fucking twenty-one year old Nigerian who thinks she has the right to be haughty when all we want to do is push her into the nearest ditch.” She sniffled. “I hate Santorini now too. We’re never going there unless we don’t have any other choice.”

“We won’t. I know better than to do that.”

She pulled back and glared at him once again. She raised a pointed finger. “And you’re making it up to me from this very moment. I don’t care how you want to do it but *you* are making it up to me, Serkan. I don’t care if she throws a fit or not. I don’t care if Ibty or whatever her name is tries to be bitchy or not. I’ve been selfless enough and you know it.”

He knew that better than anyone. He nodded. “I will, I promise. I’ve made reservations already but the resort’s a little full so we’ll have to wait a little longer. I would say where we’re going but maybe I should surprise you. Just know it’s not Santorini.”

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, glad her tears were gone. No one hated it when she cried more than he did. He hated it even more when he was the cause or when he had a hand in it. “You’re not a second choice or an afterthought, Bella, and like I’ve always promised, I’m not going to make you feel that way by taking you to another resort on that same island.”

“I still hate you.”

“Come on, Sevgilim, you don’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s see how you make it up to me first.” She completely pulled away from him with reluctance he didn’t miss and then she ran a hand through her hair. “Never do this again, Ibrahim. I really won’t forgive you.”

“The number of times I’ve heard that phrase this month and last month is starting to get scary.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know.” He knew better than to think she wasn’t. “What do you want me to do to fix it right now?”

“I’ve been near celibate for almost a month now with nothing but my toys while you’ve been here with Mrs Fahad so you can start by fixing that, Serkan. The orgasm I just had was nice but I’m gonna need more than that.” She then shook her head. “No, we need to go down first because I should have hit you when I realised we came up to this place instead of going home.”

“It’s not my fault things escalated in the elevator and we couldn’t stop on the eight floor.”

Her eyes blazed once more. “Serkan –”

“I love you. And I’m sorry.”

She folded her arms and looked away, as though she wasn’t stopping herself from saying she loved him right back. When she spoke, her voice was quieter. “After that, let’s go to our other home. Let’s celebrate there. We have spent more than a decade together after all and I really don’t want to deal with Ayra coming down to our place today simply because you’re there and she’s too much of a simp to stay up here and be the trophy wife she was supposed to be.”

He pulled her back to him and kissed her with gentleness that meant for just her; no one else. Not even Ayra. Like always, Bella melted into him and it took every sheer of self-restraint for Ibrahim to not back her up against the wall and do every single thing he wanted. He broke the kiss and pulled back.

“You want us to go to Costa Casa tonight.”

She held his gaze, silently daring him to say otherwise. “Why? You don’t want to?”

“I didn’t say that.” The wheels in his head were moving. “You do realise we’re all in tight spots, right? I don’t even know what I’m going to tell Ayra because as much as I shouldn’t be mentioning her name around you or

even talking about her, we did make those shitty promises that we'll be around for a while. I don't know what to say now because I don't think telling her there's a work emergency is going to cut it anymore. Also, we don't have a branch in Costa Casa."

"We're planning on branching there in the near future so you can come up with one excuse or the other but *we are* going to the villa tonight and that's final. We've fed her with enough lies, especially that one of you calling your mother during Eid when we both know you did nothing expect stay with me so what's one more lie? Ayra's had you here with her while I sucked it all up and played the role of the apologetic friend but I'm sick and tired of all of it right now so she needs to suck it all up now. You'll definitely come up with something or you can ask Tobi but we're going to the villa tonight. I don't want to hear anything else."

The minute that followed was a little tense, both of them staring at each other. Yielding, Ibrahim sighed and nodded. "Okay. We'll go to Costa Casa tonight. I'll ask Tobi to come up with something and relay it to the others. They might want to come along too."

"I really don't care. We all need it anyway. We need a break from all of this, especially from the unnecessary need to be in the good books of two women we really don't care about."

He smiled then. "We do. It's been a heck of a year."

There was a stab of various emotions in her chest then; anger, irritation, jealousy, a little hatred, and envy. "One where you ate your cake and still had it."

His smile shrunk, his heart dropping. "Bella."

She sighed, exhausted. "Let's just go home, please. I really hate this place."

He raised a brow. "Yet you picked out every furniture piece and had them arranged the way you wanted."

"Because I was going to be here from time to time and you said you wanted to have a trace of me in every corner, especially in your room. Right now I hate it all, Serkan, so let's go home, please. There's a lot to do and a lot of positions I'd rather be in than to be standing here arguing with you."

His heart did its little jump and every unholy thought crossed his mind; mental images that sent even more blood rushing downwards. He laced her fingers with his, a devilish smile tilting his lips upwards. "Let's go home then."

"And we'll leave for the villa when we're done."

He unlocked the door and pulled it open, his smile now a smirk. "Let's hope you can walk by then."

She finally smiled. "I'm not hoping for anything of that sort. My toys have been overused so I need you to wreck me in every way possible."

He laughed in a way he'd never done with Ayra. "I'll do that, I promise." They stepped out of the apartment. "I love you, Bella."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder as the door closed behind them. "I love you too, Ibrahim. I'm still mad at you though."

"Let's get it out of your system then."

"Yeah, let's do that."

Inside the apartment they'd just left, Ayra stayed still until the door slammed shut and the lock automatically clicked in place. With her back against the wall, she slid to the ground, her hands still clamped over her mouth while tears continued to stream down both sides of her face. In her chest, where her heart should be, was a hollow space with way too many pieces of the organ she'd given to him on a golden platter since she'd been thirteen.

In the foyer, the camera kept recording, down to its final bar.



Before her dream of being Mrs Fahad became a reality, Ayra used to tell anyone who asked what her relationship deal breakers were that cheating was at the very top of her list.

"It's disgusting." She used to say. *"I can't stay with someone who cheats. As soon as I find out that he's seeing someone else, whether I'm close to her or not, I'm out. It's just so disgusting. Like, why would you cheat when you can just leave me and go with the other woman?"*

In those moments, Ibtihaj – who always sat beside or opposite her – would nod in agreement and say *"Exactly."*

However, as she sat in the middle of the barely lit living room long after every mosque in Aomi had prayed Isha, Ayra realised leaving a relationship once she caught the man she loved – and married – cheating was easier said than done. It wasn't as though she didn't want to stand by her words; no, it wasn't that at all.

It was that in the hours that followed the scene that had played out in the foyer, Ayra had reached some painfully humbling realisations. Each

revelation shattered her more than the last one did until there was barely any part of her left.

First, when she removed everything regarding Ibrahim and the Fahads from every part of her life, she had no idea who she was; what her true character was, what she actually liked, what she wanted to do with her life...Everything. She had no idea.

She'd spent a near decade building everything around him, even when she didn't know she was doing so. The things she was so sure she loved were things that complimented everything he liked and all she'd ever wanted to do with her life was be his wife. She'd built everything around him and now that those things were crashing down, she didn't know what part was actually her and if she walked out of the house, she'd leaving with way too pieces she'll have to sieve through to figure out how to build herself back up.

Secondly, when she considered everything that had happened in most of her life, she had no idea how to stand on her two feet. This situation wasn't any different. When she'd finished crying hours earlier, the first thing she'd thought of was calling Ibtiyah and she was already going through with it when an unfamiliar voice in her head asked *'What is Ibty actually going to do, Leilani?'*

It'd felt as though ice-cold water had been poured over her head and when her mind began to reel, she realised in more than the last decade, someone fought for her once an unpleasant situation arose.

If she had a bad day at school where someone was mean, she turned to her parents and when Ibtiyah came along, she began to turn to Ibtiyah because she knew her best friend would have the right words and would scare everyone away. Even now that she was married, she'd turned to Ibtiyah a lot and every time she and Ibrahim had to iron things out, Ibtiyah played a major role in the background.

Realising she didn't know who she really was and that she wasn't independent in any way felt as though she kept being shot even when she was already laying on the floor in the pool of her blood.

The last realisation she was still mulling over as it hurt more than the others was that she'd been played in the worst ways by the man she loved and his best friends who she'd been so happy to open the doors of her heart to. It was extremely difficult to believe that the entire year had been nothing but a lie. While there was a part of her that wanted to know exactly what they'd done with her life, she was terrified to figure it all out because she had no idea what she'd find or how deep all of it ran.

The messages she'd received shortly after Bella and Ibrahim left already made her realise the pattern that came each time they had to make spontaneous trips for "work". Someone always texted first – mostly Ibrahim – and then the others would follow suit, apologising over and over for having to leave without any prior notice.

This time, just as Bella had suggested, Tobi texted her first, saying they had to leave for Costa Casa because there were some lands they had to check out. Lands, according to him, that'll hold their Costa Casa branch when they finally got everything sorted.

Ibrahim's text had followed in which he apologised like he always did; sweetly, with promises to make it up to her laced between the words. Bella's text, for the first time, seemed robotic and she kept her apology short which told Ayra all she needed to know; that Bella meant nothing she sent. Anneth, Jalal, and Nathaniel had similar texts, each one seeming so genuine while being so, so fake.

She'd cried when the pattern made sense in her sense and she'd had to stop herself from tracing it back to when it all began because she knew it would take her back to when the engagement was still new.

The final nail in the coffin, for her, was realising the camera had recorded everything once she removed it from its spot. Finding it dead when she brought it down told her it'd been running all along and throughout the time it charged, two sides of her clashed; the part that prayed that it didn't record anything so she could somehow hold onto the shrinking hope that everything was a bad nightmare and the part that hoped everything was caught on the device so she could see the two people she thought she actually knew.

The video – which was longer than any video she'd made in her entire life – was securely stored in the camcorder's storage and watching it all had her crying again. When she eventually moved the footage to a flash drive, she connected it to the TV and watched the video over and over again until her tears stopped flowing and she knew the exact minute and second the door went open and Ibrahim stumbled into the apartment with Bella.

That was where she still was and the TV was the only thing that lit up the wide space alongside the light from the upper floor. As she watched everything play out one more time, Ayra felt the tears return and she cursed it all, including her hormones as her period had come after Maghrib with the worst cramps she'd ever had.

She pulled her knees to her chest and buried her face in her hands, letting the tears flow as small sobs wrecked her whole. Her chest was hollower

than it had been that afternoon and all that was in her mind was a single question: What she was going to do and where would she go from there?

Costa Casa, Atlantica

The island which held the Atlantican state of Costa Casa was divided into five; four districts and a capital. The four districts, like the other states of the country, were named after the cardinal points; Northern Costa Casa, Southern Costa Casa, Eastern Costa Casa, and Western Costa Casa. The island's capital, Reito, sat in the middle of it all.

Every district had its beautiful beaches and resorts which made the island the most visited by nationals and tourists alike as it was the tropical heaven of Atlantica. It had beautiful residential properties too, such as the gated compound on the edge of the northern district which held four luxuriously built and furnished bungalows; a gated property that only a few people knew belonged to The Hexad Squad.

Surrounded by tall trees that provided natural privacy beyond the stone fence and nestled nicely on a highland which gave it stunning views of the Atlantic Ocean, the property was one of Costa Casa's hottest. Tobi had been the one to close the deal for the squad back in 2014 after the company had kicked off and they realised they needed a place to unwind each time the opportunity presented itself; times when they didn't want to leave the country.

Two bungalows in the compound belonged to a pair; the farthest for Bella and Ibrahim, and the one in the middle for Anneth and Nathaniel. The two bungalows a little far from the gates belonged to Jalal and Tobi respectfully. The four bungalows had the same floor plan; a living room with a lot of space, an Italian styled kitchen with a breakfast nook that served as the eating area, two bedrooms, and a sundeck with loungers and hammock seats. The exterior was the same too; stone walls coming together with wood and glass to create masterpieces. The property had a central pool and one addition from the squad was the round gazebo they used for grill dinners and game nights. They sometimes watched movies there too. The interior of each bungalow, though, couldn't be more different from the other as it was done to fit each owner; colours coming together alongside furniture pieces to make each house a home away from home.

The sun rising over the island was what woke Bella up from a blissfully deep sleep as the full length windows were uncovered, both she and Ibrahim forgetting to pull the curtains back together before they'd finally given into sleep hours earlier. When her eyes adjusted to the rays that shone into the room, she sighed and rolled over, meeting Ibrahim's side empty and cold.

She frowned slightly and sat up, an ache between her legs from all their rendezvous straight from Aomi until they slept. Goosebumps broke out briefly on her skin as the cool air hit her bare body. She looked around, waiting to hear the sound of the shower running but she heard nothing.

“Serkan?”

Silence was all she got in response and her attention moved to the nightstand when his phone beeped, the screen lighting up with a new message. She stretched and picked the device up, unlocking it quite easily. A brow rose naturally when she saw the message was from Ayra.

Ayra A.: *Hey, sweetheart. I'm sorry I'm just texting back now. I wasn't feeling so good yesterday but I'm fine now. I hope you arrived safely and I hope you take it easy on yourself. Say hi to the others for me, please. I'll text them later In Shaa Allah. I love you!*

Rolling her eyes, Bella put the phone to sleep and returned it to the nightstand. Pushing the duvet back, she put her feet on her cool floor and pushed herself off the bed. Not bothering to put on a shirt or anything, she opened the door and walked out of the room. The heavenly mix of food aromas hit her nose immediately and with a small smile that came naturally, she made her way to the kitchen.

Ibrahim was in nothing but dark blue sweatpants with his back turned towards the door where she stood as he set the breakfast nook, putting the served dishes in perfect spots. Draped on her usual chair was one of his shirts and she knew even if she ended up putting it on, it'll come off while they were eating or even right after. After all, there was something about coming to this very home that always made them insatiable.

Well aware that she'd moved from the door to stand right behind him, Ibrahim put the cutlery for both of them down and then faced her, his smile soft and lovely while his heart did that its usual little jump each time it came to her. It was natural for him to pull her close. “I was hoping you'd be asleep for a little longer.”

She smiled a little wider. “Why?”

“I haven't gotten dessert ready yet. I was hoping to make sugar cookies but I guess we can settle for something else. After all, there's ice cream in the fridge and we both know the way I like it.”

Anticipating what would come when he got the tub of ice-cream out of the fridge, she pushed herself to her toes and kissed him hard; their way of saying good morning once there was no need for them to pretend as though they hadn't been together for years. Ibrahim kept a steady arm

around her waist while the other moved to cup the back of her neck as he moved his head sideways so he could deepen the kiss, almost feral when she returned his dominance with hers.

It was way too easy to forget about the meal he'd prepared – from chicken dumplings to her favourite potato salad – and back her up against the nearest counter while her hands moved to push down the band of his trousers. Being buried deep inside of her a minute later, like always, felt like home and he savoured it all; his face buried in its favourite spot in the crook of her neck.

Her eyes rolled back when he moved and she spoke with her hands in his hair. "Your wife texted, finally. It's quite unlike her."

His pace didn't slow; it picked up instead. "And what did she say?"

It took everything in her to stay focused while he satisfied her every morning craving. "Something about being a little down or...*Serkan*."

He kept his eyes on her face, finding the usual satisfaction that came with watching her unravel; every part of her solely at his mercy. "Did you give her a reply?"

Her glare should have sent him to the next grave. "Not today. I'm not texting her until we get back."

He grabbed her chin, a little rough. "That's fine. I'll text her later."

Her nails dug into his scalp as she felt the pressure start to build. "You need to make up for her kinda ruining my morning."

He grinned, perfect dentition on full display. "Okay."

He gave her everything she wanted and the climax had her milking him dry which pushed him to near insanity. When they managed to catch their breaths, he kissed her softly. "Let's clean up and eat."

"I think we should have dessert first. There is ice-cream in the fridge after all."

His laugh was deep and so velvety that her toes curled, her smile a natural reaction. He kissed her again. "You're not going to kill me, Bella."

"I can't do that, Serkan. I love you."

He kissed her once more, taking his sweetest time. "And I love you too."



Ayra stepped out of the apartment at noon when her mind stopped being numb and little pieces had fallen into place. Her head throbbed, a side effect of the sleep she'd barely gotten, but she ignored it as she took the elevator down to the lobby.

She murmured greetings at those she knew in the time she'd stayed in the residential area and if anyone found it weird that her eyes were swollen with dark circles underneath while her face was flushed, they said nothing and she was insanely grateful.

Going out through the main doors, she didn't stop until she was on the other side of the tarred road. She then turned around and stared at the towering structure of The Oasis, remembering how amazed she and Ibtihaj had been – like every other citizen of the country – when the property became open to the public.

She then recalled how Ibrahim had told her they'd been staying in The Oasis once they were married and she nearly laughed humourlessly now that it all made sense to her.

"Bella and her lover moved recently," He told her back then, right there by the pool in his parents' home. *"And they've had nothing but good reviews so I got us an apartment at The Oasis. We'll be staying there when we get married In Shaa Allah."*

And the previous day, Bella had called the apartment on the 8th floor "home"; not for her (Bella) and the Serkan she'd introduced to Ayra in December but for her and the Serkan who was Ibrahim.

Swallowing the bitter lump in her throat while her hands were painfully balled into fists, Ayra crossed the road and walked back in. The elevator carriage was already on the lobby floor so she got in and pressed the eighth floor button. Once she got there, she walked all the way to Unit 8C and stared at the closed door, recalling how months back Bella had opened up with a smile on her face and ushered her in, saying welcome in Italian.

Thinking back now, Ayra realised there was more Bella said that day while she said welcome and she'd never wished so badly that she understood the language so she could know everything Bella said. Her line of sight moved to the keypad by the side and she thought about how the other members of the squad had come in, knowing the passcode; something she never even bothered to wonder why she didn't know it too since she lived in the same apartment building and could check up on Bella if there was any need to.

She then recalled how Ibrahim had been against her idea of making changes to their own apartment, stating that he didn't want white walls and black accessories and "let Serkan and Bella deal with that alone". Yet, he'd called

the apartment he claimed to not like “home” an exact day before and he’d come down to it before leaving for Costa Casa to the villa Ayra knew nothing about.

As she tightened her fists, causing her nails to dig into her palms, Ayra recalled the story Bella had shared; she and Serkan being together for more than a decade and going all the way to Leicester where Ayra knew they’d all schooled together, “Serkan’s” parents disapproving of their relationship and wanting him to get married to someone else, both of them living their best lives without actually committing and then the sex that was a big bonus.

Replaying the conversation in her head sprung up way too many questions and when it felt like her head was ready to split in two, Ayra forced herself to walk away. The elevator ride up was short and it was the first time she helped herself into the apartment she’d called home while looking at it with a different eye; the rose coloured lens of love had been painfully pulled off after all.

The foyer no longer seemed welcoming and beautiful. It felt tainted; used and all she could see as she stared at the floating shelf was Bella clinging onto Ibrahim as she came undone on his hand with his fingers buried deep inside of her. All Ayra could see was the gentle way Ibrahim had held Bella and the way he’d stared at her; a way she couldn’t remember ever being stared at by him, not so sincerely at least. It said a lot because there was nothing that ever gave it away that the looks and expressions he gave her (Ayra) were ever fake.

She turned away from the floating shelf and looked up at the corner where the camera had been. The thought of installing a CCTV camera popped up from nowhere and she did nothing to push it away. Keeping the thought in mind, she walked deeper into the house.

Everything, now that she knew Bella was the one who’d picked it all, seemed very ugly and the hatred that hit her was so strong that it scared her to death because she’d never hated something that much. The beige walls no longer offered warmth and the white sofas now seemed too bright. The painting above the TV made Ayra realise that they never really got around picking out a photo from their wedding album to get framed and hung up. In fact, now that she thought of it, they’d only looked at the album together twice. Each time she went through it in order to relive the memories, she was on her own and he was either at the office, with Bella downstairs, or they were all out of the country.

She laughed dryly despite the tears that prickled her eyes. “Ayra, you’ve been the biggest fool.”

And it hurt like hell.

The kitchen was spotlessly clean; something she'd ensured the previous night before heading up. She couldn't bring herself to hate it and she had no idea why. She thought about how excited she'd been to make dishes for him, to surprise him, and yet she'd been the one who'd been so surprised that her heart and mind were no longer the same.

Fate, she decided then and there, worked in very twisted ways.

She left the kitchen and headed up. The family lounge, for the first time, seemed too small and too choked up and she hated the voile curtains that swayed. She went to the room he'd called Ayra's space and she hated it all as she saw it for what it was; a den to keep her in and preoccupied while he went ahead to do everything else.

Her room no longer seemed stunning and the only thing she couldn't bring herself to dislike was the painting on the wall which was of her, covered with a Leilani in full bloom. Not knowing why, she moved forward and climbed the bed to take a very close look at it. The strokes had been done with precision and she realised then she never asked who the artist was. For the first time, she realised there was a little signature in the bottom left corner and her heart – in its hole – sunk even deeper as she read out what was spelt in the cursive calligraphy in red paint that matched the flower.

“S.F.” She had to squint a little. “Serkan Fahad.”

Another memory hit, clashing with the new discovery; her birthday the previous month and what he'd said after she'd twirled in front of him, wearing the baby pink dress he'd gotten.

“I’m no painter but God knows if I could create masterpieces with the strokes of brushes against canvas, I’d have captured the radiance and happiness coming off you in waves.”

She nearly fell as she hurriedly got off the bed, catching the foot of the bedframe just in time to stop herself from toppling forward. She ran back down, straight to the living room, and she pulled one of the side stools towards the wall with the painting. In the bottom left corner of that painting was the same signature and the name underneath; S.F. Serkan Fahad.

Ayra shook her head, too deep in disbelief. “No...No.”

She got off the stool and went to the foyer. The two mini paintings on the floating shelves had the same signatures and it hurt...All of it hurt; like little knives that kept cutting every part of her that was visible. Recalling there was a painting in his room, she went there. Like the first time she stepped

into it, she was hit with the fact that it was his room. It was all of him and there was only very little of her in it. She then remembered what Bella said; that she'd done work in here because he wanted to have traces of her in the apartment.

Not wanting to dwell on it for her own sake, she took small steps in and went straight to the sitting area, focusing on the painting on the wall. Unlike the first time she'd seen the painting, it was no longer hard to make out who it was. It was a painting of Isabella Valentino; done in a way to confuse people who didn't know her as well as he and the other members of the squad did. And right there in the bottom left corner was his signature yet again: S.F. Serkan Fahad.

"Don't think too hard about who it is." Ibrahim had said with his chin on her shoulder and his mouth by her ear the first time she and Ibtihaj had come to tour the apartment. *"I just saw it and I liked it. Helen also said it fit the theme of the room."*

Ayra, in so much pain, realised there was no way Helen was not in too on whatever scheme had played out. She – Ayra – had actually loved the painting because Ibrahim loved it and each time she saw him glance towards it, she never imagined that he was thinking about Bella. That he was looking right at Bella.

Her mind went back to Bella's house. The paintings in the study and then all of the pictures, especially in the one in the living room which had made her feel as though Serkan was familiar with his knee length shorts, his extra loose top and his hair that had been captured being ruffled by the wind.

Ayra had to bring a hand up to her mouth to muffle the sound of her choking on a sob. She'd assumed it was because she'd seen the "Serkan" on the day of her and Ibrahim's Nikkah, having absolutely no idea that she'd been staring at Ibrahim himself.

"This photo was taken in Cape Town." Bella had said and Ayra wondered how the pieces only came together in that moment.

The Fahads had been the ones who brought together South Africa and Atlantica in unimaginable ways and she knew – like everyone else – that they had a number of properties in the country, especially in Cape Town. She thought she couldn't feel even more pain but every new thing she learned proved her wrong as she broke further and further; in ways she'd never ever done before while being surrounded by things that now felt so unfamiliar.

She let her body move on its own accord, towards his walk in closet. The lights blinded her momentarily when she switched them on and when her eyes adjusted, she moved and went through each storage space, not feeling even an ounce of guilt. His perfume drawer had her pausing. Staring at his row of Tom Fords made her really think once again, more pieces snapping into place and leaving her in even more pain.

She remembered hugging Bella the first time she and Ibtihaj met the squad and saying *"You scent exactly like Ibrahim."*

They – the squad – had laughed and then Anneth had said Bella was the biggest perfume thief and *"I think Ibrahim's tired of changing his perfumes because of her so they've stuck this one. We all have actually."*

As she stared at the perfume bottles, she realised – quite belatedly – that no one else in the squad used Tom Ford's Oud Wood; only Ibrahim and Bella, despite Anneth saying then that they'd all stuck to it. Only Ibrahim and Bella used the perfume and then he'd gotten it for her as part of his wedding gifts to her and also as a part of her birthday present.

She took a shaky step back and tripped on the hem of her kimono, going straight to the floor as a painfully prickly sensation she couldn't recognise crept towards her throat from her chest. She recalled a story she'd come across online with Ibtihaj; a story of a man who got his wife bottles of a particular perfume which she loved using until she came across a message on his phone where he told his lover that having his wife spraying the perfume in the house was nice because it reminded him of her (the lover), especially when he and his wife had to get intimate.

The painfully prickly sensation slipped past Ayra's lips as an eerie scream. She moved to her knees and held her head in her hands, shaking it from left to right as more and more things came crashing down. Each time he'd hugged her, he'd held her tight and more than once he'd said *"You always scent like home, Ayra. You have no idea just how much you do."*

And those times, she'd smiled, glad she made him feel safe while having no idea that she wasn't the home he was referring to. His home had always been two floors below and he'd gone there time and time again, even when it was late and she wanted them to do something such as watching a movie together or even running a home spa session.

Ayra kept screaming, feeling too much at once and breaking in way too many ways. All of it, from the very start, had been a lie and there was no more denying the truth that was as clear as day.

She was his wife in the public's eye and on paper but in real life? She was the other woman. She'd always been the other woman. In real life, there was only one Mrs Fahad and it wasn't her.

It was Bella.

Ayra was seated at the dining table in the kitchen when the clock struck midnight and the calendar date moved from Thursday, August 12th to Friday, August 13th. It had only been a full day since Bella and Ibrahim left but with the discoveries Ayra had made and with the emotional numbness she felt, it felt as though it had been years.

Her eyes were still a little swollen and the dark circles underneath were even more prominent. She'd only bathed because of the blood she was losing and her hair had never been so messy; curls tangled slightly as she'd been so unmotivated to even run a wide toothed comb through them. The nightdress she wore was long, reaching her ankles with sleeves that stopped at her elbows. For the first time in so long, her lips were dry and were on their way to being chapped.

In front of her, on the top of the table, was her laptop. Displayed on the screen were minimised browser windows, all of them displaying every single social media page – from Instagram all the way to LinkedIn – of Serkan Yilmaz; the man Bella had introduced as her lover.

The longer she stared at the displayed pages, the more Ayra wondered if things would have gotten this far had she not trusted Bella and the others so blindly. If she'd gone ahead back then to try to find him out online, it would have told her that there were things that didn't quite add up.

Serkan Yilmaz was a real person and he was the same man Ayra had seen on the day of her and Ibrahim's Nikkah; the same man who winked at Bella before disappearing. Unlike all she thought and all she was told, Serkan Yilmaz was a married man with two daughters he clearly loved more than anything.

Like Bella had said, he was Turkish but he wasn't based there and neither was his family – both nuclear and extended. They were all based in Europe and unlike what Bella said the first time Ayra went down to the apartment on the eighth floor, Serkan Yilmaz was not a software developer neither did he like tech as much as the squad did. He'd tweeted about it so many times because his wife – Aliana – was into coding.

Serkan Yilmaz was into banking and finance and he was very accomplished in that area. He dabbled in acting too, getting little roles as a way to unwind. It told Ayra all she needed to know as to how he'd been able to step into the shoes of the real Serkan and play it out really well based on the very little she knew.

Taking in all that was opened, Ayra closed most of the windows and maximised Serkan Yilmaz's Instagram page. She scrolled down, to a photo

that had been taken in May 2019; mere months before the first time Ibrahim claimed to have stumbled upon her picture on the same social media platform.

In that particular post, Serkan, his wife – Aliana, and the entire Hexad squad stood with their arms around each other's shoulders and wide smiles on their faces. Bella stood between her two Serkans: the real Serkan who was Ibrahim and the Serkan that played the role of her lover perfectly well, fooling both Ayra and Ibtihaj.

Ayra snipped the photo with her laptop's snipping tool and then uploaded the saved photo to her Google drive, placing it in the same folder that now held the footage from the foyer and pictures of every other discovery she'd made. Going through all the posts once again, she closed Serkan Yilmaz's page and pulled up Bella's and Ibrahim's; putting them side by side and scrolling through both simultaneously. In the mental puzzle sheet that was spread out in her head, more pieces fell into place.

Side by side, Ibrahim and Bella's posts told a story of people who'd been together for a very long time; pictures complimenting each other in a way that wouldn't be noticeable if the person scrolling through didn't have both pages open side by side the way Ayra did. She couldn't help but smile bitterly as she saw how she'd liked each and every post on both pages, oblivious like most people in the world to both Ibrahim and Bella telling everyone codedly that they were together.

Her tear glands were dry, otherwise she would have cried again as she reached the bottom of both pages and restarted the scrolling process, seeing everything in a brand new light. She'd stopped assuming there was no more part of her heart to break because she kept being proved wrong.

Moving from Bella and Ibrahim's pages, she pulled up the pages of every member of the squad; from Anneth down to Jalal. The silhouette photos finally made sense and in a particular one on Nathaniel's page, Ibrahim and Bella were captured kissing, both of them in a water body with the sunset in the distance; a photo people always assumed held Nathaniel himself and his wife.

They never completely lied, Ayra realised, but they'd played her good and she didn't think she could free herself of any blame. People who loved her always said she loved Ibrahim too much. Seeing how everything was playing out, Ayra wished she'd listened to them. All she'd wanted was to be loved back by him and for a near year, she was convinced that was the case but it'd been a lie. All of it had been a well-crafted lie that she'd only began to unravel.

There were still so many questions that required answers and although she was still scared, she knew she had to find out. She had to know when the lie started, how and why they'd pulled her into it, and how they'd planned to keep her in it for the rest of their lives because she couldn't understand much no matter how hard she tried.

When the throbbing in her head returned, she knew she had to force herself to sleep or she'd physically break and she didn't want to risk it. Not when she still wasn't sure what she wanted to do moving forward although she'd sent a text to Ibrahim, pretending as though was well; a text he was still yet to reply. It wasn't as though she was waiting for him to do so, now that she knew what he was up to with the woman he actually loved.

She closed all her open applications and shut down the laptop. She was rising to her feet when her phone screen lit up, notifying her of a new message from Ibtihaj. Not feeling anything including the guilt she expected to hit her, Ayra picked the device and unlocked it, clicking on the new message.

Ibty: *Babe, you good? I've been trying to reach you but network seems to be shitty because your line's been unreachable. Anyways, how did you and Ibro's dinner go? I hope he appreciated it or I'd kill him.*

You were offline throughout today and if not for this yeye meeting I had, I would have come over to be sure you're fine. I was hoping to come tomorrow but this stupid company I work for want us (all the remote workers) to come in to Cardiff on Sunday so my flight leaves tomorrow night and Mummy said I have to follow her to the market before I can even think of leaving. God abeg!

Anyways, call me abeg so I can be sure you're good. I love you, Ayra, and if that Ibro does anything, let me know so I can actually go through with killing him (and yes, I don't care if he's reading this with you).

Let it not be like I'm disturbing you o. Goodnight! You better reply me by tomorrow morning or I'll leave what I have to do and come and disturb you.

Bye!

For the first time in the years they'd been best friends, Ayra felt herself being glad that Ibtihaj was going to be out of the country and she sincerely prayed Ibtihaj stayed out for a long time. She waited for the guilt to hit; to feel like she was a bad friend for making that prayer. It never did.

Not wanting Ibtihaj to show up at the apartment, Ayra did what she'd done with Ibrahim. She acted as though all was fine and typed out the perfect reply where she said Ibrahim enjoyed every dish and that he's been the best

husband ever since. She said she'd spent the entire day with him and so her phone had been on DND because they didn't want to be disturbed and then she said she would try to visit Ibtihaj before the latter had to leave for Cardiff, adding "if I can because Ibrahim and I really filled up this weekend".

Ibtihaj's reply came almost immediately.

Ibty: *Come, see this woman o! It's me you're putting in second place, Ayra! No wahala. In fact, you and Oga Ibro should continue sticking to yourselves like glue. Don't allow me see you until I return from Cardiff. I may be there for a while sha because I want to tour and the visa I got (this my company is connected sha) lasts for a month or so. Let me not see you until I get back. Wahala for who is not married. I'll pay you back, I swear.*

With a straight face and no flutter in her chest or laughter that easily slipped past her lips, Ayra typed out her reply and attached laughing and heart emojis.

Ayra: *I love you too!*

Not wanting to get even one more message, she turned the phone off and gathered her things before leaving the kitchen, remembering to switch the lights off. She dragged herself up the stairs and went straight to her room. Dumping everything on the loveseat, she crawled into bed and lay on her right side, staring at the wall until she barely saw it anymore as her mind shut down, putting a firm lid over every discovery she'd made.

A minute later, the darkness that came with sleep began pulling her in and she gladly surrendered to it, praying she found peace there until she had to wake up and return to the nightmare that was now her life.

In the gated compound at Costa Casa, Bella laughed when Ibrahim pulled her close; both of them skinny dipping in the wide pool underneath the star studded night sky. Her arms on his shoulders, she smiled lovingly at him. "Are you finally going to tell me why we're leaving Costa Casa tomorrow?"

He smiled back, just as beautifully as she did. "I was able to make a reservation on another island we've always wanted to visit and I don't see why we should stay here much longer when we can be celebrating there, the way we'd originally planned on doing."

Her heart swooned and her mind raced as she tried to figure out what island he'd picked from their world list. "And are you going to let it slip or are you still going to be a devil and hide it from me?"

He laughed, loving how her legs came around his waist underneath the water's surface. "Depends. Have you forgiven me?"

She pretended to think. "I mean, you have done a lot of beautiful things since we left Aomi so I guess I can put you in my good book once again." Her smile returned. "Where are we going, Serkan?"

He traced a random shape on her bare back, loving how she shivered slightly; something that hadn't changed despite all the years they'd been together. He kept his eyes on hers. "A woman I love with all of my heart always wanted to visit Fiji and ever since she came across the ad, she's been crazy about the lagoon plunge pool bungalow at the Royal Davui Island so..."

Her eyes were wide and she looked as though he'd wrapped the galaxy in a gift box and handed it over to her. "Oh my days, Serkan!"

Ibrahim's expression softened while his heart soared at how happy he'd made her. "Is that good enough?"

"It's perfect! I couldn't have asked for anything more." She rewarded him with a big kiss and when she pulled back, she excitedly asked "How long are we staying?"

"A week and two days." He was excited too. "Just you and me, surrounded by all that beauty."

She squealed. "Yes!" She kissed him again. "I love you!"

His laughter rang out nicely. "I love you too, *Sergilim*. I'm always going to do so."

She laughed and kissed him yet again, knowing his words were true and that they were always going to be that way.



The mosque in front of Ayra was beautiful. Although she'd driven past it a number of times in the near year she'd lived in the area, she'd never really stopped to come in. Until now.

As she stared at it, the bag in her left hand felt heavier and it was as though an invisible weight began to press down on her chest; only slightly but there all the same. She hadn't planned to come to the mosque. She hadn't planned it at all.

Hours earlier, just before Jumm'ah, she'd woken up from the longest, deepest dreamless sleep she'd ever had and once she was bathed and changed, she'd proceeded to clear out various parts of the walk-in

wardrobe, wanting to get rid of every single bottle of the Tom Ford Oud Wood perfume along with every piece of clothing that had its scent on it.

Everything she cleared out filled a medium sized travelling bag and she'd left the apartment in an abaya and its accompanying veil, determined to dump it all in a trash can blocks away from The Oasis so she didn't have to see it in case she came back out hours later. However, her body and mind had other plans and she found herself walking past trash cans until she reached the mosque; a sanctuary she'd never entered. When she thought about it, she couldn't actually remember Ibrahim going to a mosque a lot; only on the Fridays they spent together and even then, they went all the way to Monwict where the National Mosque was.

Every other time they were together, they prayed together and she always assumed he prayed at the office or wherever he was when he and the others were on a trip. She never used to ask "Have you prayed, Ibrahim?" and he never did too, something she'd wanted as a norm in her matrimonial home.

Ayra found herself blinking tears back, surprised her tear glands that had been dry just the previous day were functional again. Sniffing, she held the bag tighter and swallowed the growing lump in her throat, taking in every visible part of the mosque in front of her.

The square shaped building had layered exterior walls that brought together coffee brown and chanterelle beige paint. The mosque's single minaret stood tall, calligraphy done on a side at the top with the crescent moon and star – Islam's signature symbol – perched up high. The mosque had full length widows with beautifully patterned protectors which were painted white. At intervals on the interlocked ground were plants and flowers that were well groomed.

Ayra wondered if anyone was in there. It was past Asr after all and she wasn't sure she wanted to be seen by a lot of people. For the first time since her life had been thrown off its orbit, she cared about her appearance. She wondered if she was beautiful enough to walk into one of Allah's homes because she didn't feel beautiful at all.

The weight on her chest pressed down a little harder and she moved the bag from her left hand to her right, not once looking away from the beautiful – and peaceful – sanctuary in front of her while the breeze blew softly. Lost in it all, she failed to notice the woman who came out from the back area of the mosque, a trash bag in hand which she disposed in the trash can in a corner.

The woman, wearing a turquoise two piece jilbab, turned to head in but stopped at the sight of Ayra who kept staring at the mosque with glassy

eyes. The woman's line of sight moved from Ayra's face to the bag in the latter's hand and her heart dropped as so many women had come to that particular mosque and to other mosques all around the island, wanting a place of peace even for a little while.

Hiding the way her heart went out to Ayra, the woman schooled her expression and smiled warmly. She put her hands together and walked over, crossing the distance between them. "Assalam Alaykum."

Startled, Ayra nearly jumped. She turned to the other woman with slightly wide eyes, fear clawing at her chest. "W-Waalaykum Salam." She suddenly wanted to run. "I'm sorry, I was just —"

The other woman's smile widened sincerely, radiating warmth that went straight to Ayra's chest. "Admiring the mosque?"

Ayra was hit with the urge to break down there and then as the warmth of the woman's smile reminded her so much of her own mother, Salama. She could only swallow. "I..." She didn't know how to continue. "I was just..."

"Would you like a cup of tea, sweetheart? There's nothing better for a body that needs rest than a lovely cup of tea with the right amount of honey. And there's nowhere better for a heavy heart than the house of Allah. So you're in safe hands, sweetheart. My name is Maya Aman. I'm the wife of the Imam."

Ayra had to force her sobs back, now holding onto the bag with both her hands. The other woman — Maya — did not stop smiling as she took a small step forward. "So, sweetheart, would you like a cup of tea?"

Ayra nodded. "Yes, please."

Five minutes and introductions later, she sat in the tea room in the office area at the back of the mosque. The bag she'd carried sat on the floor, just right by her chair, and she only looked up from her hands when a cup of chamomile tea was put in front of her. Maya smiled at her once again. "Don't let it get cold."

Ayra could only nod and she watched the other woman help herself with a cup before sitting on the opposite side of the small, round table. Ayra's line of sight dropped to the cup of tea in front of her and meekly, she reached out her hands, wrapping her fingers around the warm mug and barely holding herself back from crying as the warmth seeped upwards from the tip of her fingers.

On the other side of the table, Maya took a sip of her tea and lowered the cup, putting it on the wooden top. She then exhaled quietly. "That's a lovely bag."

Ayra looked at the bag and made a spontaneous decision. She swallowed and pushed the bag towards Maya. "I...I want to donate these. I actually wanted to throw them away but now that I'm here, I think I should donate them. Surely, there'll be people who need them better than I do."

Finding a little relief in the thought that Ayra probably wasn't urgently fleeing from something or someone, Maya took the bag and opened it. She went through the dresses, shirts, trousers, and veils that had been so neatly folded above the bottles of perfumes, all of them in perfect condition. Once again masking how her mind reeled and how her chest squeezed, she raised her head and smiled.

"May Allah bless you, Ayra." She zipped the bag shut and put it down. "There's a shelter in Eastside for the less privileged people from within and outside Aomi so I have no doubt this would be of great help to them. Jazakhallah Khair for not throwing them out and coming here instead."

Ayra choked on a sob. "I don't know what led me here. I didn't plan it at all."

Maya's chest squeezed again. "Allah led you here. He knew these could be used for something better so he led you here."

Ayra's restraints began snapping; one after the other, and she tried so, so hard to not give in but it was impossible. Once again, she began to spiral; every emotion coming at her with no single ounce of mercy. Painfully watching as the woman in front of her broke down, Maya reached out a hand and placed it on Ayra's.

"It's okay to cry, Ayra. You can let it all out and I'll be here, I promise. You're not alone right now. In Shaa Allah you won't be alone anymore. So let it all out. You'll feel better."

The last restraint broke and Ayra's sobs were let loose. Maya moved then. She stood from her chair, walked around the table and hugged Ayra, patting her back. "It'll be fine, In Shaa Allah. It's going to be okay."

Ayra simply cried harder.

28 (Part II)

“If you want to talk, I’ll listen and if you don’t, that’s fine too. We can just finish our teas and I can invite you to be a part of our sister community. It’s all up to you, Ayra. I just want you to feel better before you return home.”

Ayra smiled sadly at that. “It’s not home anymore...I called it home since late last year but it’s not home anymore. It’s never been.”

Maya was at loss for words. “Oh.”

Ayra sniffled and then exhaled, motivated to talk as Maya wasn’t in anyway related to her or to her family. She felt safe and strangely at peace. “I’ve been in love with my husband since I was thirteen. I met him for the first time on a Friday and since then all I wanted was to be his wife. He’s ten years older than I am and he didn’t really know about me until 2019.”

Maya nodded to show that she was following. Keeping her gaze on her hands, Ayra continued. “I spent the past eight years of my life getting to know everything about him, loving and praying for him from a distance. Our families are friends but we move in different circles so my husband and I didn’t see ourselves. Also, he’d already gone on to be a prodigy with his friends while I was still schooling.”

She paused to breathe. “My parents didn’t encourage my feelings for him but they didn’t make me feel awful about it and there were family members who told me to not hold on to him because there was more to life and there were more people that I’d meet. But we’ve always been taught that Allah makes the impossible possible so I never gave up. Even when my best friend came into my life and kept shaking sense into my head, I never gave up. I called his name in every prayer I made and I held on tight to the hope that Allah would reward my perseverance. And He did. It took seven years but he did and I was over the moon, Maya. I was so happy.”

It was Maya’s turn to get emotional; a lump growing in her throat as she continued listening.

“His marriage proposal came out of nowhere and I was so, so happy that I wasted no time in accepting because I was convinced I knew everything about him as I’d spent my teenage years focusing on him at every given opportunity. I felt as though there was no need to hesitate or act as though I was still thinking about it when I already knew my answer. My best friend, Ibty, calls that dragging class. I didn’t want to drag class when I knew what I wanted so I said yes and we got engaged. That was July last year. It was on my birthday so I remember it very, very well. We didn’t talk after that. We didn’t talk until the day of my graduation which was in August.”

“Why?”

It was a new realisation for Ayra and her brows furrowed. “I actually don’t know...I assumed he was busy then because the news spoke about him and the others working on the Nohean branch of The Hexad so I just assumed he couldn’t find some time to talk to me. God, that’s why Ibtty was so sceptical. Oh my God...”

Maya, who’d put two and two together in order to know the Ayra in front of her was the same woman married to Ibrahim Fahad, put her hands on her laps as her chest squeezed again. “I’m sorry, Ayra.”

Ayra reached up to rub her temple. “We didn’t talk for a month, Maya, and I was fine with it. I told everyone close to me that he was busy and it was alright. Then on the day of my graduation, his parents called my father and told him Ibrahim hadn’t reached out because he wanted our first conversation to be in person and with his schedule, it’d been hard...I was over the moon and I looked forward to our engagement party which was that same day. Oh Allah...”

Maya swallowed the lump in her throat, unable to not say anything.

“Then during the engagement party, he was able to take me away from everyone else and we went to the second living room at my parents’ home because he wanted us to talk privately. Along the line we spoke about how long we’ve liked each other and he said he’d liked me since October 2019 when he came across an Instagram post of mine. He told me how he’d done his digging and how he’d fallen for me and that when he went to his parents, they said bringing a marriage proposal would be better and they did.”

“And you accepted.”

Ayra let her hand drop back to her lap and she nodded. “I did...And then we started planning the wedding and I blissfully went with everything.”

“I’m guessing it went well. The planning process I mean.”

“There was a hitch at the beginning because his family...” Looking back with a new set of eyes made the memory even painful and Ayra had so many more questions. “His family was a little difficult at first and it nearly made everything fall apart but he pleaded so genuinely and I didn’t want to lose him. After that, everything went well...Then we got married.”

“How has it been since then?”

Ayra felt herself shake her head slowly; from right to left as everything hit her as it’d been doing in the past days. “The first night was spent alone but

I don't want to go into details about it. He came home before Fajr and it was fine. Then we went for our honeymoon and it was blissful."

The thought she'd had then in Zanzibar came flooding back; the thought of him being good at intimacy, as though he'd done it before. Ayra felt as though she'd been stabbed again and she wondered when it was all going to end; if it was ever going to end.

She had to breathe in and out. "It was blissful, Maya, and then we came home to face married life together and I can't tell you it played out the way I'd always imagined because it didn't."

"In what way?"

"Ibrahim's a workaholic. I'd always known that and I was also working on my master's but still...He spent long hours at the office and there were trips. And then he missed events. He always made it up to me and I always moved on from them but...Last month was the worst. He returned for my birthday after being away for so, so long and then he said he couldn't stay long because they still had so much to do. He promised to be back home for Eid and my graduation but..."

Tears began to well up in Maya's eyes. "He never did."

Ayra nodded, just once. "He never did. He did return on the day of my graduation but he'd missed it all and that period was so, so hard for me. I was always crying and I couldn't even find joy in the fact that I was done with school and all of that...I knew it made my best friend mad but I didn't know how mad it made her until he said she told him to send me back home if this was how our marriage was going to keep being."

Maya sniffled. "You have a very good friend, Ayra."

Ayra, moved to tears once again, nodded. "I do and I thank Allah for her so many times."

"So what happened after that?"

"It was a big issue. Well, it was the biggest issue we'd had and he cried and continuously apologised and he just...He was so determined to make things right and we ended up going to Santorini for a week. We talked things out and we made compromises. Everything was good, Maya. Everything was perfect. We came back early this month and it was still so beautiful...Until Wednesday. Everything stopped being beautiful on Wednesday."

A tear slid down Maya's cheek and she used the back of her hand to quickly wipe it away. "What happened on Wednesday, Ayra?"

Ayra stared at nothing in particular and the smile she had on her face was small but laced with everything that told Maya she – Ayra – was a woman in unfathomable pain.

“He was supposed to take me and my best school to school to pick up our final degree documents but a message came in from his friend, saying he was needed at the company for a meeting. I actually had been making plans to surprise him with lunch or dinner one of these days because he had been extremely sweet since we returned so I was actually happy about the fact that he’d been called out...My family and my best friend’s family live in the same estate so I say hi to my mum first before picking Ibty up. She even teased me about it but I didn’t mind. I was really looking forward to it and immediately I dropped her, I came back home.”

Maya felt fear slowly creep into her chest. Ayra managed a small, dry laugh before she adjusted her veil.

“He came home earlier than I expected. I was literally about the put the sauce on the cooker when I heard the sound of him imputing the passcode. He inputted the wrong one and since it’d happened before, I didn’t think much of it. Knowing there was no way I could whip up a dish so quickly, I decided to surprise him by hiding behind the wall and jumping on his back when he stepped into the living room from the foyer...I never got to do so.”

Maya gripped her jilbab skirt, fear holding her heart captive. Ayra’s pained smile returned as everything played out in her head as though she was reliving that cursed hour.

“There was a soft thud, as though something had fallen, so I leaned forward to check and...Right there in the foyer I had loved from the first day I stepped into the apartment, my husband was kissing his best friend in a way he’d never kissed me before.”

Maya’s heart dropped to the pit of her stomach and blood drained from her face. *“Innalillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon.”*

Ayra kept smiling, even when a tear slid down her left cheek; a tear she barely felt. “I can’t describe how it felt in that moment but if I had to liken it to something, I would tell you that it felt as though I was a glasshouse and people had thrown so many stones. I don’t even know how I did it but I pushed myself back against the wall and put my hands over my mouth to stop myself from making a single sound while things escalated between them in the foyer...” Her eyes moved to Maya’s. “I’m sure you know what I mean, Maya. I don’t want to be explicit.”

Maya was as white as sheet, unable to comprehend just how much pain Ayra was in. Ayra's smile became a ghost on her face and she looked away, her gaze turning unfocused once again.

"You'd think it doesn't get worse than that but when it finished and they spoke, it was as though they were strangers I was meeting for the first time who spoke in a language I couldn't understand. I couldn't recognise them and then they left, going to their home first before going to a second home in Costa Casa which I had no idea existed."

Maya's heart was shattering. "T-t-their home?"

Ayra nodded. "Their home. They've been together for thirteen years now, if my calculations are right, and they have homes. Since Wednesday I've learned that this whole thing has been a lie which was intricately plotted out with everything taken into consideration, to the extent that people were hired to play certain roles so everything flowed out perfectly well."

Maya got even paler. "*Innalillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon.*"

"And when I think it can't get any worse, it does. I've been finding out a lot of things, Maya, and all this time, everything had played out in front of me but I was too naïve and so, so in love with him that I didn't see it. They were so good that even Ibty who is very sceptical when things didn't add up couldn't see it...So here we are, Maya. Here we are."

There was no stopping Maya's tears. "Ayra...Oh Subhanallah."

Ayra turned back to the other woman and that heartbreakingly beautiful smile of hers appeared while her eyes glazed over with a fresh wave of tears. "I've learned new things about myself too and right now, I'm Ayra who doesn't know who she is when everything related to Ibrahim is taken out of her life."

The heartbreak and pain came back again; a prickly feeling that moved from every part of her to the place where her heart was supposed to be. "I'm Ayra who doesn't yet know how to stand on her own two feet. I'm Ayra who loved so much that she couldn't see things going wrong." Her voice broke. "I'm Ayra who doesn't know what to do or where she's going to go from here. I don't even know what else I want to say anymore, Maya."

Maya shook her head, crying too. "No, Ayra, no."

Ayra began to cry. "I don't know what else to believe, Maya. I don't know what to do. I don't know who to trust anymore, Maya." She sobbed harder. "I don't know anything anymore. I don't know anything anymore..."

Once again, Maya pushed her chair back and stood. Yet again, she walked around the table and hugged Ayra. This time though, they cried together, each one holding the other for help and support. Maya couldn't help but kiss Ayra's covered head. "It'll be fine, Ayra. In Shaa Allah it'll be fine. In Shaa Allah you'll be fine."

Ayra couldn't do anything else but keep crying. In Plum Boulevard, Salama was on her knees in the yard, planting tomato seeds in the small garden space Muhsin had created for her. As she covered the seeds with soil, she found herself wondering if Ayra was okay and she put it at the back of her mind to call later to check in on her.

Hours later, Ibtiḥaj sat in the departure terminal of the Raven Isle International Airport, awaiting her boarding announcement. Although she'd been stubborn when her parents suggested they accompany her to the airport, she felt a little lonely and she found herself wishing Ayra was there.

"You look very sad for someone who acted as though she'll always be fine."

Ibtiḥaj's head whipped to the left and right there, a few feet away was none other than Ayra. She looked stunning in a floral print maxi dress Ibtiḥaj couldn't remember ever seeing, her face subtly – but beautifully – made up and a veil wrapped as a simple turban wrapped around her head. Ayra's eyes though... They were dim and it made Ibtiḥaj frown as she stood.

Still smiling, Ayra walked over. "You don't look happy to see me."

"Ayra, are you okay?"

"Do I not look okay, Ibty?"

"Your eyes don't."

Ayra's smile widened by the tiniest inch. "I've been crying. Cramps want to kill me."

Ibtiḥaj raised a brow. "That's all?"

Ayra shot her best friend a perfect amused look. "Don't tell me you've become like those men who say that cramps aren't so bad. Ibty, you know I don't usually have cramps and this one was bad." She rolled her eyes. "I shouldn't even have come since you don't want to believe me."

Ibtiḥaj's worry melted and she smiled like a spoiled brat. "Are you mad? You knew you were going to miss me na, that's why you came."

Ayra laughed. "You're mad."

"You love me anyways." Ibtiḥaj looked around. "Did you come alone? Where's Oga Fahad?"

Ayra's smile was as beautiful as it always was. "He had to leave for Costa Casa not too long ago and I stayed behind to wait for you. I called Aunt Falilat to find out your terminal gate and she was more than happy to present it to me."

Ibtihaj eyed her. "I don't blame you and my mother. But wait...Why is he in Costa Casa?"

"You know they've been planning to branch out in every state of the country and something came up with the Costa Casan land so they're there to sort it out. He'll be back tomorrow or next, otherwise he would have been here with me."

Ibtihaj's eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you sure? Are you okay with it?"

Ayra nodded, still smiling. "I am."

"You're smiling too much this night sha o."

Ayra stopped smiling and feigned anger. "I'm going home. Bye."

The boarding announcement was made just as Ibtihaj grabbed her best friend's hand. "Oya, I'm sorry." She smiled when Ayra faced her once again. "I just want you to be okay, Ayra. I want you to always be okay."

"And I'm perfectly okay, Ibt. In Shaa Allah I'll always be." Ayra freed her hand from Ibtihaj's and moved it along with the other one to Ibtihaj's shoulders. "I want you to not worry much about me on this trip and enjoy it to the fullest. It's not every day you get free trips like this and if you don't tour like you've always wanted to, I'm going to be very, very angry with you."

Ibtihaj grinned proudly. "See how you're talking like me. I like this new you o."

Ayra laughed. "Ibty, I'm serious! You have worked so beautifully since you got this job and you deserve this trip so once you have finished with every official engagement, treat yourself to the best things that Britain has and enjoy it all to the fullest." Her eyes then narrowed. "You better bring back things for me."

The boarding announcement was made again as Ibtihaj replied. "Of course na. What do you take me for sef?"

Ayra's smile returned. "I'm just reminding you." She then hugged Ibtihaj. "I love you so, so much, Ibt. Take care of yourself, okay? If you dare replace me with someone else, I'll kill you."

Ibtihaj hugged Ayra back, scoffing. “It’s you I should be telling that. You that has replaced me with Oga Ibro.”

Ibtihaj would never know that Ayra’s façade faltered in that very moment. Putting her mask back on, Ayra slapped the other’s back. “I told you to stop calling him that.

“Abeg, abeg!” Ibtihaj pulled back. “Leave me and what I call him alone.” She then smiled warmly. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you more. Fall in love with so I can plan your wedding.”

Ibtihaj laughed heartily. “Wahala. Let’s wait and see sha.” Her face fell when the final boarding announcement was made. She hugged Ayra again. “I’ll call you when I land.”

“In Shaa Allah.”

“Thank you so much for coming, Ayra. You have no idea how much it means to me.”

Glad she’d made the spontaneous decision, Ayra tightened her embrace briefly. “You’re welcome...You should start leaving now. Don’t let them leave you behind.”

“When they’re not mad. They can’t even try it.”

Five minutes later, Ayra stood alone in the now empty waiting area and she let her façade slip, suddenly drained. She’d never tell Ibtihaj that she’d been crying for days and she’d made the decision to come say bye after talking with Maya and her husband – Yunus – who’d come in to recite the Qur’an ahead of the Maghrib prayer. She’d never tell Ibtihaj that she’d taken the first available taxi to Raven Isle, paying via transfer, and she’d only gotten changed after purchasing the outfit she now wore from one of the duty-free stores.

She’d never tell Ibtihaj that she showed up just so the latter wouldn’t worry about anything. Ayra knew one day she’d have to come clean about everything that was happening but until she was somewhat steady on the new path she was taking, she was certain she wanted to do it all alone no matter how painful it would get. As she watched a plane take off through the glass walls of the airport, Ayra repeated the words Yunus had said.

“It’s up to you to decide what you want to do, Ayra. You’re more than allowed to ask for a divorce now and leave as it is.” He’d then hesitated before he added *“But if you’d like to do anything before then, such as finding out the truth about anything, then you have to be mentally, physically, and emotionally strong because it’ll be a lot. You have to pray to Allah too, so He can ease this all for you as no one else can ease affairs except*

Him...We can't walk the path for you but we can assist however we can. So always know that the doors of this mosque are open for you and that no matter what, you have a community of brothers and sisters who would always be ready In Shaa Allah to help whenever you need it."

As she watched another plane take off, Ayra told herself she was going to be fine. No matter how long it took, she told herself, she was going to be alright.

On the plane that was getting ready for take-off, Ibtihaj buckled her seatbelt with a pretty smile on her face and contentment in her heart. In Cape Town, South Africa, Fareeda and Salim boarded the private plane, finally ready to return home to Aomi. In Fiji, Bella and Ibrahim toured their rented bungalow while in Costa Casa, the other members of the Hexad squad laughed and shared stories as they grilled in the gazebo, underneath the star studded sky.

29

August 25th was a Wednesday and in the early hours of that morning, Bella and Ibrahim returned from Fiji while the others came back to Aomi from Costa Casa.

As the chartered vehicle neared Downtown Aomi, Bella sighed deeply. "Back to our day to day lives and lies."

Ibrahim, who'd held her hand throughout the ride from Raven Isle to the capital city, squeezed gently. "We'll be fine."

She turned from the tinted window, towards him. "I know. I just really had fun with you since we left and it's going to take more than twenty-four hours for me to get back into the Bella who's happy for you and Ayra. It's getting tiring."

"We knew what we were signing up for."

She sighed again. "We did...Well, you have it harder. You have to bounce out of Serkan mode in less than an hour." She smiled devilishly. "Sucks to be you, Serkan."

"You don't have to rub salt on my wounds."

She laughed, the sound blissful to his ears. "You know I love you." Her mood dampened as The Oasis came into view. "That reminds me. I should call our other Serkan to come down for a bit. It's been a while and I need to remind Ayra that he's alive and well before I start getting paranoid each time she decides to stop by because you're in."

"And maybe we can introduce him to Ibty this time. To solidify everything."

Bella nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like a plan. I'll deal with it later when I wake up. Expect me up later tonight. Let it not seem like I didn't miss her."

"You and I both know you didn't."

She smiled easily. "I didn't. But it's thrilling, you know? How gullible she is. How gullible she's been. She makes it really easy and when we're all together, I sometimes wonder how dense she is that she doesn't notice that there's so much going on in front of her. She really loves you."

Ibrahim's smile was gone and there was a slight furrow of his brows as he wondered why there was a very little part of him that felt as though something was wrong. He shook it off and smiled at Bella. "She really does."

"You good?"

“Yep.” He stole a quick kiss. “I’m perfect.”

By the time they got out of the car minutes later, both their masks were back on. Gone were Serkan and Bella who had a perfect time in Costa Casa and Fiji. Back in place were Bella and Ibrahim; Co-CEOs of The Hexad and the best of friends amongst the members of the squad.

The reception staff were more than happy to have them back and they – Bella and Ibrahim – played their roles well, stating they were glad to be back too as “work was so stressful” and “there’s really no place like home”. They took the elevator up, to Bella’s floor, and once the door of their apartment shut behind them, Ibrahim’s lips were on Bella’s. He kissed her long and hard, taking everything he could before he had to head up. Understanding perfectly well, Bella gave him all she had to offer.

When they both pulled apart, Ibrahim focused on catching his breath for a long minute before he kissed her hair. “Be good.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

He chuckled. “I’m always good.”

“Get lost.”

Five minutes later, he was in the elevator with a small box he hadn’t travelled with; just so Ayra didn’t suspect anything. When the carriage stopped on the tenth floor, he breathed in and out, told himself to get back into the role of being Ayra’s husband, and then he got out. The floor was peacefully quiet and it was fine by him. Stopping in front of the door he’d gotten used to, he inputted the passcode and pushed the door open once it unlocked.

The lights were on and for a minute, Ibrahim was sure he was in the wrong house. He had to go back, ensure he was in Unit 10B before stepping in again, a small frown on his face. In the time he’d been gone, changes had been made in the foyer and it was destabilising was too small of a word to describe how it made him feel.

The warm beige walls he’d left were now painted in the petal pink pastel shade which went well with the wooden slat wall and the floating shelf that was now dark brown as against the cream shade it had been in the last time he was in. The mini paintings that had been on the shelf were gone and so were the books that had been aesthetically placed. Sitting on the shelf was a wide layered vase with faux short pampas grass. The hanging lights were gone too, replaced by a mini chandelier that sat in the middle of the ceiling. On the ground was a small, round furry rug in that same petal pink shade.

Ibrahim turned to the opposite wall that had been bare and took in the painting that now sat there; Hawaiian Leilanis in their different shades sitting between white daisies and magnolias. Even he, although he still comprehended it all, had to admit the painting was a work of art with colours that came together with the perfect strokes of the artist who'd done it. On reflex, his line of sight moved to the bottom left corner but he saw nothing and he checked the entire painting for a signature he didn't find.

Wondering what on earth was happening, he moved deeper into the house. If he thought the foyer was a shock, the living room was much worse. The double height windows now had sheer white curtains that had been drawn together; every inch of glass covered. The contemporary chandelier was still the same, hanging down from the ceiling. The L-shaped sectional sofas that used to be white were now Columbia blue, and the single seater that used to be blue was now white.

The earth brown seaters were gone, replaced with accent chairs and the side lamps on the side stools had been replaced with new ones. The rug stayed the same and so did the coffee tables but the cushions were now white and black with a touch of blue here and there. The vases on the full length shelves were still there and between them, the painting that had been put up before they got married was gone. The TV was now a little higher and right above it, replacing the painting that had been there, was a connected canvas painting that pulled him in.

Confused but entranced, Ibrahim walked forward until he was right in front of the wall, staring at the two canvasses that made one picture while being placed on the same level.

On the right canvas was him, staring at the left canvas which held Ayra, the sea in the distance and the sun setting. In the left canvas, Ayra stared straight ahead, the painting capturing the veil that was wrapped around her head which had moved because of the breeze. The painting also captured his ruffling hair. Both canvasses had been placed side by side but there was a little gap between them that ruined the symmetry; a space that irked him as he wondered if it had been a mistake on the handyman's part or if it had always been meant to be placed that way.

Frowning visibly, he turned and looked around again, wondering what on earth was going on and then wondering where Ayra was.

Leaving his box there in the living room, Ibrahim went to check out the kitchen which was still the same except for the fruit basket that now sat on the middle of the table. The laundry room was untouched too and he noticed that the laundry baskets were empty. Still frowning, he headed up

and stopped in his tracks once he reached the family lounge. The white curtains had been replaced with black ones that matched the new black loveseat and accent chairs which replaced the sectional sofa that had been there. The coffee table was still there and on the wall that had been left bare, the three paintings – the big one that had been in the living room and the two mini ones that had been in the foyer – were hung up; the two mini paintings on both sides of the big one.

Ibrahim couldn't help but seek out his painting signatures and it brought some sense of peace with underlying relief that at least the paintings were still there, his signatures on them unnoticeable to those who weren't familiar with his work.

“What on earth is going on...?”

He went into the room he called her space and everything was the same but in a different colour scheme; pink, black, and cream replaced with black, gold, and touches of silver here and there. The bookshelf was no longer as full as it used to be. Too deep in confusion and a little disbelief, Ibrahim left the room and stopped in front of Ayra's door, realising a minute later that he was actually scared of what he'd find with how much changes had been made in the little time he'd been gone; changes he never would have seen coming.

He willed himself to relax before he knocked once on her door, pushing down on the handle when he was met with silence. The mist of black oud incense hit his nose almost immediately and it tingled a sense he didn't know he ever had. Moving past the momentary bliss, he pushed the door open wider and stepped into the dimly lit room, his eyes zeroing on Ayra who was fast asleep in the middle of the bed, her hair spread out on the pillow with the duvet drawn up to her shoulders.

Reaching for the switch, Ibrahim switched on the main lights and his heart dropped a bit at how unrecognizable her room was. A space that had combined beige, brown, gold and green now combined shades of brown, black, gold, and dove grey. The curved panels of the wall behind her bed were now all brown and her bedframe that used to be beige was now black. The ottoman stools were now black too with gold legs and the cactus loveseat that used to be green was now dove grey, matching the new curtains. Her night lamps were the same and so was the black and white rug he'd actually loved. The painting he'd spent hours on; of her covered with a Leilani in full bloom was still on the wall, and he found himself holding onto that familiarity for dear life.

His steps light, he walked over to the bed, finally realising her sheets and her duvet were now pastel teal. As carefully as he could, he sat beside her. Ayra looked so beautiful in her sleep and it was startling to realise he'd actually – sincerely – missed her. It was even more startling for him to finally realise it was the first time he'd travelled that she hadn't texted him much; as much as she usually did each time he was away.

His gaze moved from her face to her hair and his breath hitched. Her hair had to be at least two inches shorter, he was sure of it, and then between the dark curls were streaks of dark red; streaks that weren't there before. He was going to admit it that it looked sinfully good on her.

His gaze moved back to her face and he took it all in, his brows furrowing as he wondered why she looked the same and different all at once. Apart from her hair, nothing was different. Her almond brown skin was still majorly spotless and her lashes were still long, her nose was still a lovely button and her lips were in their resting heart shape. For a split second, her lips twitched and he caught a ghost of her dimples before her expression relaxed again.

Blaming the unfamiliar way he felt on the disorientation that came from walking into a house that was different from the one he'd walked out of, Ibrahim got off the bed and headed out, pausing momentarily in front of her walk-in wardrobe before deciding against it and leaving the room while trying to shake off the disorientation that bothered him more than it should have.

His room was the only place in the house, like the kitchen, that wasn't touched and for the first time, it felt cold. He loved the familiarity and the painting of Bella on the wall brought him calm but there was a coldness in the room that he had difficulty shaking off; as though it'd been closed since he left which was something he doubted because Ayra always loved coming into his room, especially when he was away. He knew her that well.

He left the room and went back down, returning minutes later with his box after taking it all in once again. When the room door was closed behind him, he walked over to the sitting area and made himself comfortable in one of the single seaters, his mind reeling as he tried to understand why so many major changes had been made with no preamble or clue from Ayra.

No matter how hard he thought about it, nothing made sense and when his head began to throb softly, he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, putting it at the back of his head that he had to neaten his stubble once he got to the bathroom. He sat for a minute longer before he rose to his feet. His jacket came off and then his shoes did, his socks following right after.

He was removing his turtleneck when the door flung open and he barely had time to brace himself before Ayra jumped on him.

“Ibrahim, you’re home!”

It was surprising to Ibrahim how naturally he caught her, an arm going around her middle as she wrapped her legs around his own middle while his other hand went up to cup the back of her head as she buried her face in the crook of his neck, laughing heartily the way she always did.

For the first time in a near year, Ayra didn’t scent exclusively like him and Bella and it took him a whole moment to notice it. She scented like a garden of flowers in full bloom; soft, feminine, and extremely floral with undertones he couldn’t recognise. It was too unfamiliar, like the house now felt, and he found himself pulling back a little so he could look at her. Bright hazel eyes met his onyx ones and her smile was so bright it went to a very unfamiliar – yet very little part – of his chest, confusing him even more.

“You’re home!” Ayra, glad he kept her steady, moved her hands to his face. Her smile did not shrink neither did it waver. “God, I missed you.” She hugged him again, giggling. “I missed you so, so much.”

He didn’t hug her back like he usually did, his entire mind an honest mess. Noticing, Ayra leaned backwards and her smile slowly slid off her face as she took in his slight frown and the way his brows furrowed.

“Ibrahim,” Her voice was so soft, like always. “Are you okay?”

The question slipped past his lips without second thought. “What on earth happened here?”

She smiled again then. “Oh!”

She slid down his body until her feet were on the tiled floor and Ibrahim, once again startled, realised a part of him had missed her doing that too.

“I changed the house!” Ayra said proudly. “I was *so* bored when you left, Ibrahim, and Ibtu had to go to Cardiff for work a day after you and the others left so I had to think of ways to keep myself busy and I stumbled upon this renovation playlist on YouTube. God, Ibrahim, the house was so beautiful and I wanted to recreate it but I couldn’t just change everything here because that would have cost a lot of time and a lot of money and while we have the money, I didn’t want you to come back to a disarrayed home so I had them revamp some of our furniture pieces and then got some new ones and also, I had them paint some walls and all of that.”

Her eyes were so bright and her smile was dazzling. “I didn’t want to touch your room until you got back.” She could barely stand still, bouncing on her feet. “But I have so many moodboards you have to see, Ibrahim. Pinterest is such a beautiful place. Working on changing things in a home is so fun and so beautiful and we should definitely do it again in a few months but for now...”

She breathed in the needed breath. “Please tell me you like what I did with the house. I wanted to surprise you and I made sure to factor your likes into the decision I made.”

The smile that appeared on her face was the bashful one he was so used to and her cheeks turned rosy; a signature move of hers. “I just really wanted to surprise you and I also wanted us to have a familiar yet new space. I even got new paintings for us. Please tell me you like what I did with the house. If you don’t like it, I think I’ll cry.”

It was the most confused Ibrahim had been in the time he’d known her; his thoughts and emotions clashing. On one hand, she was the same Ayra he knew; the same smiles, the same signatory blush, the same deep dimples, the same look of love and complete adoration...The same everything. On the other hand, there was something that wasn’t there before; a subtle edge that seemed like a flickering bulb. One minute it was there, the next minute it was gone.

His earlier thought came back; she was the same and she was different at the same time and he couldn’t pinpoint what was different. All he knew, quite surprised at the realisation, while it was a little frustrating to try to pinpoint what it was, it was also quite intriguing and there was an unfamiliar curiosity that slowly bloomed.

Her cheeks got even darker and she shyly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Ibrahim, you’re staring.” Her hand returned to her side. “Do you like the house?”

He told himself to breathe and he did just that before smiling back at her; yet another one of the small smiles he reserved for her. “It threw me off because I didn’t see it coming.”

She beamed. “That’s the surprise aspect of it! I’m glad I nailed it. But do you like it?”

He wasn’t sure he did because it erased Bella’s touches in nearly every place, replacing it with her – Ayra’s – own touch. He knew better than to tell her that so he nodded twice. “It’ll take some time to get used to but it’s beautiful, Ayra. Thank you, for wanting to surprise me.”

She brightened even further. “You’re welcome!” She then took his hand and began pulling him out of the room. “I know you want to bathe and get some rest but I can’t wait for a moment longer. I’ll be your official tour guide around the house and I’ll explain everything to you. I thought I was dreaming, y’know? I felt the bed dip and I opened my eyes a little later, wondering if someone had actually been in the room with me and then I sniffed our perfume and I just had to come over to check and you were really home! It’s the best way to start my day, Ibrahim. You have no idea!”

Ibrahim could only stare at her, surrealness and amazement balling into one. She led him to the foyer and they stopped right in front of the main door. She never stopped smiling. “You returned quite early from Costa Casa though. Like, no one ever returns from Costa Casa until evening hours.”

“I missed you like crazy.”

She feigned sadness. “Yet you didn’t call or text much.”

“Neither did you.”

She laughed. “I was surprising you, Ibrahim, so I had a very valid reason. You though...”

“Work was a pain in my neck.” The lies kept spilling easily and for the first time, it scared him. “Thankfully, we were able to wrap things up. Sorry it took longer than normal.”

“Oh it’s alright. I missed you but I had time to put things in order. I’m just glad you’re here now.”

His chest twisted unfamiliarly. He managed a smile. “I’m glad too...Let’s start the tour?”

“Sure!”

She led him in, her façade slipping each moment he turned away from her, revealing an Ayra he would never be able to recognise. Ibrahim found himself listening to her every word while mentally comparing the new look of their house with the old one. He thought so deeply that he didn’t see the way her eyes – and expression – turned cold each time he wasn’t looking.

He had no idea that between the light fixtures and in other strategic locations were mini cameras that captured their every movement; the footage only accessible by – and to – her. He also had no idea that in the room he’d called Ayra’s Corner, disguised as Veronica Roth’s *Insurgent* was a notepad that had every discovery she’d made so far with red lines that connected dots alongside questions she still needed answers to. Disguised

as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was her travel guide as there were answers outside Aomi which she was going to find no matter what. She only had to sort out a few things first.

All the way in Liverpool, Ibtihaj looked up from her phone when the elevator came to a stop on what she thought would be a long ride down. Noting that it had stopped two floors below hers, she turned to the doors that had gone open and unconsciously, her brow rose. Right outside the elevator was the same man she'd run into about three times since she arrived in the city.

He also had a brow raised and quietly, he stepped in, occupying the space beside her. The carriage doors closed and the ride down resumed. He put his hands in his pockets, a small smile tugging on his lips as his brow relaxed. "Are you sure you're not following me? This should be the fourth time, yeah?"

Ibtihaj snorted but it wasn't her usual one. This was playful and she smiled like him as she turned back to her phone. "God abeg. How will I be following you *bayi*?"

He chuckled at that. "I should be one doing the following." He glanced her way, smiling a little wider when she held his gaze for a moment. "I hope you can let me."

Unused to the way warmth bloomed in her being, Ibtihaj turned away and cleared her throat, acting as though she wasn't affected. "Let's wait and see."

He turned back to the carriage doors as the elevator came to a slow stop. "Before that though...Hello, Ibtj."

She smiled again then, lowering her head just so he didn't see it. "Hello, Adil."

September, 2021

The night lamp cast a soft glow on one side of the room and Ibrahim lay on his back, staring at the ceiling above him but barely seeing it. Physically, he was there. Mentally, though, he was far, far away; thinking about his wife the same way he'd been doing in the three weeks he'd been back.

Like every other day, Ibrahim didn't think he'd ever been this confused and disturbed. Like always, he didn't know where to start unravelling everything from and it bothered him more than he ever expected which was a problem in itself.

Ayra was a near different woman and he now had a mental list to prove it. In the first week, he convinced himself that it was all in his head. By the second week, he had to face the reality that his wife wasn't the same woman he'd left behind. While he should have been happy that she was now the woman he'd always wanted her to be with bits and pieces of the woman she'd always been, he was honestly disturbed and he found himself longing for them to fall back to what had been their patterns time and time again.

He wasn't ready to admit it to anyone – including himself – that the reason he'd barely wanted to leave the house in the three weeks since his return was because of Ayra; because he was trying to understand where the changes were coming from and because he was – shockingly – finding himself searching for the little moments she already created with him and the little things she did. Moments she no longer created and things she no longer did.

She no longer woke him up for prayers with little kisses and giggles. Sure, she still smiled adorably but her eyes...He'd come to note the slight coldness they now had and he disliked it so much. After Fajr, she no longer sat with him in the family lounge to talk about something random or ask if he was going to work that day. She now simply folded her prayer mat and left him there, heading to her room to soak in the bathtub and watch the sunrise; something she said she'd added to her routine when he was away.

Throughout the day, she'd do one thing or the other; staying away from him rather than being clingy the way she usually was when he stayed home. She was now part of the sister community of the masjid he'd never step foot into and if she wasn't out for one drive or the other, she was locked in the room he'd given her as her little haven, reading or typing away on her laptop. During meals, she didn't speak as much as she used to and more than once, he'd have to keep the conversation going; a new thing for him.

Then there was the physical aspect. Her hugs weren't long anymore and her kisses were now chaste and brief. Nothing more, nothing less. They'd only slept on the same bed thrice since he'd returned and she'd fallen asleep halfway into their pillow talks; talks she usually forced herself to stay awake for because of how much she loved them, especially when he'd been away on a trip.

Ibtihaj had been quiet too which was a new thing for him as he and the others had been expecting her to call them out for travelling to Costa Casa after saying they – the squad – were going to be in town. It was radio silence on her end and Ayra didn't say much about her anymore; just that she – Ibtihaj – was in the UK for a personal trip after the work she'd gone there for finished. Ayra never mentioned more.

Sighing, Ibrahim rolled over to his side and stared at the crack of the curtains that enabled him see the clearing grey skies through the full length window. His thought path then moved to how Ayra still seemed unsatisfied with the house's interior. He still wasn't used to having so much of Bella taken away and just when he'd try to get used to one thing, Ayra was replacing it with something else. At the time the first interior had been completed, they'd been so sure Ayra loved it because although it'd been all Bella, they had put it in the back of their minds to do something Ayra wouldn't dare dream of changing. Now though, Ibrahim wasn't sure he even knew what Ayra's dream home was because the changes she was making were not it at all.

There was the way she now dressed too. Her outfits were mostly new and the one time he'd stepped into her closet, he'd barely recognised it. Most of the clothes he'd gotten for her before the wedding were gone and in their places were new clothes, mostly dresses and abayas and loose trousers with matching tops. She now had more jilbabs and two pieces too. Gone were those her short nightwears. In their place were pyjamas sets that covered more than they revealed; sets he'd dare call conservative when compared to what she wore on most days as long as he was home.

Her Tom Fords were now placed in the last drawer of her vanity. He had not scented it on her since he returned and when he asked why, she said she didn't want the other perfumes to just go to waste. As to where her clothes had gone, she said her style had changed and she'd decided to donate them to the shelters within and outside the country because they needed them more than she did.

He didn't buy it and even he didn't understand why. Her reasons were really, really valid but he couldn't even believe them. However, the Ayra he married would never lie to him. He knew she'd still not lie to him

but...Everything felt too wrong. Everything. Including the painting in the living room with the space between both canvasses that made his skin crawl each time he saw it because a part of him wondered if that was how he and Ayra now were; two people with a barrier between them.

His phone ringing pulled him out of his head. He rolled over and picked up the device, accepting the call once he saw the caller ID. He brought the phone to his ear, sitting up. “Sevgilim, this is –”

“Hello to you too, Ibrahim.” It was Anneth. “Your sweet Sevgilim is not the one on the phone.”

He raised a brow. “Are you at our home or Bella’s at your place?”

“We’re outside your apartment door and we don’t want to ring the bell so Ayra doesn’t get here first. We want to be sure you’re well because Serkan Fahad doesn’t stay home for this long after a trip unless we all have to be on good behaviour for lil miss Abdulaziz.” She sighed. “Just come down and open the door. It’s high time we see in person what Ayra did with the interior.”

He got off the bed and put on his slippers. “I’m on my way.”

“Good!”

The call ended and he lowered the phone. The painting of Bella caught his eye as he walked out and he stared at it for a moment before leaving the room. Instead of heading straight down, he walked to Ayra’s room and hesitated slightly before pushing down the door handle, letting himself in.

The room, like his, was dimly lit by one of her night lamps. She was fast asleep, warmly covered by her duvet. He stopped by the bed and stared at her for the longest moment, only forcing himself to look away when the doorbell rang. With a sigh and hesitation he wasn’t used to, he left her room and headed down.

The squad all had their brows raised when he opened the door. Tobi spoke first. “Bro, you look like shit.”

Anneth nodded, her arms folded. “Tell me about it.”

Ibrahim simply stepped aside and they made their way in. Bella was the last one in and she had a small frown on her face. “*Stai bene?* (Are you okay?)”

He smiled easily, closing the door. “I will be. You look good.”

She smiled then. “I always do. You look awful. Let’s go down after they leave so we can get your hair trimmed and your stubble dealt with. Is she giving you trouble?”

“Nope.”

“Is she in?”

“It’s morning, Bella, on a Saturday so yes, she is in. She’s asleep though, thankfully.”

Her smile widened. “Perfect.”

Stepping forward, she kissed him and he let her, kissing her back for the first time since their return. When she pulled back, she used her finger to wipe away the lipstick on his lips. “You should return to the office, Serkan. These three weeks have been long and since we don’t have anyone to appease or be on good behaviour for, we’re clear.”

He nodded although he wondered why she wasn’t bothered by the fact that there was actually no need to appease Ayra and Ibtihaj the way they usually did after their trips. “Sure. I’ll be there on Monday.”

She beamed. “Yes! Serkan should be here by next weekend.” She traced a shape on his shoulder. “He’s coming with Aliana. We’ll introduce her as his best friend the same way we tell the world you and I are the closest in the squad.”

He reached up to push her hair away from her face. “And she’s fine with it?”

“Of course.” Bella then looked around the foyer and her expression shifted into one of irritation with an undertone of disgust. “God, this is awful. What was Ayra thinking?”

I wish I could tell you, Ibrahim thought, *because I don’t know either.* He let her step away from him to properly look around before she left him there, heading deeper into the apartment to join the others after saying the painting was the only thing she didn’t hate; she just hated the fact that there were Leilanis present in the frame.

Ibrahim stayed in the foyer a minute longer, just taking in the painting for the thousandth time. He then sighed and joined them in the living room, watching as they all walked around, each person appalled. Anneth looked like someone who was afraid of being bitten by an invisible insect as she sat on one of the accent chairs. Once she was sure the chair won’t bite her, she made herself more comfortable, speaking as her husband – Nathaniel – sat beside her.

“Ibrahim, what’s going on? Like, this is so awful and as someone who loves the colours used, I have to say that I hate it. What was Ayra thinking? What was the interior company even thinking when they agreed to all this?”

Jalal perched on an armrest. "It's probably one of those unprofessional ones." He then juttred his chin in the direction of the wall with the TV. "And what's with the space between the canvasses on that painting?"

Ibrahim took a seat and crossed one leg over the other. "I would reply you if I know, J. It pinches me too and she said that's how it's supposed to be."

Tobi, who'd gone into the kitchen, stepped out with a bottle of wine and a glass. "It's really sad there are no alcoholic stuff here."

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. "Isn't it too early for wine?"

Tobi raised a brow. "You wanna go down that road with me, Nate?"

Nathaniel raised his hands in surrender. "Suit yourself, mate."

"Better."

Bella made herself comfortable beside Ibrahim. "I hate it. All of it." She snuggled into his side once he – out of habit – wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I'm so glad she didn't touch the study or your room. I would have been really pissed."

Tobi sipped his wine. "The kitchen's the same too."

"So are her bathroom and her walk-in." Ibrahim stated. "Everything else is renovated and she's still not satisfied."

"Please tell me you're joking." Nathaniel said. "She's not satisfied? This can't be anyone's dream home. It's definitely not mine."

"Not mine either." Anneth added.

"I'd rather live in a pig pen." Jalal stated. "This is bad and only God knows what else she wants to add."

"Is she in?" Tobi asked. "Before we get carried away and say things she isn't supposed to hear."

"She's asleep." Ibrahim told them. "And I'm quite sure she's not waking up anytime soon."

Tobi smiled disturbingly. "Rough night and morning?"

Bella's glare was the most scathing. Ibrahim patted her arm, making her relax. "It was a nice night and morning, Tobi." It was a lie but he wasn't going to tell them he barely slept because of how busy his mind was. "We slept in our sides of the house, thank you very much."

"But what's going on?" Anneth asked. "You seem troubled and you've been weird these three weeks. What's going on?"

They all turned to him – including Bella. Sighing defeatedly, Ibrahim came clean. “Ayra’s acting weird and it’s been getting to me.”

Jalal raised a brow. “Weird?”

Tobi made himself more comfortable in the single seater. “This is the kind of stuff I like.” He topped his wine. “Oya, hit us with it.”

Ibrahim let a moment pass. “She’s acting the same, yeah, but at the same time she’s different.” He continued when they all opened their mouths. “I’ll explain so you all should shut up.”

They did exactly that.

“She’s not as clingy as she is usually supposed to be. She doesn’t talk so much anymore. She no longer annoyingly comes to fool around while I’m working or if I’m just simply getting something done in study. She’s changed perfumes. She now has friends from the community at this nearby mosque; people I know nothing of. She’s changed her fashion style and she doesn’t even talk much about Ibty anymore. She spends a lot of time in that room I made to keep her away from me and we all know how she’s never really used it because she likes being where I am but now she’s in there for hours. If she’s not reading a book, she working away on her laptop and I have no idea what she’s doing. All of it is weird and it feels wrong and it’s kept me wondering what’s going on.”

Brief silence followed as they all took in what he’d said. Nathaniel then folded his arms, leaning back in the chair he occupied. “Isn’t that what we wanted though?”

Ibrahim was taken aback by the unexpected question. His brows furrowed. “What?”

“Isn’t that what we wanted though?” Nathaniel repeated. “We wanted someone to be a cover for you and Bella; someone to get your parents off your back. She’s been clingy all along and you’ve complained about it because you have to play the role of the nice husband and it kept you away from Bella. Now she’s allowing you breathe and you have time to do your own stuff so...Isn’t this what we wanted? You have the woman the media and everyone else can talk to because you two are publicly married and that gives you every opportunity you need to focus on us, on work, and especially on Bella. It works perfectly so isn’t this what we’ve wanted?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a big deal. Sure, it took longer than I would have liked for us to get this point where we don’t have to worry about appeasing anyone but we have gotten here and that’s the important part. I don’t think there’s anything to be worried about, Ibrahim. We planned this

out perfectly well and we know better than to not keep looking back at those plans to ensure we left nothing behind.”

Ibrahim could only stare while he felt it even more that there was a reason to be worried; that something was wrong.

“Nate’s right.” Tobi said, getting Ibrahim to look at him. “This is what we wanted and we should be happy that things are working out.” He looked around. “We just need to get her to take things back to the way they were around here and we’ll be good.”

He turned back to Ibrahim and smiled. “I think the reason why things seem weird is because you’ve gotten used to all of her in the year we’ve had so it may be a little destabilising to get used to this change.”

Little, Ibrahim wanted to say, *was the understatement of the century.*

“Exactly.” Anneth agreed before turning to Ibrahim. “Let’s be happy that she’s finding things to keep herself busy and let’s focus on ourselves the way we’ve always wanted to. Ibty’s a working woman now so she has her own stuff to deal with.” She rolled her eyes. “I won’t be surprised if Ayra’s with the people from the mosque because her darling best friend isn’t around twenty-four-seven anymore.” She wiped away a fake tear. “Poor Leilani.”

They laughed, except Ibrahim who simply smiled, discomfort making itself quite comfortable within him.

Bella looked at him, her smile dazzling. “You get to be home more now.” Her smile widened when he smiled back. “That’s the best part. It’s also good she’s never come over to the office. I doubt she’d going to start now.”

“The security team already know what to do. The secretaries do too since she’s able to text yours, Ibrahim.” Jalal said with a shrug. “Once they alert us that she’s in the premises, we can always start a meeting.” He smiled widely. “That’s the best thing about owning a company as a team and being the best friends too. Anything’s possible.”

He clapped hands with Tobi who said “Word, bro!”

“I think you and Bella should consider moving.” Anneth suggested. “After all, this was a temporary arrangement.”

Bella pouted. “Why do we have to move?”

Anneth raised a brow. “So you wanna stay here and have Ayra coming down when you are Ibrahim are getting hot and dirty? Just because that hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen. You two need a

house where you can do everything you want without anyone watching or coming to disturb. Lots of things to try and lots of corners to baptise.”

Tobi feigned a cough. “Some of us are trying to stay celibate for more than a week.”

That made Ibrahim snort. “As if that’s possible.”

“Fuck you, Serkan.”

Bella threw a cushion at Tobi, purposely missing him so his wine didn’t spill. “No one fucks him but me.” She then turned back to Ibrahim. “She has a point though. I do love our home now but it’s time we got a house. We’ll have fun.”

Ibrahim nodded, not completely into the idea. “Let’s talk about it another day.”

“Sure.”

“Are your parents finally back?” Jalal asked. “They’ve been in Cape Town since July.”

“They’re back.” Ibrahim replied. “And before y’all ask, no, they’ve not reached out to me or Ayra yet. You know how things get once they travel and get back.”

Anne rolled her eyes. “Renovations and then intense cleaning. That mansion gives me the creeps.”

“Good thing we hardly go there.” Nathaniel said, smiling when she nodded. He then turned to Ibrahim. “Anyways, there’s nothing to worry about, Ibrahim. All is well and our other Serkan’s flying in next week so Ayra and Ibtihaj can meet him. Is Ibtihaj even around?”

Ibrahim shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Hopefully she’s back by then and then we’ll further concrete everything so it would all fall into place. Don’t beat yourself up too much. The important thing is that you get to spend time with Bella the way you’ve always wanted to so do that. You’ll no longer have to deal with a clingy woman all the time and you won’t have to think about Bella when you have to sleep with her.”

It was chillingly scary for Ibrahim to realise he’d stopped doing that for an actual long time; long before they – he and Ayra – had to leave for Santorini. He knew better than to say that though as Nathaniel continued.

“Every piece has fallen into place and we’re going to revel in it.”

Anne flipped her wrists. “Yeah baby! We celebrate from here on.”

Jalal winked at her while Bella laughed. “That’s how we do it, baby.”

Tobi raised his near empty glass of wine. “To more good times and to Serkan and Sevgilim. To more things falling into even better places too.”

They all – except Ibrahim – raised their hypothetical wine glasses, cheering. Bella then looked at her lover, her entire being radiant. Ibrahim found himself forcing on what he hoped was a sincere smile. She lit up even further. “I love you, Serkan.”

A heavy weight pressed down on his chest. “I love you too.”

Above them, in the light holders of the chandeliers, the cameras captured everything. Upstairs, Ayra stood with her back against the wall by the stairs, every word they’d said engraved in memory and caught on footage. In her hand, her phone vibrated and she turned it over to look at the new message that had come in.

Ibty: *I’m on the plane and we’ll be taking off soon. Adil’s staying back for a little longer before he comes down to Aomi. I promised to tell you all about him once I return and you can be rest assured I won’t have go back on that. Then, Madam, you and I have our own pending discussion. I’ll see you soon, In Shaa Allah!*

Listening to everyone cheering except the man she’d loved most of her life, Ayra took a minute to go over all they’d said and then think about all the plans she had made; plans that had some standstills she was still trying to work around independently but to little avail.

Making a decision, she exhaled quietly and then typed out her reply, her fingers flying over her screen. Once she finished typing, she clicked on send.

Ayra: *Be quick, Ibty! I want to hear all about Adil and know whether or not we need to start planning a wedding. And yes, madam, we’ll have our pending discussion because you’ve refused to believe I’ve been fine all this time.*

There’s a lot I want to tell you, Ibty, and I hope doing so helps me clear some blockades I’m having in getting some information for this new thing I’m working on. And I hope your company gives discounts because I’m about to milk you dry.

Get here safely first. In Shaa Allah, I’ll be there once you get home. I love you, Ibty. In Shaa Allah I always will.

Not checking whether or not the message delivered, Ayra tapped into the camera feed and ignored everyone else, focusing on Ibrahim who seemed uncomfortable although he hid it well. She knew he’d been thinking since

he returned and sincerely, acting like her old self had been draining which made her continuously wonder how they'd done it for so long.

She couldn't push him away for much longer, she knew that, if she didn't want him trying to pry deeper than he already was but at the same time, there was no way she'd want to go close to him now; not after all she'd heard, especially the part of him thinking about Bella each time they were intimate. She wasn't going back from that.

Back downstairs, Ibrahim sat with a smile plastered on his face while the weight in his chest pressed down deeper; to the point of near pain.

31

When the clock hands moved from 5:59PM to 6:00PM, Ayra smiled humourlessly. Feeling disappointed but not surprised, she pushed herself off the loveseat in the family lounge and looked away from the paintings on the wall; paintings that reminded her of just how much of a pathological liar her husband was.

She went straight to her room and picked up the jersey veil she'd left lying on the armrest of her loveseat. Her hands moved naturally, from years of doing the same routine over and over, and she draped the veil over her cap-covered head, throwing the longer end over her left shoulder and leaving the shorter end to fall forward, over her chest.

She then looked down at her outfit and thought about how differently she would have felt had everything not become the way it was. It was the first time in a long time that she was dressed exactly like Ibrahim; a thick sand brown long-sleeved turtleneck as the weather was colder, cream coloured wide legged trousers, and a matching cream coat that she was yet to wear. Her veil was black to match the boots she'd already dropped down in the foyer, right beside the small box she'd packed for the indefinite time she'd planned to stay at Haven Estate.

If things weren't as they were, she would have been happy – ecstatic even – that they were going to be matching. However, in that moment, all she felt was the same coldness that had been eating at her heart – what was left of it – little by little. There was no happiness and if it weren't for the fact that she needed the comfort the outfit provided as her period had arrived earlier than planned, she would have dumped it for something else.

She made a stop in the walk-in wardrobe simply to check her reflection. Just like every other time the house was empty, her defences were down and the woman who stared back at her was the Ayra she was still coming to terms with; the Ayra who was now starting to stand on her own although she did so wobbly, the Ayra that had more of rage on the days she didn't feel numb as she wondered just how much audacity Ibrahim and the Hexad squad had, the Ayra who still felt hurt when she thought about little things that used to matter, the Ayra that still had a part that thrived on fear concerning what she was yet to uncover, the Ayra that the masjid community now loved...All of it was in the woman who stared back at her through the mirror.

Exhaling, she turned away and spritzed a new perfume she'd gotten before she switched off the lights and left the walk-in before leaving the room as a whole. She went to Ibrahim's room, knowing better than to spend more than a minute in there. If she did, her rage would return and the last time

it'd hit her with an intensity that threw out all sense of reasoning, she'd renovated the house just so she could derive deliciously petty happiness from destroying everything Bella did. The apartment's new interior was nowhere near the dream home she'd wanted but knowing that it affected them all, especially Ibrahim made her very, very happy.

The fact that his room was still everything Bella wanted annoyed her a lot but she had better things to do. She was going to ruin his room, that much was certain, but until she found it in herself to do so, she was going to have to push down the rage that came each time she stepped into his space.

The keys to the Telluride were on the top of the table in his sitting area and Ayra easily picked it up, leaving as soon as she'd done so. She'd originally planned to get a Ryde but seeing how he'd decided to stay out for hours after leaving with the squad without his usual lies or texts, she decided it wouldn't hurt to take the car. She deserved it.

She switched off each light as she walked, heading down with no rush. The painting in the living room held her attention for a near minute and she put it at the back of her mind to get the handymen to move it a little further apart so the space between both canvasses became wider. She needed it to disturb Ibrahim even more as that was the least thing he could think about after all the lies he'd told and the lies he was still telling.

She put on her coat in the foyer and proceeded to put on her boots. She'd barely pulled out the box handle when the passcode was inputted and the door went open to reveal Ibrahim who'd been taking his coat off.

For Ibrahim, coming home to meet Ayra dressed exactly like him made his stomach dip unfamiliarly. It was humbling to realise he couldn't remember the last time such coincidences had happened. It was even scarier to realise he didn't hate this particular coincidence the way he'd hated other coincidences in the past.

He stopped removing his coat and let his hands drop, watching with that same heaviness in his chest as Ayra's expression morphed into a calm, neutral one. She then gave him a small smile but it didn't reach her eyes and it felt like a soft punch in his gut.

It was then he noticed the box beside her and his heart dropped. What felt like fear clawed at his chest and he brought his now slightly widened eyes back to hers. "Ayra, where are you —"

"Ibty's called like thirty minutes ago. She'd landed in Raven Isle and she was about to start heading home to Plum Boulevard. I'm going to wait for her there. I promised I'd do so."

The clawing in his chest wouldn't stop. "And the box?"

She half-shrugged. "I'm sleeping over."

"That's too big of a box for just one night, Ayra."

"I'll be staying for some time too." Her smile widened and it seemed so much like the old her. "I haven't seen Ibty since August, Ibrahim, so you can understand why I want to stay for some time, right? There's so much to do, so much to catch up on. Besides, you'll be busy with work so..."

The weight in his chest? It pressed down harder and he didn't like it one bit. He also couldn't understand what it meant; all he knew was that it had to do with her and it wasn't going away, not even when he left earlier with the squad. They'd gone down to his and Bella's place and it had taken so much to act as though he was really into what was being said when in reality he'd been going over the mental list of what was different with Ayra and what wasn't. When Bella had asked him to stay the night, he'd told her he'd do so another day and now, Ayra was leaving for Ibty's. He realised in that moment that he didn't like that she was going to Ibty's but he didn't know how to say it. He wasn't sure how he'd say it even if he wanted to.

"How long are you staying there?" He asked when his mouth finally moved.

Ayra focused on straightening her box handle, not liking how the mix of emotions a part of her felt with the way he looked at her; a look she knew better than to fall for as it could turn out to be a lie, just like everything else.

"I don't know." She told him sincerely.

Once her emotions were under lock and key, she turned back to him and smiled, internally getting drained like always when she had to act in front of him. She wondered – yet again – how they did it for so long; pretending to be people they weren't until she peeped behind their masks, unable to recognise the faces she saw.

Ibrahim felt his chest squeeze but he acted as though all was fine; as though it didn't feel like he was beginning to sink when he asked "Are you driving?"

She nodded. "Yep." She raised the keys in her other hand. "I'm taking the Telluride. I hope you don't mind."

"Can I drive you?" The clawing in his chest worsened as he watched emotions clash against each other, her eyes a mirror to a part of her he wasn't sure he knew although he'd been previously so sure he knew her so well. "Please."

She opened her mouth to say no but he beat her to it. “I need to see Ibty too and I haven’t seen your parents in a while so...Let me drive you, please.”

She stared at him for a moment before she sighed, not ready to argue with him if she said no and he had more ways to get her to say yes. Tightening her hold on the box handle, she turned away and held out the keys. “Fine.”

The relief felt like a wave pulling him back to shore and Ibrahim smiled – a small one – before taking the keys from her. “Let’s go?”

“Sure.”

She didn’t let him take the box and while it made him feel what he wasn’t used to, he let it be. The elevator ride down was unusually quiet and he couldn’t think about anything to get her talking. It made the weight in his chest press down even further. When the carriage stopped, she got out first and she stayed in front of him the entire walk to the car. Once the doors were unlocked, she put the box in the backseat before she got into the front passenger seat while he got behind the wheel.

For a minute, none of them moved or said anything. Sighing, Ibrahim turned his head to look at her. “Are we okay, Ayra?”

She turned her head his way, her brows furrowed slightly. “Are we not okay?”

“I could ask you that. Things between us have been...off. We don’t talk like we used to, we don’t hang out as much as we used to, we don’t do most of what we used to. You’re quieter too. You’re spending more time in your haven and...” He blew out a breath. “I’ve been going crazy thinking about all of it. You didn’t even tell me Ibty was coming back and that’s never happened before. You used to tell me everything, Ayra, and now you seem like someone else and it’s driving me nuts trying to understand what’s going on.”

Ayra’s hands were loose fists on her laps and it took every ounce of self-restraint for her to not ask *‘Me telling you everything was the problem, wasn’t it?’*. Breathing in and out as quietly as she could, she spoke “There’s nothing going on.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that? The Ayra I’ve known for a long time and the Ayra with me right now seem like two different people.”

“We’ve been married for a near year, Ibrahim, and we got engaged even longer than that. In every relationship, there are transition stages and I’m finding a new side of myself that I’m trying to understand. There’s nothing

going on. I'm just trying to understand this transitioning stage of mine, that's all."

He had gone back to feeling as though he was drowning as he stared back at her, his emotions too much to handle in that moment. He told himself she'd never lied to him before and that she had no reason to do so now, even when he hadn't been the most honest person to her; something she didn't need to ever find out.

In some way, she transitioning made some sense and it could explain the changes he'd noticed but still...There was a part of him that wasn't buying it. She was doing a complete one-eighty and he couldn't wrap his head around every part of it.

Her hand on his snapped him out of his head and he looked from her smiling face down to their hands; hers smaller and a near shade darker than his. Her hand was warm and he felt it all the way in his chest, something that had never really happened before. The longer he stared, the more he wondered if her nails had always been so beautiful.

"Nothing's going on, Ibrahim." She said calmly. "I'm just transitioning and I'm sorry it's affected you this much."

He brought his line of sight back to her face, exhaling. "It's fine. I'm just glad we've had this conversation. It was driving me nuts."

The playful smile he'd learned to associate with her appeared on her face and it was one of the few normalcies he'd seen in the near month he'd been home since his trip to Costa Casa and Fiji. She pulled her hand back, saying "We can't have you going nuts, Engineer Fahad. An entire company depends on you."

Pushing down the sadness he felt at the loss of contact, he brought the engine to life. "Just the company?"

"And the squad. They depend on you too."

His hands on the steering wheel, he looked her way. "And you?"

She held his gaze for a moment before she turned away, putting on her seatbelt while ensuring the lock on her emotions stayed in place just so she didn't commit bloody murder. "I've always depended on you, Ibrahim." *Much to my detriment*, she added in her head. "I've always done that so..."

He stared at her for a few heartbeats, knowing that was not the answer he wanted but an answer he wasn't sure he was ready to dissect. Sighing silently, he put the car in drive and drove them out of the parking lot.

She turned her head to look out of the window and the sight of the masjid that had become a second home made her smile sincerely as they drove past it. Ibrahim, who'd noticed her smile, turned on the vehicle's media player and the first song that played was Hamilton's First Burn.

Unable to help himself, he reached over and took her hand in his. It took everything in Ayra to not flinch. She continued staring out of the window and glad she wasn't pulling back, Ibrahim set their hands on the console between the seats and drove easily with his other hand.

The drive was majorly quiet save for the songs that played and when they got to Haven Estate, he drove them to her parents' first. Salama and Muhsin were over the moon at the impromptu visit. Not wanting to dampen their spirits, Ayra delivered her best performance yet; acting so beautifully that she even scared herself.

Salama felt as though something was wrong but she couldn't put a finger on what it was so she pushed it away, asking how the renovation had gone and how both Ibrahim and Ayra were.

"You're even busier than the President these days, Ibrahim." Muhsin joked. "It's been long since we last saw or heard from you."

Ibrahim laughed, still keeping Ayra's hand in his. "I'll rectify that In Shaa Allah. I'm freer now that we've gotten started on reforming the company. So while I'll get more time to spend with Ayra, I'll make sure I spend more time here too."

Salama's smile was beautiful. "We'll look forward to it."

Sincerely, Ibrahim found himself saying "I look forward to it too."

All Ayra wanted to do then was pull her hand back from his and slap him to oblivion.

By the time they got to the Adeola home, Ibtiḥaj had arrived and she ran out of the front door, screaming without a care in the world. She threw herself on her best friend and Ayra hugged the other woman as though her life depended on it, realising just how much she'd actually missed – and how much she actually needed – Ibtiḥaj.

Ibtiḥaj laughed, patting Ayra's back. "I know you missed me but *éjor*, no kill me. Na me be my family last born."

Laughing through the tears that surfaced, Ayra pulled back. "You never change."

Ibtiḥaj's grin was blinding. "I can never do so."

Ibrahim cleared his throat then. Her grin falling off her face, Ibtihaj turned his way and eyed him from head to toe. Not so fazed, Ibrahim smiled at her. “Hello, Ibtty.”

“Hello to you, Oga Ibro. The only reason I’m not asking you to get out yet is because of my friend here. Thank you for bringing her safely even though I know she was more than capable of driving herself here.”

Ibrahim put his hands in the pockets of his coat. “I know she is. I just didn’t want her to come alone. Besides, I haven’t seen you in a while. You’re still a little cold towards me.”

She rolled her eyes. “God abeg. Oya, be going.” She turned to Ayra and her smile reappeared. “You came with a bag *shebi*? You’re not going home this night and e no concern me whether or not you and Ibro are doing couple outfits. I did not send the two of you message.”

Both Ibrahim and Ayra ended up laughing and while the harmony of it sent a warm arrow to Ibrahim’s heart, it made Ayra’s chest squeeze and her smile wavered which did not go past Ibtihaj’s sight. Ibtihaj frowned, wondering what was going on.

Ibrahim was the one who got Ayra’s box from the car and he ended up going in with both women so he could say hi to Ibtihaj’s parents who were leaving for Raven Isle with the chartered vehicle Ibtihaj had come with. They – Falilat and Al-Amin – had a wedding in Lagos which was to last the entire new week. Ayra couldn’t believe just how grateful she was, knowing she and Ibtihaj were going to be the only ones in the house.

Ibrahim stayed until Falilat and Al-Amin were gone. When Ibtihaj took Ayra’s box in, Ibrahim faced his wife, quite sure he didn’t want to leave although he knew he couldn’t stay. Ayra, who’d discarded her coat so Ibtihaj could take it up, faced him. Her act was starting to crumble and she just needed him gone.

Ibrahim put his hands in his pockets, lamely asking “You two would be good, right?”

She nearly laughed as she folded her arms. “Are we ever not good?”

That got a small smile out of him. “I didn’t know what else to ask...” He sighed, taking a small step forward. “If you need anything, call me.”

All she could wonder as she stared at him was if he was only saying that so it could seem as though he cared; as though he actually loved her and he was going to miss her. For all she knew, it could be just another lie in the mighty web he’d built with the people he called his best friends.

Knowing better than to not act for a little longer even though she was really tired of it all, she nodded, smiling at him. "Sure, Ibrahim. I'll call you should I need anything."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They stayed there, no one moving even by the tiniest inch. With a sigh, Ibrahim got his hands out of his pocket and closed the space between them. One arm going around her waist and the other hand cupping the back of her head, he brought his lips down on hers; kissing her softly and gently, in a way he'd never done.

Ayra's vision blurred as the tears welled up in her eyes again and her body, not used to such gentleness, treacherously gave in bit in bit. She kissed him back, her body and mind revelling in how softly he kissed and held her, as though he was scared she'd break with the tiniest pressure. Glad she wasn't pushing him back, Ibrahim pulled her closer and kissed her deeper, loving how so close to insanity he felt pushed towards when her hands moved from his sides to his hair, her fingers weaving through his curls.

The memory of him kissing Bella and bringing her to a climax in their foyer back in August was like a cold slap on Ayra's face and she pulled back, abruptly ending the kiss and surprising Ibrahim. Reality caught up with her and she looked away from him which made him frown.

"Ayra?"

She tried to pull away from him but he didn't let her. He tried to meet her eyes but she wouldn't let him. His frown deepened. "Ayra, what's —"

She said the first lie that came to mind, crumbling to pieces internally. "I'm on my period and we're not home..."

"Oh."

She finally raised her head and her eyes shone with the tears she was barely holding back. "You should go, Ibrahim."

He nodded, a slight rosiness on his cheeks. He let her go and rubbed the back of his neck. "I should...I'm sorry."

She needed him out, as fast as possible. "It's fine, Ibrahim."

Thankfully, Ibtihaj came down then, clapping her hands. "Oya, oya, Oga Fahad, come and be going...Ayra, what's —"

Ayra shook her head, smiling insincerely. "It's nothing."

That was all it took for Ibtiḥaj to know she had to push Ibrahim out of the house. She told him not to call them until it was extremely important before slamming the door shut in his face, leaving him on the front porch wondering why everything felt wrong.

Inside the house, Ayra's knees gave way and she fell to the ground. Bringing her hands to her mouth, she broke the same way she'd done on the day she'd discovered that everything was nothing but a lie; a perfect painting that was now ripping to shreds.

Her chest squeezing painfully, Ibtiḥaj knelt in front of her best friend and pulled Ayra into her embrace, allowing the latter cry against her chest, her frame wrecked by her sobs.

"Oh, Ayra." Ibtiḥaj blinked back her own tears. "I'm so sorry."

Outside, Ibrahim stopped by the car and turned around to look at the Adeola home, wondering if Ayra was really going to be fine. In the area between Downtown Aomi and Eastside, Anneth pulled hers and Nathaniel's front door open, smiling at Jalal and Tobi who raised the beer packs in their hands with grins on their faces.

In Downtown Aomi, Bella sat in the living room of hers and Ibrahim's apartment, talking to Serkan Yilmaz and his wife, Aliana, over the phone while internally asking herself whether or not Ibrahim was coming back home.

It took half an hour after Ibrahim left for Ayra to pull away from Ibtiḥaj and say she wanted a bath. Although she wanted them to get straight into whatever it was that had happened, Ibtiḥaj couldn't bring herself to say no; not after Ayra had cried in a way she – Ibtiḥaj – had never witnessed before, even when Ibrahim didn't show up for Eid or for their graduation.

She held Ayra's hand the entire walk up to her room and she only let go when she had to step into the bathroom, Ayra's sniffles haunting her in the tiled space. She got one of the bath bombs in the basket on the vanity and put it in the tub before filling it with water that was warmer than she'd like on a normal day; water that would be warm enough for Ayra.

Ayra, who'd gotten out of her clothes and into the bathrobe she'd brought along with her, sniffled once again as she stepped into the bathroom. She managed a small smile. "Thank you, Ibty."

Ibtiḥaj's chest squeezed painfully but she managed to smile back. "Come off it abeg. This is nothing." She turned off the tap. "You'll be okay alone in here?"

Ayra nodded. "I will be."

"Alright then. I'm right outside if you need anything."

"Thank you, Ibty."

"You're always welcome."

When she stepped out of the bathroom, Ibtiḥaj let her mind finally run wild and she came up with every unfortunate situation. She wondered if Ibrahim and the others had gone back to their old ways of leaving for a long time while Ayra stayed alone or if they'd done something as bad as uttering the worst statements.

She went as far as wondering whether or not Ibrahim had done something as bad as hitting Ayra. She told herself that if that was what had happened, she'd waste no time in killing him and feeding him to the wild animals in the zoos and resorts all around the country once she was done roasting his remains.

To keep herself busy, Ibtiḥaj got out pyjama sets for the both of them and then proceeded to put every single thing that was out of place back into their respective spots. By the time Ayra stepped out of the bathroom, the room was clean but Ibtiḥaj's mind was still spiralling.

No words were shared as she picked her own towel and headed into the bathroom. The only thing she was grateful for was that Ayra looked a bit

better after the bath although her face still stayed a little puffy. Ibtiḥaj had her bath in record time and by the time she got out, Ayra was dressed and she had a small smile on her face.

“Shey we can start talking now?”

Ayra’s smile widened by an inch. “Tell me about Adil first.”

It took everything in Ibtiḥaj not to groan. “Ayra.”

“Please, Ibty. Tell me about Adil first and I promise, I’ll tell you everything I haven’t told you since the day you left.”

“Aunty, if I beat you!”

“Ibty, *please*.”

Ibtiḥaj’s chest squeezed again and she knew deep, deep inside that there was no way she would say no. Pushing every negative thought aside, she focused on the man who’d recently become part of her life and it was easy – something that was still scary for her – for heat to rush to her cheeks. Wanting to hide it, she moved in the direction of the wardrobe.

“Omo, where do you even want me to start from?”

Ayra loved it so much that for the first time in a while she could focus on something that wasn’t the nightmare her life had become. Her eyes widened slightly and she sat on the bed. “Ibty, are you blushing?”

Ibtiḥaj, who refused to turn around from her skin products, blushed deeper. “Shut up!”

“Oh my days, Ibty!”

“Guy, stop na.”

Ayra laughed and the sincerity of it made her chest ache as it had been so long. “Ibty, you said the day a man would make you blush like me is the day the world would run mad. I guess that day has come.”

Resigned to her fate, Ibtiḥaj turned around and began applying lotion to her arms. Her smile was small but lovely and for a moment, Ayra saw herself in her friend as that was the same expression she’d always had when she thought about Ibrahim or when she spoke about him, even long before he’d reached out with a marriage proposal.

Shaking her head slightly to push away the thoughts, she focused on Ibtiḥaj who’d started talking, moving from her arms to her legs and ensuring every inch of skin was generously covered with lotion.

“His name is Adil Bello and he’s half Atlantican-half Palestinian. His mum is Palestinian while his dad is Atlantican from Nohea, just like your family.”

She smiled at Ayra who was already smiling back and then she turned back to the dresser, putting the lotion’s cap in place before picking her powder. “He’s into graphic design but he’s actually a Computer Engineer who’s completing his PhD there in Liverpool. He plans to return to Atlantica once he finishes early next year In Shaa Allah. He said they’re a lot of his family members there in the UK who’d be returning from the end of this year. According to him, they’ve stayed away from home for too long so...”

The warmth she felt as she listened was yet another thing that caused Ayra’s heart to ache and she chose to focus on the good, pretending that her own life didn’t exist; at least until Ibtihaj was done with her own story. Letting the warmth bloom within her, Ayra folded her legs and ensured she was comfortable. “How did you two meet?”

Ibtihaj put the powder back down and then moved to put on her pyjama set. Her smile was even more beautiful. “It was very funny sha.”

“I’m all ears, Ibt. Share the details!”

Ibtihaj laughed. “I bumped into him at this coffee shop and I spilled his coffee. The thing was even doing me like dream because all those things only happen in films na.” She rolled her eyes when Ayra laughed. “Get out abeg. Sha, his coffee spilled and I offered to get him another one as per the big woman I am.”

“You’re not okay.”

Ibtihaj grinned. “You should know that by now na. Sha, I wanted to get him another one as per the big woman that I am but he insisted on getting another one for himself by himself and then he went ahead to pay for mine too even though I didn’t ask him.”

Ayra’s eyes were wide with amazement. “Are you serious?”

Ibtihaj nodded, briefly returning to the bathroom to hang up her towel and Ayra’s bathrobe. She replied when she returned. “I am. I got to know his name was Adil then and he got to know my name was Ibt because you know they ask for our names to put on our orders.”

Ayra nodded. “Yeah.”

Ibtihaj walked over and sat beside her. “This whole encounter was like dream o but I told him thank you and I didn’t think I would ever see him again but the very next day, I went to get croissants from this bakery and I

ran into him and this yeye man just had to look my way before I could look away.”

Ayra smiled teasingly. “You’re the type of person to run away though.”

“Thank you o! I’m not that kind of person but for some reason, this man was making me want to run away.” She hissed but there was no spite to it. “He paid for my croissants o and when I told him that I could pay for it myself, he was like ‘I know you can. I just don’t want you to’. I will lower my pride and tell you that it was then I knew I was in trouble and you had to see me praying to not run into this man again. Ayra, if you see me begging God.”

Ayra so badly wanted to laugh. “That prayer wasn’t answered, right?”

“Guy! I met him in a bookstore and then I met him in my hotel elevator. He said he was there to see his cousin, Ayman, abi na wetin be his name?” Ibtihaj shook her head. “We even spoke about what we were doing in the hotel when we got down. When he entered the elevator, he asked if I was following him and you had to see me trying not to smile, Ayra. God abeg...”

She sighed heavily. “Sha, he was able to get me to have lunch with him and let’s just say throughout the time I spent touring, he made time to come around to be with me.”

“So you’re dating him?”

“Nah, I’m dragging class small.”

“Ibty!”

Ibtihaj smiled smugly. “He’s up to the task, I know so...Also, I want him to finish his degree first and then return to Atlantica before I can think of committing. I don’t want to rush into this but he’s a good person, Ayra, and yes I like him a lot. You can tease me about it later abeg because I was going to warn you to not compare me to how you were when you liked Ibrahim but with what happened earlier, I know better than to make that joke now.”

Ayra’s smile dropped and so did the badly bruised heart she was still trying to piece together. She tried to put her smile back on but it was too hard so she had to look away. Ibtihaj, who’d seen the brief internal struggle on her best friend’s face, felt her chest squeeze once again. She reached out and took Ayra’s hand in both of hers.

“Ayra, what’s going on?”

Ayra swallowed and stared at the crack between the curtains on the window, arranging all her thoughts so she could tell everything in chronological order, no matter how painful it was going to be. After all, if she needed Ibtiḥaj to help, the latter had to know every single thing.

“Ayra?”

Exhaling softly, Ayra turned back to her friend with eyes that turned glassy with a fresh sheen of tears and a smile that a perfectly carved knife aimed at Ibtiḥaj’s heart.

Staring at Ayra made Ibtiḥaj understand she had to brace herself for the worst because she wasn’t sure she could completely recognise the Ayra in front of her. With fear clawing at every part of her, Ibtiḥaj swallowed and patted the back of Ayra’s hand, forcing a smile on her face. “I’m listening, Ayra.” She said softly. “I’m always going to listen.”

With every ounce of courage she had gathered, Ayra opened her mouth. “Do you remember the day we went to school to get our certificates and other documents?”

Her heart in the pit of her chest, Ibtiḥaj nodded. “You said you wanted to surprise Ibrahim with lunch or dinner and I was being my usual self about it.”

Ayra’s smile bled with pure pain. “That dinner never happened, Ibty. Lunch didn’t happen too.”

Ibtiḥaj’s heart dropped a little lower. “Ayra —”

“I’m going to tell you everything and I’ll show you what I have and I need to listen to me, okay?”

For the first time in her life, Ibtiḥaj wasn’t sure she could trust her best friend. However, she nodded, scared to death. “Okay.”

When Ayra started talking, Ibtiḥaj realised she should have expected the absolute worst of the worst. With each word that slipped past Ayra’s lips, Ibtiḥaj felt blood drain from her face and a chill run down her back. With every story Ayra told, Ibtiḥaj’s heart dropped lower and lower until there was nowhere else for it to go.

Disbelief held her tightly in its grasp and every other emotion came together to form a cocktail that felt as though it would poison and drown her if she let it. When Ibtiḥaj was sure it couldn’t get worse and that everything had to be a sick, twisted dream, Ayra got her laptop from her box and pulled up the folder with the necessary footages and pictures. Turning the screen Ibtiḥaj’s way, Ayra felt play and the only thing that

stopped Ibtiḥaj from screaming was the fact that she brought her hands up to her mouth, pushing back every single sound.

It was one thing to hear it all and it was another thing entirely to watch it all play out on the screen; evidence that harshly told Ibtiḥaj that it wasn't a sick and twisted dream. All of it was real and while she'd been touring the UK, Ayra had been living in that reality.

The last footage, which had been gotten that very morning, ended but Ibtiḥaj couldn't bring herself to turn away from the screen until the laptop went to sleep and the screen turned dark. Slowly, Ibtiḥaj turned her head Ayra's way.

Ayra, who still her small smile on despite the tears that slid down her cheeks one after the other, managed to shrug. "That's everything I promised to tell you, Ibty. I hope you can understand why I kept it from you and from everyone else all this time. It was in my best interest and if it weren't for the fact that I can no longer do this alone, I would have held on for a little longer."

Pain and guilt hit Ibtiḥaj first. Pain because out of every person, Ayra had to be the one to be dealt fate's cards of misfortune. It wasn't as though she wished misfortune on anyone but Ayra shouldn't have been on the list because if there was a person who deserved the world and everything good it had to offer, Ayra was the perfect embodiment.

The guilt was that born out of the fact that while she'd been living her best life and catching feelings for Adil, Ayra had been navigating her way through lies, deceit and pain; all on her own although the women at the masjid had helped in their own way.

Ibtiḥaj's tears felt like little knives as they welled up in her eyes, disfiguring her line of sight while the pain and guilt balled into one big ball that pressed down on her. She choked on a sob; there was no way to avoid it and when there was nothing else to do apart from succumb to her tears, Ibtiḥaj let herself go. Like she hadn't done in so long, Ibtiḥaj cried while her heart felt as though it was cut open and left to bleed.

Doing nothing to wipe away her own tears, Ayra pushed the laptop aside and shifted closer, pulling Ibtiḥaj into her embrace and providing the same warmth she'd wanted since that day in August. Ibtiḥaj cried harder and Ayra let herself cry too, both of them holding onto each other as they let it all out.

They stayed there for a while, not caring about the time that ticked by. When their tears dried, Ibtiḥaj's anger began to simmer until it became an

uncontrollable blaze. She pulled back and angrily wiped away her tears. “I’m going to kill them.”

There was a little flip, right in Ayra’s chest. “Ibty –”

Ibtihaj was already on her feet, slowly starting to see red while all that blared in her mind was bloody murder. “I’m going to kill them! Starting from Ibrahim, I’m going to kill them and then I’m going to gladly go to jail for it. They can’t get away with it, Ayra, and I’m not even going to allow you stop me.”

Ayra watched her best friend go towards the wardrobe and pull it open, rage rolling off her in ways. Like every single time she’d turned to Ibtihaj for help, she felt immense gratitude that there were people in her life who were willing to do so much for her even when she didn’t know how to do much for herself until now that she had no other choice but to learn.

By the time Ibtihaj put on an abaya, Ayra sighed quietly and stood, taking small steps towards her best friend. “Ibty –”

Ibtihaj whirled around, still so mad. “No, Ayra, you should listen to me.” She put her hands on Ayra’s shoulders. “Any other time, I would let you tell me that Ibrahim and the others would come back and all would be fine. Any other time, I would let you go back even when all I want to do was pull you away from him and then.”

Ayra’s chest had another flip when Ibtihaj’s eyes glassed over, the grip on her – Ayra’s – shoulders tightening.

“Any other time, I’d let you tell me to calm down but *not this time*, Ayra. I’m not going to listen to you this time. They went too far and they all deserve to die and if I need to spend the rest of my life in jail, repenting for my sins, I’ll do it. So please, do not try to stop me. Don’t even tell me you’re going back there. We’re going to forget about them once I’ve fed them to the wild animals in the zoo and –” She choked over a sob. “God, they need to die and be ruined. You don’t deserve all of this. I don’t wish this on anyone but you of all people didn’t deserve this.”

Smiling sadly yet beautifully, Ayra reached up and cupped Ibtihaj’s face. “Ibty, I need you to listen to me.”

“Ayra –”

“Please, Ibty. Just listen to me.”

Ibtihaj glared tearily. “If you mention anything about going back there or something along the line of forgiveness, I swear to God, na here I go kill you.”

Ayra let out a small laugh before she sighed. “Ibty, I’m going to go back there.”

Ibtihaj’s heart dropped and the rage came back in full force. “Ayra, shó wá —”

“It’s not because I want to, Ibty, but because I have to. I have to go back, for my sake more than anything else.”

“Why?!” Ibtihaj shook her best friend the way she always did when she needed Ayra to see reason. “Why?!”

Ayra’s sad smile returned. “I’ve only told you the things I know of, Ibty, but there’s still so much left to uncover and I don’t think I’ll be able to leave or be at peace with myself if I don’t get to the end of it. I want to know everything so that when I leave, I won’t keep asking myself what I did to deserve all of this. I don’t want to leave and still wonder how I came into the picture and how they knew so much about me to the extent that they knew the roles to play; roles that deceived me totally and deceived you too.”

Ibtihaj felt as though she’d been stabbed repeatedly and her emotions were back to being that poisonous cocktail.

Tears welled up in Ayra’s eyes. “I need to do this, Ibty, and I can no longer do it alone so I’m here with you because you’re the only one I can open up to right now. The others I opened up to are the sisters in the masjid but they don’t know me as well as you do. I don’t think anyone, apart from my parents, does.”

She blew out a small breath, trying to hold the tears back. “I don’t like staying there, Ibty, and you have no idea how draining it is to pretend to still be the girl who’s helplessly in love with Ibrahim. You have no idea how much it hurts to see him almost every single day, to not flinch when we have to touch or kiss or hug, to smile at everyone else and act like I can’t see them for who they truly are.”

Ibtihaj’s restraint on her tears began to snap and Ayra blew out another breath, moving her hands to Ibtihaj’s shoulders. “You don’t know how hard it is to stay there, Ibty, knowing that although I changed a lot of things in the house, it’ll always be a house that Bella worked on and left pieces of her inside. This is hard for me, Ibty, especially when I have to pretend as though I’m not hurt; as though I’m not trying to find my footing or even as though I don’t hate the fact that there’s still one part of me that still craves everything I had and —”

Her voice broke, breaking Ibtihaj too. “I don’t want to do this, Ibty, but I have to. For my peace of mind, for my eventual closure — no matter how

painful it'll be to get there, for everything, I need to do this, Ibtu. I need to know what led to this web of lies being created and why I had to be dragged into this. I need to do this so I need you to understand and I know it won't be easy but I need you to pretend as though you don't have any idea too, until we figure it all out. You will get your chance to ruin and kill them and believe me, I won't do anything to stop or pull you back but *please*. Until then, *please* trust me."

She began to cry. "Please help me and please trust me, Ibtu. Please."

The flame of rage died out and Ibtuhaj hugged Ayra again, both of them breaking one more time. It went without saying that Ibtuhaj was going to trust and help. No matter how hard it was going to be, especially when they all – she, Ayra, Ibrahim, and the squad – had to meet along with every other lying piece on the chess board they'd spread out.

Ibtuhaj was willing to do anything. She loved Ayra that much.

33

Monday morning was grey and dull and it met Ibrahim in his personal studio; a place only he and the squad knew about. A place only he and Bella had access to.

The smell of fresh paint hung in the air, the entire space so quiet to the extent that Ibrahim could hear his breaths as he slowly slid out of the bewitched mode he went into each time he had to paint. In his chest, the heaviness was back and in his mind, there was only one thought: that he had had officially lost it.

The painting he'd taken an entire day to complete stared back at him. Unlike the pride he should have that came with a completed work, Ibrahim felt a mix of things; uncertainty, absurdity, confusion, and fear.

In front of him, on the thirty by forty inches canvas, was a painting of Ayra; his second painting of her and the first one where he didn't have to do it for an ulterior motive. His first painting of her – the one which he'd hung in her room before they'd gotten married – was to make her feel special and to further rope her into him.

The painting in front of him, however, wasn't supposed to exist yet it did. He'd come to studio when staying at the apartment alone had begun to feel as though he was being haunted. When the urge to paint had hit, he'd given into it, allowing it bewitch him and pull him into the world he knew all too well. He'd started the painting with Bella in mind but along the line, he'd gone off course. Instead of the red dress he'd pictured, he'd brought to life one that was pink. Dark curls with red highlights replaced the ones of the woman he'd loved for years. For her face, he'd used his signature butterflies but even a dummy would know it was Ayra.

He'd painted the memory of her on her birthday back in July; capturing her mid-twirl, the pink dress he'd gotten a beautiful cloud around her, while her hair was the one she had on since he'd returned from Fiji.

His chest squeezed as he accepted the fact that this had to be his best painting but he couldn't bring himself to love it, quite unsure of how exactly he was supposed to feel and why Ayra was now ingraining herself in nearly every part of his mind although they'd been together for quite a while.

Sighing, he put his brush down and then put the palette aside, telling himself to get it together although he'd been telling himself to do just that for a near month. He then removed his apron, turning back to the painting. He reached a conclusion then that no one, except him, could see it. He could imagine how the others would react, especially Bella, and he honestly

wasn't sure he was ready to deal with that. It was the first time he felt like a criminal and it felt like an itch he couldn't get to no matter how he tried.

Too many emotions swirling within him at the same time, he began to put his things together so he could clean up. He glanced at his phone screen as he moved with the brushes, his chest squeezing once again when he reminded himself it'd been over twenty-four hours and he'd not heard from Ayra; something that had never happened before.

She always texted, even though in recent times her texts had reduced, and not hearing from her did things to him; things he wasn't sure he wanted to decipher. Pushing the thought down, he washed his brushes and then laid them out to dry before proceeding to clean up the splotches of paint and remove the protective cover he'd spread on the floor around the canvas.

He'd just finished when his phone rang and it was funny how a twinge of disappointment settled in his stomach when he saw that it wasn't Ayra calling. It was Bella.

Ensuring his hands were dry, he picked up the device and accepted the call before bringing the phone to his ear. "*Sengilim*."

"Good morning to you too, Serkan. It's so nice to know that your phone is finally reachable."

He leaned against the nearest wall, his newest painting drawing his line of sight like a moth drawn to flame. Even while painted with her face covered, Ayra was so beautiful that it actually did hurt. He refocused on the conversation. "I'm sorry. I just had a rough day and night so..."

"Where are you? I've rang your doorbell thrice but no one's answering. Not even Ayra."

He reached up to massage his temple. "No one's home."

She was quiet for a moment. "Serkan, it's barely seven AM on a Monday morning. Where are you?"

He kept massaging his temple, looking away from the painting. "I'm at the studio. I had a painting to work on because it wouldn't leave my head."

Her voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "Please tell me you *didn't* take Ayra there."

He nearly laughed humourlessly. "I didn't." Her painting which stood in the middle of the space felt like he did. "I'm not that stupid, Bella."

"So why is no one home? Where's Ayra then if you're in the studio?"

Although he knew it would eventually lead to an argument, he told her the truth. “Ibty returned on Saturday night and Ayra’s been there ever since.”

The moment that followed was quietly tense and then she spoke, her voice was back to being a dangerous whisper. “*Sei solo da sabato sera* (You’ve been alone since Saturday night).”

He let his hand drop from his temple back to his side. “*Proprio sabato sera* (Just Saturday night). I’ve been painting since yesterday.”

“And you didn’t think it was important to let me know that?”

He sighed. “Bella –”

“I slept off wondering if you were coming home on Saturday night although you weirdly said you couldn’t sleep over or at least stay late until you had to go up to meet Ayra. While I wondered if you would come home or not, you were actually alone?” She laughed dryly. “Wow, Serkan, wow.”

Not having anything to say, something that hadn’t happened in a while, Ibrahim let his head drop, staying quiet. Thankfully for him, she continued.

“And then you’re unreachable throughout yesterday which made me worried. While it was tempting to barge into yours and Ayra’s apartment, I didn’t want to face her and all that time, you were painting and she wasn’t around while I was losing it at home.”

“Bella –”

“I normally have access to you at any time, Serkan, even when you’re painting but this weekend has been all shades of weird. Now that I think about it, everything has been somewhat weird since we returned from Fiji. It’s what we spoke about on Saturday, isn’t it? She’s acting weird, according to you, and it’s getting to you. That’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

Something unfamiliar crept up the back of his neck. “Drop it, Bella.”

“Why should I? Ibrahim, do you have any idea how I feel right now? I’ve been worried sick and all along, you’ve been alone and Ayra’s been gone and I had no idea neither was I able to reach you. Now you want me to drop it? Ibrahim, *che diavolo*? (What the hell?)”

Whatever it was he felt, it crept even upwards; headed straight towards his mind. “I’m sorry, okay?” He wasn’t; that much was startlingly clear to him. “I know you all said it’s a little destabilising to get used to how much she’s changed but it’s been a lot for me and Ayra surprisingly telling me she’s leaving for Ibty’s on that same Saturday was also a lot so I’m sorry I

worried you but I'm not sorry for taking yesterday for myself. I needed it for my sanity, Bella, and I need you to understand that."

"Are we seriously about to fight because of Ayra?"

He was tempted to smash his head against the wall. "Bella..."

The silence that followed was heavy and he hated how confused it made him; how everything felt as though it would spiral into something he won't be able to stop from blowing up into way too many pieces. Eventually, Bella blew out a long breath and his chest squeezed. That unfamiliar feeling kept spreading and he could feel a migraine coming.

"It's Monday, Ibrahim." She eventually said. "You promised you'd be at work today."

He had forgotten but he knew better than to say that. He sighed and nodded although she wasn't there. "I'll be there. I'll just clean up and then head home."

"Okay."

They weren't okay, he knew it, and it was the first time it drained him in a way he couldn't explain. "Bella —"

"Serkan and Aliana would be here by Friday night and we'll be having dinner with them on Saturday. I'd text Ayra since I'm supposed to be the happy person whose lover is finally coming home but I don't think I want to do that...No, I definitely *do not* want to do that. Not when she's starting to affect us."

"Bella —"

"I'll see you at the office, Serkan. I'd ask what you painted but I'm really not in the mood so I'll probably see it when I get the chance to come over. There's a meeting at noon for a new programme Jalal came up with. You don't want to miss it."

She hung up on her end and he lowered the phone, his emotions and thoughts a jumbled mess. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe but it didn't help. Moving around the studio didn't help too and when there wasn't much else he could do, he stopped in the middle of the space; right in front of the new painting.

His chest tightened and he looked down at the phone that was still in his hand. No calls from her, no messages, and he was losing it like he'd never done before. Knowing until he pleased Bella, the day was going to be shitty, he drew in a long breath and slowly blew it back out.

He was confusedly drained in every way possible and the day had barely started.



The dining room in the Adeola home was a detective's dream.

It was littered with a lot of papers, pens, and Ayra's notes which she'd camouflaged as novels she knew Ibrahim would never read; something Ibtihaj had found very, very smart. There were highlighted names and words, printed pictures, and lines that linked two likely happenings together. There were question marks too; in areas where some things didn't add up and in places that needed more clarity.

Ayra sighed as she descended the stairs, rolling up the sleeves of her the cashmere sweater she wore over her favourite trousers which she borrowed from Ibtihaj each time she slept over. Her hair was in a single braid, the red highlights a striking contrast against the dark curls. Although it had been a little over twenty-four hours, she was looking much better than she'd done in over a month since everything in the new phase of her life began.

She took in the empty dining room before finding her way to the kitchen, a smile appearing on her face at the sight of her best friend at the island and the aroma that reached her nose. Ibtihaj had made Indomie noodles and Ayra was glad as she couldn't remember the last time she'd had them. Also, Ibtihaj made a noodle dish that was worth dying for.

"I did not want to cook anything and since you were still taking time in the bathroom, I said lemme cook indomie." Ibtihaj put forks in both bowls of noodles and fried eggs before pushing one towards Ayra who'd stopped on the other side of the island. Ibtihaj's smile was small but warm, hiding the rage that still simmered underneath. "How far?"

Ayra nodded once, pulling out a stool and occupying it. "I'm okay. Much better than I was yesterday."

"Better. We're still killing them."

Ayra laughed, nodding. "Yes, Ibt. We're still killing them. That's not going to change."

Pacified, Ibtihaj smiled satisfactorily and pulled out another stool so she could sit beside her best friend. Her smile turned small but pretty. "Adil called when you were in the bathroom. He wanted to say hi to you but omo, you were wasting time."

"You should have told me! I would have rushed out."

“Abeg, abeg, na you know that one. He’ll call another day and you’ll be able to talk to him.”

Ayra picked her fork. “I don’t like you right now.”

Ibtihaj snorted. “Be lying to yourself.”

They ate in silence for a bit before Ibtihaj spoke again. “Collin got back to me this morning.” She watched as Ayra straightened. “There are available flights to all the destinations we’ve highlighted from now until the middle of October. From the middle of October, prices would be higher as the festive period approaches so if we’re going to travel, we’ll have to make up our mind soon as to when we’d want to leave, how long we’d want to be away, and how long we’d spend in each place.”

Although the food had lost a little taste, Ayra took a hearty bite, chewed and swallowed before nodding. “Okay. We’ll think about it. That was fast of him though.”

Ibtihaj’s smile was evil. “When I have something I can use to blackmail him, he knows better than to not answer me.”

“Ibty!”

“Abeg shift.” Her smile slid off her face a moment later and then she sighed. “I was thinking this morning.”

Ayra’s stomach dropped a little. “I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

“Wó, you will still listen to me.” Ibtihaj lowered her fork. “I don’t think I’ll be able to hold back from causing damage if I’m in the same room with those idiots.”

“Ibty —”

“I will try, for your sake and for the sake of the fact that all of this is for the greater good. But, I think to be on the safe side I’ll like to limit how many times I’ll see them. I know they know we’ll always attend events together and until we call this marriage off, there are going to be events. I just want you to know that while I will be pretending as though I don’t want to commit murder, I won’t be able to attend all of it. I will kill them if I do and I don’t trust my mouth to not run.”

Ayra nodded after a moment passed. “That’s understandable. You holding back for now is already more than enough for me.”

Ibtihaj rolled her eyes. “How many times do I want to tell you that there’s only so much I wouldn’t do for you? Ehn?”

Ayra let out a small laugh. “Get away.”

“Also,” Ibtiḥaj’s serious tone returned. “I wanted to ask you something. Can you do this?”

Ayra’s brows furrowed slightly, confusion a beautiful expression on her face. “Can I do what?”

“We’re about to dig deep into all of this, Ayra, and I know we would find a lot of things we won’t like and it’s going to hurt you, a lot. During this time, you’ll have to keep acting as though everything’s fine. You’re going to keep transitioning like you told Ibrahim but you do realise that while all of this is going on, you’re still going to be his wife, right?”

Ayra’s appetite disappeared and her throat dried as the words sunk in. Ibtiḥaj, who kept her eyes on the other’s, continued. “I know you won’t be clingy to him the way you were before and you won’t always stay in the same space with him but you do realise you’ll have to keep having conversations with him, you’ll have to hug him, kiss him, and do everything else, right? After all, you’re still married to him and although I want to kill him and take you far away from him, he has no idea that we know what we do so at one point, he’s going to expect things from you. So can you do it, Ayra?”

“If we are to push forward with this, you have to be sure that you can because if there’s something I realised this morning while talking with Collin, it’s that this is going to be big and you said acting so far has been draining but we’re going to have to keep acting; in front of our families, in front of those devils that we called friends at some point, in front of Ibrahim... We’re going to keep acting and you’ll have to act more than me because you’re going back to that house again and again, as long as we’re still both in Aomi. So, Ayra, can you do this?”

It felt as though her chest was being clawed at when there were marks that were yet to heal. Ayra swallowed the lump in her throat with little difficulty, the words and the gravity of the situation swirling in her head. She’d had those thoughts cross her mind once or twice but she never sat down to really understand it all, until now. All she’d been focused on was how to get answers to every question she had, ignoring how she’d have to act while getting those answers that were going to sting in so many ways; something she was very sure of.

She tried to picture it; acting even better than she’d done, pushing away everything she’d learned while being intimate with Ibrahim, just like before. Her chest squeezed and too many bells went off in her head, repulsiveness hitting her perfectly well. So far, every little – and chaste – kiss and hug had taken a lot from her and she’d done her best to stay away from him more

than she used to. But moving forward, she asked herself how long that would be enough. He'd already kissed her in a way she wasn't used to on Saturday night when he'd dropped her off at Ibtiḥaj's and like Ibtiḥaj said, until she decided it was time to leave, she was still his wife and he had rights over her even though she was now leaning towards disinterest in most of the rights she had over him.

It was going to be hard, that much was clear, and it was going to take so, so much from her. But they couldn't move on without it. She couldn't get everything she was searching for without it and it hurt, much more than she'd expected it to.

Ibtiahj felt another stab of pain at the sight of Ayra's inner turmoil, her – Ayra's – eyes filling up slowly with tears that welled. Ibtiḥaj told herself not to cry. "Ayra..."

Ayra sniffled. "I'll try." She wiped away the tear that slipped. "It'll kill me over and over again but I have to try. It's a sacrifice I'll have to make in order to get away from him and the others for good so I have to do this. I'll try my best, Ibty. You'll help me on days when it gets too hard, right?"

Ibtiḥaj took Ayra's hand in hers. "You don't even have to ask. I'm always going to be a phone call away and I don't care how late it is. Even if it means us booking a hotel room just so my parents and your parents don't suspect anything until you're ready to tell them, I'll do it. You mean the world to me, Ayra, and for hurting you, *Olorun nikan ni yoo gba won* Ibrahim from the deaths I have planned for them."

Ayra let out a teary laugh. "I don't understand that one very well."

Ibtiḥaj smiled like an innocent child. "That's even better."

Ayra laughed again before a sob lodged itself in her throat. "I love you so much, Ibty."

Ibtiḥaj softly squeezed the hand that was in hers. "I love you too. Oya, eat and let us go back to our detective work. We've already finalised that we'll be going to the UK, Turkey, and South Africa before we come back here to Atlantica to figure out everything else. Let's finalise the list of all the places we'll visit there and also the people who might help. Then, we can get started on our travel plans and we'll come up with the lies we need to tell those *ozwors*." She hissed. "They'll just be making good girls like us lie."

"Allah will forgive us. It's not like we are doing it on purpose."

"True. He will forgive us...When we're not working on our plans, I'll help you practice your acting skills. I'll practice mine too. And if that stupid

Ibrahim comes to do that nonsense thing that they do inside film where the man will now be loving the woman because she changed from the woman he knew her to be, it's me and him that will enter one trouser."

Thinking back to the conversation they'd had in the parking lot on that same Saturday and the way he'd been extra touchy and gentle, Ayra felt raw fear at the possibility of that happening. Ibtihaj gently squeezing her hand again brought her back to the present.

"Ayra," Ibtihaj spoke softly. "You know better now than you did before so even if that ends up happening, you're not the same person he got married to. Also, if you try anything mad, you know I will knock sense into you. Don't forget I still know how to shake you like rag and ask *'Sho wa alright ni?'*"

Ayra could only laugh, gratitude a tiny seed that grew in her chest and every other part of her being.

"In fact," Ibtihaj continues. "It's even good if he ends up loving you because he's mad for pulling you along all this time. He should even love sef, so that it will pain him die. I want to see what he'll do when that happens because there's no way he's going to leave Bella that easily and all will be well, especially when she and the others find out it's because of you."

Ayra felt slight discomfort. "I don't want things to get too messy."

"Wó, at this point, my dear, things are going to get messy but we'll do our best to not be on the side that's messy." Ibtihaj offered an assuring smile. "Let's just focus on what we have to do and let everything else happen the way it wants to. If Ibro starts to fall, just be looking at him and remind yourself that he had all this time to do so, he just wanted to be mad. Remind yourself that he took your sincere love for granted and so he no longer deserves it because you were ready to offer him everything you had to give. Everything he'll want to give now is going to be too little and it's going to be coming when things are too late."

Ayra allowed the words get engraved in her head, focusing on the part where everything Ibrahim would give from that moment on would only be too little and too late.

"You're going to be fine, Ayra." Ibtihaj said. "And I will be with you all the way. When our parents get involved, they'll be with us too and we will get you out of here and you will get better. In Shaa Allah you'll only get stronger and stronger and you'll get to live the very best of lives. You're going to be fine, I promise. Okay?"

Barely holding back her tears, Ayra nodded. "Okay."

"I love you, Ayra. I always have, even on the days you nearly wanted me to kill you, and In Shaa Allah I always will."

Letting out another teary laugh that had her dimples popping, Ayra sniffled. "I love you too. Adil will never come close to how much I love you."

Ibtihaj was left blushing and she playfully hit Ayra's arm. "Stop it jor!"

Unable to help it, Ayra started laughing again and Ibtihaj had no other choice but to join in. Upstairs, in Ibtihaj's room, Ayra's phone beeped, a new message lighting up the screen.

Anneth: *Ayra, love! It's been so long and I'm so going to apologise for how long it's been once we see each other. However, I have wonderful news! Serkan (yes, Bella's lover) is coming into town on Friday so they're inviting us all for dinner at their place on Saturday. Bella's too excited and Ibrahim is supposed to be the one inviting you but I got ahead of myself. See you then! Please extend the invitation to Ibtty too! Looking forward to seeing you both there. Ciao!*

At exactly 11:59AM, Ibrahim pushed the meeting room's door open and stepped in, his head hosting a gentle throb he knew was going to get worse as he'd barely slept since Saturday night.

Every person in the room – the squad and some other employees – turned his way. He didn't bother to fake a smile as he closed the door and headed straight to his chair, noticing how Bella – who sat on the opposite side of the table – turned her head, away from him. Frustration and irritation nicked at him but he pushed it down and looked away too, towards the others who watched them with varying emotions.

Ibrahim only felt more irritated. "Aren't we getting started? We don't have all day."

Jalal jumped from his chair, a lazy smile on his face. "You're right. We certainly don't. Also, we have very important issues we'll have to attend to after this. Right, Ibrahim?"

Ibrahim's reply was an icy glare; something he hadn't given out in quite a long time. Unfazed, Jalal only smiled wider and went on to power the projector, his presentation appearing on the screen a minute later while a secretary passed printed copies around. Breathing in and out, Ibrahim told himself to focus. Although it took a minute longer than he would have liked, he slipped into business mode.

Jalal's proposed application brought together a number of their already existing applications but rather than for the general public, he wanted them to have it targeted at tertiary institutions within and outside the country. From student representative elections to reigning spots on campus alongside student reviews, the idea was brilliant and Ibrahim had no doubt it would scale through seamlessly up to testing level; something Jalal knew all too well, judging by the proud smirk on his face.

When the presentation ended and everyone agreed with the idea to be pushed forward, feedback was given on the restructuring of the management board. The crucial spaces had been filled with extremely competent individuals and whatever was left was to be filled by the end of the week. Full implementation of the new company front was to be at the end of October and each department was ready to work towards it.

Little issues were then discussed and Bella was the one who brought the meeting to a close. One by one, the other employees left the room and it wasn't long before only the squad remained. Whistling happily, Tobi strolled to the door and slid the lock in place while Anneth pressed the button that allowed the blinds go shut, blocking out every prying eye

although employees hardly came that way unless they were after something. Jalal then put his hands on the table and leaned forward.

“So,” He said, looking from Bella to Ibrahim. “What’s going on, Serkan and Sevgilim?”

Bella shrugged before leaning back in her seat, her arms folded across her chest. “Nothing. *Puoi chiedere a Serkan però* (You can ask Serkan though).”

Ibrahim stopped toying with his pen, a brow raised. “Seriously?”

Anneth leaned on the desk. “Guys, let’s not make this worse. We should be fixing whatever’s wrong. So...What happened?”

Ibrahim looked at Bella and she looked away. Biting back an irritated scoff, he turned to the others and the question that had been swirling around his head all morning slipped past his lips before he could even think of stopping it. “Why did we go ahead with this?”

Anneth, Tobi, and Jalal exchanged confused looks before turning back to him the same time Bella did. His brows drawn together, Tobi asked “What are you talking about?”

Ibrahim mirrored his lover’s stance; his arms folded, his body leaning back. “Me marrying Ayra, Serkan being Bella’s periodical lover; all of it. Why did we go ahead with it?”

Bella scoffed. “Is this a joke?”

“I’m not laughing about it, am I?”

She glared and he stared right back. Anneth, clearly quite uncomfortable, cleared her throat to get their attention. She gave Ibrahim a small smile when he reluctantly turned her way. “I don’t know if memory’s failing you but we did it to get your parents off our backs so you could be with Bella without worrying about anything else.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, you were going to pretend to be worried about Ayra but then your relationship with Bella was the main reason why we went through with it. Since your parents weren’t going to allow you be with Bella, we gave them someone they would like. While they got content with that, you got your lover so...Why? Are you regretting it?”

Ibrahim looked away from her, back towards Bella. “I didn’t say that.”

“Then why did you ask?” Jalal asked. He then raised a brow. “Things aren’t getting complicated, right? You’re not about to tell us you’re starting to feel something towards Ayra, right?”

It was scary for Ibrahim how fast his defences came up and how the objection hit him fair and square. He threw a dark look Jalal's way. "Are you out of your mind?"

Jalal raised his hands. "Easy, Ibrahim. What on earth did you want me to think? You can't be asking that question if things weren't getting complicated. What else would be more complicated than you coming to say you have feelings for her?"

Bella laughed but it was way too light; way too fake. "*Non essere assurdo*, Jalal (Don't be absurd, Jalal)."

Tobi shrugged, sitting beside Jalal. "He does have a point though."

Ibrahim ignored the unfamiliar way his heart beat in chest and then tried to ignore the bitter taste in his mouth as he told them "There's nothing between Ayra and I except the marriage that binds us together. I know better than to look at her that way."

"Then why are you asking why we went through with all of this?" Bella asked, speaking to him directly for the first time since their phone call earlier that morning. "Why would you bring that up?"

Ibrahim sighed. "I've been thinking about it, that's all. I've been thinking about everything that's happened since we came back from Fiji and also everything that happened this weekend, up until our phone call this morning, and it wouldn't leave my head."

Anne's lips thinned. "Please tell me both of you didn't get into this situation because of Ayra." When silence was all she got in reply, she scoffed in disbelief. "Guys, what the hell?!"

Ibrahim ignored her and focused on Bella. "Remember when we decided to push through with it?"

"How could I forget?" Bella held his gaze, her expression calm and composed although she wasn't in anyway internally calm or composed. "You were the last person to buy into the idea but we were quite persuasive."

"You all were, especially you. I loved you enough to not say no to you. That's not the point I'm trying to make though. Out of everyone here, I think it's safe to say I learned the most about Ayra and I spent more time doing so than anyone else did."

"Well," Tobi spoke before Bella could. "You were the one marrying her so you had to be the one to know her better than we did. However, that

doesn't mean we didn't learn much about her too. Do you know how much information is in that folder of her? Don't get me started on Ibty."

Jalal shuddered. "It was worse than getting a PhD."

"Bro!"

Ibrahim cut back in. "I learned everything I could about her to I could play my role well. I ensured it was more than enough to know her like the back of my hand and be able to predict what she'd say, how she'd react, and how she'd go about things with or without our advices and Ibty's. When there was something new, I had to commit that to memory too and mind you, while doing this, I had to be the Ibrahim who led this company with all of you, the Ibrahim my parents wanted so they wouldn't see through the lies we were weaving even though we haven't ever been on good terms, and I had to be your Serkan, Bella. I had to be all of those while being the exact person Ayra wanted."

Anneth's expression softened a little. "Ibrahim –"

He didn't want to listen to whatever it was she had to say. "It wasn't easy but because I was going to be able to be with you without my parents' continuous disapproval, I put up with it all and I found a balance that's been working out well until Ayra's graduation when you and I ended up fighting because of the spontaneous decision to take her to Santorini. I made that up to you and we went to Fiji and I come back to meet a woman I can't recognise to the extent that it's impossible to even try to predict what she's going to do next. I know on Saturday you all said it was a *little* destabilising for me but you all don't know half of what I felt. You don't know half of what I've been feeling since I stepped into a house that had been turned upside down by a woman who seems the same but isn't."

No one said a word and Ibrahim continued, trying to put a lid on every emotion that brewed in one big pot in his chest. Not once did he turn away from Bella.

"You think it was easy to stay home and not leave in the last three weeks? While trying to keep the balance that was starting to tilt, I was also trying to navigate through what was different with Ayra and try to piece everything together but you have no idea how fucking hard that was because I didn't say anything; because I kept being the Ibrahim everyone wanted even when I couldn't understand myself."

Bella stared right back but the iciness in her gaze was gone, replaced by a stubbornness he was used to.

“And then on Saturday, when you all showed up, I thought it’d be better to just put it out there and I did and you all brushed it off as it being something little and that this is what we’ve always wanted so there was no big deal about it. Trust me, guys, I heard every word you all said but I don’t think you all understood that it wasn’t so little. I wasn’t going to say it out loud though so I put it at the back of my head and tried to get back on track. We went home, Bella, and I stayed with you and everyone else the entire day. If I was in the right state of mind, nothing would have stopped me from coming back once Ayra was asleep but I wasn’t in the right state of mind and I headed up only to meet Ayra leaving with a box. If you can put myself in my shoes, you should be able to try and imagine all that could have run through my head in that moment.”

Anne, Tobi, and Jalal were alert and they looked from one person to the other, trying to understand what was going on.

“Then she says she’s going to Ibty’s and when I point out that the box is too big for just one night, she tells me she’s staying for a little longer. This is someone whose schedule I used to have in my head so I could work things around for you, me, and the squad but I’m being spontaneously told on the same day I’m trying to put it into my head that I need to get back on track that she’s leaving for Ibty’s and she won’t be back.”

The memory was clear in his head but he couldn’t bring himself to tell them he’d pleaded with Ayra to drive her to Plum Boulevard. Swallowing, he continued, skipping over details. “I drove her down and had to see her parents because it’s actually been a while and it’s surprising they haven’t called us yet. I dropped her off with Ibty right after.”

The memory of the kiss they shared was like lava in his head; hot and leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Ibrahim’s chest squeezed and the pot of simmering emotions nearly toppled over. He knew better than to share that memory and even if he could share it with them, he didn’t want to. He never wanted to.

“We said very weird goodnights and since then, I’ve dealt with too many thoughts and too many voices in my head to the extent that I’ve been painting since yesterday.”

He ignored the way the others’ eyes widened. “Turning my phone off was necessary. I know I should have let you and the others know I was slipping into a space but it was the last thing on my mind. Like I told you this morning, Bella, I’m sorry I made you worry but I’m not sorry for taking this weekend to myself to try and clear my head. Just so you know, my head’s still not clear and I really don’t like fighting with you but here we are.”

He let out a breath, feeling even more drained than he did earlier that morning. He shut his eyes briefly and when he opened them, they were an open book; swirling with the emotions that toppled against each other. “I just need you all to understand that this period has been a lot for me and I’m trying to navigate through all of it.”

“So what?” Bella finally asked. “We leave you be until you can sort everything out with your *wife*?”

Ibrahim stopped himself last minute from hitting his head against the top of the table. He settled with massaging his temple while the others – Jalal, Anneth, and Tobi – looked like they’d rather be anywhere else.

“Obviously, this whole arrangement hasn’t been easy on any of us but the aim of it all was for you and me, Serkan. Yet it feels like even that’s getting affected and it all comes back to Ayra. Everything comes back to Ayra.”

Ibrahim lowered his hand. “That’s not true and you know it. We both knew what we were getting ourselves into and I’ve done my best to ensure my relationship with you didn’t suffer in any way. Sure, there were times where things got strained but I made it up to you every single time. This is the first time things are slipping out of my control and all I’m asking is for you to be patient and understanding.”

“That’s it. I should be patient and understanding for how long? It’s already been three weeks, Serkan. How much longer is this going to take?”

He didn’t have an answer to give her and the realisation had him simply staring back at her, his jaw tightly clenched to the extent his teeth ground against each other.

Anneth, who knew things were heading towards an explosion, pushed herself off the desk. “Okay, let’s take a moment to pull back a bit.” She let out a quiet but relieved breath when Ibrahim and Bella looked away from each other. Putting a smile on her smile, she brought her hands together. “Ibrahim, you’re going through a phase and thank you for letting us see how in-depth it actually is. This says more than our conversation on Saturday did.”

Ibrahim stared at the screen on the wall, his arms folded. Anneth continued. “But I still stand by what we said on Saturday. This is a destabilising period, just not as little as we’d thought, and I don’t think there’s any reason why you won’t be able to get used to whatever is going on with Ayra. We will understand but Bella also has a point. You’ve already taken three weeks and if we have to be patient and understanding, we have to know for how much longer. Bella especially needs to know because at

the end of the day you two are in a relationship that has stood the test of a decade and I think it's worth more than this...*thing* that's going on with Ayra."

Jalal and Tobi nodded, speaking like twins. "Exactly."

Bella looked at Ibrahim who kept his gaze on the screen. The throb in his head that had been gentle as at the time he'd stepped into the room was now gaining momentum and he tried to not show it.

"Like Nate said on Saturday, Ayra's change and withdrawal is for our own benefit. As long as she's not doing anything we should be wary of, then we shouldn't be too bothered. I think you should take this week and just try to get things on track. I'm not saying it's going to be easiest thing to do but remember why we started all of this in the first place. It was for you and Bella and you two fighting because of the other woman isn't really going in line with the aim of all this so..."

She turned to Bella. "And you, my Isabella, let's be a little more understanding and patient this week." She smiled wider. "I know Ibrahim's going to come around by the time Serkan and Aliana arrive." She turned Ibrahim's way. "Right, Serkan Fahad?"

Ibrahim finally turned from the screen. He stared at her for a moment before he nodded, once. "Right." Every part of him screamed in protest, saying he wouldn't be able to do it; not when Ayra was getting stuck in every part of him. He forced on a small smile. "I'll come around by the time Serkan and Aliana arrive."

Anneth clapped her hands once, clearly delighted. "See? We'll be fine...Now, Tobi and Jalal, let's give them space to have their own discussion. They need it."

Jalal pouted. "Do we really need to?"

She glared, all warmth gone. "Jalal Ahmad and Oluwatobiloba Enioluwa!"

They knew better than to stay there. Both men said byes and hurried out. Anneth grinned at Bella and Ibrahim when she got to the door. "You both should kiss and make up. We'll be fine, okay?"

They didn't give her a reply and she didn't mind. She walked out and closed the door behind her. A quiet minute passed before Bella sighed, unfolding her arms. "I don't like fighting with you."

"And you think I do?"

"This weekend was a lot for me and I was so, so worried."

“And I tried explaining things to you but it came to us fighting about Ayra.”

“Serkan.”

“Sevgilim.”

She sighed again and then pushed her chair back. Standing, she walked around the table and Ibrahim’s face stayed composed as she sat on his laps, her hands going to his shoulders. Her eyes held his. “She’s becoming a big part of our conversations these days and there’s so much revolving around her. It got to me more than it ever did and it took away every sense of rationality. I’m sorry.”

His chest squeezed again. “You need to trust me, Bella.”

“I do. I’m sorry, okay? I got insecure.”

“There’s nothing to be insecure about.” He said, feeling like a hypocrite as little insecurities popped up regarding where both of them stood on his end in that moment. “You’re the woman I love. Ayra’s just the woman I married.” It felt like he’d been stabbed and the knife had been turned in the wound. “I’ve had to live with her for this long so the disruption in my balance affected me more than it should have.”

Her smile was small. “I’ll drill that in my head. I’m sorry, Serkan.”

He blew out a small breath, wanting the pressure in his chest to ease out. It didn’t. “I’m sorry too. We should communicate better next time.”

Her smile widened, her eyes bright. “We should.” She leaned in. “I love you.”

His chest squeezed so tightly, it hurt. “I love you too.”

She kissed him softly and naturally, he kissed her back while being unable to find it in him to be happy that they were okay. The kiss broke when she pulled back and he opened his eyes, his heart dropping to the very bottom of a pit when for a split second, all he saw was Ayra’s teary face when he’d kissed her in the Adeola’s home.

Immediately he blinked the vision cleared and all he saw was Bella once again. She was smiling at him and he smiled back, knowing fully well he hadn’t heard whatever it is she’d said if she’d spoken at all. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in the crook of his neck and it should have felt as right as it always did but it didn’t and it only made his heart drop further.

Their signature scent reached his nose but he couldn’t even revel in it; not when he remembered the fruity and floral combination Ayra had scented

like on Saturday evening. Trying his best to breathe, he wrapped his arms around Bella and held her tightly, feeling colder than what was normal.

Bella made herself even more comfortable against him, a blissful sigh slipping past her lips as she asked “What did you paint anyways?”

Ibrahim told himself to keep breathing. “Nothing important.” The lie of the century. “I got rid of it.”

She pulled back, surprised. “You got rid of a painting that took you more than a day?”

He smiled and prayed to God that it came out sincere. “It wasn’t what I wanted and you know how I am with my paintings.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to the comfortable position. “I know all too well. You should make us a painting soon. It’s been a while.”

He nodded. “Sure. I’ll get started on one soon.”

“I love you, Serkan.”

“I love you too.”

And he’d never tell her or anyone else that the painting of Ayra had been moved from the studio to a new space he’d purchased; a space only he would have access to. A space they were never to find out about.

On Friday, Ibrahim left the office at 7:45PM.

With Ayra at Ibtihaj's place all week, he'd been working late; just so he could put his mind into something and not think about her. During breaks and while trying to fall asleep, he ended up doing just that; even when he stayed two nights in a row with Bella.

He parked the Telluride in its usual spot in the underground parking lot of The Oasis. A glance at the passenger seat had him recalling how Ayra had sat there the previous weekend, staring out of the window at the places they'd driven past.

The ache in his chest, which he'd been carrying around all week, returned. Unable to push down the urge for much longer, he grabbed his phone and unlocked it. He stared at her contact for a moment before he hit the dial button, bringing the phone to his ear while his heart decided it was time to race as the line rang. Just when he thought it'd go unanswered, Ayra picked up.

"Ibrahim."

His chest squeezed tightly and Ibrahim found himself swallowing, as nervous as a schoolboy with a crush; a way he hadn't felt in such a long time. It hit him then that he'd missed her even more than he knew. He'd missed her a lot. "Ayra."

"You know, when we were in Santorini, you said you and the others would no longer be closing late. It's funny how it's past 8 and you're not home."

"I just got home and —" His heart screeched when her words made sense. Barely breathing, he opened the car door. "Ayra, are you home?"

She laughed and it was so soft that it hurt. She hadn't laughed like that in what felt like forever and Ibrahim told himself he'd cry if she told him she was still at Ibtihaj's place although there was no way she'd know he wasn't home if she wasn't in it.

"Yes, Ibrahim." She said beautifully. "I'm home."

It took him less than half a minute to leave the car and lock it. It took him a minute and a few seconds to run to the lobby and when the elevator took its time coming down, Ibrahim made the decision to use the stairs, not caring how long it took to get up to their floor; no matter how long it took to get home to her.

By the time he got to the tenth floor, his breaths were laboured but he didn't care. With a hand that trembled, he entered the passcode and then

pushed the door open. His world came to a beautiful stop and the first thing that hit him was the scent of her; a fruity and floral combination. Then there was Ayra; an embodiment of the painting he'd made and hidden from the world, including himself.

She wore the dress he'd gotten her for her birthday back in July and her red highlights were a little darker than they used to be but still evident, a contrast against her dark curls. Her hair fell past her exposed shoulders and while she had no make-up on, she was beautiful. So, so beautiful. Dimples he'd missed appeared on her cheeks when she smiled and her familiar blush made an appearance, adding more magic to the already beautiful scene.

Her eyes twinkled in a way he'd never seen before. "Don't tell me you ran up here, Ibrahim." Mischief wrote itself clearly on her face as she leaned forward, her smile widening by the tiniest inch. "You missed me that much?"

Feeling the overwhelming urge to cry, Ibrahim grabbed her hand, pulled her close, and brought his lips down on hers. A moment passed before she kissed him back and Ibrahim pulled her even closer, feeling as though he could finally breathe; as though he'd been underwater throughout the week.

Her arms moved to his neck, her fingers weaving into his hair and he sincerely loved it; all of it. He kissed her with a mix of emotions he couldn't explain; feeling anything and everything all at once and revelling in the way she kissed him.

The need for air had them pulling apart and Ibrahim only properly looked at her once he'd caught his breath. She kept her gaze lowered for a few more seconds before she brought her eyes to his, a smile returning to her lips. "Hi, Ibrahim."

He brought his hand up to gently cup her cheek, his thumb moving in a soft caress. "Hi... You're home."

"I am." She then made a face. "You waited a whole week before calling? Wow, Ibrahim."

His chest squeezed again and he nearly told her that he'd opened their chat windows time and time again, typing out so many messages that he never sent because he couldn't bring himself to; not when he wasn't used to being the one who often texted first between them.

He wanted to tell her of the times he'd driven to Haven Estate just so he could try to get a glimpse of her while being scared to death to walk up to the Adeola's front porch to ring the bell. He wanted to tell her about how

many times he'd clicked on her contact, wanting to call but being unable to do so until that very night.

He wanted to tell her all of it but the words wouldn't come together so he went with the first thing that came to mind. "Ibty said I shouldn't call unless it was extremely important." He felt awful; as though he was the world's greatest liar. "And I had to respect the time you two had. After all, you two hadn't seen each other in a while."

"So you didn't miss me? Is that what you're trying to say, Ibrahim?"

She'd raised her brow and it was beautiful on her; way too beautiful for him to handle. His chest squeezed gently and the truth slipped past his lips. "I missed you...I missed you more than I even know, Ayra."

There were emotions that crossed her face at his admission but the only one he recognised was surprise; as though she had not expected him to say he missed her. The realisation that he'd only said the words "I miss you" a few times to her in the near year they'd been married was a stab in his chest. If there was hole he'd dug for moments when he felt like the worst person, he wanted nothing more than to crawl into that hole in that very moment.

Her smile was small and a little sad; a combination that made him feel way worse. "I haven't heard that from you in a while, Ibrahim. Usually I'm the one who says I miss you first and then you say you missed me too." Her smile brightened a little. "Good to see you taking new steps, Engineer Fahad."

He tried to smile but he failed. "I'm sorry." He really was. "I'll say it more often from now on."

Her mood changed, brightening up completely. She stepped away from him, taking his hand in hers and leading him in. "It's alright! I wanted to make dinner but I was so tired so I ordered in and set the table."

The living room was brighter than it had been in the entire week and it scented so much like her; it scented so much like home. Her things were there too; a veil on an armrest, her phone on a coffee table, and a half-finished bottle of orange juice by the remote on the other coffee table. Such placements weren't new to him – she'd done even more in the year they'd spent together – but in that moment it felt new, as though he was starting to live with her for the first time and everything she did amazed him and also made him feel really awful.

She led him to the kitchen and Ibrahim had to force himself to look away from her dazzling smile to the table she'd set. She'd gotten them a full

course meal from a Korean restaurant and everything was laid out well in the dishes they owned rather than the take out packs.

“I thought it’d be better if we ate from our dishes and not from the take out packs.” She told him, a little shyly. “Is that okay?”

He nodded, finally able to smile. “It is.” He couldn’t bring himself to ask for anything more. “It really is.”

“Great! Have you prayed Isha?”

He shook his head, knowing fully well his prayers were scanty like they always were once she wasn’t home. “Nope. I need to pray Maghrib though. I couldn’t do so at the office.”

“Alright then. I’ll wait for you to pray Maghrib and then we’ll pray Isha together.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

She didn’t stop smiling. “Okay.”

None of them moved and it was obvious she was holding back her laugh which made him smile a little wider. Giving into the temptation, he stepped forward and kissed her hair. “Thank you for coming home tonight, Ayra.”

“If I hadn’t come home tonight though?”

“I would have come to pick you and Ibtu up tomorrow. We’re having dinner with Serkan, Bella, and Serkan’s best friend, Aliana. Annet beat me to sending you the memo. Did you get it?”

She nodded, grinning. “I did! I’m so excited, Ibrahim. I wanted us to pray first before asking if Serkan’s here yet.”

He shook his head, back to feeling like the world’s worst person. “I don’t think he is. Annet and Bella went to await their arrival in Raven Isle. When they arrive, they’ll probably let us know.”

“Sweet! I can’t wait to meet him properly.”

His chest squeezed but he told himself to keep smiling. “I’m sure he can’t wait to meet you properly too.” He took her hand. “Come on, let’s go and pray.”

He led the way and she followed. Staring straight ahead and finding a beautiful feeling of intimacy with her hand in his, Ibrahim had no idea that Ayra had stopped smiling and that she stared at their hands with a little numbness and a little pain. She knew that in that moment, he was the man

she'd always wanted, but like Ibtihaj had said, his emotions were coming out when it was way too late.

Also, she – Ayra – could no longer trust him, no matter how badly a little part of her still wanted to.



“Oh yeah, before I get caught up in the excitement of finally meeting the man who has Bella’s heart, Ibty and I are planning to go on a girls trip next month In Shaa Allah. We came up with the plan on Monday and I really, really want to look forward to it but I have to run it through you first. You’re my husband after all.”

Although she didn’t raise her head, Ayra knew Ibrahim stopped eating. Using her chopsticks to pick a dumpling, she put it in her mouth and raised her head to look at him, chewing softly. Practicing how to act with Ibtihaj all week had paid off and while it had still been draining to pretend since he got back, it wasn’t as tiring as it used to be.

Ibrahim stared back at her, his chopsticks in one hand and his other hand on the top of the table. His expression was a mirror of her earlier one; surprise and a little disbelief as clear as day. His voice was low when he finally brought himself to ask “A girls trip?”

She nodded, swallowing the dumpling she’d finished chewing. “A girls trip.” Her smile came with practiced ease and she propped an arm up before resting her chin in her palm. “It was all we could talk about and I really, really want to go. Ibty and I haven’t travelled beyond Atlantica’s shores together before and now that she went to tour the UK, all we could talk about was going together. However, we don’t want to tour just the UK, we want to visit some other places in Europe too.”

A moment – maybe two – passed before Ibrahim lowered his chopsticks, putting a smile on his face that was all shades of insincere. It took him another moment to bring his gaze back to hers. “That’s...very impromptu.”

She nodded, pushing down the part that felt a little bad. “I know but please...We won’t stay long, I promise. I just really, really, *really* want to go on this trip with Ibty and I want it to be before the year runs out.” Although the reminder made her chest squeeze, she kept smiling and playing her part well. “Our anniversary’s coming up soon and while I’m not going to tell you if I have anything planned, I want to be home with more than enough time to spare in case I do have something planned.”

That got a very small laugh out of him. “That’s a very bad way of telling me you do have something planned, Ayra.”

She grinned while her heart cracked. She leaned forward. “Good thing you don’t know what it is. That’s *if* I do have something planned.”

His smile was a ghost on his face and he lowered his head. A near minute passed before he asked “Where do you two want to go?”

“We’ll start with the UK and then we’ll go to this town in Turkey Ibty can’t shut up about because a lot of people are making bookings there with her company.” She made the face she’d practiced so many times; one that made her appear cutely confused. “I don’t think I remember the name right now.” Her smile reappeared. “I’ll ask Ibty later... Anyway, we’ll tour the UK first and then we’ll go to Turkey and then we’ll tour whatever town comes to mind before coming back to Atlantica. Ibty said we should make a short stop at this new resort in Costa Casa before returning to Aomi.”

Ibrahim was back to staring at her and there was sadness mixed with another emotion she couldn’t decipher on his face. She felt a stab of guilt which she pushed down with immediacy.

“How long is this going to take?” He asked quietly. “You said you want to be back with enough time before our anniversary and that’s a lot of touring you’re about to do so... How long are you going to be away for again?”

She lowered her chopsticks and moved her hands to her laps. Silently blowing out a breath, she crossed one leg over the other and once again held his gaze. “Two weeks. Like I said, we won’t stay long and that’s a promise. Ibty already has the offers lined up so if you’re okay with me leaving, I’ll just give her the go ahead and she’ll get started.” She smiled perfectly well. “Perks of having a friend in the travel and tourism industry, right?”

He didn’t smile back. “What if I’m not fine with it?”

Ayra’s stomach dipped and her smile froze on her face. On her laps, her hand loosely gripped the fabric of her dress. “Ibrahim.”

“I’m just asking.” He pushed away his plate of dumplings and then folded his arms on the top of the table, leaning forward. “What if I’m not okay with you travelling, Ayra?”

She gripped the fabric tighter, tightening the leash on her rage. “Please be okay with it, Ibrahim.” The next words left a bitter taste on her tongue as she wasn’t one to emotionally blackmail but desperate times called desperate measures. “This is the first time I’m asking to travel, Ibrahim. You’ve travelled with the others a lot while I stayed back on my own and I just want to travel with Ibty this once. *Please.*”

The brief flash of pain on his face told her she'd hit her desired mark and while a part of her revelled in the victory, another part felt like a little monster. She didn't stop gripping her dress.

On the other side of the table, Ibrahim felt as though he'd been shot in the chest; the bullet hitting his heart squarely and perfectly. He stared at her and she stared back, the silence heavy and tense. She had a valid argument; he wasn't going to deny it. However, all it'd made him feel was even way worse than he'd been feeling since he'd walked into the house.

He had no valid reason to stop her to travelling with Ibtihaj, he knew it, but he wasn't ready to watch her leave again; not when she just got back. Not when he could barely survive a week without her. Not when everything about him – his thoughts, emotions, dreams, and even daily actions – had begun to revolve around her.

"Please don't say no, Ibrahim." She said quietly. "I'm really excited for this trip and I promise we won't stay long. Just please, don't say no. I'm begging you."

A band around his chest tightened to the point of sheer pain and he had to swallow the lump in his throat. When the urge to cry returned, he pushed his chair back and stood. Walking around the table, he took her hand and carefully pulled her up. He pushed away the plates, had her sit on the table and then he kissed her, holding his tears back when she returned the kiss.

He held her close and his lips moved from hers to her neck. Her hands moved to his hair and she tugged a little while he went on to leave little kisses on her exposed shoulder, unsure of whether he wanted them to go any further but not wanting to pull away.

"Ibrahim."

Maybe it was how softly she called his name or maybe it was the fact that in the hour they'd been together, he'd felt way more than he'd felt all week. Whatever it was, it made his movements stop and he rested his forehead on her shoulder for a moment before hugging her, burying his face in the crook of her neck.

Ayra frowned, hugging him back out of habit. "Ibrahim?"

She felt the dampness against her skin a moment later and when she tried to pull back, he held her tighter. He cried silently, the feel of his tears against her bare skin the only thing that gave him away.

Quite unsure of what to do, Ayra slowly patted his back while feeling a lot at once; the urge to push him away, the urge to hold him as tightly as he

held her, and the urge to continuously remind herself that he'd hurt her too and she had no right feeling bad for him in any way. He'd broken her first after all.

Although she didn't think it was possible, Ibrahim's arms around her tightened and a quiet sob made his shoulders shake. Not wanting to feel any worse than she already did, Ayra hugged him tightly; not as tightly as he hugged her but tight enough. She told herself she wasn't going to care more than she'd already done. She wasn't going to give him any more of herself; not when she was still putting her pieces together.

At Raven Isle, Bella smiled at the couple that approached. Beside her, Anneth smiled too. Serkan Yilmaz grinned and removed his shades, his wife right at his side. "We're back!"

Bella's smile widened. "And we're so glad to have you back." She then stepped into his open arms, hugging him as tightly as she and the others always did.

"Hello, Isabella."

"Hi."

Ibrahim Fahad was beautiful when he slept. Ayra always acknowledged that fact each time she woke up before he did on the nights and afternoons they slept in the same bed.

Unlike those times, there were no butterflies in her belly. A hollow space was what stayed in her chest and she no longer felt honoured to be blessed with the beauty of his sleeping face; not when Bella and the others had seen it more times than she'd done.

She watched him sleep for a minute longer, once more committing everything to memory; his skin that was the shade of smooth honey, his dishevelled curls, his full brows that furrowed slightly and relaxed at intervals, his long lashes, his straight nose, his lips, and his stubble-beard that was as neatly kept as it always was.

With a silent sigh, she gently pulled away from him. Putting a pillow underneath his arm where she'd been all morning, she got off the bed. She picked her nightdress from the ottoman at the foot of the bed and left the room. She walked past the family lounge where their prayer mats were still folded from Fajr and went straight to her room. She dumped the nightdress in the laundry basket in her bathroom and stepped into the shower area.

The water was warm against her skin and she took her time performing ghusl. The hollowness in her chest didn't ease up and she didn't try to force it. She thought back to the previous night; Ibrahim crying until he had no more tears to shed and then him taking her up to his room. He'd kissed her so tenderly and little by little, their clothes had come off and he'd made love to her. Although she'd told herself it was just sex, she wasn't going to deny it'd been beautiful and extremely gentle; as though he'd break them both if he applied even the slightest pressure. If things had been different, she would have loved every bit of it but things weren't different and when it had ended, the first thought she'd had – as he held her against him – was whether he'd had such tender moments with Bella and if he thought about Bella as he held her in his bed.

She'd stayed the night as he'd refused to let her go and after Fajr, they'd repeated the night's events. She'd been unable to fall asleep after that and she didn't have it in her to stay there until he woke up from sleep. Not with how hollow she felt as she stared at him after loving him so much for so many years.

Turning off the shower, she stepped out of the shower area and grabbed a towel from the rack. Once she'd patted her skin dry, she brushed her teeth and then exited the bathroom. On her way to the walk-in, she grabbed her

phone and met messages from Ibtihaj. Stepping into the walk-in, she switched on the lights and dialled her best friend's line. It was answered almost immediately.

"Ayra, tell me if you're well or if you want me to come over and murder those people starting from Ibrahim Fahad."

Ayra had to laugh. She stopped at the vanity, put the call on speaker mode, dropped the phone on the top of the dresser and then picked up her bottle of lotion. "I'm well. There's no need to come over and murder them, not when you'd be murdering them in your head this night."

Ibtihaj hissed. "I was kind of hoping you would ask me to come. I woke up wanting to slap someone this morning."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Abeg forget that one first." There was slight ruffling. "Anyways, how far? I didn't hear back from you last night and I didn't want to imagine what was going on."

Ayra applied lotion generously to her arms and then moved to her middle. "Last night was a lot honestly."

"Ah, wetin happen?"

"Nothing bad." She bent to rub her legs. "I came home before he did actually and it was easier to act around him. Thank you for the acting lessons. They're paying off."

"Of course! Na me na. You can't find a better actress than me."

Ayra rolled her eyes. "Get out."

"Never! Continue, my dear."

"He was really...sweet last night, Ibty, and it hurt a bit, y'know? I mean, this is the man I've always wanted but why is he coming now that he's tainted the image I've always had of him?"

"Shey he's doing that yeye thing of falling in love now that you're changing? Why are men like this?"

Ayra closed the lotion bottle and put it in place. She then picked up her body mist and went on to spritz. "I don't think he's in love with me because that'll be a stretch but it's like he's seeing me clearly for the first time and it made me feel a lot of ways."

"Ayra, I swear —"

"I'm not taking him back, Ibt. I'm not going to thwart all the plans we've made. I'm more sensible than that."

"Better."

"I just –" She applied the powder to her face, her nose twitching at the sheer mist it created. "I just feel a lot and it's not the easiest thing. He even cried last night and..." She sighed. "Ibrahim of last night and this morning isn't the same Ibrahim that left for Costa Casa with Bella. He also isn't the same Ibrahim I left last week and I don't want to dwell on it so I'm reminding myself that I don't need to feel bad for him because he broke me first and all...I'll be fine."

"Yes, Ayra." Ibtihaj said softly. "You'll be fine and I'm right here beside you, all the way."

Ayra smiled cutely. "Thank you."

"There's no need for that jor! Ehen, shey we are travelling o? I hope that man did not say no."

Ayra moved to one of the racks and pulled a maxi dress off the hanger. "He said yes." She pushed down the memory of him doing so as he held her against him, his lips on her hairline. "I just told him we'd be going to the UK, then Turkey, and then Costa Casa. I didn't mention Cape Town so he doesn't get suspicious. Bella texted him this morning. Serkan Yilmaz and Aliana are here and they're looking forward to meeting us this evening."

"Better, because I am looking forward to meeting them too."

"Ibt..."

"I have promised to be on my best behaviour na." Ibtihaj whined. "Free me abeg. I've already told you I'll be murdering them in my head but omo, if they do anyhow, they'll see anyhow."

Ayra put the dress on, pushing away the mental reminder that she didn't put on underwear. "I have no doubt about it. I'll give you my passport when you come this evening."

"Oya na. Lemme text Collin to secure those deals for me. If Ibro tells you he's going to give you money, collect o. Let's finish the money that we can before we leave. You deserve it. Think about it as you getting paid for damages."

"Ibt!"

"My dear, such is life o. We will survive and until you stop being Mrs Fahad, let's make use of what we have. It's all the best, Ayra. We'll be fine."

Ayra walked back to the vanity and picked up her phone. “In Shaa Allah...Anyways, I’ll see you in a bit. Lemme go and get something to eat. I’ve had a long evening and morning.”

“You people did it?! Ayra!”

Ayra hung up, warmth of embarrassment rising to her cheeks. Putting the device to sleep, she proceeded to loosen her jumbo braids and brush out the curls before pulling them into one single braid. Satisfied with the woman staring at her through the mirror, she grabbed her phone and turned around.

She opened the door of the walk-in to step out but stopped in her tracks when Ibrahim let his hand – which had been raised to knock – fall back to his side, both hands disappearing a moment later into the pockets of the navy blue sweatpants he had on. His smile was sleepily pretty. “You ran away.”

Ayra slipped back into acting mode, doing it half-heartedly as she just really wanted to eat and then try to get some sleep, alone. Giving him a small smile, she leaned against the door she held open. “I wasn’t able to go back to sleep so I decided I’ll just perform ghusl, take a bath, and then get something to eat.”

He stared at her so softly that her chest squeezed. Sincere worry became etched on his face. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I am. Just tired...You can’t blame me for that though.”

He smiled boyishly. “I can’t.” With a sigh, he got out his left hand and took her right one, squeezing softly. “Come on, let’s go down. I’ll whip up something for you.”

Something – despite it being very little – cracked a bit as she allowed him pull her forward, towards him. “Anything I want?”

Ibrahim’s smile didn’t waver and just like the first day, she was reminded that he was beautiful. He nodded, his arm going around her waist and holding her steady; her clothed body against his bare torso. “Anything you want.”

She held his gaze for a heart-breaking moment and then she plastered an excited smile on her face. “I’ll make sure to stress you.”

He nodded yet again. “That’s fine.” His smile then widened a little and he leaned forward, pressing his lips to her forehead. “Hi, sweetheart.”

Her chest squeezing and a small sob forming in her throat, Ayra shut her eyes. “Hi.”



Ibrahim walked to the mirror, adjusting the strap of the black watch he wore. Once the watch snug perfectly to his wrist, he blew out a breath and raised his head.

Compared to the times they – he and the squad – had to meet Serkan and Aliana, Ibrahim was dressed comfortably; a forest green long-sleeved sweater shirt, pale cream trousers, and white sneakers. He left his hair messy, his fingers being the comb that ran through them minutes earlier, and apart from the watch on his wrist, he didn’t have on any jewellery piece.

Satisfied with his reflection, Ibrahim walked over to one of the drawers and pulled it open, revealing rows of his signature perfume. He picked up the current bottle he was using and sprayed just a little before putting it back. Grabbing his phone and wallet from the top of his watches’ display case, he switched off the lights and headed out.

His steps were light, almost silent as he left the room, purposely ignoring the painting of Bella on the wall as he no longer thought it fit the room’s aesthetic, wanting Ayra’s painting on the wall instead. He stepped into the family lounge, wanting to call out to her, but his words died in his throat and his heart did a treacherous flip when Ayra raised her head and looked his way.

Like him, she’d dressed comfortably but just like he was starting to appreciate everything that came to her, he took a minute to appreciate how beautiful she looked. She wore black and white; a white long-sleeved inner shirt which she covered with a black, square necked, sleeveless dress that cinched slightly at her waist before flowing down to a mere inch below her ankle. There were black boots on her feet and a white crinkle cotton veil was wrapped around her head as a simple turban. There were simple stud earrings on her ears and her face was bare, devoid of make-up.

Ibrahim pleaded with his heart to not give up on him, especially when she gave him a little smile, her dimples making a shy show. She pushed herself off the loveseat and rose to her full height, her hands disappearing into the pockets he had no idea the dress had.

“Ibty’s on her way up.” She told him. “I hope you don’t mind us waiting for her.”

He shook his head, putting his hands in his own pockets as she walked over, to him. “No, I don’t.” He cleared his throat, attempting to chase away

the slight breathlessness. “You look...Beautiful. You look really beautiful, Ayra.”

Her cheeks warmed a bit as she stopped right in front of him, her smile not leaving her face. “Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“I just wanted to be comfortable.” Warmth crept up the back of his neck and a little flutter tickled his chest. “Thank you though.”

“You’re welcome.”

The doorbell ringing cut off his next sentence and disappointment hit when she turned around, away from him. “Ibty’s here. I’ll get the door.”

Not waiting for his reply, she walked away and he had to breathe in and out before pushing down every bitter feeling he had. Putting a tight leash on his emotional box, he went after her. Their excited voices reached his ears as soon as he descended the stairs and he purposely slowed his pace, wanting to listen to Ayra’s excited and animated sentences a little longer.

“Oh, here’s my passport.” She said. “Let me not forget.”

“As if I’ll allow you.” Ibtiḥaj said. “When you’re not mad.”

The reminder that she was travelling was a punch in Ibrahim’s gut and he barely had time to dwell on it as he stepped into the foyer. Ayra had her back facing him while Ibtiḥaj faced him perfectly. Ibrahim watched as Ibtiḥaj’s smile slipped off her face, her gaze turning to frosty ice, making his stomach drop. He knew Ibtiḥaj could be dramatic but in that moment, it didn’t feel as though she was being dramatic or overbearing. It felt as though he’d messed up in every way possible and she knew all about it.

“Ibrahim. Fahad.”

Ibrahim plastered a smile on his face, stopping beside his wife. “Ibty. I’m so glad you could make it.”

Ibtiḥaj’s smile did not reach her eyes. She put Ayra’s passport in the bag she came with as she replied. “Oh, I couldn’t miss it. I haven’t met Bella’s lover before so I was really looking forward to this.”

Ayra’s voice was soft. “Ibty, you said you’d be on your best behaviour.”

Ibtiḥaj turned from Ibrahim to her best friend. “I said I’d try.” She turned back to Ibrahim. “As long as you don’t annoy me tonight.”

Ibrahim forced out a laugh, dread starting to settle in his stomach. “I won’t. That much I can promise you.”

“Better.” Ibtihaj then grinned and pulled Ayra closer, linking their arms. “Oya let’s go.” She glared at Ibrahim. “Shey you can walk on your own?”

Ibrahim nodded although he wanted nothing more than to hold Ayra’s hand. “I can. Let’s go?”

Ayra nodded, her smile small but radiant. “Lead the way.”

He did just that, walking in front of them all the way to the elevator. They chattered about their upcoming trip and Ibrahim felt his chest twist over and over painfully as he had no choice but to listen as they got lost in their own world. By the time they got to his and Bella’s place, he wasn’t certain he wanted to continue with the dinner; not when he felt like a mess.

Unfortunately for him, he didn’t get the chance to come up with an excuse and flee. The door went open before they could even ring the bell and Jalal grinned at them before looking over his shoulder to yell “They’re here!”

Ibrahim could only offer a small smile, watching with a stab of jealousy as Ayra beamed, Ibtihaj doing the same beside her. “Jalal!”

Jalal’s grin brightened and Ibrahim felt the urge to punch his friend. “Ayra! Ibt! It’s been ages.”

Ayra nodded, her laugh beautifully light. “Tell me about it. God, I missed you.”

“Me too.” Ibtihaj said. “Shey you cannot call ni?”

Jalal laughed. “Don’t mind me. I’ll make it up to you two from now on.”

Ayra’s smile was so bright. “As you should.”

Ibrahim cleared his throat, getting Jalal’s attention. The latter raised a brow, opening his mouth to speak. Fortunately – for Ibrahim – Anneth joined them and she squealed as she hugged Ayra before hugging Ibtihaj, stating that she’d “missed them so much”. Nathaniel and Tobi joined them and as Ibtihaj glared at Tobi, warning him in Yoruba to not come close to him, Ibrahim felt like the world’s greatest hypocrite.

They – Jalal, Tobi, Anneth, and Nathaniel – did not mean a single word they said and Ibrahim knew it all too well. After all, he’d pretended like them once upon a time. However, things were changing and it was the first time he so badly wanted to shield Ayra from them. Unfortunately, he couldn’t; not when he’d been on their end once and not when he still had loyal ties to them – ties that had existed long before he even knew Ayra existed.

Anneth playfully hitting his arm pulled him out of his head. “Ibrahim! Where have you gone?”

Jalal was leading Ayra and Ibtihaj in while Anneth, Tobi and Nathaniel stared at him. Ibrahim schooled on a fool proof expression and returned his hands to his pockets, shrugging. “I’m lost in my head. You know how I get when such dinners come up.”

Nathaniel snickered. “You better gear up. Serkan’s in full acting mode tonight.”

On cue, Ibrahim let out a fake groan that he prayed seemed genuine. “Oh Lord. I’ll kill him.”

They all laughed and then pulled him in. In the living room, Ayra kept her practiced excited smile as Bella introduced her and Ibtihaj to Serkan and Aliana, her “lover” and “his best friend”.

For the first time, Ayra saw through their smiles and clearly saw the mockery their eyes held as they expected her to buy it all; like she’d always done. Keeping her smile on, she hid the fact that yet another part of her broke deep, deep inside. She’d really been a fool.

Beside her, Ibtihaj smiled too but in her head, she had each one of them hanging from ropes tied to a high bar while she tortured them over and over again.

It was one thing for Ayra to find out the squad – including Serkan and Aliana Yilmaz – had been lying all along and acting perfectly well, and it was a completely different thing to witness it first-hand now that the rose-tinted glasses of love and naivety had been taken off.

Every member of the squad was a beautiful liar and Ayra kept a practiced smile on her face while smiling ruefully inside at how much of an idiot she'd been. The squad's smiles were all shades of fake and their gazes held mockery as they delivered subtle jabs which she'd seen as complements in the time they'd all known each other.

The only thing that was different was that Ibrahim was quieter than normal and while Ayra thought it was a bit hypocritical as he'd definitely spoken about her and Ibtihaj time and time again, she derived slight satisfaction knowing that his changing tide affected the squad although they were doing their best to hide it while asking if he was alright.

Once introductions were out of the way, Serkan asked that they move up to the roof where dinner had been set as the dining table in the apartment wouldn't have been able to take them all. In that same moment, Falilat called and asked Ibtihaj to kindly return him as she – Falilat – wanted to take Al-Amin to the hospital to get a shot for the fever he'd come down with.

Although she was apologetic towards Ayra, Ibtihaj was happy to leave as she was more than ready to commit bloody murder. Ayra couldn't blame her best friend; not when she knew she'd honestly leave if the opportunity presented itself. For a dinner that had barely begun, it already seemed way too long and with how everyone was pretending, she knew there was a high chance it was only going to get worse.

While the others headed to the roof, Ayra saw Ibtihaj down to the lobby, unable to stop herself from laughing at how the latter insulted every single person they'd left behind. She – Ayra – waited until the chartered Ryde was gone with her best friend before taking the elevator back up to the roof level. By the time the carriage stopped and the doors went open, she'd slipped back into the Ayra they knew and took advantage of while keeping a box in her mind open for any information she didn't know of before.

The roof level of The Oasis was nothing short of stunning; its views of Aomi being the best offered by the entire building complex. The general pool was a clear and stunning shade of blue, lit up on all sides; including the side where a round table wide enough to sit ten people had been set for them, dishes – both local and intercontinental – laid out beautifully on

stunning dinnerware that clearly were reserved for nothing but the best occasion.

Like they always did, the squad acted well; gasping at the perfect moments and stating that Serkan and Bella didn't have to. Despite her smile and practiced awe, Ayra saw it clearly that Serkan and Bella didn't fit. When they thought she wasn't looking, Serkan and Aliana snuck in little movements; his hand moving to the back of the chair she pulled out, his hand brushing hers, and him adjusting one thing or the other.

Ayra had to applaud their audacity as it was a whole lot. She pulled out the chair opposite Serkan and sat, only turning her head when the chair on her right was pulled out and Ibrahim sat, pulling the chair closer to the table once he was comfortable. Judging from how the table became momentarily quiet, Ayra had a hunch Ibrahim's current sitting position was not the one they – the squad – had agreed on.

"Ibrahim," It was Bella. The smile on her face was tight and for some reason, Ayra loved it. "Serkan was hoping you'd sit closer." She patted the chair beside her that was still empty. "Like somewhere here."

Ibrahim, whose expression had been impassive, cracked a small smile. "I'm more comfortable here." He moved his line of sight to Serkan and Aliana. "Besides, I think this is better since we're facing each other."

Bella's glare was icy despite the fact that she was still smiling. "Ibrahim, you _"

Serkan cut her off, taking his hand in hers. "Let's not have a fight between best friends now, sweetheart." He turned to Ayra who saw through how fake his smile was. "Besides, tonight is to get to know Ayra better and also catch up. It's sad Ibtu had to leave early."

Ayra smiled back beautifully, finding petty happiness with how things were playing out. "It's sad indeed. She's really going to miss out but I'll let her know how it goes." She then linked her hand with Ibrahim's on the table; where all of them – especially Bella – could clearly see. Ignoring the momentarily surprised look on Ibrahim's face, she continued. "Also, please let Ibrahim stay here. I'm a clingy person."

Anneth snorted and covered it with a light laugh. "Tell us about it."

In her head, Ayra pulled the trigger of a gun that had materialised out of thin air, hitting Anneth in her chest. In reality, she simply smiled wider and tried to pull her hand back, cursing internally when Ibrahim held her hand tightly. On the other side of the table, Bella's eyes were lasers and the smile on her face – to Ayra – was sweetly murderous.

Aliana, wanting to ease the tension, put a smile on her face. “Why don’t we eat? The food shouldn’t get cold.”

Sliding into the seat that should have been Ibrahim’s, Jalal nodded with his signature smile on his face while amusement danced in his eyes. “Yes, please. I’m starved.”

Ayra should not have been relieved when Ibrahim let go of her hand to take the bowl Nathaniel was passing across but her silent exhale spoke volumes. The conversations – once the awkwardness from Ibrahim not staying in his assigned spot lifted – were light and they – the squad (including Serkan and Aliana) – spoke about everything they’d been up to with Ayra joining the conversation at intervals. Ibrahim majorly stayed quiet and Ayra told herself not to care.

By the time they got to desserts of cheesecake with vanilla scoops, Ayra told herself she’d had enough of their hypocritical conversations, jabs, and laughter. She decided to rein the conversation her way.

“I’m so, so glad we’re having this dinner, Serkan.” She said sweetly, ignoring the subtle eye roll from Bella. “You have no idea how excited I’ve been ever since I got Anneth’s text.”

Beside her, Ibrahim flexed his fingers just so he wouldn’t give into the urge to fist them, courtesy of the stab of jealousy he felt; an ironic moment as such stabs of jealousy were usually because of how touchy Serkan used to be with Bella each time all of them – without Ayra – met each other.

On the other side of the table, Serkan leaned back and rested his left arm on the back of Bella’s chair and his right on the back of Aliana’s chair. His smile was good but it held the mockery Ayra saw clearly. “I would have been fooled. I didn’t really get that vibe from you so I tuned down my own excitement.”

The others – except Ibrahim – snickered and Ayra’s smile shrunk a bit, making her seem embarrassed when she felt anything but. She crossed a leg over the other under the table, losing interest in the cheesecake although she was going to end up finishing it.

“I didn’t want to come off as too excited too.” Her laugh was disbelievably sincere and she even brought a hand up to her mouth, as though she was bashful. “I’ve been really, really, really excited, Serkan.” She let her hand fall back to her lap. “And so far, you haven’t disappointed. I’m awed.”

Serkan, laughing lightly, leaned forward – as though he was bowing for a cheering audience. “I’m flattered.” He straightened in his seat. “It’s also really lovely to be meeting you, Ayra. You haven’t disappointed too and it’s

so nice to see that all I heard about you is what I'm presented with. It's really lovely. Like I said earlier, it's a shame Ibty had to leave early."

Beside Ayra, Ibrahim wanted the dinner to come to an end altogether as he knew every single thing Serkan was saying; things he assumed Ayra didn't know.

Ayra's smile didn't waver. "Surely you'll be here in Aomi for a bit so you'll definitely see her around."

Serkan's smile deserved an Oscar. "Let's see how it goes. Hopefully, family won't call me back for one thing or the other before I can even enjoy being back here, with all of you."

Ayra, on a row with her performance, pouted as though she was really saddened. "Gosh, I hope that doesn't happen. I'd really love to have you around. I'm sure Bella would too. She talks about you so beautifully and I'm sure she missed you a lot."

Smirking while the others snickered, Serkan turned to Bella whose cheeks were stained with a little colour. "You did, didn't you?"

Bella pushed his face away, quickly glancing Ibrahim's way while Serkan laughed. "*Allontanati da me*, Serkan (Get away from me, Serkan)."

They – except Ibrahim – laughed, including Ayra who didn't know what had been said neither did she care. When they sobered, she turned to Aliana and offered a heart-warming smile. "And you, Aliana, it's so, so lovely to meet you. Just as with Serkan, I didn't want to come off as overly excited but I'm so curious about you. It's not every day I get to meet someone as amazing as you've shown yourself to be so far."

Aliana's cheeks darkened and her laugh was airy as she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, revealing the five piercings that ear had. "You know how to flatter people, Ayra."

Ayra's smile widened. "Consider it one of my talents."

Barely hiding a smile, Bella turned to Annet who sat between Tobi and Nathaniel. "*Olire ad essere abbastanza stupido al punto che é così facile ingannarti* (As well as being dumb enough to the extent that it's so easy to fool you)."

She smiled evidently when they snorted, trying to hide it as coughs, and then she turned back to Ayra. "You have a lot of talents, Ayra."

Ibrahim felt his anger simmering. He focused on Bella who stopped smiling when she saw the look on his face. "*Smettila* (Stop it)."

Ayra acted as though she was genuinely confused while a part of her cracked deeply. “Why are we switching to Italian? I don’t –”

Ibrahim cut in, taking her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “It’s bad habit.” He brought her hand up to his lips without much thought and kissed the back of it. “I’ve told them to stop. We can carry on with yours and Aliana’s conversation.”

Silence descended and another part of Ayra cracked. Where she sat, Bella fisted the fabric of her skirt, her voice icy when she spoke. “Serkan.”

Ibrahim gave her a blank stare while Serkan put an arm around her shoulder, smiling at her. “I’m right here, sweetheart. Don’t mind him.”

Her pettiness returning, Ayra went with every idea that popped up in her head, telling herself two could play a game although it was going to hurt her even by the littlest bit. She leaned in Ibrahim’s direction, still smiling with their hands still linked together. “You and Serkan are really cute, Bella.”

Aliana took a sip of her wine, nodding while the others looked from one person to the other. “Tell me about it. They really are.”

Bella glared, only looking away when Annet, Tobi, Jalal, and Nathaniel shared a joke that had her chuckling; a joke Ayra didn’t know. Ibrahim’s other hand balled into a fist and Ayra had to remind herself not to dwell on it as she refocused on Aliana and Serkan.

“So,” She asked. “How did you two meet and become best friends? Serkan, Bella says you’re Turkish. Aliana, are you Turkish too?”

Aliana nodded. “I am. Serkan and I have known each other for as long as we could remember.”

Serkan smiled fondly. “True. Like our parents said, we ran after each other with nothing but diapers and made sure to follow ourselves everywhere, up until now.”

While the others smiled, Aliana let out a lovely laugh. “That’s true. There are so many memories.”

Ayra, who smiled coldly, cut in then. “So where exactly in Turkey are you from? Ibtu and I are travelling by next month and Turkey’s one of our stops so maybe we can take a short tour round your hometown.”

Smiles froze and some of them stilled. Her hand in his, Ibrahim squeezed and although it was nothing too tight, it was clear he wasn’t fully comfortable. Nathaniel looked from Ibrahim to Ayra. “You and Ibtu are travelling?”

Gladly, Ayra nodded. "We are."

Bella fixed her line of sight on Ibrahim. "That's very sudden. There was literally no notice about it." She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "I thought we tell each other everything, Ayra?"

Ayra's smile stretched and she pictured herself for the first time as a villain in a story. "It was very spontaneous. You know Ibty's been away on work so we haven't seen each other in a while. I spent the week with her, I'm sure you know about that already, and we made the decision to go tour Europe before coming back to explore a new resort in Costa Casa and then come back to Aomi. Turkey's one of our stops and we want to explore Antalya. Let's know where you and Serkan are from, Aliana, so we can visit there too."

Anneth spoke before Aliana could. "Really though, this is so spontaneous. We didn't even know Ibty was gone until we came back from our last trip."

Ayra gave a half-shrug. "You six were busy in Costa Casa and I was busy with the renovation so let's just say it skipped my mind." She turned back to Aliana. "So where are you two from, Aliana and Serkan?"

Aliana's reply stopped Anneth from saying anything else. "Cappadocia. Serkan and I are from Cappadocia."

Ayra turned to Serkan. "So after our Nikkah, you had to go back to Cappadocia?"

Serkan's smile was small as he nodded. "Yeah."

"So your families are based there?"

Both Serkan and Aliana nodded and Ayra smiled bitterly. She continued with her statements and questions. "Can Ibty and I pay a visit to your families if we can? Would that be okay?"

"That's really impromptu." Tobi stated, moving forward in his seat. "If you're travelling by next month, there's little to no time to inform them that you're coming. They probably have things planned."

"We have events across Europe this period." Serkan told Ayra. "So there would barely be anyone in Turkey until Christmas and New Year. Even that's a probability."

Ayra nodded, as though she didn't know they were lying with their eyes wide open and their bodies unflinching. She continued. "So you two have been best friends forever. Before Serkan met Bella, did you two ever feel like you'd get married?"

Bella frowned. “You’re *very* interested in Serkan and Aliana, Ayra.”

Ayra pulled her hand away from Ibrahim’s, folded her arms on the table and leaned forward, nodding with a grin. “I am! I told you I was excited to meet them and very curious.” She turned back to Aliana and Serkan. “So did you two ever think you’d get married?”

Aliana nodded, sharing a brief look with Serkan before turning back to Ayra. “I think all best friends who have known each other for so long think about that at some point. However, Serkan met Bella and I’m married to a man who’s also – coincidentally – named Serkan. He’s just as sweet too.”

Ayra’s bitter smile returned, hidden beneath her pretence. “Oh really? There must be a lot of people named Serkan. Right, Serkan?”

Serkan’s laugh wasn’t sincere in any way. “You can say that. It’s a name with a beautiful meaning so...”

Ayra turned back to Aliana. “So you and your Serkan are married. Do you have kids?”

Aliana nodded. “Yep. We have two daughters; Kehlanı and Ayah. They’re the prettiest duo.”

Although Ayra knew both daughters’ faces, she asked “Can I see their pictures? I’m sure they’re beautiful, seeing how beautiful you are.”

The others – except Ibrahim and Serkan – opened their mouths but Aliana was faster. She shook her head. “I’m very private about my family. I know you’re trustworthy because of how well they’ve spoken about you but I’d like to know you a little more before showing you more about my family. I hope you understand.”

Ayra wasted no time in nodding. “Yes, I understand.” She then turned back to Serkan. “Serkan, you said your name has a beautiful meaning. What is it?”

Serkan adjusted his seat. “It means ‘of noble blood’. It can also mean ‘leader’ or basically, someone who’s of noble origin.” He nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Ayra’s smile shrunk. “That’s really nice...Has there been any situation where you’ve inspired someone to take on the name? I think Serkan’s a lovely name that can be taken, even if it’s as a nickname.”

She turned to Ibrahim who brought his glass of juice to his lips and her smile was that of the devil. “Serkan Fahad. It has a nice ring to it, right?”

Ibrahim choked on his juice and Jalal's cheesecake went down the wrong windpipe, causing him to go on a coughing fit. All around the table, the others looked like they'd seen a ghost and Ayra loved it. When Ibrahim was able to properly breathe once again, he faced her with wide eyes and Ayra smiled so sweetly; the perfect epitome of an angel who could do no harm.

"Serkan Fahad sounds so beautiful." She hoped her eyes shone so brightly that it hurt him. "Don't you agree?"

"Ibrahim sounds perfectly fine." Bella gritted out through her false grin. "I don't think Ibrahim's the type of person you can call Serkan."

But that's what you and everyone else here call him, Ayra wanted to say. Instead she asked "Why do you think Ibrahim's not the type of person to be called Serkan? He's of noble blood so..."

Bella's right eye twitched. "He's just not a Serkan. Serkan Fahad doesn't have a nice ring to it."

Enjoying herself so well, Ayra leaned back in her seat. "I think it does. I'm sure Serkan would agree. You too, Aliana."

Bella's eye twitched again. "Ayra, I said it doesn't –"

"Guys!" It was Anneth. Her smile was so shaky that Ayra noticed. "Let's not fight. Bella, Ayra's just joking. She likes Serkan's name and she just thinks it'll be cool as a nickname for Ibrahim. It doesn't mean she actually wants to call him Serkan and –"

Ayra cut in. "What if I want to? I really like Serkan as a name."

Tobi made a sound in his throat while Nathaniel shook his head. "I don't think you should. We can't have two Serkans in one group."

"But Aliana's husband is also a Serkan," Ayra argued. "And I don't think he and this Serkan have any issues. It wouldn't hurt to have one more."

Ibrahim, who felt as though his heart and his head would implode, spoke up then. "Please stop."

Ayra pouted, leaning towards him; unaware of the depth of how affected he was. "But Ibrahim –"

"Let's stop." Serkan said. "Like Nate said, two Serkans in one group is not nice. We don't have to fight about it. Ayra," He smiled. "Why don't you find another nickname for Ibrahim?"

Ayra went on to be evil. "How about *Sevgilim*?"

Ibrahim had never felt so pained in his life, his chest constricted so tightly that it was insanely difficult to breathe. Bella pushed her chair back, the legs scraping against the smooth floor; a sound that caused Anneth, Tobi, Jalal, and Nathaniel to flinch. If looks could kill, Ayra would have been six foot under the tall building that was The Oasis.

"I've lost my appetite." Bella said. "You all should carry on without me."

Without waiting for a reply, she walked away. Acting confused, Ayra looked from one person to the other. "Was it something I said?"

Serkan pushed his own chair and stood, shaking his head. "No, it isn't. *Sergilim* is off the table too. That's what I call her. How did you even learn that?"

Ayra grinned. "Ever since Ibty and I agreed we'd stop at Turkey, I looked up Turkish endearment terms." Her grin dropped. "I really liked *Sergilim* but if that's what you call her, that's fine."

Serkan nodded slowly. "Right...Well," His smile returned. "I'll just go check on her. You all should continue dinner. I'll try to pull her back."

Anneth stood. "I'll come with you."

With one dirty look thrown Ayra's way, she went after him. Ayra let a minute go by, for Ibrahim's sake as he breathed in and out while flexing his fingers on his laps. She then smiled at Aliana. "Bella said Serkan's into tech like every other person here, except me of course. Are you into tech too?"

Jalal's expression was the coldest it had ever been in Ayra's presence. "Shouldn't we stop asking questions, Ayra? Your questions just pushed Bella out."

Ayra turned to him, sputtering with practiced ease. "B-but I didn't do anything. I had no idea that's what Serkan calls her."

Jalal stood and walked away. "I'm done with all of this."

Ayra turned to Ibrahim. "What did I do now?"

He sighed. "It wasn't your fault." He stood and took her hand, pulling her up. "Come on, let's get you home before I go down to be sure Bella's fine." He shot a small smile at Aliana, Nathaniel, and Tobi. "Sorry, guys."

Aliana said it was fine while Nathaniel and Tobi's eyes danced between them, their brows raised. Ayra let Ibrahim lead the way to the elevator, her façade dropping with his back turned towards her. Inside the carriage, they stayed on opposite sides and when it stopped on their floor, she stepped out, turning around when he did not step out after her.

Ibrahim felt ripped; too torn between going with her or going down to his home and Bella's. Ayra's expression didn't help matters for him; her eyes so round and her adorable confusion. His finger on the button was the only thing stopping the doors from closing and his free hand was a tight fist by his side while a vice tightly gripped his heart.

"Ibrahim?"

He cursed his fate and then cursed the love he had for Bella and everything that had been against them being together; situations that forced him to give into the crazy idea of marrying Ayra just so he could keep living the best of two different worlds that were never meant to collide.

He swallowed and forced on a small smile. "I'll be with you in a bit, Ayra, I promise. I'll check on Bella and head back up."

"Can't I come with you?"

He shook his head, his chest way too tight. "Not now. Later, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

He let go of the button and the doors began to slide together. When they closed, the carriage continued its descent. Where she was left, Ayra's expression frosted and her fists were loose at her sides. The laugh that slipped past her lips was dry and it lacked every trace of humour. "Why am I not surprised?"

Inside the carriage that was coming to a slow stop, Ibrahim struggled to get his thoughts on track. The ride stopped completely and the doors went open. Breathing in and out, he stepped out and walked straight to the apartment. He punched each keypad with hesitation and an unfamiliar feeling of heaviness. Once the door unlocked, he let out a long exhale before pulling it open. He stepped in and as soon as the door shut behind him, Bella pushed him, causing him to slam into the barrier that shut out the outside world.

"What the hell was that?!"

Anneth pulled her back. "Bella –"

Bella shrugged her best friend's hand off, her eyes lasers aimed at Ibrahim. "Serkan, what the hell was that?! This dinner was supposed to go well!"

"And I didn't do anything to ruin it." Ibrahim said calmly despite being anything but.

Venom laced her every word. “Your *wife* did! Why on earth didn’t you stop her from asking those stupid questions?! Who the heck does she think she is?!”

Behind both women, Jalal and Serkan stood with their hands in their pockets. Bella continued, shoving Ibrahim back once again. “And you! What do you think you were doing by telling me to stop talking?! And why on earth did you kiss her hand?! Why did you even sit beside her when you know where you were supposed to sit!? How dare you, Serkan?! How dare she even try to call you Serkan?! What the fuck is wrong with the two of you?!”

Anneth pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “This isn’t going to end well. Bella, stop.”

Bella was too blinded by rage to listen. She fisted Ibrahim’s shirt and pulled him towards her so they were eye to eye, her blazing ones meeting his dark ones. “Answer me, Serkan!”

Ibrahim felt himself tethering dangerously towards a new territory where rage bloomed in so many different ways. His voice was unfamiliarly low when he said “Let go, Bella.”

She didn’t flinch. “Make me.”

A brow of his went up and Anneth stepped forward, a twinge of fear tugging at her at Ibrahim’s expression. “Bella, come on, you need to –”

Surprising them all, Ibrahim grabbed both of Bella’s wrists and tore her hands away from his shirt with a little more force than was needed, forcing her to take a few steps back and slam into Anneth. When she recovered, Bella turned back to him with eyes as wide as those of Anneth, Serkan, and Jalal.

“Ibrahim, what the hell?!”

Ibrahim forced out a shaky breath, his hands returning to his sides as fists. He inhaled and exhaled once again before speaking. “Isabella.”

Bella glared at him while Serkan whistled under his breath, saying “Okay, he’s mad, mad.”

Ibrahim ignored him and everyone else. “I don’t think you have any right to be mad at me, especially when I didn’t do anything wrong. Ayra did nothing wrong too.”

Bella scoffed. “*Mi stai prendendo in giro* (You have got to be kidding me).” When he stared at her, quietly, her expression frosted. “Ibrahim Fahad!”

“Yes, this dinner was to be one of our numerous pretences but don’t try to play victim now when you and everyone else made snide comments here and there about Ayra.”

“Don’t act like you haven’t said bad things about her too!”

Ibrahim would have preferred being shot over the pain that came with the truth of Bella’s words. “I have.” And he’d never hated himself so much. “I’ve said much worse about her and I’ve made snide comments when she was there with Ibty but it’s never been this bad. It’s never been this open and you know it, Bella. You, Jalal, Serkan, Anneth, and everyone else know it!”

Bella’s jaw locked and she trembled with rage that rolled off her in extremely tall waves.

“And yes, Ayra’s questions hit areas they shouldn’t have, especially with everything we’ve crafted but you can’t really blame her for it, can you?” When she stayed quiet, he looked from her to Anneth, Jalal, and Serkan. “We’re the ones who wanted to play her further so it’s all on us.”

Bella stepped forward, towards him. “And her trip with Ibty? You couldn’t have mentioned that beforehand?”

“Bold of you to assume I knew about it earlier than yester night.”

“That’s still enough time!”

Ibrahim lost it. “Are you out of your damn mind, Bella? What the hell is wrong with you this night!?”

Bella sputtered. “Excuse me!?”

Serkan, who’d moved, got between them. “Guys, cut it out.” He turned to Ibrahim, ignoring Bella’s scoff. “Stop it.”

Ibrahim was tempted to punch the other man. “What am I doing that you’re asking me to stop?”

“You’re defending her!” Bella screamed as Anneth held her back. “You’ve defended her all evening!”

“What was I supposed to do?” Ibrahim shot back. “Let you seven say everything you want when she’s right there? Let you all blame her for our games not going the way we wanted?”

“Why do you even care?” Anneth asked him. “It wouldn’t be the first time anyways. We’ve said worse things about her so what was wrong is saying a little more while she’s there? It’s not even as though she speaks Italian.

Also, her questions were too much and you actually did nothing to stop her. Ayra's not the victim here, Ibrahim. We are, especially Aliana and Serkan."

Ibrahim stared at them for a moment before he laughed dryly, the fight and rage leaving him. He ran a hand through his hair and ended his laughter with a heavy sigh. He spoke when his hand fell back to his side. "We shouldn't have gone through with this."

Jalal stepped forward. "Ibrahim —"

Ibrahim took a step back. "We really shouldn't have. No matter how much I love you, Bella, we shouldn't have gone through with it. I shouldn't have given in. At least then, we wouldn't be here, wanting to murder each other over something we all couldn't control."

Bella scoffed yet again. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm not." And Ibrahim knew he meant every word. "Our lies are getting too tangled and I don't know about you all but I'm getting so sick and tired of it all."

"Are you crazy?!" Bella pushed Serkan aside and got in Ibrahim's face, seething. "This was for our own good!"

"And look where it's gotten us!" He hissed. "Does this feel like it's for our own good anymore?"

"Ibrahim!"

He exhaled, his shoulders dropping. He then shook his head. "I can't do this. Not tonight at least."

Bella's anger dissipated, replaced by a mix of dread and fear as her heart dropped. "Serkan."

Anneth, Jalal, and Serkan called out to him at the same time. "Ibrahim."

Ibrahim found himself blinking back tears. "I can't do this anymore, guys. We didn't think this through as much as we thought we did. I don't know when you guys are going to see it but it now seems as though we're driving off course. I don't know how long we can keep this on for."

"We can keep it on." Serkan said, holding Ibrahim's gaze. "As long as none of our loyalties shift and we don't get distracted, we can keep it going. I can speak for everyone else but I can't speak for you, Ibrahim, especially not with how you behaved earlier and how you're behaving now." His voice dropped. "You better not be in love with Ayra. You better not even be thinking about it, not when your loyalties are supposed to lie here; with Bella."

Ibrahim, with his chest torn wide open and left to bleed, turned from Serkan to Bella who stared right back with a mix of emotions he didn't want to decipher; not when he could clearly make out apprehension and betrayal.

"Ibrahim." It was Jalal. "Please tell us you're not walking down that path."

Ibrahim's hands returned to fists and his chest tore even more. His fists tightened and he swallowed before forcing the words out. "I'm not." The taste left on his tongue was extremely bitter. "I have a role to play and I'm playing it out to the best of my ability." He turned to Serkan. "You should take a tip or two. You slipped up a number of times earlier with Aliana and it's good Ayra didn't notice."

He pushed down the urge to cry and continued. "I meant all I said though. This is going to fail, especially if this is how we're going to react after a dinner that's going to occur many more times. If this is how we're reacting with just Ayra, then I think we need to brace ourselves for a dinner with Ibty in attendance throughout because it's definitely going to worse than this."

Bella's lips parted. "Serkan –"

Ibrahim turned around. "Goodnight."

"Serkan, wait!"

He all but ran out of the apartment, nearly running into Aliana who'd come down with Tobi and Nathaniel. They asked if he was fine but he didn't wait to give them a reply. He ditched the elevators and took the stairs, heading down and ignoring their calls for him. He didn't stop until he got to the basement level. Finding a corner, he squatted and forced himself to try and breathe as he broke into way too many pieces; the life he had and the life he was starting to wish he had clashing against each other.

Ibrahim brought his hands up to cover his face and he cried, feeling so much to the extent that it felt as though he'd been set ablaze. Back in the apartment he'd left, Bella tuned everyone out and focused on breathing and out, repeating in her head that they – she and Ibrahim – were fine and no one – including Ayra – was going to break them apart.

One by one, their phones beeped and they all got the devices, clicking on the invitation that'd come in from Fareeda Fahad; Ibrahim's mother. On the tenth floor, in the living room where she'd made herself comfortable, Ayra had a brow raised as she clicked on the invitation, reading the message that'd been attached.

Mum: *Dear Ayra, I hope this message finds you in very good condition. I do apologise for not texting you all this time. Well, you didn't text too but that's a story for another day. Do accept this as me personally inviting you to our biennial Fahad gathering which Salim and I are hosting on behalf of the family. I'll be giving you a gift, too so do make sure you attend and be sure to bring lbty too. I don't want to hear any excuses. See you October 2nd (Saturday!).*

Ayra took in the invitation again, finding it beautiful how purple and gold came together elegantly. She lowered her phone, realising then that she didn't look forward to returning to the Fahad home, not with everything that had happened since their last meeting.

In the basement level, Ibrahim kept crying.

October, 2021

Once the living lights were switched off, Ibrahim blew out a small breath and stepped into the foyer. He stopped in front of the mirror and took in his reflection.

His hair had been slicked back and his face was a little pale, devoid of any emotion. There were dark circles underneath each eye; not as dark as they'd been all week but still there all the same. He looked tired, even with his expensive outfit, and there was only so much he could do to hide it.

His suit was a deep shade of denim blue; perfectly tailored trousers and a double breasted blazer which he'd left unbuttoned, the hem brushing his mid-thighs and exposing the dark blue-black turtleneck he'd wore inside simply because he wasn't in the mood for a tie. A black strapped watch adorned his left wrist and there was a ring on his right hand; one that matched the one Ayra had worn on her way out to get ready at Ibtihaj's house.

Knowing – for the millionth time – that he couldn't ditch his parents' event for the entire Fahad family, Ibrahim turned away from the mirror and dropped his shoes on the rug. It was easy to put them on and when he rose to his full height, he straightened out the invisible creases on his outfit, grabbed his keys from the floating shelf, took one last look at his reflection, and exited the apartment.

It took two and a half minutes for the elevator carriage to come up to the tenth floor and he was glad it was empty. He stepped in, pressed the basement level button, and the doors slid shut. The descent began and stopped not long after, making Ibrahim's heart drop when he realised it was on the eighth floor; the one floor he'd avoided like a plague since the disastrous aftermath of the dinner with Serkan and Aliana; something he'd yet to fully recover from.

The elevator doors slid open and his chest squeezed at the sight of Bella. She raised her head, surprise as clear as day on her face at the sight of him. Regaining composure, she schooled her expression and stepped into the carriage, the doors sliding shut almost immediately. The journey down continued with them standing side by side, the mirrored walls reflecting their every angle.

Unlike him, Bella was brightly dressed in a tempting shade of burgundy red; an off-the-shoulder vintage tulle ball gown with ball sleeves, a cinched waist, and a layered tulle skirt that flowed down to the floor. Her hair was styled in an elegant chignon bun and her jewellery pieces were silver and

simple including the clutch she held. As usual, her make-up was flawless; her lips a shade of burgundy that would have pulled him in for a kiss but Ibrahim was certain he didn't feel anything like that as the ride down continued.

When they got to the ground floor level, approaching the basement, she scoffed. "Really, Ibrahim? You're still going to ignore me even when we're in the same space?"

He told himself to not ball his hands into fists. "I'm not ignoring you."

"Funny." She said dryly. "Your actions are saying otherwise."

"There isn't much I want to say, Bella. There hasn't been much to say since Saturday."

"And did it occur to you that there's much we have to say, especially me?" She turned to face him fully. "Serkan and Aliana left without properly saying goodbye to you and you know how I usually feel about going to see your shitty parents yet we've been on opposite ends of a tunnel, drawing further and further apart."

A soft throb began in his temple as the carriage came to a stop. "Bella, please not now."

"And don't think I don't know you've been mostly indoors with Ayra all week. She even went out more than you did."

"Bella —"

"I'm surprised she isn't here with you. Wouldn't put it past her to be downstairs already, waiting for you to —"

"Bella, please!"

The carriage stopped completely, the silence tense enough that it could be sliced with a knife. Ibrahim counted to five in his head before he exhaled, turning to her as the doors slid open. "Not now, please. We can talk about everything and you can scream at me about whatever you want later but not now. I just —" He blew out another breath. "I just want to get through tonight as best as I can so please..."

Not wanting to see her expression softening, he walked out of the carriage and into the parking lot. She went after him. "Ibrahim, are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." He hoped she didn't push it. "I'll be alright after tonight."

She put her hand on his, stopping him from opening his car door. Fighting back a tired sigh, he turned to look at her. She offered him a small smile. "I'm sorry."

"I know." He couldn't bring himself to tell her he was sorry too when he knew fully well that he wasn't.

"Where's Ayra though? She's not going?"

"She is. She's at Ibt'y's place. They'll be coming together."

Her eyes brightened with mischief and Ibrahim found himself hating it. "So, I can go with you instead of driving down to Nathaniel and Anneth's place so I can join the limo?"

"You'll have to still go with them though. I'm coming back with Ayra."

She smiled and let his hand go. "That's fine. Let's deal with that when we get to the event and we have to leave." She walked around the car and pulled open the passenger door, easily sliding in. "Come on, Serkan."

His chest heavy, Ibrahim pulled open his door and slid behind the wheel. A minute later, the engine was coming to life and she spoke. "You look good. I've never really seen you wear this before."

He pushed down the memory of Ayra picking it out that morning when he told her he didn't know what to wear, just because he wanted to have her in his room; just because he wanted to hold onto her for a little longer, the way he'd done all week.

"I guess it's new." It wasn't. He got it back in July, when he'd purchased Ayra's birthday dress. He put the gear in reverse and eased down on the gas pedal. "I didn't think much of what I wanted to wear. I just picked it out."

"It's really good."

"You don't look bad yourself."

"That's a lame compliment coming from you, Serkan. You usually do better than that."

He gave her a small smile. "That's all I can come up with right now. Hopefully, by the end of tonight I'll have something better."

"You hate the fact that we have to attend so badly?"

Not for the same reasons as you, he wanted to say. "You have no idea."

She laughed, reaching out to take his hand that rested between the seats. She laced their fingers. "I love you, Serkan."

His chest constricted and he simply smiled, finding himself unable to say his usual "I love you too". Keeping a small smile on her face, Bella turned the other way and stared out of the tinted window at the places they drove past. Her smile faded and she tucked her tongue inside her cheek, forcing

herself to turn a blind eye to the fact that there were a lot of things that needed to be sorted between them. She told herself that they were to going to be fine, no matter what it took.

They had to be.



Palm Drive saw an influx of luxurious cars that evening. Some cars were tinted, others weren't; some with covered number plates, others without. Security, as expected, was tight and every single person knew better than to not follow the standard protocols so everything ran smoothly.

Beyond the huge open gates of House 16A, the Fahad mansion was a masterpiece. Recently renovated, the walls gleamed beautifully; the shrubs and trees were trimmed; the pathways actually shone and there was no single dirt in sight. Smartly dressed officials directed cars into parking spaces and guests were led to the back, down the sunken limestone terrace, and into the rear gardens where tables had been arranged, each one covered with golden fabric with dinnerware set perfectly and dishes and drinks laid out in the buffet area, snacks in tall aesthetically pleasing towers.

Every member of the Fahad family, and those who were plus-ones, were dressed regally to impress – and outshine – the other and conversations flowed as they caught up, laughing over little jokes and discussing the major happenings that had taken place since they'd all last seen each other.

Ibrahim was one of the few who did not need to go through the security protocol. Once his number plate was sighted, access was granted at all gates and he drove into the compound he'd grown up in, finding his reserved parking space quite easily. The space beside his got filled a minute later and he recognised the limo as that of his friends'.

In the passenger seat, Bella unbuckled her seat belt and smiled at him. "You'll stay with me or close to me tonight, right? You know how it can get."

Acting as though there wasn't a small wave of dread in his stomach, Ibrahim managed a small smile. "I'll try my best."

They got out of the car at the same time, the others – Tobi, Jalal, Nathaniel, and Anneth – stepping out of the limo too. While Jalal and Nathaniel were in lapelled suits, Tobi was in an agbada and its matching cap. Anneth was in an ink blue dress that shimmered and hugged her like a second skin, the side slit up to her thigh, exposing an entire flawless leg. Her hair was in its afro glory and her make-up, like always, was stunning.

She smiled at Ibrahim and Bella. "I see you two have made up already." She then feigned a glare, aiming it Ibrahim's way. "Don't forget you have to make it up to us too."

Ibrahim said nothing, simply looking away while Bella laughed and told Annet to cut it out before they went on to complement each other. Faces of aunts, uncles, cousins, and distant relatives were all Ibrahim could see as he looked from one person to the other and he wondered whether or not Ayra and Ibtihaj had arrived yet. He found himself praying they hadn't; so he could walk to the rear gardens with Ayra's arm in his and not Bella's.

"Well, well, well...If it isn't my son and his best friends."

They all turned, watching as Fareeda approached them with a smile on her face and her hands in front of her. Like always, she was as graceful as a queen who was very comfortable in her kingdom. Her dress was in an elegant navy shade which complemented the honey-brown skin Ibrahim had gotten. It had a closed neckline and Pearson styled sleeves, a detailed embroidered bodice, a slim waist sash, and a skirt that flowed to the ground in slim layers of chiffon, satin, and crepe. Her turban was simple, pushed back to start from the near middle of her head; thereby exposing jet black hair that had been parted in the middle and brushed back. She wore little jewellery and if they didn't know her well, they would have sworn she was not wearing any make-up.

She stopped right in front of the small crowd and focused on Ibrahim first. "I was hoping you'd call since the last time we saw each other. I should have known your old habits won't die so easily even though we seemed fine before and after you and Ayra got married."

Ibrahim wanted to bristle but he didn't. With false calmness, he smiled at her. "It's not like you called either."

"I purposely did so, Ibrahim, just so you could reach out first and not complain that I'm hounding you the way you used to."

For the first time, Ibrahim felt her words hit him squarely in his chest. He pushed down the ball of emotions before it fully formed. "I'll do better." He then stepped forward and hugged her, surprising himself at how he felt the need to cry when she hugged him back. "Hello, Mum."

"Hello to you too." Fareeda pulled back, cutting the hug short. Blinking back how momentarily taken aback she was by the hug, she turned to Bella. Her smile turned frosty. "Isabella Mariá Valentino."

Bella's smile did not reach her eyes. "Fareeda Fahad."

“It has been a while, has it not? A couple of years, right?”

“Yes, it has.” Bella’s fake smile stretched. “Time flies. It feels like forever has passed since then.”

Fareeda nodded, twice. “Forever has passed since then. You six have achieved greater heights, Salim and I have grown older,” Her smile turned mean. “And Ibrahim has gotten married. Something you told me back then would never happen because both of you were always going to be together whether or not Salim and I gave our approval. So yes, Isabella Mariá, it has been forever.”

Bella’s glare was lethal and Ibrahim’s stomach sunk lower. “Mum.”

Fareeda ignored him, her smile brightening as she turned to the others. “Anneth and Nathaniel Samson, Jalal Ahmad, and Tobi Eniola. It’s good to see you four again after such a long time. I trust you’ve all been fine, although there have been news of your countless parties and a string of one night stands and broken hearts both within and outside Atlantica.”

Ibrahim grabbed her arm. “Mum, stop.”

Anneth’s smile was bitter. “I should have known you’d be this petty when we received the invitation. It’s good to know you haven’t changed much, Fareeda. I can imagine Salim being much worse.”

Ibrahim turned to his friend. “Anneth.”

“Oh trust me, Anneth, when it comes to you, I haven’t really changed at all.” Fareeda said, still smiling so beautifully. “I still think Ibrahim could have done better. In terms of business and the company, you’re all one great team. In terms of love and friendship though, you six are a big mistake and I’m still waiting for the day you all realise it, no matter how long it takes.”

Ibrahim closed his eyes and prayed for strength, letting go of his mother’s hand. Bella had one hand tightly gripping her clutch while the other hand was a fist that pushed her nails into her skin. “So,” She asked Fareeda. “Did you invite us here to clearly show your displeasure and stoop even lower than you’ve done all these years? Even when you know that majority of the family you hold so dearly have long accepted us despite you and your husband’s disapproval?”

“I invited you because of Ayra.” Fareeda responded, her smile nearly gone. “Ayra’s my daughter-in-law and I know she considers you five her friends even though there’s a high chance you all might just be humouring her when there is need for it.”

Ibrahim's stomach kept sinking. Fareeda went on. "I wasn't looking forward to her asking why you all weren't invited. The times she's been here, there's always been one reason or the other why you five couldn't make it. Tonight, there would be none and I can manage a few hours with you all in my house instead of lying through my teeth, pushing out one reason or the other."

Nathaniel scoffed. "Well, aren't you the best mother-in-law?"

"I'm far from it, Nathaniel, but thank you." She gestured towards one of the smartly dressed men. "Kian would lead you to the gardens although I'm sure you five can find your way." She turned to her son, her smile long gone. "I need to have a word with Ibrahim."

Bella, Nathaniel, Anneth, Tobi, and Jalal stared at her for a moment before they laughed dryly and walked away, leaving her and Ibrahim alone. Ibrahim watched them go and when they disappeared out of sight, he turned to his mother. "Mum, you have no right –"

"I heard a rumour, Ibrahim, and I hope to God that it's not true."

The band that never failed to squeeze Ibrahim's chest when the need arose showed up then, squeezing just a little. Ibrahim forced his calm façade to stay on. "There are a lot of rumours, Mum, so you should clarify what you're talking about."

Fareeda took a small step forward, cutting the little space between them by half. He was taller than her with about four to five inches but in that moment – as she stared at him with a hostile coldness he'd never seen before, even on the days they fought when he was growing up – Ibrahim felt as though he was the small one and she was taller.

"I hope you're not seeing Bella, Ibrahim. I hope, like you said, that things ended between you two years back. I hope you didn't lie to me when you said you liked Ayra and wanted to settle with her, Ibrahim. I really hope you didn't."

The band around Ibrahim's chest tightened and his throat dried, his mind going blank. He could only stare at her, his heart sinking into a hole it had dug. An extremely tensed moment passed and then Fareeda's emotions were as clear as the day.

For the first time, the disbelief in her eyes hurt him. The disappointment that followed was a punch in the gut. Her humourless laugh as she stepped back from him was a knife and it stabbed him well. His mouth opened on its own accord. "Mum –"

She held up a hand, looking away. "You're no better than your father."

If he'd been tethering dangerously towards the edge of a cliff, her statement threw him off it. Ibrahim felt himself freeze for what felt for the longest minute of his life before slowly, he cracked and began to shatter, each broken fragment smaller than the last. Somewhere deep within, there a small slice of anger. His hands balled into fists and he thickly swallowed. "I'm *not* Dad."

Fareeda faced him once again. "How are you any better right now, Ibrahim? Give me one thing that backs up the fact that you're not Salim. Just one thing, Ibrahim...Come on, tell me."

Ibrahim's fists tightened and he lost the war against his tears. His vision began to blur. "We wouldn't have done this if you and Dad had given your blessings. If you hadn't tried to manipulate me like a marionette nearly all my life, to the extent that I had to leave for Leicester just so I could breathe, we wouldn't be here. When I brought Bella home time and time again and begged you to accept her, if you had actually done it, we wouldn't be here. I'd be happy, Mum, and I wouldn't be trying to balance out two lives. I'm *not* Dad."

Fareeda's smile was so sad it felt like a slap to Ibrahim's face. She shook her head. "You wouldn't be happy, Ibrahim. I still stand by what I said the first day you brought Bella home. You don't love her, you never have, but you're too loyal to her and those other good for nothings that you'd rather stay and ruin yourself than leave and here we are...I admit I wasn't the best mother but I did try, Ibrahim, just so you didn't end up like me or put someone in the position my family and your father's family did. I admit that I didn't go about things well but still..." She laughed bitterly. "Here we are. Fate really did me dirty with this one. An apple really doesn't fall far from its tree."

Ibrahim kept breaking. "Stop it. Please."

"Does she know? Ayra, I mean."

He found himself shaking his head and answering her so easily, furiously blinking the tears back. "No, she doesn't"

Fareeda regained composure, her neutral mask sliding right back in place. In front of her, though, her hands were tightly clasped together. "End it, Ibrahim. Ayra might not have been the first choice candidate we had for a wife for you but you convinced us that she was the one you wanted and we gave in. She is your wife and while your father and I are going to try our bests to do better, you will try your best to be a better husband. I don't care

if it's going to hurt but you should and you will end what you're having with Bella."

He shook his head again, a tear breaking past the shaky barrier he'd tried to erect and sliding down his cheek. "I can't. You don't —"

"I don't care, Ibrahim. I really don't care. What I do know is that if you keep this going, you're going to get hurt. When that happens, you're going to see every reason why your father and I told you Bella and the others weren't good for you. Your father and I aren't perfect beings and we're seeing that but if you stubbornly choose to walk down this path that we took, I hope you can bear it when it all goes up in flames. Just because your father and I survived it doesn't mean you will. Don't put Ayra in that position I was in, Ibrahim."

Ibrahim could stare at her, tears streaming down his cheeks. For a moment, her façade cracked and he caught a glimpse of the hurt she was trying to hide before the mask slid back in place. She sighed a moment later and stepped forward, hugging him briefly.

"Freshen up inside and meet us in the gardens when you feel better." She told him. "I'll tell everyone you needed a minute to pick something for me."

He simply nodded and she stepped away. Turning around, she raised the hem of her dress, revealing black suede platform heels, and walked away. Ibrahim stood there for a few more seconds before he walked in the opposite direction, heading into the house he'd always wanted to get out from.

A few spots away from where his car was parked, the backdoors of a heavily tinted Land Cruiser Prado went open and Ibtiḥaj stepped out before Ayra did. In the rear gardens, the members of the Hexad squad spoke with those they were friendly with, smiles on their faces although they were mostly seethed deep within.

Inside the mansion, Ibrahim went straight up to his room, shut and locked the door, before resting his back against it and sliding to the floor, repeatedly telling himself that he was not his father. He was never going to be.

Ayra first made a stop inside the mansion to use the restroom, using the mirror to fix her dress and turban once she'd relieved herself. Satisfied with her reflection and with the pep talks she gave herself just so she acted well the entire night, she grabbed her clutch and stepped out of the guest bathroom, stopping in place at the sight of Ibrahim descending the stairs.

He also stopped in place when he sighted her, his gaze slightly sad as he took her in. Ayra's chest did a little squeeze and she forced every unwelcome emotion back. All week, since the sorry excuse of the dinner with Serkan and Aliana, he'd carried around him a cloud of sadness and had been a little clingier than usual; to the extent that she had to stop herself from feeling bad for him when he hurt her with every discovery she made and every plan she had to put in place.

Regaining composure, she closed the bathroom door while he descended the remaining stairs before making his way towards her with slow but graceful steps. He looked so good, Ayra was not going to deny it, but unlike before, she couldn't bring herself to say the words. They'd since gone past that.

He stopped in front of her, offering a small smile. "Hey."

She acted as though she didn't see the tell-tale signs that he'd cried. She smiled back. "Hi."

"Are you just arriving?"

She shook her head. "We arrived a little earlier. I can't say how long it's been actually. Since Ibt'y's using the opportunity to talk to this really good friend of hers, I decided to use the restroom and then admire myself in the mirror."

The last part got a small laugh out of him and it made her chest squeeze again. He ended his laughter with a sigh, a moment passing before he said "You look beautiful, Ayra. You'd definitely turn heads tonight."

Her blush was little and her smile turned sad although she did her best to ensure he didn't see it. She blessed him with a twirl. "I had to dress to impress. It is a big event after all and a Fahad shouldn't be caught lacking."

The tender way he stared at her made her chest squeeze once more. The part of her who was yet to get the memo that she was no longer supposed to love him let out a little sound of pain.

You're seeing me too late, Ibrahim, she wanted to say. You should have looked at me this way a long time ago.

He stepped forward and took her free hand in his, lacing her fingers. He stared at their hands for a moment, as though he'd never seen anything more beautiful, before bringing his eyes to hers; giving her a glimpse of his pain and anguish before he brought his walls up. His smile returned, a little wider than it had been. "This is a new dress, right?"

She nodded, keeping her act going. "It is. You should be paying more attention to your bank statements, Ibrahim Fahad, because this was covered with your card."

His smile stretched and his expression brightened sincerely. "I wouldn't have had it any other way." He leaned in and kissed her cheek, right above her dimple. "It was worth every penny, that I can assure you."

Her chest felt like it'd been scratched for what should have been the billionth time. "Thank you."

He straightened. "You're welcome."

Her dress was black; a high-necked satin A-line dress with a wide sash that accentuated her slender waist and bishop sleeves that covered the length of both her arms. Like his mother, her turban was simple but her hair was entirely covered. Her earrings, as was becoming regular with her, were simple silver studs and they matched her black and silver clutch which held her phone and cards. Although the dress covered her heels, she had no doubt he knew she wore them as she was definitely taller.

The sound of approaching footsteps forced them to break eye contact and they both turned to see Ibtihaj walking over, disbelief written clearly on her face. Just like her mother, Ibtihaj clapped her hands dramatically and stopped in front of them.

"I was outside there standing like mumu and you people are here sharing love. Hian!" She glared at Ibrahim, in a way that came with practiced ease that Ayra saw through. "You! Oga, are you not supposed to be in the gardens? We're supposed to meet you there."

Ayra watched her husband offer her best friend yet another small smile. "Mum asked me to drop something for her. I was just coming back down when I ran into Ayra." He turned to her and his smile widened. "Perfect timing, I must say."

Ayra knew Ibtihaj wanted to smack Ibrahim's head so she suggested "Why don't we head out to the garden?"

Ibrahim agreed but with reluctance that Ayra didn't miss. He held her hand the entire walk while Ibtihaj stayed on her other side, engaging Ayra in

small talk. The sight of the decorated rear gardens had Ayra stopping in her tracks briefly to appreciate it all.

She had to give it to the event planner – whoever it was. The event’s layout was breath-taking and it brought a sad smile to her face as she reached the realisation that she’d never again be excited for another Fahad event.

When Ibrahim led her forward, she let him. He led her and Ibtihaj down the stairs and they got sucked into the crowd of faces and names Ayra knew and those she didn’t. There were polite greetings and little talks and not once did Ibrahim let go of Ayra’s hand. She was ironically glad as his and Ibtihaj’s presence was a sort of anchor she could hang onto as she clearly saw the way she was looked at and judged; how gazes scrutinized her from head to toe; how some few gazes first moved to her stomach, as though they expected to see a bump and then relieved that there was none.

Ayra told herself to ignore it all but it was easier said than done. Before long, they joined the squad and she put her smile back on, the same way five of them did; all of them acting like they always did. Bella put away her glass of champagne. “Ibty and Ayra, you two look stunning.”

Ibtihaj, who wore a similar dress to Ayra’s but in the wine purple shade, mimicked a hair flip. “We have to impress so... You sha, you’re stealing the show tonight. You’re prettier than everyone else here.”

Ayra saw it although it was subtle; the arrogant shift in Bella’s composure and the way she – Bella – stood a little taller, feeling validated. Ayra wanted to laugh but she knew better than to do so. She echoed Ibtihaj’s words and then went on to compliment Anneth, Nathaniel, Jalal, and Tobi. They returned her complements and she forced herself to blush, as though she still wasn’t used to complements. A moment passed before she re-focused on Bella.

“About what happened on Saturday night, Bella, I’m sorry.” She kept her pitch perfect; soft and apologetic. “I’ve wanted to reach out all week but I didn’t feel so courageous. It wasn’t my intention to make you uncomfortable or anything.”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Bella told her. “We’re fine now so it’s no big deal. Also, I should have told you that Serkan calls me *Sevgilim* so it’s kinda my fault too. It’s fine, Ayra. It’s all water under the bridge.”

“Are you sure?”

Bella nodded. “I am.” She turned to the others. “Right, guys?”

They all gave affirmative replies before turning to Ibrahim who, just like the previous Saturday night, was quiet. No one said anything, the silence a little awkward. Thankfully, Salim and Fareeda walked over and Ayra didn't miss the way Salim hid his coldness behind a smile he directed her way and Ibtihaj's.

"Well, well, well." He said, his smile widening. "If it isn't Ibrahim, Ayra, Ibt, and the Hexad squad."

Ibrahim's hold on Ayra's hand tightened a little. "Dad."

Salim patted his son's shoulder. "Hello, Ibrahim. We should have a discussion before we leave."

Ibrahim held onto Ayra's hand a little tighter. "It better not be about politics."

Salim laughed, his hand dropping to his side. "I dare not." He turned to his daughter-in-law and her best friend. "Ayra and Ibt. Do allow Fareeda and I congratulate you on your master's graduation. It is way late, we know that, and we apologise. We hope you can forgive us."

Ayra's smile was radiant. "We didn't hold anything against you in the first place, Dad."

Ibtihaj nodded, smiling too. "Exactly."

"I hope you had a nice time at Cape Town?" Ayra asked. "You two stayed there for a while."

Fareeda nodded with a smile of her own. "We had a splendid time. There was no rush to return so we soaked it all in. Cape Town would always be a favourite place for us. Maybe when next we're going, you can come along. Ibrahim too."

There won't be a next time, Ayra said in her head. She kept smiling though. "I'll look forward to it." She then turned to her husband, her smile shrinking slightly. "It'll be like a second honeymoon, right, Ibrahim?"

Ibrahim smiled back, nodding. "In Shaa Allah."

Ibtihaj cleared her throat. "Abeg, we are still here o. Don't be sharing love in our front abeg."

Ayra laughed and so did Salim and Fareeda. Ibrahim simply smiled a little wider while his best friends didn't share much in the humour. When they sobered, Salim turned to the squad. "Isabella Mariá, it has been a while. I hope you have been good."

While the middle name got the attention of Ayra and Ibtihaj, Bella didn't bother smiling back. "I have been, Salim. I have no doubt you have been good too."

Salim nodded. "I have been splendid, thank you for asking."

Ayra watched the exchange play out, Ibrahim's tension reaching her in small waves. Salim continued. "Nathaniel and Anneth, I see you two are still as perfect as day one. Marriage has been really good to you two, right?"

Anneth smiled insincerely while Nathaniel replied on their behalf, her arm linked with his. "It has been. It's the loveliest thing."

"I'm glad." Salim turned to the last two members of the group. "Jalal and Tobi. I hope we're no longer leaving trails of one night stands and broken hearts behind. The parties should have reduced too."

Every laugh let out in that moment was dry and hypocritical. Jalal shrugged. "Old habits die hard, especially for Tobi. I'm a good man."

Unable to help it, Anneth snorted while Tobi playfully smacked Jalal's arm. Salim's smile didn't hold any humour neither did it reach his eyes. "Well, as long as you two are fine, then that's alright...I'm glad you all could make it. It is really good to see you all. It's been a few years." He turned to his wife. "The last time they were over was ending 2018, yeah?"

"Early 2019, right after they were awarded Best Tech Company of 2018." Fareeda replied, not looking away from Bella. "That was the last time."

Ibrahim's hold on Ayra's hand was now ironclad and it had begun to hurt. She tried to free herself but he barely noticed, not when he looked ready to be swallowed up by the ground once it split into two. Ibtihaj spoke up then, looking from one side to the other. "That's quite a long time."

Bella lips tipped upwards slightly. "We've been busy and we've been travelling and then Ibrahim got to know about Ayra so...It's been a lot. We're here now and just as you're happy to see us, Salim, we're delighted to see you too. The last years have done you well." She smiled like a devil straight from the pit of hell. "I mean that in every way possible. After all, there were some habits you —"

Ibrahim cut in then. "That's. Enough."

Ayra freed her hand and flexed her fingers, joining her best friend in looking from one side to the other while the silence thickened until it could be sliced perfectly well with a knife. All around them, the members of the Fahad family continued talking and laughing; the party going on as planned.

It felt like forever before Salim chuckled, shaking his head. “Oh Isabella. You’ll never change.” With a sigh, he turned to Ayra and smiled sincerely. “Ayra, sweetheart, Fareeda and I have a long overdue gift for you.”

Ayra blinked. “A long overdue gift?”

Fareeda nodded, her excitement becoming apparent little by little. “Yes, a long overdue gift. The first time we had dinner together, I mentioned renovating what would end up becoming your room. I should have finished that before the wedding but it was a lot. After the wedding, I didn’t have it in me to get to it. However, when we returned from Cape Town and we were doing a full renovation, I had it finally done and I really, really loved how it turned out.”

Ayra simply stared, unsure of what to say while the hollowness in her chest returned, widening slightly. On both her sides, Ibrahim and Ibtihaj were quiet. The squad was quiet too. Salim and Fareeda appeared undisturbed as Fareeda continued, bringing her hands together in front of her, her smile blindingly wide.

“Ibrahim always had a room he wanted to gift to the woman he ended up marrying and since that’s you, I picked that room out for you.”

Ibrahim’s heart – what was left of it – sunk to the depths of darkness and the band around his chest pulled until it threatened to kill him through suffocation. Bella looked like she’d been slapped.

“It used to be white with black furniture pieces,” Fareeda continued, focused on Ayra. “And since those weren’t colours that suited you, I changed it all and did away with those boring furniture pieces. That’s mine and Salim’s gift to you, Ayra, and we hope you love it as much as we do.”

Ibrahim’s voice was a pained whisper. “Mum.”

While Ibtihaj bit back a pained scoff, Ayra stared at her mother-in-law as yet another part of her cracked. She recalled Ibrahim and Bella’s apartment; how their colour scheme was majorly white and black. She didn’t need a scholar to tell her the room she was being gifted had been for Bella. Every single shoe she’d slipped into and everything she was handed had always been for Bella. Bella was always going to come first and although it was a realisation she’d reached that day in August, it didn’t hurt any less.

“You must have hated that colour scheme so much.” Bella said coldly. “It surely didn’t fit the overall theme of your lovely home.”

Fareeda smiled sweetly, nodding. "I really hated it. It was a minimalistic room meant to be redecorated when Ibrahim got married and he's done just that so..." She shrugged. "Here we are."

Salim turned to Ibrahim, holding his son's gaze with his cold ones, both of them saying nothing. Slowly, Ayra turned to look at Bella who still hadn't turned away from Fareeda. Bella's eyes shone with a sheen layer of what Ayra recognised – a moment later than she should have – as tears and her hands were tight fists, her clutch in Jalal's hands.

Looking away from Bella, Ayra took in the expressions on the others' faces. Jalal and Tobi stared venomously at Salim and Fareeda. Anneth and Nathaniel stared in part-hurt and part-disbelief. Then there was Ibtihaj who had a brow raised, very much in disbelief at the audacity of everyone and everything.

"Ayra." Fareeda called softly. She smiled again when Ayra turned her way. She then reached out a hand for Ayra to take. "Come on, let's go see the room. Everyone else is going to come along. Friends support each other after all and I'm quite proud of the work I've done."

Ayra looked at Ibrahim who still had his gaze locked with his father's. She turned back to Fareeda and stared at the held out hand for a long moment before she swallowed and stepped forward, putting her hand in Fareeda's outstretched one. Fareeda grinned and turned around, telling the others to catch up as she led Ayra away, Ibtihaj following closely behind.

Salim looked away from his son, not bothering to fake a smile now that his daughter-in-law, her best friend, and his wife were gone. "You should go along with them. Ibrahim and I need to have a word."

Bella's hold on her tears was commendable. "You're always going to be a monster."

"That's rich coming from you, Isabella." He gestured towards the path Ayra, Fareeda, and Ibtihaj took. "You should go and see what has become of the room you delusionally thought you'd occupy if Fareeda and I ever gave our blessings. Let this be your closure and let it make our stance clear. Ayra is our daughter-in-law and I don't care what you think you're doing or what you five are going to do but that's never going to change. We never accepted you and Ibrahim, and we're never going to do so. You'll never be Mrs Ibrahim Fahad, Isabella. Get that into your head now."

He turned around and walked in the opposite direction of his wife and daughter-in-law. "Come with me, Ibrahim."

Bella turned to Ibrahim, a tear finally breaking free. "Serkan."

Ibrahim turned from his father's retreating figure, towards the woman he'd always been sure he'd love until his last breath. He was breaking once again, tearing into way too many shreds. Like her, a tear had slid down his cheek and his eyes were glassy with a dam that was waiting to be unleashed.

"Ibrahim." Salim called, his tone stern; just as it had been years back.

Ibrahim's chest constricted even more and he found himself looking away from Bella and the others, whispering "I'm so sorry."

Inside the mansion, Fareeda happily led Ayra down the corridors. She only let go of Ayra's hands when they reached the door after Ibrahim's. Smiling so widely and beautifully, Fareeda told both Ayra and Ibtihaj to brace themselves and then let a moment pass for the fun of it before she pushed the room's double doors open. "Ta-da!"

Back outside, Salim stopped in a private corner, surrounded all around by trees. Reining in his rage, he turned around to face his son. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Ibrahim?!"

Ibrahim felt every restraint of his begin to snap. "Dad, please."

"You're still seeing Bella?" Salim seethed, stepping forward so he was in his son's face. "I made myself clear in 2011, Ibrahim. I made myself clear again and again in 2013, 2015, 2017, and that day in 2019. I never stuttered neither did your mother and you thought you could play us for fools?!"

Ibrahim broke further and further. "Dad..."

"You were on your best behaviour throughout that year and we thought things were going to fall into place for us as a family. You then said you'd seen someone you liked and it was Ayra. She wasn't who we imagined you'd bring home but she was good enough and we gave our blessings. Now you're trying to tell me all of it was a lie just so yours and Bella's relationship could continue? Answer me, Ibrahim!"

Ibrahim couldn't bring himself to do so; not when a sob had lodged itself in his throat; not when he was in way too many fragments that he didn't know how or where he was to start picking himself from. A minute passed before Salim exhaled and it was long. He put his hands on his son's shoulders.

"Ibrahim." His tone was softer. "Ibrahim, this is going to backfire and you'll hate yourself and hate every single moment of it. Ibrahim, don't be like me. Do not put someone through what I put your mother through simply because I wanted to get my family off my back while continuing to live the life I was certain was the best for me. I hate myself for it every day and you don't want to go down that road. Please, Ibrahim...I haven't

begged you for anything but this is me begging you now. Don't do this, Ibrahim. *Please.*"

And just like he'd done with his mother, Ibrahim crumbled to dust in front of his father. In the mansion, Ayra took small steps into the room that had been so beautifully done in pastel shades that came together so well, feeling nothing but a sad heaviness in her chest. Behind her, Ibtihaj's chest squeezed; her heart going out to her best friend. Oblivious to the feeling of both women, Fareeda looked around with a satisfied – and proud – smile on her face.

In the fitness centre of the mansion, Bella locked herself in the female restroom. Although it killed her so much, she stood with her hands tightly gripping the edge of the marble sink slab and cried, her emotions one thick mix while a frustrated – and angry – scream was doing everything possible to break free from her voice box.

Back where they stood, Salim did the one thing he hadn't done in over two decades. He hugged Ibrahim and hesitantly, he began patting his son's back, a little crack forming in his chest; right where his heart was. Oblivious to all that was going on, the other members of the Fahad family continued partying.

Wanting to get away from everything as her act was starting to crumble, Ayra descended the stairs of the mansion and hurried out through the main doors. The front of the house was empty as every single person was at the rear gardens and Ayra was so focused on getting to the fountain that she didn't realise someone was walking in her direction, admiring the mansion with a smile on her face.

Both women collided into each other and the glass of wine the other woman held fell to the ground, cracking on the side that took the impact while the red liquid spilled. Both women jumped back, avoiding getting the liquid on their dresses and Ayra's apology rushed past her lips.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I should have –"

The female Fahad raised a hand. "You should be sorry." Once she was sure her dress was not soiled in any spot, she let her hand drop and raised her head. "You should have paid more attention to where you were going."

Ayra's throat dried and she was thrown back to the previous year when the Fahad women came over to her parents' house without any prior notice to discuss hers and Ibrahim's wedding. The woman who stood in front of her in that moment had the same face – just a younger version – of the same woman who'd said "*Is this the family Ibrahim's marrying into, Fareeda? Because we can honestly do better*".

"Are you just going to stand there, gawking?"

Ayra snapped out of her head and managed a small smile. "I should have paid more attention to where I was going. I'm sorry."

The other female said nothing and made a show of dusting her dress's hem. She stopped halfway and with slightly furrowed brows, she looked at Ayra again. When the realisation dawned, she raised a brow and her lips curled up in a smile that raised the hairs on the back of Ayra's neck.

"Well, if it isn't my cousin's wife." Her smile stretched. "Ayra, right?"

Ayra nodded once. "Right. I apologise, I don't recognise you."

The other woman flipped a wrist in dismissal. "Of course you won't. I've never met you. Never saw the need to do so when I didn't approve of Ibrahim marrying you. I still don't approve by the way but the deed's been done so..."

Ayra wasn't sure there was more she could take; not when she had cracks everywhere and wounds that weren't even getting the chance to heal before they were torn open again.

“But for introduction’s sake, I am Maryam Fahad, the daughter of Kenan and Sabeeha Fahad. You should have met my mother.” Maryam folded her arms, still smiling in the way that didn’t sit well with Ayra. “She let us know just how well the first meeting with your family went. Like her, I think Ibrahim, Aunt Fareeda, and Uncle Salim could have done better than you. But then again, maybe that’s what they get for constantly rejecting a woman like Bella. Serves them right and it sucks to be you, Ayra. It really sucks.”

Ayra told herself to turn around and keep walking but her body felt like lead; as though it wasn’t hers and she was living out someone else’s story. No one in the Fahad family – no matter how they judged and looked down on her – had told her they didn’t like her as Ibrahim’s wife to her face but here Maryam was, doing exactly that. It hurt Ayra, even more than the reminder of her being second to Bella had done.

“I know that must seem harsh to say,” Maryam continued. “But I’ve never been one to mince my words. Neither have my mother and father. You already have one experience with my mother so...” She then sighed. “How’s marriage treating you, Ayra? Surely by now you should know that you’re Ibrahim’s trophy wife, right? Ibrahim, in his right mind, won’t marry someone like you but desperate times do call for desperate measures. When I heard about the crazy plan they’d come up with, I was all for it. I’m sure you know about it now so you don’t have to pretend around me or around most people here. You’re nothing but a woman to be shown to the public as Mrs Ibrahim Fahad but between you and me, we know who the real Mrs Ibrahim Fahad is.”

Ayra’s nails dug into her palms with how tightly her hands were as fists. She pushed the tears back with every might, refusing to break down in front of Maryam although that was all she wanted to do.

Maryam sighed again and turned towards the fountain where Ayra had been headed. “I was one of those who expected you to be pregnant by now or to have popped out a kid already as this month is going to make it ten months since you and Ibrahim got married. I’m surprised Aunt Fareeda and Uncle Salim haven’t started asking for grandkids yet. But then again, they do the things we never expect and then do not do the things that we expect. Very unpredictable, those two, and very sad too.”

Ayra focused on breathing; in through her nose and out – quietly – through parted lips.

“I can still remember the first time Ibrahim brought Bella here. It was during Uncle Salim and Aunt Fareeda’s wedding anniversary party in 2011.” Maryam smiled fondly at the memory. “I remember being blown away by

Bella's beauty and I laughed so much that night with Anneth, Jalal, and Tobi. Nathaniel had his professional exams so he couldn't make it but he made sure to send a gift. More than half of the family welcomed Bella with open arms. I mean, what else were we supposed to do? Beauty, brains, elegance, and nobility. She's from old money too. She was the perfect companion and it was so clear that Ibrahim loved her but Uncle Salim and Aunt Fareeda said no. That she wasn't good enough for Ibrahim." She scoffed. "What a load of bullshit. Bella wasn't good for Ibrahim but you were? Oh please!"

Ayra finally found her voice. "Why are you telling me this?"

Maryam faced her once again, her smile gone. She half-shrugged. "Simply because I don't like you. I never have and I don't think I ever will." She stepped over the spill that had spread on the driveway, closing the space between them. "Only about one per cent of this family tolerates you and while they don't like doing classless things such as fighting, I'm not afraid to state the clear truth."

Her eyes – and expression – were as cold as ice. "You're just a Fahad in name, Ayra, nothing else. No one cares about you. Even Uncle Salim and Aunt Fareeda don't like you as much as you think but since you're going to be around forever, they'll probably make an effort to be the so-called good in-laws you want. No one else likes you, certainly not me. It's always been Bella and it's always going to be Bella. Whether or not you and Ibrahim spend the rest of your lives together, whether or not you and Ibrahim have or adopt kids, it's always going to be Bella. You'll always be second place and no one is going to spare you any attention when it's not needed."

She reached out and dusted invincible lint off Ayra's shoulders. "So if I were you, I'd stop dreaming of a day when Ibrahim would love me and I'd stop deluding myself that I'm going to have a life full of roses because you're only going to keep lying to yourself, sweetheart. If I were you, I'll just use the money to keep myself busy and maybe pop out a kid or two for companionship but even kids can be annoying and extremely silly so...The bottom line, Ayra, is that you shouldn't get ahead of yourself and try to be a part of this family because you're not welcome here. You're never going to be."



It took Ibrahim an hour to realise Ayra and Ibtihaj were gone. With his heart hammering in his chest, he checked every single room and corner, holding onto the hope that they were still somewhere on the property. The hope dwindled with each place he checked being empty.

“They left a while ago, sir.” One of the security men told him when he brought himself to ask if anyone had seen his wife. “They said they weren’t feeling too well.”

Ibrahim nodded, as though the band around his chest wasn’t tightening once again. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

He walked back to the rear gardens and listened of a minute of his parents’ appreciation speech before he ditched it and headed to the wellness centre. His friends sat by the pool and they all turned his way when he approached them slowly.

Bella’s face was flushed and it stung him, just not as much as it used to. She sat on the pool’s edge, Jalal’s jacket on her shoulders while her dress was bunched up, her legs in the pool. Beside her, Anneth sat the same way, Nathaniel’s jacket on her shoulders.

“How nice of you to finally join us, Serkan.” Bella said, her words a little slurred. Ibrahim noticed the bottle of wine between her and Anneth then. “*Sono sicura che stasera sei stato il miglior marito* (I’m sure you’ve been the best husband tonight).”

He hadn’t been and Ibrahim knew it. The apology slipped past his lips although he didn’t know what he was apologising for. “I’m sorry.”

With a sigh, Nathaniel pushed himself off the lounge he’d occupied. “Guess we could say the same thing too. They must have charmed us with something for us to actually show up.”

“And get humiliated.” Jalal added. He let out a small, dry laugh. “It never changes. It’s a never ending cycle.” He stood too. “If I were you, Ibrahim, I’d honestly consider cutting them off for good. I mean, it’s not impossible to legally disown parents. It gets worse each time we come here. I’m sick and tired of it.”

Bella laughed drunkenly. “It’s funny how we never considered that.” She sniffled, pushing hair out of her face. “We came up with a plan of marrying Ayra to cover up everything when we could have just gotten you to cut your parents off, Serkan.” She blew a raspberry. “I mean, you could have done well on your own and we’ll have the company and everything else. We would have been married and we wouldn’t have had to care about anyone’s blessings...We should have done that.”

Beside her, Anneth nodded while staring at her feet in the water. “We really should have.”

Ibrahim turned away from them to the clear water, his chest – once again – tight. As at the time they came up with the plan to marry someone to cover up his relationship with Bella, he would have gladly given into the idea of cutting his parents off and going ahead with what he wanted. In that moment though, Ibrahim couldn't bring himself to even consider it; not when he wanted more of what he and Ayra had; not when two hugs from his parents had him feeling vulnerably safe, something he would have sworn would never happen with how rocky his relationship with Salim and Fareeda had always been.

“What did they even tell you anyway?” Tobi asked, causing Ibrahim to face him. “Your so called righteous Mum and Dad, what did they say?”

Ibrahim opened his mouth but Anneth beat him to it. She scoffed. “You should know the answer to that. They’ve gone on and on about it for so long that they’re already sounding like a broken record. They told him to end things with Bella and I’m sure they reminded him that he’s married to poor, little Ayra and that she should be his top priority.”

Bella snorted and then she giggled. “Poor little Ayra.” She let out a loud sigh. “God, I hate that girl.” She raised her head and looked at Ibrahim. “Maybe we should go ahead with you disowning your parents, Serkan. I mean, you’re more than capable of standing on your two feet and you’re not a child anymore that they can control.”

Anneth nodded, quite eagerly. “We should do that and when that’s done, we should get started on divorcing you from Ayra.”

Bella grinned. “Yes! And then we can take a few months after the divorce to fool the public that we’re grieving and then we’ll come out publicly as a couple. Anneth, you’re so smart!”

Anneth grinned right back. “I am!”

Nathaniel chuckled. “Your minds would never cease to amaze me.”

Tobi was smiling too. “Tell me about it.”

Jalal smiled at both women until he turned Ibrahim’s way. His smile dropped. “Ibrahim?”

That got the others’ attention and like him, their smiles dropped. Where he stood, Ibrahim’s face had lost its colour and he stared at them as though they were strangers with the faces of his friends. It was scary, to Ibrahim, to recall how they’d sat in a similar setting back in 2019. They were all hung-over, recovering from drinking their asses off the night before at the party a friend hosted; a party where Tobi had drunkenly mentioned Ibrahim getting

married to someone his parents would approve of just so he and Bella could carry on with their relationship.

“Now that we’re not all that drunk, it’s actually a good idea.” Anneth had said. *“Let’s try to draw it out and look at the loopholes so we can fix it.”*

“You will say yes, Ibrahim, right?” Bella had asked, stealing a kiss and drawing out a small groan from him when she bit down softly on his lower lip before letting go. *“You love me enough to do that so...”*

Tobi was on his feet. “Ibrahim, are you okay?”

Ibrahim took a step back, his mother’s earlier words ringing in his head. *“What I do know is that you’re going to get hurt. When that happens, you’re going to see every reason why your father and I told you Bella and the others aren’t good for you.”*

Nathaniel got to him first. He reached out to hold Ibrahim’s hand. “Ibrahim, yo, what’s –”

Ibrahim moved as though he’d been burnt. Anneth and Bella were on their feet now and Bella was so much sober than she’d been when he’d walked in. Ibrahim looked from one person to the other, taking in their worried faces but it clashed against the expressions that were frozen in his head; the way their faces had lit up just minutes earlier as they told him to disown his parents and then divorce Ayra, just like they’d convinced him to marry someone to cover up his and Bella’s relationship.

“Let me tell you something, Ibrahim, and I don’t care if you’re going to listen to me or not.” Salim had said back in that same 2019, after stating he was never going to accept Bella into his house. *“Those people?”* He’d pointed in the direction of one of the drawing rooms where Fareeda sat with the squad. *“They’re never going to sacrifice so much for you. But you, Ibrahim, you’re going to sacrifice yourself for them and when you have nothing left, you’ll see such how easily they’d leave you. I only hope by then, you still have little to cling onto just so you’re not an empty shell. That’s all I hope for you, Ibrahim.”*

“Ibrahim.” It was Bella. “You’re scaring us.”

“Was it what we said?” Anneth asked. “We were just coming up with a solution, the way we always do.”

Feeling a chill that definitely didn’t come from the water, Ibrahim turned around and he ran. He didn’t stop, not when people asked where he was going, not when Salim asked what was going on or even when Fareeda tried to stop him. He went straight to his car and the entire ride home, his heart didn’t stop thumping. His ears didn’t stop ringing. The elevator carriage felt

tight, as though the walls were caving in, and when it stopped on the tenth floor, he stepped out, his breaths short and a layer of sweat on his forehead.

His hands shook as he entered the passcode. He got it wrong the first time and then got it right. He pulled the door open and stumbled in, grateful that the foyer was brightly lit. He stumbled forward, into the living room where Ayra sat, still in her dress with her hair flowing past her shoulders. She stood, her brows furrowing. "Ibrahim? Ibrahim, what's —"

He hugged her like his life depended on it as in that moment it felt as though it did. The cold was still there, causing him to tremble a little, and in his chest, fear was a vice that held tightly, squeezing him.

"Ibrahim? You're scaring me."

For the third time that night, he was moved to tears. He tightened his embrace. "Please." His words were hurried whispers as fear squeezed tighter. "Please just let me hold you like this. *Please.*"

Over his shoulder, Ayra felt her own heart break. She reached up and patted his back, taking the same comfort she was offering as she needed it just as much as he did. On the accent chair she'd been occupying, her phone screen lit up with a new message from Ibtihaj.

Ibty: *We're leaving on Wednesday o. Ryan just texted, that our visas are ready and Collin was able to move our flights forward. Also, when all of this is out in the open, remind me to slap that mumu Maryam Fahad. She's mad! Tell Ibro we're going on Wednesday and if he tries anyhow, he will see anyhow.*

A moment later, another text came in.

Ibty: *Sha, let's tell your parents and mine on Monday. That'll be the best date so we can use Tuesday to pack. Our flight is on Wednesday morning so...Please be fine, Ayra. This will be over soon In Shaa Allah.*

Over Ayra's shoulder, Ibrahim let his dam break. He buried her face in the crook of her neck and cried, finding solace in the way she scented, fruits and flowers coming together beautifully. Back at the Fahad mansion, the squad was leaving in the limo, each one of them a bit shaken as Ibrahim had never reacted that way. Never ever.

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The water in the tub was warm and soothing against Ayra's skin. It was also a mix of colours, courtesy of the bath bombs they'd put in. Behind her, Ibrahim was really warm and as she toyed with the water and its bubbles, she couldn't help but smile sadly.

As had become their norm, they were doing everything she'd always wanted but the sanctuary of it all had since been broken and she was always left feeling the opposite of what she was supposed to feel.

Ibrahim, on the other hand, felt lighter than he'd done in days. There was still a heaviness weighing down on him but in that moment, with Ayra's bare back flush against his bare chest, he found beautiful peace that he knew better than to not appreciate. He watched as she toyed with the water and when he couldn't help himself, he softly kissed her exposed shoulder.

"You're unusually quiet." He said softly, as though he'd ruin the serenity of the moment if he was any louder. "I didn't get to ask earlier if you're okay. The security said you left because you weren't feeling too good."

"I didn't like the event." She told him, her voice as quiet as his. "Don't get me wrong, there was nothing wrong with it, but I didn't feel like a part of it all and I didn't have it in me to stay for much longer."

His chest squeezed a little. "You should have called me."

Her smile stretched slightly. "I didn't want to disturb your discussion with Dad. Seeing how you couldn't come up to see the room I'd been given, I knew it had to be important so...Besides, Ibtu was with me so it was alright. I should have texted you to let you know I was leaving but it was the last thing on my mind. Sorry."

He wrapped his arms around her middle, resting his chin on her right shoulder. "I should be the one apologising, Ayra. I'm sorry my family's not what you want them to be."

Ayra found herself pushing tears back down before they even surfaced. She blew out a quick breath. "It's fine. I mean, we can't always get what we want so..." She let a moment pass. "Your parents don't seem to like the squad very much. It's never been so obvious. It's as though there's a rift between them and they don't want to build a bridge across it."

The minute that followed was silently long and just when Ayra thought he'd say something to brush it under the carpet, Ibrahim surprised her with sincerity.

"They don't like the squad much. My parents, I mean."

This time, she couldn't hold the tears back. Her vision slowly blurred. "Why?"

His chin still on her shoulder, Ibrahim's vision blurred too. "As business partners, my parents think the squad and I make a great team. As friends though, they're convinced I could have done better. Mum once said the squad would only ruin me and Dad said I'll make sacrifices that the squad won't appreciate until I have nothing more to give."

Her chest twisted. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "And you? Do you feel like the squad would only ruin you and that you'll only make sacrifices until you have nothing more to give?"

A tear slid down Ibrahim's cheek when he blinked. Another minute passed before he replied, telling her the honest truth. "I don't know anymore, Ayra. It feels like I don't know who I am anymore and that I'm trying to hold onto so many things that are determined to slip through my fingers...I don't know anymore."

A tear slid down her cheek and another one followed. "Sometimes, no matter how much you love something, you have to let it go." *Just like I'm going to have to*, she completed in her head. "If it gets to the point that you no longer feel like yourself, you can let things go. It'll hurt but love shouldn't be about you sacrificing yourself for a person or for people who won't do the same for you. You shouldn't have to fill shoes that don't fit, no matter how much you love someone or no matter how much you've loved them."

Ibrahim listened to her every word, letting them engrave themselves in his head and in his heart. Another tear sliding down his cheek, he asked "Don't you love them though?"

"I didn't like how they spoke to your parents." She replied, taking the safe route. "It was as though I didn't recognise them and no matter how badly you've fallen out with someone, there's something called respect especially if they're older. I believe people can be civil for a little while, no matter how many indirect jabs are thrown around...The squad's made up of people I've looked up to for years and I was glad to have them as my friends but since that dinner with Serkan and Aliana, things have been shifting and it feels like we're heading towards an explosion. Now you're having mixed feelings so..."

She shrugged. "It's not about whether or not I love them. It's about me growing and realising that it's okay to love people and still have to walk away when I feel like I'm losing every bit of myself. That's all."

It was the first time Ibrahim felt as though Ayra was the older one, and not him. He couldn't help but painfully wonder if they would have had such moments where she parted with such beautiful advice had he been honest with their love story right from the start.

"If the squad's not sitting right with you anymore, Ibrahim, you can let them go. I won't tell you that it won't be messy but you should matter to yourself too." She patted the back of his hand. "I have no doubt that you'll be fine. We all will be."

He simply kissed her shoulder again, leaving his lips there. His emotions swirled into one big ball in his chest and the three words he'd never really told her sincerely pushed themselves to the tip of his tongue. However, he didn't feel worthy enough to say the words to her yet, not when he still had so many tangles he had to unravel; not when he had so many things to straighten out and understand. Not when he still had to make up for every deceptive moment he'd taken her – Ayra – through. He pushed the words back and said the first thing that came to mind.

"I painted you."

Ayra told herself to not break down then and there. His sincerity when it came without him being forced or cornered by what she'd discovered was actually painful. "I thought you said you don't paint?"

Ibrahim's heart bled. "I started at some point. I learnt along the line and I painted you. It really turned out good and it's the first painting I'm signing as Ibrahim Fahad."

Ayra's self-restraint began to snap. "And what did you want to sign as before?"

Ibrahim shut his eyes, tears still streaming down his cheeks. "Serkan. Serkan Fahad."

Ayra told herself to keep breathing. "I thought the others said it shouldn't stick?"

Ibrahim's heart bled even more. The truth kept spilling out. "I don't want it to stick anymore. It's very impersonal and I don't want it anymore. I just want to be Ibrahim. I still need to learn the type of person Ibrahim Fahad sincerely is but that's just who I want to be."

In that moment, all Ayra could see was herself in the living room back in August, crying while being broken in so many ways as she realised she didn't know who she was outside everything that revolved around him.

Ibrahim hugged her tighter, whispering, "That's all I want to be, Ayra."

Unable to hold it back any longer, Ayra let herself cry. "Ibrahim, Ibtu and I are travelling on Wednesday. Our tickets and visas are ready and we're picking them up on Monday In Shaa Allah."

Ibrahim let his emotions push him into depths, as though he was underwater being prevented from swimming up towards the surface. He held even tighter. "Okay."

He told himself he'd use the time to set everything right. He could do that much, no matter how hard it was going to hurt, for her. Ayra, he told himself, deserved it; especially after all he'd done.

"I'll wait for you." He whispered against her skin. "And when you two return, I'm going to ensure we have the best time together. I'll ensure what's left of the year is even better than all that's gone by. I'll be better, Ayra, I promise."

Ayra could only cry, her head falling forward and her hands on his. There wouldn't be anything to enjoy, she knew that, and it hurt a lot. With how things were going, she knew he was going to keep his promise but it was too late. Compared to all he'd done, it was too little and it was coming way later than it should have.

She cried, letting it all out, and he did too. When he turned her head towards him a while later, Ayra allowed him kiss her as softly as he now did; as though time would cease to exist and only that moment mattered.

For better, for worse, she'd whispered to herself with a giggle the night before their wedding, *until death do us part*.

They were never going to get to that point anymore. Their end was already in sight and it killed her so, so much. However, there wasn't any more she could do. She couldn't stay with him, even if she ended up forgiving him. She just couldn't. She'd only kill herself if she did.



Monday's break of dawn met Bella pacing the length of her and Ibrahim's living room. She was in a romper that stopped mid-thigh and her hair was in a messy bun. For the first time in a long while, there were slight dark circles under her eyes and her mind was a mess. Her heart wasn't any better.

When the clock struck 7AM, she let out a breath, pulled herself together, and dialled Ibrahim's line. Just as it had done since the Fahad gathering on Saturday night, his line rang but he didn't pick up. Scoffing, she tried again and got the same response.

The apartment's landline rang after her third attempt and she angrily picked up the receiver, snapping at whoever was on the other end of the line. "What?!"

"Good morning, Ms Valentino." It was the receptionist calling from the lobby. "You asked to be alerted when Engineer or Mrs Fahad leave the building."

She forced out a breath, reaching up with her free hand to smoothen the wrinkles between her brows. "Yes, I did. Has any of them left?"

"Yes ma'am. Mrs Fahad just left. Engineer Fahad came down with her but he's heading back up now."

"Alright. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry if I called at a bad time."

"It's fine."

Without waiting for a reply, Bella put the receiver back in place, ending the call. She switched her home slippers for sandals and then stormed out of the apartment. The elevator took its time reaching her floor and although the ride up was short, it felt as though it took too long.

She didn't bother ringing the doorbell when she got to Ayra and Ibrahim's place. She inputted the passcode, pulled the door open, helped herself into the apartment and let the door slam shut behind her. Ibrahim, who'd been stepping out of the living room with his phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder, stopped right at the division between the foyer and the living space.

Bella glared while he calmly stared back. He put his left arm in the sleeve of his coat and straightened, speaking to whoever was on the other end of the line. "I'll be there in a little bit...Sure. Bye."

As soon as he hung up, she spoke. "Where do you think you're going?"

He tucked the phone in his coat pocket. "Monwict. I'm having breakfast with my parents."

She raised a brow. "Breakfast with your parents."

He nodded, once. "Yes."

"Since when did you start doing that? Last time I checked, we were all on the same page when it came to them."

Ibrahim told himself to stay as calm as he'd been all morning. He exhaled softly. "Bella —"

She took a step forward, crossing her arms. “I’ve called you over a hundred times since Saturday night.”

“I know.”

“Oh wow.” Her laugh was dry. “Wow, Serkan, wow.”

He nearly flinched, catching himself last minute. She didn’t notice as she went on. “Shouldn’t you be apologising? You act weird and scare us on Saturday and then you flee. Instead of you to let us know what’s going on or assure us that you’re good, you ghost each and every one of us. You are supposed to be apologising, Serkan, not telling me that you’re aware of the fact that I called you over a hundred times between that night and this morning.”

“I didn’t want to talk to you.” He admitted quietly. “I didn’t want to talk to any of you.”

She hadn’t been expecting him to say that and it showed in how taken aback she was. It took her a near minute to regain most of her composure. “I’m sorry... What did you say?”

Ibrahim sighed. “Bella –”

She took another step forward. “I was worried sick and so were Anneth, Jalal, Tobi, and Nate. And you’re telling me to my face that you didn’t want to talk to me or to the others?”

For a moment, he nearly took the easy way out; nearly pushed away the confrontation just so he didn’t have to deal with it, just like he’d been doing with all their recent issues. However, he didn’t, reminding himself that if he wanted to make things right for Ayra, he had to face every issue head on.

Putting his hands in the pockets of his coat and exhaling, he nodded and held her gaze with his. “Yes, Bella, that’s exactly what I’m saying. I didn’t want to talk to you or the others whether or not you all were worried about me.”

She was caught off-guard again and Bella had to open her mouth and close it back twice before finding her voice. “Ibrahim!”

“Bella –”

“You have got to be kidding me.” She took yet another step towards him. “Are you sick? Did you hit your head on something? Did Ayra do something?”

“Stop it.”

“No, you stop it. We all went for your family dinner, endured the shit your parents kept tossing our way, and went through the aftermath of it without you by the pool. When you finally grace us with your presence, we provide solutions to all our problems and you panic, scaring all of us before you leave and now you’re –”

“That’s the problem.” He told her. “The so called solutions are the problem.”

Her brows furrowed. “Ibrahim, what the hell are you talking about? How are they the problem? From the first day we met, you’ve had issues with your parents. They tried to control your life to the extent that you ran away to Leicester and then you met me and you were happy. They couldn’t accept that so they rejected our relationship time and time again, to the extent that we had to get you married to Ayra just so you could still be with me. Even now, they’re not content and they’re telling you to break up with me, all for Ayra, and we’re telling you that the best course of action would be to cut them off and then get divorced from Ayra and you’re saying the solutions we’re offering are the problem?!”

Ibrahim stared at her in two ways; as though she was someone he’d known so well all his life yet didn’t know at all and as though she was a stranger he was meeting for the first time. In his chest, his chest was falling back into the hole it’d been trying to pull itself out from.

“Answer me, Serkan!”

He went on to echo the words that stuck with him from all that she’d said. “*I met you and I was happy...I got married to Ayra so I could still be with you?*”

“Ibrahim, for God’s sake –”

“I thought it was always ‘we’, Bella. Has that changed? Did it even exist?”

Bella blinked and blinked again. She then let out a small laugh. “*Non essere assurdo* (Don’t be absurd). You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” He asked, feeling a bit of the chill he’d felt on Saturday night. “Do I know what you mean?”

“Ibrahim –”

“If we even have to return to the main issue at hand, how was it so easy for you all to tell me to cut my parents off and then divorce Ayra? Does that seem like a walk in the park to you? Is that a piece of cake to you?”

Bella didn't look as confident as she usually did. She kept her arms crossed though. "Ibrahim, don't pretend as though you love your parents now. Seeing how you've always wanted to get away from them, yes this seems like a walk in the park. Cutting them off should be a piece of cake and since Ayra's always been a pawn in our game, divorcing her should be same."

"Isabella!"

"What?!" She screamed. "It's the truth and you know it! We all know it! You don't love your family neither do you love Ayra so stop being stubborn and stop trying to have your cake and eat it, Ibrahim. Besides, if there's someone who's sacrificed enough for the both of us, it's me and you can't deny it."

He couldn't stop the scoff that slipped past his lips while his chest twisted, his emotions one big ball. His voice was low when he asked "You're the one who's sacrificed enough for the both of us?"

"Yes, Ibrahim, I am. You know it."

"Bella." The memories were a dam. "Bella, I've done a lot for you, even when it went against every single thing I believed in and held dear. The biggest sacrifice you've made is choosing to let another woman take the title of Mrs Ibrahim Fahad and even then, I was still sacrificing enough for you. Even then, if you hadn't pushed forward for the idea using my love for you as a weapon, we wouldn't be here."

"So it's my fault, is that it?"

"Have you always been like this?"

She looked as though he'd slapped her. "Excuse me?!"

The chill intensified and his chest twisted even more the longer he stared at her. She stared right back with eyes he couldn't bring himself to recognise; with emotions he felt he'd always read wrong.

"Ibrahim –"

"Would you do the same if our roles were changed?"

She frowned again. "Do what?"

"If our roles were reversed and I told you to marry someone who loved you the way we found out Ayra loved me, would you have done it? If I told you that I'd be content just being the other man as long as you didn't pay him any attention than what was necessary, would you have done it?" He could barely breathe but he kept going. "And if things got complicated, if I told

you to cut your parents off and then divorce your husband, would you do both? Would you do it all, Bella? I need you to be honest with me.”

Silence. Silence was all he got from her and he felt himself breaking in a way that was different from the ways he’d broken in recent times. He swallowed thickly, telling himself to not cry.

Bella unfolded her arms, her hands falling back to her sides as tight fists. “Ibrahim –”

“Yes or no, Bella.” The pain was so raw and it hurt excruciatingly. “Would you do it all?”

A tense moment passed before she replied, her words knives that were expertly aimed at his heart. “Our roles aren’t reversed, Ibrahim, so I can’t give you the answer you’re asking for.”

The walls of the mental gallery he had that held their memories cracked and one by one, they came down and all the years they’d been together flashed in his head like a fast-forwarded film; him pinning after her until he gathered the courage to engage her in their first conversation when they were grouped together for an assignment, their first dates and him doing everything possible to ensure it always came out perfectly, asking her to be his girlfriend over and over until she agreed, the parties he gradually got used although he hated them at first, all the dates they had, the trips they went on and the lists they drew up of places they wanted to visit, the decision to call each other Serkan and Sevgilim while in Turkey, his parents’ constant rejections, their break-ups and reunions, him always putting everything aside just because she wanted something or she wanted to go somewhere, their drunken plan to get him married to someone else, marrying Ayra yet letting her – Bella – go through the events (behind the scenes, of course) as though she was the bride and Ayra wasn’t, every moment he left Ayra just to go to wherever she was even on the first night of his marriage to Ayra, being unable to see Ayra for who she was until recently because all he could ever see was Bella, the way the tides had started to turn yet he stayed loyal, and then the domino effect that had been in motion for a while, heightened by all that had happened on Saturday at his parents’ place.

The chill became worse and Ibrahim unconsciously hugged himself, whispering. “Please leave.”

Bella took a step forward, reaching out for him. “Serkan –”

He stepped back, nearly tripping. “I need you to leave, Isabella. I don’t want to hear anything, just *please*...Please leave.”

Bella, for the first time in a short while, looked hurt. “Ibrahim, don’t do this.”

He didn’t want to listen. He hugged himself tighter. “Please leave, Bella. I don’t want to drag you out.”

“Serkan, come on. You can’t be doing this.”

“Bella –”

“If I leave, we’re going to have a big problem and this is going to be worse than every other time we’ve broken up. I won’t let you off the hook that easily.”

It was scary for Ibrahim to realise he didn’t care. She was not joking, he knew that, but he didn’t feel anything except pain and every other synonymous emotion that made him a castle with walls that were crumbling down. Bella, when she saw he wasn’t going to budge, paled slightly. Her eyes went a little wide. “Ibrahim –”

“Leave.” His voice was cold; way colder than it’d ever been. “*Ti sto implorando* (I’m begging you).”

The moment that followed stretched for what seemed like eternity before her expression frosted over and she straightened, her hands back to being fists at her side. She gave him a small smile that did nothing but worsen his chill. “You’re going to regret, Ibrahim. I promise.”

“I know.” He told her. “I’m to regret everything. I’m already doing so and it’s clear that it’s only going to worsen from here on.”

“*Vaffanculo* (Fuck you).” She spat out.

He said nothing, having no words to say in reply. Another moment passed before she turned around and stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door shut with so much force that he was sure the hinges rattled. Allowing himself tremble slightly, Ibrahim stumbled forward and went on to change the passcode, using the first date that came to mind; 2612, his and Ayra’s wedding date.

His hands shaking, he texted Ayra, telling her he’d changed the passcode. He knew better than to say why. The text delivered but it wasn’t read and he put his phone to sleep when a minute passed. He squatted there on the corridor, not caring if anyone saw him or not, and focused on breathing in and out. He didn’t know how long it took but eventually the trembling stopped and the constriction in his chest eased up.

He only forced himself to stand when he felt as strong as he'd done as at the time he walked Ayra down to the parking lot. Although it was tempting to go in and stay inside the confines of the apartment, he forced himself to turn and walk towards the elevators.

He had breakfast with his parents after all.

Salama opened the door and laughed at the expression on her friend's face. Falilat, who was breathing heavily, waved a hand and stepped into the Abdulaziz home.

"My dear!" She told Salama between breaths. "I don't dey old o. Common from my house here, see how I'm breathing. *Olorun mi o.*"

Salama ensured no one else was outside before closing the door and following Falilat. "Well done, my dear."

"Thank you o."

"Where's Al-Amin?"

"Oh, he got called into work so he had to go." Falilat peeped into the main living room. "They also called Muhsin, abi?"

"Yep."

"*Hian*, where are these girls?"

Salama, looking so much like her daughter, did not stop smiling. "They're in the second living room. You know they prefer that one."

Falilat straightened and walked on. "That's true. That Ibty *sef!* I will kill her. I told her to wait for me. *Yeye* girl."

Salama could only shake her head, her smile fond. They reached the second living room in no time and Salama watched, laughing alongside Ayra, as Falilat and Ibtiḥaj ran around like cat and rat until Falilat was able to slap Ibtiḥaj's back before turning to Ayra and being dramatic about not having seen her in a while.

Ayra laughed, her head thrown back as Falilat held her. "We saw each other before you and Uncle Al-Amin travelled."

"*Ehen?* Weeks have passed since then so it's the same as me not seeing you in a while."

Ayra laughed again, nodding. "I understand, Aunt Falilat. I missed you." She hugged the other woman. "I missed you a lot."

"I have missed you a lot too, my dear. Abeg tell Ibty to do and bring this so called Adil home. I want to be sure that this man is not fictional."

Ibtiḥaj stared at her mother in disbelief. "Mummy, I swear to God –"

Falilat waved her daughter away, causing Ayra and Salama to laugh again. "*Tab, commot* there!"

Ibtihaj pursed her lips. “It’s not your fault, Mummy. It’s not your fault at all.”

Five minutes later, they were seated on two sofas; Salama and Falilat on a loveseat and Ibtihaj and Ayra on the three seater. On the coffee table, a jug of cold orange juice sat on a tray and they each held a cup, some fuller than the others.

“So,” Salama asked her daughter. “Do you now want to say why you’re here this early?”

Ayra smiled, her eyes alight with playfulness. “I thought you said I’m always welcome here, Ummi.”

“I did, but first thing on a Monday morning?” Salama cocked her head, just as playfully. “Come on, Leilani. There’s definitely more to it.”

Ayra’s laugh was beautiful. She nodded. “You’re right, there’s more to it and I’ll get to it shortly.” She sighed. “I wish Baba and Uncle Al-Amin were here though.”

“We’re going to definitely pass on the message to them.” Falilat said before Salama could. She then leaned forward, her curiosity as clear as day. “Is it baby news?”

Ayra – although her heart shattered – acted as though she’d heard the most absurd thing. “Aunt Falilat, no! It’s not baby news.”

Falilat nodded, leaning back in her seat. “I said let me ask o so that suspense will not kill me. Don’t mind me, my dear.”

Ibtihaj spoke playfully. “*Na there dem dey* find you.”

Falilat glared. “Ibty, it’s swear I will –”

Salama cut in then. “Let’s not fight.” She smiled when mother and daughter eyed each other before looking away. She then turned to her own daughter. “Like Falilat said, Leilani, we’re definitely going to pass on the message to them so feel free to say what you want to say. We’ll listen and we’ll advice you as much as we can. Muhsin and Al-Amin would offer theirs once we tell them what’s going on.”

Ayra nodded, her smile a near ghost on her face. “Okay.”

“I hope all is well though?” Salama asked, having no idea why she felt a sudden pang of nervousness and slight dread. “There’s nothing wrong, right?”

Ayra reminded herself that she was strong although she felt nothing of the sort. She turned to look at Ibtihaj who gave her a small nod, smiling

reassuringly. When Ayra brought herself to turn back to both their mothers, she found that their smiles were gone and their apprehensive looks were no good to her broken heart that never really got to heal even for a bit before it got broken again.

Salama found herself reaching for Falilat's hand. She held on tight. "Leilani...?"

Although it wasn't what she'd planned to do, Ayra dropped the biggest piece of news first. "In Shaa Allah, before the year runs out, I'll be divorcing Ibrahim. It's a decision I've reached and one I won't change my mind on."

If a pin had dropped in the silence that followed, it would have echoed around the space. Ibtihaj simply exhaled, her shoulders dropping. Falilat and Salama, on the other hand, looked as though they'd seen the dead come back to life. It didn't matter that they were both different shades – one darker than the other; they were both pale, the blood drained from their faces.

Falilat was the first to open her mouth and her voice was a little shrill. "Ehn!?"

It took Ayra everything to stay sitting up straight, her hands together on her laps as she'd put down her glass of juice. "There's a lot I haven't told you both and while I'm sorry it's going to hurt, I'm not sorry that I chose to keep it to myself. I've been trying to find a footing and sort through the tangled web I was pulled into. I would have loved to tell you all of it on a later date but I plan to travel the day after tomorrow In Shaa Allah and I don't want to keep that from you. I also can't just show up and tell you I'm travelling without telling you where I'm going to or why I have to leave."

Falilat spoke again. "*Olorun mi!* Ayra, what are you saying?"

Salama, still too pale, found her voice. "Ayra...?" Her eyes began to glass over. "Leilani, what on earth are you saying?"

"She's divorcing Ibrahim before the year runs out." Ibtihaj replied before Ayra could. "And we're travelling next tomorrow In Shaa Allah."

With wide eyes, Falilat whipped her head in her daughter's direction. "You knew?!"

Ibtihaj nodded, her expression solemn. "I did. I found out that night Ayra came over. The same night you and Daddy travelled."

Salama felt her chest slice open and it hurt more than anything. "Leilani... That evening, you were pretending?"

Ayra's resolve cracked and her tears were impossible to hold back. "I'm sorry."

Falilat let go of her friend's hands and put her hands on her head. "Ah!"

Salama shook her head, unable to understand what was going on. "Leilani, what's...?" Her voice broke and a tear slipped. "Why? Has Ibrahim not been providing for you?"

Ayra shook her head. "He has." He never failed in that regard. "He's never stopped providing, Ummi. He's provided everything."

"Was he disrespectful or even abusive?" Falilat asked. "Did he raise his hand against you?"

Ayra shook her head, her resolve snapping further. A tear slid down her cheek when she blinked. "No, he didn't."

"Then why?" Salama asked. "Why?"

"Did he cheat?" Falilat asked.

When Ayra stayed quiet, Salama broke like an antique vase falling from an upper level to the ground down below. She brought her hands to her mouth to hold back the pained sound that threatened to slip past her lips. Beside her, Falilat did the exact opposite. She screamed. "Ah!"

"Our entire marriage was a ruse." Ayra said with a calmness that came from a place she couldn't point towards. "Everything was done in accordance with our religion and in line with tradition but...The intentions on his end were wrong. They've been wrong until recently but the damage has already been done."

Salama couldn't move, even by an inch. Falilat had her jaw still on the ground. Ibtihaj was simply sad but calm. Ayra pushed herself forward, to keep going. "Ibrahim has been in a relationship with Bella for over a decade. My marriage to him was to be a cover, to hide the fact that they were still together as his parents never gave their blessings no matter how many times Ibrahim and Bella sought it."

Salama choked on a sob. Falilat's eyes couldn't get any wider. "Bella?! Isabella Valentino?!"

Ibtihaj was the one who nodded. "Yes, Mummy. Isabella Mariá Valentino."

"*Mogbé* o! Ah! It is finished!"

The particular memory that felt like tiny daggers digging into Salama's flesh was that of her opening the front door for the first time for the Hexad squad; how Jalal had charmed her with his smile and him saying he was her

biggest fan before Anneth pushed him away with a smile of hers, and then how she – Salama – had stepped aside, welcoming them into her home. How she'd welcomed them into her home time and time again, convinced that Ayra had found the best group to be a part of.

"I found out about it since August and since then, I've been unravelling the lies they built." Ayra continued. "I'm still doing that and that's why Ibtty and I have to travel because the final puzzle pieces aren't here and I can't leave if I don't know at least ninety-eight percent of all that led to this. Ibrahim and the others don't know that I'm aware of all that's going on and I know you may want to confront them but please, let it stay between us for just a little longer...I'm sorry, because I know this is something you would have never seen coming, but please trust me, Ummi and Aunt Falilat. It will hurt for a long time but I'll be fine. In Shaa Allah it'll all be fine."

Her hands still on her head, Falilat slid to the floor and let out a strangled sound as tears welled in her eyes. Salama finally moved then. She pulled her hands away from her mouth, buried her face in them, and cried like she'd never done before.

Where they sat, Ibtihaj took her best friend's hand and held tightly. Together, with both their hearts bleeding, they watched their mothers break just like they'd done over and over again.



The Fahads ate breakfast by the pool and although it had been a majorly quiet affair, Ibrahim was glad it didn't go southwards at any point. When their used dishes and cups were taken away and they were served sliced fruits in expensive flat plates, Salim cleared his throat. "To what do we owe this honour, Ibrahim?"

Fareeda shot her husband a dirty look. "Salim."

"What?" He asked, the word coming out as a near whine. "It's unlike us to have a meal together civilly. The ones we've had were with people present and not just us."

"That doesn't mean we can't start now."

Salim scoffed, picking up his fork. "When we haven't sorted out everything between us? Oh please."

"Salim, for God's sake –"

"It's fine." Ibrahim stated, cutting into their exchange. He managed a small smile when they both faced him. "I didn't come here to just eat. Like Dad said, we haven't sorted everything between us so..."

Salim raised a brow at Fareeda and she did the first thing that came to her mind; she flipped him off. Ibrahim, who'd never really paid any attention to their exchanges over the years, found himself holding back a small laugh and wondering if he and Ayra would have such exchange in the years to come as they grew older. He hoped – sincerely – that they did.

“So, Ibrahim.” Fareeda began. “Before we go into why you’re actually here, how are you?”

“Don’t act like you actually care.” He used to say back when she called and asked how he was doing. *“We both know you don’t give an honest shit. We also know you’re nothing close to a real mother so stop acting like one. It doesn’t suit you. It never will.”*

“I’ve had better days.” He replied honestly. His small smile returned. “But I’ll be fine.”

Fareeda smiled back, reaching across the table to pat the back of his hand. “You will be. I’m sure of it.”

Having no words, Ibrahim simply continued smiling. With her smile still on, Fareeda patted the back of his hand again before pulling her hand back. Salim cleared his throat once more. “So...What are we talking about?”

A few moments passed before Ibrahim brought himself to ask “Why did you always say Bella and I weren’t good together? I know it might seem as though I’m asking you to repeat yourselves when you’ve done just that over and over again but this is first time I’m willing to listen to what you have to say so...”

A quiet minute passed before Salim sighed, lowering his fork. He leaned back in his chair, bringing his hands together. “Did you end things with Bella?”

“No.” Ibrahim replied, without any hesitation. “Not yet at least. But it isn’t something I can put off for much longer.”

“Is it because of Ayra?” Fareeda asked. When Ibrahim nodded, she pressed further. “Because we asked that you don’t walk down the same road your father and I took or because of something else?”

Ibrahim considered it for a moment even though he knew the clear answer. “Ayra deserves better than I’ve put her through in the time we’ve known each other so...I want to make things right, at least to the best of my ability. And like you two said, I shouldn’t put someone through what you went through, Mum, and I shouldn’t be like you, Dad.”

Fareeda's expression had softened. Salim's had too but it was less obvious. He regarded his son for a near minute before he opened his mouth. "You love her. Ayra, I mean."

Ibrahim nodded slowly. "I'm headed in that direction but yes."

Fareeda teared up. "Oh, Ibrahim."

Salim glared at her. "Don't even start."

She waved him away. "Buzz off." She then smiled so beautifully at her son. "Oh Ibrahim."

Ibrahim's small smile returned while a bit of his heart warmed. Salim then blew out a long breath. "The day you brought Bella home for the first time, it was quite clear that both of you were a bad combination. When you threw in the rest of the so called squad, it was a bomb that was slowly ticking towards explosion."

Ibrahim knew he wasn't completely following but he let his father go on. Salim stared at his hands for a moment before raising his head, his eyes meeting Ibrahim's.

"Like everyone else thinks, Bella is a beautiful woman. She's also smart, socially prim and proper, and she's from a long line of wealth. However, there's very little love between you two and most of it came from you. You've always been ready to worship the ground she walked on, Ibrahim, but while you and the others couldn't see it, it was clear she wasn't going to do the same for you. Each time you six came over, it became clearer and clearer that you held them dearer than they did and while we weren't the best parents as we tried to control your life, they were people who thought they knew what was best for you. I'm sure they still think they know what's best for you."

Ibrahim had to look away, choosing to focus on the plate of untouched fruit slices in front of him.

"Maybe at some point, you did love Bella." Salim continued. "But as at the time you brought her home, and each time you did so, the love you thought you felt was more of an infatuated loyalty. It was as though you loved the idea of someone like Isabella Valentino being with you, especially for that long, rather than loving the woman herself. For Bella, it's always seemed as though she loved the idea of having you; a man who'd be ready to do anything for her. I've never believed she loved you sincerely as a person. I still don't. Each time you asked why your mother and I why we wouldn't give our blessings, I wanted to tell you all of this."

Salim smiled sadly then. “But we’ve never been able to hold a calm conversation and it’s hard to say much when we’re both shouting and reopening old wounds and calling each other names.” He then sighed. “We really have a lot to sort out.”

Ibrahim raised his head a few heartbeats later. “Then why did everyone else like her? From the first time I brought her home, my aunts, uncles, and cousins loved her and said we fit perfectly. Why?”

Fareeda was the one who replied. “You’re both an aesthetically pleasing couple. Like your father has said, Bella’s a beautiful woman and she’s everything a typical Fahad is, including the pride and arrogance that we all try to deny.”

She smiled when her words cracked a little smile out of him. She then continued “Both of you together are a dreamlike couple and it’s easy to accept the idea of having someone like Bella in the family, especially when everyone else thinks they read us better than we can read ourselves. That’s the only explanation we could come up with. Trust me, Ibrahim, only a few people among those who accepted the both of you actually know you and Bella beyond superficial level and if things had actually gone the way you two wanted and you ended up having issues, those same people would have been the first to flee.”

“The bottom line is,” Salim stated. “You don’t love Bella as much as you think you do. You’re more infatuated with the idea of you two being together and you’re loyal to a fault, Ibrahim. That’s why you stayed with her as much as you did and that’s why you went ahead to pull yourself out of your comfort zone time and time again to please her and eventually please what is now known worldwide as the squad.”

Ibrahim’s stomach did a little drop. “Dad –”

Salim nodded. “Yes, Ibrahim, we know about the grades that dropped at one small point. We know about the parties and the drugs. We know about the fights that would have escalated had you and Nathaniel not been the sober ones. We know about the trips and we know about the times you always nearly got a tattoo. We know it all. We just turned a blind eye to it, hoping that you’ll come to your senses...We’ve been bad parents, we’re learning and accepting that time and time again, and like you’re making an attempt to make things right with Ayra, we need to also make an attempt to make things right. We can’t do it all in one day but we can surely start from somewhere.” He faced Fareeda. “Right?”

She nodded, smiling warmly at him. “Right.”

Ibrahim looked from one person to the other, the urge to cry returning. Another mental gallery of memories began to crack and crumble and this time, the memories weren't nice. He blinked back the tears as they surfaced, his hands gripping the fabric of his baggy distressed jeans.

"You weren't nice parents." He said quietly, barely pushing back the memories he had of them screaming and memories of plates being broken before doors were slammed shut. "You weren't a good couple too." He held the fabric a little tighter. "And I didn't get a chance to properly grow up, not when you had goals laid out for me that I had to achieve while you two tried to balance working out your fragile relationship and the personal aspirations you had."

Fareeda was moved to tears again, pain etched on her face. Underneath the table, she was gripping the floral fabric of her dress just as tightly as Ibrahim did with his jeans. Salim lowered his head, filled with a mixture of regret, shame, and pain.

Ibrahim continued, mentally reliving even more memories of shouting, near fist fights between him and his father, Fareeda always getting into the middle when things got heated, insults being exchanged, and then the memory of a sixteen year old him screaming at Fareeda *"I wish I was a still-born so you wouldn't have been able to put me through this hell!"*

"I hated this house so, so much that I always wanted to leave and university gave me that chance so I went all the way to England because I knew you didn't like it much so there were only going to be a few visits from you two. At some point, my aunts and uncles were more of parents to me than you two were. That's how bad things got."

Fareeda reached up to quickly wipe away her tears with her hands while Salim kept his head lowered, blinking his own tears back.

"I didn't think I was going to enjoy Software Engineering but I did and when I met Bella and the others, I had a first shot at being valued as part of a community. I felt happy and I never wanted to let go of that so even when I was uncomfortable with a setting or a particular plan, I went ahead with it because it made them happy and their happiness made me happy. I've always been proud of who we were as a squad and the things we've done together but that's changing now and it's been the hardest thing, Mum and Dad." His voice broke, courtesy of a sob. "You have no idea how hard it's been for me since August when Ayra began to mean more to me than I ever thought would be possible."

Fareeda had to bring a hand to her mouth, her words muffled when she spoke. "We're so sorry, Ibrahim. You have no idea how sorry we are."

“Each time I brought Bella and the squad home and you rejected them without fail, I used to hate you two so, so much. That’s why I always lashed out. That’s why I always spoke the way I did and why I said the things I did. I couldn’t understand why you two were so stubborn when I’d never really asked for something as much as I asked for you two to accept Bella and me, and also my friendship with the squad. Back then, that was all I wanted, but you two weren’t yielding and I did think about cutting you two off for good time and time again but it was funny how I never came around to actually doing it, the same way I never got around getting a tattoo each time I went with the others to a tattoo parlour. I’m regretting a lot of things now, especially all we said and did, but you two need to understand that you weren’t the best role models. You weren’t that at all. If things had been good at home, maybe things would have turned out differently and we wouldn’t be here. At least things wouldn’t be this bad.”

Salim bit down on his lower lip while Fareeda kept crying, her head lowered.

“The decision to marry Ayra was because we thought it’d be better to have someone you two would approve of as my wife while Bella and I continued our relationship with you two being in ignorant bliss. I didn’t come up with the idea but I didn’t put my foot down on it not going through. I admit that then it seemed fool-proof and it seemed as though we’d be able to keep up with the ruse until the end of time without caring about the consequences. I also wanted Bella to be happy and if that was what she wanted, I was ready to go through with it. It never crossed my mind that I was doing the same thing you did, Dad, not until Mum pointed out to me on Saturday.”

Salim began to cry then, a fist at his mouth to keep himself quiet.

Ibrahim let his own tears flow freely. “Things got complicated for me along the line, Mum and Dad, and the ruse was no longer easy to keep up with and I thought I could balance it out but it’s proven to be impossible, especially with me wanting more of what I have with Ayra and less of what I’ve had with Bella and the others. Then Saturday’s party made things really clear, especially when the squad asked that I legally disown you two and then get started on divorcing Ayra just so I could properly and publicly be with Bella.”

That had Salim and Fareeda raising their heads, glassy eyes wide and shock on both their faces.

“I’m not going to go through with it.” Ibrahim told them. “I swear I won’t. It was just a clarifying moment and everything that’s happened since then has made everything even more clearer to me. Ayra deserves better and I’m

going to do all I can to ensure that happens. You always told me I was going to sacrifice so much for the squad and that they won't sacrifice that much for me in return, Dad. I'm sorry I didn't listen then. I'm definitely listening now, no matter how late it is."

Salim shook his head. "No, Ibrahim, no..."

"I'm going to sort things out. I can't say to you two or to myself that it's going to be a smooth ride because I know for a fact that things can go wrong in so many ways but..."

He forced out a breath. "But I want to try. I want to know who I really am and what it is I have to sincerely offer. I want to also be the best person possible for Ayra...And I want to have my family too, with both of you. I want us to have meals where we can talk and not eat with silence that can put that of a graveyard to shame. I want to be able to come home and tell you that I'm having an issue and have you part with advice that'll actually help. I want to do everything that parents do with their children, no matter how old they are, so I can be a role model to my kids; the kind of role model I wish you two had been. That's all I want, Mum and Dad. That's all I'm asking for."

Fareeda pushed her chair back and stood. She walked around the table and hugged Ibrahim to her, holding him as tightly as she could. "I'm so sorry, Ibrahim. We're so, so sorry."

In his chair, Salim cried harder, his shoulders shaking from his heavy sobs. All the way in Plum Boulevard, Salama sat on the rug, holding Ayra tightly against her; both of them crying. Beside them, Ibtihaj held her mother close as Falilat sobbed. In Downtown Aomi, Bella's room in hers and Ibrahim's home was a mess. With a scream, she pulled at her hair, frustrated and overflowing with rage that she could no longer contain.

The East Midlands Airport was cold.

As she and Ibtihaj claimed their luggage, Ayra hoped the weather did not get colder until the both of them returned to Atlantica. She wasn't sure she'd be able to take it despite her having packed enough essentials just in case it got really cold.

Ibtihaj checked her phone, reading the text she'd received. "Adil said they're outside."

"He didn't come alone?"

Ibtihaj shook her head, putting her phone to sleep. "No. He said he's with his cousin, Ayman."

"Remind me how you got him to pick us up and actually drive us all the way to Leicester."

Ibtihaj smiled proudly. "When a man wants to do anything for you, you cannot say no. Oga insisted, saying that he and Ayman actually had stuff to do in Leicester tomorrow and next. You know I like free thing."

"Oh Ibtty."

"I love you too. Oya, let's go!"

Halfway to the exit of the terminal, Ibtihaj felt the urge to pee and while searching for the restroom, Ayra decided she'd grab a to-go cup of coffee from one of the cafes and wait until Ibtihaj returned. Both of them ditched their boxes with a friendly female security officer and went their separate ways.

Apart from a few people who sipped their coffees and munched on their chosen pastries, the café was sparsely filled. Ayra, with the heaviness in her chest that she'd carried all the way from Aomi, took in a breath and blew it out before walking to the counter where three baristas busied themselves with one thing or the other.

One of the two females among them perked up when Ayra stopped on the other side of the counter. The barista smiled. "Hello. What can I get for you?"

Ayra quickly scanned their menu. "A mocha, please, with extra hot chocolate. I'll have one to go."

The barista nodded. "Will you be having anything to go with it?"

Ayra glanced through the display case that held pastries in different sizes and colours. She nodded a moment later. "I think I'll take muffins." She raised her head. "They're blueberry muffins, right?"

The barista's smile was dazzling. "Right. Fresh from the oven as the first batch sold out earlier than planned."

That got a small smile out of Ayra. "I'll have them. Three please."

"Alright. One mocha with extra hot chocolate and muffins coming right up."

Feeling a little guilty at the thought of getting something for just herself, Ayra added "And one cappuccino for my best friend. She'll be here in a bit. Sorry. Three muffins for her too."

The barista shook her head. "No worries. Also to go?"

Ayra nodded. "Yes, also to go."

"You wanna take a seat while I get your orders?"

Ayra shook her head. "No, I'll just wait here. I've been sitting on the plane for hours."

An understanding smile appeared on the barista's face. "Alright then."

The barista got to work and Ayra watched. It wasn't long before the space beside her was occupied and although she was tempted to turn her head to see who it was, Ayra forced herself to keep her eyes on the barista attending to her while the other female barista turned to the new customer, a nice smile on her face as she asked what the customer wanted.

"A mocha, please." The voice was deep and velvety, each word beautifully pronounced with a hint of an accent that blended in with the British intonation. "I think I'd have that instead of an affogato. I've had enough sugar today."

Ayra felt goosebumps break out on her arms and she knew it had nothing to do with the chill of the airport. Whoever the man beside her was, he spoke so beautifully and there was a part of her that actually hoped he'd say something else.

"The classic mocha or you'd like an extra of something?" The barista asked. "Drinking here or to go?"

Through her peripheral vision, Ayra saw him reach into the coat he wore and pull out a sleek black wallet. He was tall, that much she could tell. "Extra milk and hot chocolate. To go, please."

Her own barista walked back to the counter, two to go cups in her hands. She smiled at Ayra. “One mocha with extra hot chocolate and one cappuccino. I’ll get your muffins.”

Ayra shot her a small smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

As she walked away, Ayra opened her sling bag and reached in for her wallet. As she pulled it out, it hit the strap of the bag and slipped through her fingers, hitting the ground a moment later with a soft thud, a few inches away from the next customer’s feet; the same man who spoke with beautiful eloquence.

Ayra sighed and squatted, picking it up. His shoes got her attention and she shouldn’t have smiled but the fact that he wore crocs – midnight black in colour – made her do just that. The shoes looked really good on him and she got a glimpse of initials on the side of his right shoe; A.H.B. Telling herself they were probably customised, Ayra moved to push herself back up when something caught her attention, causing her to freeze in place. In a hole on each croc was the jibbitz of a flower she’d recognise anywhere; a flower she’d been named after.

“Are you okay?”

Startled, Ayra raised her head and the first thing she took note of was his eyes; hazel green and bright, framed with long, full lashes. Her chest squeezed and she forced herself to look away, back to his shoes. She stared at the jibbitz for a moment longer before she stood, blowing out a small breath before putting a small smile on her face, aiming it at him.

Getting a proper look at him now that she was standing, Ayra realised two things. One, he was tall; way taller than the men she’d known all her life. Two, just like his manner of speech, he was beautiful in a soft, humble way. Ayra forced herself to not stare for too long although that same part of her that wanted to listen to him speak wanted to do just that. She focused on giving him a reply to his earlier question.

She nodded, pointing towards his shoes. “I am. I was just taken aback by the flowers.” She brought her line of sight back to his face, her chest squeezing again as she watched them look down at both crocs. “I don’t mean that in a bad way; please do not get me wrong.”

He stared at his shoes for a moment longer before he raised his head, his expression calm. “You recognise the flower?”

Ayra realised then that she was a little nervous. She nodded, holding his gaze with hers; hazel green meeting hazel brown. “A Hawaiian Leilani. Right?”

It was subtle but she noticed the slight cocking of one his brows. He smiled a little too and she caught the surprise that flickered in his eyes before astonishment followed. He nodded, slowly. “Right...Are you a florist? Not a lot of people around here recognise it.”

She found herself smiling like him; a small smile that barely became evident on her face but had her feeling a slice of warmth inside. She shook her head. “I’m not a florist.” She glanced at the crocs again. “It’s my mother’s favourite flower.”

This time, his brow clearly shot up and his astonishment doubled. “Are you serious?”

Ayra nodded, her smile stretching a bit on its own accord. “I am.”

“Well, as crazy as it may seem, it’s my mother’s favourite too.” He smiled fondly, a little colour staining his cheeks as he looked down at his feet once again. “It’s her current favourite actually. She changes favourites with each season and I love her too much to not indulge. Also,” He brought his head back up. “It’s a beautiful flower and the jibbitz creator nailed it.”

She nodded, nearly laughing. “He or she did.” She looked at the flower again, her smile nearly as fond as his had been. “It’s been my mother’s favourite for years, to the extent that she named me after it. It automatically became my favourite.”

When she raised her head, she found him staring at her with every emotion that was synonymous to astonishment and surprise. “Are you serious?”

She nodded once again, warmth creeping up the back of her neck and going to her cheeks. “I am. It’s not my first name but it’s my name all the same.”

“Wow...I’m so telling Mama I ran into someone named Leilani. She’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

This time, Ayra did laugh. “I’m sure she’s a lovely person. Please tell her Leilani says hi.”

He smiled and it made her breath hitch slightly. He nodded. “I will, In Shaa Allah. It’s nice to meet you, Leilani.”

“It’s nice to meet you too...”

“Since we’re going by middle names, I’m Hakeem.”

The only thought that ran through her head in that moment was that the name Hakeem fit him, maybe even more than it should have. She smiled again, sincerely. "It's nice to meet you too, Hakeem."

Still smiling, he turned back to the barista who'd attended to him as she dropped his to go cup on the counter. Knowing their conversation was over, Ayra turned back to her barista who'd been watching the entire scene play out. Unable to help it, Ayra blushed and busied herself opening her wallet. Pulling out her card, she was reminded of why she was in Leicester and just like that, the momentary happiness she'd experience vanished.

It was the card linked to a domiciliary account Ibrahim had opened for her after they'd gotten married; an account he'd credited after the party at his parents' home because he didn't want her to spend any more of her own money while on the trip with Ibūhaj.

"Please ring up her order on my card."

That brought Ayra back to the present and she watched, nearly horrified, as the barista rang up her order and Hakeem's on his card. Her eyes wide and panic slowly bubbling within her, Ayra faced the man beside her. "Hakeem _"

He shot her a small smile, taking the card back from the barista. "It's no big deal. Also, Mama would have my head for dinner if I told her I met a Leilani and I didn't treat her well. Please don't take this the wrong way. It's something I want to do, and also to say thank you, for making what would have been a regular trip to a café a nice one."

He picked his cup of coffee and pocketed his wallet and card. Ayra noticed then that underneath his black coat, he was in a milk coloured thobe that seemed familiar; as though she'd come across it somewhere. She pushed the thought to the back of her head and managed a small smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He began to turn, ready to leave. "I hope you have a lovely flight. And if you're just arriving, I hope you reach your destination safely."

"Thank you. I hope the same for you."

"Well, I'm just picking up someone with my cousin but thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Goodbye, Leilani."

"Bye."

Nearly a minute after he left, Ibtiḥaj stepped into the café, not caring about the other customers as she loudly said “Ayra, oya ol!”

It was impossible for Ayra to not blush, embarrassed to no end while Ibtiḥaj let out a small cackle. She – Ibtiḥaj – appreciated the coffee and muffins and once they left the café without Ayra mentioning her encounter with the man named Hakeem, they got their boxes and exited the terminal.

Outside were buses, taxis, and private vehicles alike. As she wasn’t sure she’d be able to recognise Adil although she’d seen his photo, Ayra let Ibtiḥaj lead the way.

“Ibty!”

They both turned towards the left and while Ibtiḥaj grinned, Ayra had to blink continuously. Pictures, she decided then and there, did not do Adil Bello justice. Also, he was tall. Sporting a lovely smile, Adil walked over, his hands in the pockets of his sand brown coat.

Ibtiḥaj stopped smiling once he got to where they were. “I said I was not going to smile. I’m supposed to be dragging class for you small.”

Ayra snorted and brought a hand up to her mouth when she realised what she’d done. Adil, on the other hand, laughed and shook his head. “And here I was, excited to see you again, Ibty.”

Ibtiḥaj smiled smugly. “It’s me now. You have to miss me.”

Laughing again, Adil turned Ayra’s way. His smile was friendly and warm. “Hello, Ayra. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Ayra returned his smile with ease. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you too. Please don’t mind this woman.”

Ibtiḥaj nearly shoved her best friend while Adil chuckled, nodding. “I won’t. I hope your flight was nice.”

“It was, Alhamdulillah. Thank you for choosing to pick us up and drive us to Leicester, Adil. You have no idea how grateful I am.”

Adil, clearly embarrassed, blushed a little. “Oh please, it’s nothing. Although Ibty’s refusing to believe me, my cousins and I have some things to sort out there. We’re relocating to Atlantica as the year runs out so...”

Ayra could only nod. Adil then got his hands out of his pockets and put them together, his smile retuning. “So, let me help me with your boxes. Ayman’s clearing the booth because we got some purchases on the way here. He’s a patient man and I haven’t been the best travel companion

because I've annoyed him today. You know Ayman's on his last nerve when he enters an airport terminal just to get coffee from a café."

"Thank God we're finally meeting Ayman." Ibtihaj said, gladly stepping away so he could take the handle of her box. "You're always talking about him."

Adil did not stop smiling, wrapping his hands around the box handle. "He's my favourite person, but do not let Aneesa hear that."

While Ibtihaj chuckled, Ayra assured Adil she could pull her box along herself. He was not having it and she eventually had to let go. He walked in front of them, pulling both boxes with ease and Ayra took her best friend's hand.

"So," Ibtihaj asked quietly. "What do you think?"

"He's really beautiful, Ibt." Ayra said honestly. "He's lovely too."

Ibtihaj smiled stupidly. "I told you! Wait until you see Ayman. Omo, if he is not everything Adil described, I'll kill him."

A few more steps lead them to a red Range Rover Sport whose glasses had been wound down and the booth opened. Adil walked right to the back, Ayra and Ibtihaj following with small steps and hearing bits of the conversation that began.

"Ayman, the boxes should come first. What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"Adil, wallah, if you do not move..."

Both men came into focus for the best friends and Ayra's heart dropped alongside her stomach. Adil's cousin – Ayman – straightened, his back turned towards her and Ibtihaj but Ayra knew who he was. She recognised the voice and the beautiful manner of speech. She recognised the milk coloured thobe that was majorly covered with his black coat. Most importantly, she recognised the black crocs on his feet, knowing that if he turned around, she'd see the initials A.H.B on the side and she'll find the Hawaiian Leilanis as jibbitz in two holes. She had a feeling he'd be holding his cup of mocha too, the one with extra milk and hot chocolate.

Adil shook his head, sighing. He then turned to both women, his smile retuning. "Ladies, this is my cousin and also the one person I'll annoy to no end, Ayman Hakeem Bello."

Ayman Hakeem Bello turned around, his small smile freezing when his eyes met Ayra's. Adil, oblivious to it all, continued, gesturing towards the best

friends. “Ayman, this is the woman I’m praying to marry once we’re settled in Atlantica if she’ll have me; Ibtihaj Oluwatosin Adeola.”

Ibtihaj’s lips curved into an impressed smile. “Someone’s been practicing.”

Adil’s smile widened. “I have. And, Ayman, this is her best friend, Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz.”

Ayra wondered then if she should have told Ibtihaj that both of them – she and the man who introduced himself with his middle name, Hakeem – met in the café. She watched, with a heart that picked up its pace, as Ayman recovered, his smile unfreezing itself as he turned to Ibtihaj.

“Assalam Alaykum, Ibtihaj. It’s so nice to finally meet the woman my cousin wouldn’t shut up about.”

Adil’s eyes widened and he whipped his head in his cousin’s direction, his cheeks on fire. “Ayman, you promised to not say anything of that sort!”

Ibtihaj smiled back widely at Ayman. “Waalaykum Salam, Ayman. It’s nice to finally meet you too. Omo, this man does not ever shut up about you.”

Subtly, although Ayra didn’t miss it, Ayman’s smile stretched and his eyes crinkled slightly; amusement lighting the hazel green shade even further. “He’ll deny it once my sister, Aabidah, and our cousin, Aneesah, are around but I’m his favourite person.”

“I hope the feeling is sha reciprocated.” Ibtihaj said with false sternness. “Don’t be stressing Adil for nothing.”

Adil stood up straighter, pride a beautiful emotion on his face. “Exactly.”

Ayman laughed and the beauty of it hit Ayra squarely in the chest, making her tighten her hold on her cup of the coffee she was yet to take a sip from. Ayman, when his laughter died to a smile, nodded. “It’s reciprocated, don’t worry. I’m only saying it because you’re here. I’d never hear the end of it if I say it to his face.”

Adil smiled, still so proud. “You’re saying it now so...”

“Get away from me, Adil.”

Adil and Ibtihaj laughed. His smile still on, Ayman turned Ayra’s way and his smile shrunk, softening. He put his free hand in his pocket and as though he knew she’d not told Ibtihaj about their encounter at the café, he said “Assalam Alaykum, Ayra.”

Gratitude was all she felt as well as a slice of the same warmth that had wrapped itself around her back in the café. “Waalaykum Salam. Hello, Ayman.”

His smile did not waver. “Hi.”

Adil threw an arm around his cousin’s shoulder then. “Let’s get this vehicle loaded and then we’ll be on our way. We’ll pray at a nearby masjid. That cool with you two?”

The best friends nodded and Adil grinned. “Perfect! Ayman, chop chop!”

“Adil, wallah —”

“I love you too.”



Leilani: *Hi, Ibrahim. I promised to text or call once we landed but I actually got carried away, sorry. We got to EMA safely and the ride from the airport to our hotel went well. We (lbty and I) are just going to freshen up and then call it a night. I’ll call you once I’m well rested In Shaa Allah. Bye!*

The knot in Ibrahim’s chest loosened and he let out a long breath, relieved that she was safe and fine. There was a bit of disappointment at the fact that he wasn’t going to hear her voice yet but he reminded himself that she’d had a long flight and he could wait.

He was about to put his phone to sleep when a new message came in, this time from one of the secretaries at The Hexad.

Alexis: *Hello, Engineer Fahad. I hope this doesn’t come at a wrong time. A meeting was scheduled for 9:30AM tomorrow by the other members of the squad and there was no mention of your name on the memo I received so I wanted to clarify if it’s supposed to be that way because I know such memos are only released when you’re not in the country and as far as I know, you’re around. I’ll await your reply, sir. Do have a lovely evening.*

Frowning, Ibrahim read the message again and before he knew what he was doing, he was about to dial Bella’s line out of habit. He caught himself at the very last moment. Breathing out shakily, he closed her contact window and tried to understand why they were having a meeting without him.

He’d not been to the office in a while and although he wasn’t sure he was ready to head back, he knew he had to go in the next morning. There had to be a reason for the meeting and he needed to know what it was although there was a part of him that dreaded it.

Ibrahim stepped into The Hexad through the company's revolving doors and felt nothing. There was no rush of excitement to be surrounded by everything he and the others built. There was certainly no stab of pride at how far they'd come. Lastly, there was no eagerness to head up to be with Bella alone if they'd come together or to meet her in his office if they'd come separately due to one reason or the other.

Swallowing the little lump in his throat, Ibrahim buried his hands in the deep pockets of his coat and walked on. He was greeted by people he knew well and those he didn't, and he did his best to reply as politely as he always did even though he no longer felt like he was worthy of the way they looked at him with happiness and admiration; as though he was someone they wanted to be so badly when he knew he wasn't.

The elevator ride up was unusually long and Ibrahim didn't like that the seconds were dragging themselves. He reached the last floor and stepped out of the carriage once the doors slid open. The secretary who'd texted the previous evening, Alexis, was at his side in no time and she let him know where the others were.

Ibrahim smiled at her, grateful. "Thank you, Alexis."

She smiled back. "You're welcome!"

Anneth's office was the last one on the left end of the floor and Ibrahim found himself hesitating for a near minute once he got there. Pulling himself together and relying on every ounce of courage he had, he put his hand on the door handle and pushed it down, helping himself in.

The conversation in the sitting area of the wide space ceased immediately he stepped in and every single person he'd called his friend for more than a decade – including Nathaniel who he assumed would be at the hospital – stared at him, warmth being a non-existent emotion in their gazes and on their expressions.

Ibrahim let go of the door and took another step forward, allowing the barrier to fall shut behind him. His hands returned to his pockets and although he was tempted to fake a smile, he didn't. "I had no idea there was a meeting. I didn't get an invite."

Tobi shrugged. "Wouldn't have made a difference. You've been a ghost here recently and we've ran things well without you."

Ibrahim's heart cracked; yet another crack amongst many. "I've been going through a lot."

Jalal stood, speaking as he did so. “So we can see.” He walked around the table. “In case you’re blind, we’re going through a lot too and it’s all thanks to you.” He walked over, his steps straight and sure. “How was breakfast with Mummy and Daddy dearest on Monday morning?”

“Jalal –”

The punch was one Ibrahim never saw coming and the force of it pushed him back a few steps. He hit the closed door and pain shot up his back. He barely recovered from the shock of it when Jalal punched him again and then again, pushing Ibrahim to the ground.

“Jalal,” It was Bella. “Stop it.”

Jalal didn’t listen. He got on Ibrahim and threw another punch, hitting Ibrahim’s hands which he brought up to shield his face. “The first one was me telling you hello. The second was me saying fuck you. The third? Another fuck you. The fourth is for Bella and this –” He got in one more punch before Nathaniel and Tobi pulled him away from Ibrahim. “That’s for all of us, you asshole! Get the fuck off me!”

“Jalal, *smettila* (stop it).”

“He deserves it and don’t you all dare tell me you didn’t feel like punching him too five minutes before he dragged his stupid self in here!

Ibrahim’s ears were ringing. Slowly, he pulled his arms back and the sleeves of his cream coat were stained with blood; little patches here and there. As his mind took him back memory lane, his breaths came out shaky; the fights that broke out in clubs and in parties where he and Nathaniel had to pull Jalal and Tobi out of each mess while Bella asked them to stop and Anneth avoided getting them caught by the cops, especially when it seemed as though things would spiral even further out of control.

His face feeling as though it’d been set ablaze and his heart in what seemed to the darkest corner of his stomach, Ibrahim forced himself up, his eyes slightly widened. The ringing in his ears continued and he watched – unhearing – as the people he’d always called friends exchanged words, Jalal’s veil popping and his hands as tight fists. The men – Nathaniel and Tobi – stood with Jalal between them while the women – Anneth and Bella – sat.

While Bella spoke, Anneth stared at Ibrahim in a way she’d never done, almost unrecognisable with her blank face and cold eyes. Ibrahim could only stare back. Slowly, the ringing stopped and when his hearing returned, every member of the squad faced him. On shaky limbs, Ibrahim forced himself off the ground and raised his head to look at them.

“Who told you we were having a meeting?” Tobi asked.

“Does it matter?” Ibrahim heard himself ask.

Jalal scoffed. “We’re definitely fishing out that rat. Someone’s going home tonight.”

“If they even stay that long.” Anneth said, finally pushing herself up to a standing position. “They’ll be gone by noon.” She walked around the table and it shouldn’t have been possible but her gaze grew colder. “Ibrahim, we were to have this meeting without you so we could decide where to go from here but since you showed up, let’s have the discussion we were coming to have with you at your place.”

Ibrahim felt his heart crack again. “And the assault I just suffered?”

Jalal scoffed once more. “You should be grateful they pulled me back because –” He took a step forward, only stopping when Nathaniel put a hand on his chest. His glare was lethal, aimed towards none other than Ibrahim. “Because if I did what I had in mind, Ibrahim, you’d be on your way to the ER, praying you wouldn’t need a reconstructive surgery.”

“And am I supposed to know what warranted that?”

“Really, Ibrahim?” Anneth asked. When he turned her way, she let out a dry laugh before she nodded, leaning against the table. “Fine then. Why don’t we go down memory lane? What the hell happened on Monday when Bella came to your place? What were those questions you asked? And what on earth did you mean by the solutions we came up with were the problems you had?”

“And then asking her to leave,” Tobi added. “Even when she said you were going to regret it.”

Ibrahim slowly turned to Bella who stared right back at him. She looked innocent, as though she couldn’t hurt a fly, and it scared him. The question slipped past his lips before he could re-think it. “What did you tell them?”

“Everything.” Jalal pushed Nathaniel and Tobi away and stormed over, grabbing Ibrahim by his collar. He gritted each word out, his voice dangerously low. “She told us how you stated that you didn’t want to talk to us even when we worried sick and how you spent the weekend in pure bliss with your wife while we wondered what was going on with you.”

He tightened his hold, his blazing eyes holding Ibrahim’s wide ones. “She told us how you said the solutions we provided to the issue we’re having were problems. She told us about how you tried to make yourself the victim, how you tried to paint yourself as a good son when we both know

you don't give two flying fucks about your parents. Then she told us about how you tried to make it seem as though you're the only one who's been sacrificing when Bella's given so much for you; when she's been nothing but selfless for the both of you. And then she told us how you asked her to leave, even when she told you you'd regret it, before you went ahead to have breakfast with the same people you never liked yet you called them Mum and Dad. You're a fucking asshole, Ibrahim, and you have no idea how hard it is to hold back when all I want to do is punch you so hard that you won't be able to see until next year."

The pain in Ibrahim's face began paling in comparison to the knife that was internally stabbing him over and over again. He looked over Jalal's shoulder, at Bella. The words hit him all at once and began to pour out. "Why didn't you tell them that you said things that singularised both of us such as me meeting you and me being happy? Why didn't you tell them that you painted everything in a way that made it seem as though time and time again you were doing me a favour by being with me?"

Bella's innocent look stayed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Ibrahim's blood ran cold. "Bella –"

Jalal shoved him. "Ibrahim, she's doing you a favour by being with you." He pointed towards Bella. "This is a woman that people worship and you got her. This is a woman people are dying to be with and you have her and she was selfless enough to let you marry someone else just so you two could be together. Isabella Valentino did you a favour by being with you and you don't get to decide you want to abandon ship now. It doesn't work that way, Ibrahim, and we're going to ensure it doesn't happen the way you want it to go."

Ibrahim turned back to Jalal, trying so badly to wrap his head around how quickly everything was unfolding that he nearly missed it when Bella softly said "*Amore, basta cosi* (Love, that's enough)."

Ibrahim felt the world stop and if his blood ran cold before, it drained out of him then. He saw – quite clearly – the way Jalal momentarily panicked. He saw – with blinding clarity – how the eyes of the others widened and how Bella paled. Ibrahim barely recognised his voice. "*Amore?*"

Jalal's expression shifted; the panic getting buried underneath rage that didn't burn as much as it did prior to the new revelation. "Bella's doing you a favour by being with you and we've done you a favour by being friends with you for this long and also by providing solutions to every problem that has come up, including the solutions that you called problems."

Ibrahim couldn't move on. He painfully stared at Bella. "*Amore?*"

Bella held onto her innocent act for a moment longer before she rolled her eyes and let it drop. She leaned back in her seat and folded her arms. "Yes, Ibrahim, *amore*. The same way you call Ayra your love and your wife."

Ibrahim's chest was sliced open. He looked from Jalal to Bella. "You... You two are seeing each other? You two have been seeing each other?"

Jalal's hands were back to being fists at his sides. "We're not talking about Bella and me here, Ibrahim. We're talking about you and Bella. You can't even say shit about fidelity because when Ayra came into the picture, you were no longer loyal to Bella. So don't try to act like a saint now because everyone in this room knows you're not."

Ibrahim couldn't breathe. "I don't understand." He wasn't sure he wanted to. "When I married Ayra, you started seeing Jalal?"

Anneth rolled her eyes, letting out a frustrated groan. "For God's sake, Ibrahim, drop it! That's not why we're here."

He'd noticed the way their expressions had changed when Bella called Jalal love but for some reason, Anneth's words made Ibrahim actually realise they'd all been aware of what was going on. He was the only one who didn't know and he'd been convinced that the only person she – Bella – would have had to see was Serkan Yilmaz and even that was to be a ruse. Nothing more, nothing less.

There was only so much pain he could take and in that moment, his limit had been exceeded. His vision blurred. "Bella –"

"For the love of God." It was Nathaniel. He walked over and grabbed Ibrahim the same way Jalal had done, using the collar of Ibrahim's coat. "Listen to me, Ibrahim. I don't know what the hell it is you're trying to do but we're not going to allow you ruin things for us. So, here's how things are going to go. You better be listening to me."

Ibrahim was listening but the words weren't registering; not when a memory dam he didn't know he had burst in his brain; snippets of Bella and Jalal playing like a movie – snippets that dated back to their time in Leicester and then West London before they moved to Aomi. Moments that had seemed normal until now that he was seeing them through a different lens.

"You are going to cut your parents off and you'll do it legally and perfectly so they don't find any loopholes they can use against you and against us."

Nathaniel put emphasis on every word, not once breaking his locked gaze with Ibrahim.

“When that’s finished, you will divorce Ayra. Islamically, it’s a long process and I don’t know why it’s that way. You’ve never cared much about religion but that lowlife does so we’ll go through whatever needs to be gone through and just like you’ll do with your parents, you will also legally separate from Ayra so that there’s no chance in hell of her getting back with you. After that, we’ll move on to pretending that we’re sad that you two ended things and then you and Bella would come out as an official couple, just like you’ve always wanted to, and you two will get married, just like you’ve always promised you would.”

Ibrahim’s pain was as clear as day and it was wrenching; like nothing he’d felt, even with all he’d gone through with his feelings changing. He didn’t recognise Nathaniel. He couldn’t even try.

“You will do all that, Ibrahim.” Nathaniel continued. “And if you don’t, then I hope you’re prepared for what we were about to agree on when you walked in.” Nathaniel’s smile would have put the devil to shame. “If you decide you no longer want to be a part of everything you played a hand in planning, we’re cutting you off from everything; the friendship, the assets, and the company. This squad that’s six is going to become five and we’re going to do it without batting a lid.”

Ibrahim felt as though he’d been poured ice-cold water. He blanched. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Nathaniel raised a brow. “Do you want to bet?”

It was another blow and yet another knife that stabbed him with no mercy. Ibrahim, horrified, stared at Nathaniel for the longest minute before he turned and looked from one person to the other. There was no humour that could delude him that they were joking. Unapologetic expressions and nonchalance was all he got and Ibrahim heard the message loud and clear. They were going to go through with it if he refused to bend.

He brought his line of sight back to Nathaniel, his voice hoarse when he spoke. “I worked just as hard as everyone else in this room, maybe even harder since I had to lead with Bella.”

Nathaniel let him go and shrugged. “We’ve worked hard too, especially with all we’ve been through with you, so if you’re going to jump ship now, Ibrahim, it’s only fair that we get compensation. Thirteen years of friendship isn’t something that can just be tossed aside. You can’t just discard us and expect to still enjoy what we built. It doesn’t work that way.”

Ibrahim was dawning. “After all you’ve been through with me?”

“Come on, Ibrahim.” It was Tobi. He straightened from his leaning against the desk position. “Stop echoing our words. They’re clear as day. Surely you didn’t think you’re on the same level with us.”

“He did.” Anneth said with a small laugh. “I always told you guys that he did.”

The ringing in Ibrahim’s ear began to return, slowly yet surely. He heard himself break; heard every shatter that tore him into fragments he was going to spend a long time picking up and trying to piece together.

“Let’s even start with you and Bella.” Tobi said, his hands disappearing into the pockets of his trousers. “You weren’t on Bella’s level but if there was one thing you had, it was consistency and a loyalty that was going to be nice so Bella decided to humour you and eventually you grew on her so she kept you close. Us?”

Tobi scoffed. “Bro, we humoured you too. Just like Bella, you grew on us so we kept you close and went on to do all we could with you. When you’re compliant and loyal, you’re the best guy, Ibrahim, but when you try to be stubborn like you’re being now, you’re the ugliest thing and it makes me sick. It makes me wonder why we didn’t just cut you off when we saw how desperately you wanted to be loved. You were the loner that year anyway with so many mummy and daddy issues that you didn’t care who you held dear, just as long as they accepted you.”

“And now we’re trying to help you cut dear mummy and daddy off but you’re being ungrateful.” Jalal added. He walked around the table, until he was behind Bella’s chair. “Like Nathaniel said, thirteen years isn’t a joke and we’ve sacrificed more than enough for you so if you’re going to toss us aside, we should be compensated and what better compensation is there than this company and the properties we own?”

“I could think of some more,” Anneth said, smiling at Jalal. “But let’s stop there for now. I don’t want Nate to call me a greedy person.”

Nathaniel smiled and turned to his wife. “Babe, stop it.”

Anneth simply grinned. Tobi turned back to Ibrahim. “The ball is in your court, Ibrahim.” He then smiled, triumph an unhidden emotion. “Knowing how much this company means to you, we can guess what path you’re going to take. Don’t try to be the dog that attempts to bite the hand that feeds it. It never ends well.”

And just like when he and Bella had stood face in face in the foyer back on Monday morning, the mental galleries in Ibrahim's head crumbled to dust and every memory dam burst, filling his head with too many snippets of the life he'd shared with them; the good moments, the bad ones, even the ugly. Memories he could see only he had held dear.

He looked at Bella who stared at him for a moment longer before she looked away, putting her hands together. He looked at Jalal who smiled wickedly, moving his hands to Bella's shoulders before leaning in to kiss her head while never breaking eye contact. Ibrahim then looked at Anneth who smiled at him while Nathaniel occupied the space beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders, a smile on his face too. Lastly, Ibrahim looked at Tobi who stayed smiling.

"The ball's in your court." He – Tobi – repeated. "You don't have to make your decision now, especially with your face looking like that, but you shouldn't take too long. Time is money after all and we all don't have that to waste so...tick, tock."

Ibrahim, with how shattered he was, remembered Ayra's words. *"If it gets to the point that you no longer feel like yourself,"* She had said on Saturday, right there in his bathroom. *"You can let things go. It'll hurt but love shouldn't be about you sacrificing yourself for a person or for people who won't do the same for you."*

Tobi's smile stretched until he resembled a maniac on the loose. "Tick tock"

"Those people?" His father had said. *"They're never going to sacrifice so much for you. But you, Ibrahim, you're going to sacrifice yourself for them and when you have nothing left, you'll see how easily they'd leave you. I only hope by then, you still have little to cling onto just so you're not an empty shell."*

Standing there, with all their eyes on him (including Bella's as she'd turned back his way), Ibrahim knew what his decision would be. Although it killed him inside, he knew it was the right thing to do and he was going to try to find whatever he could to cling onto. For the sake of himself and his now uncertain future.

And for Ayra too.

Part 3

Castles Crumbling



“Power went to my head and I couldn’t stop.
Ones I love tried to help so I ran them off.
And here I sit alone, behind walls of regret.
Falling down like promises that I never kept.
And I feel like my castle’s crumbling down.
And I watch all my bridges burn to the ground.
And you don’t want to know me,
I will just let you down.
You don’t want to know me now...”

~ Taylor Swift (ft. Hayley Williams), *Castles Crumbling (from The Vault)*.



“Thunder rumbling. Castles crumbling.
I am trying to hold on...
God knows that I tried seeing the bright side,
But I’m not blind anymore...”
~ Katy Perry, *Wide Awake*

Gateway House at De Montfort University was tall, with glass windows that reflected the rays of the cool sun. Ayra took it all in, her hands in the pockets of the coat she'd worn over a black maxi dress.

She was tired; not as much as she'd been the previous night as at the time Adil and Ayman dropped her and Ibtihaj at the hotel, but tired all the same. However, she knew the earlier she got into everything, the earlier they could wrap up and move on, no matter how hard it would be.

Beside her, Ibtihaj stood quietly, knowing her best friend needed the silence more than anything. Ibtihaj's heart was heavy as she knew a lot of what they will uncover during the duration of the trip would hurt but it had to be done. Also, she was always ready to be a comic relief once the opportunity presented itself. A smile from Ayra would always be worth it, no matter how little the smile was.

The front door of the Gateway House was pulled open, getting both Ayra and Ibtihaj's attention, and out stepped a friendly looking female with a wide smile and orange dyed hair. She smiled wider when she spotted both Ayra and Ibtihaj and hurried over.

"Hi! Welcome to De Montfort!"

Ayra found herself smiling back. "Hi. Stace, right?"

Stace nodded. "Right. You're Ayra and you're Ibtihaj, right?"

Ibtihaj nodded. "We are."

"Thanks for agreeing to be our student tour guide." Ayra told her. "You have no idea how much you've eased our trip for us."

Stace laughed beautifully. "Oh it's alright. I'm always down for such once I'm free and also..." Her smile turned bashful. "I'm a big fan of your husband, Ayra. I admit that I didn't know you were married to *the* Ibrahim Fahad as at the time I accepted your request but when you sent your photo so I could recognise the both of you, I knew you looked familiar and so I did a little digging. I'm honoured."

Ayra's heart was once again battering. She kept the smile on her face, using a lot of strength. "Well, I'm honoured."

Stace grinned before turning to Ibtihaj who had a small – and fool proof insincere – smile on her face as she asked "Why don't we get started on the tour?"

Stace nodded, quite excitedly. "Of course. This way, please!"

The interior of the building was warm and Ayra was grateful. Stace shared with them that she was just starting as a fourth year Aeronautical Engineering student and that from time to time, she volunteered as a student tour to those who wished to visit the university. She explained to Ibtiḥaj and Ayra that Gateway House was not the only building that held the Faculty of Computing, Engineering, and Media. According to her, the faculty also used the Clephan Building and Courtyard Studios, the Leicester Media School – Bede Island, and Mills Studio.

As Stace continued with the history of the Gateway House which had been built in 1960, Ayra got distracted by the pictures on the walls. What seemed like faculty members and snapshots from different events stared back at her. At some point, the pictures changed to much younger faces and a particular one got Ayra's attention. She stopped right in front of it and asked "Who is this?"

Stace and Ibtiḥaj, who'd been walking two steps ahead, stopped and turned. Stace looked at the said picture and her face lit up, her smile ready to split it in two. "Oh, that's Engineer Abdulmanan Abubakar Harun. He's one of De Montfort's stars. He studied Aeronautical Engineering here and he's so good. He's also one of my distance lecturers and you have no idea just how loved he is around here."

Ayra simply stared at the photo of the man she didn't recognise. It was a portrait photo of him and while his smile was small, it was sincere and the warmth of it was captured perfectly. He was quite handsome too. She looked away, turning back to Stace. "What made him a star?"

"Best academic records for the university from the faculty. His records still aren't broken so..."

Ayra could only nod, turning to glance at the photo once again. Ibtiḥaj spoke then. "He's a fine man sha."

Ayra laughed and so did Stace who nodded. "He is. Let's move on?"

Ayra and Ibtiḥaj nodded and Stace led the way. It wasn't long before they came across a photo of The Hexad squad, with who Stace said was the Dean of the Faculty; Professor Shushma Patel. According to Stace, the photo was taken in late June when the squad paid a surprise visit to the university and made donations "everyone couldn't stop talking about".

Ayra nearly let out a small, dry laugh. Back then in June, she'd been convinced the squad and Ibrahim were on a work trip and not once had he or any of them mentioned that they'd stopped by Leicester. With how well

she used to keep up with the activities of the squad, it was funny that she'd missed information about the trip.

The photo was beautiful; the dean standing between Ibrahim and Bella while the others stood on both their sides. Their smiles were wide and lovely, as though they'd been captured just before they started laughing. Ayra's chest ached as she zeroed on Ibrahim, noticing that his eyes were bright and his smile was so beautiful; a smile she could no longer bring herself to lovingly appreciate with butterflies swarming her belly.

"Those who were present that day nearly lost it." Stace told the best friends. "It was one thing to hear about the squad and it was another to see them here on campus. It was a whole different thing to witness these smiles." She sighed dreamily. "They're so beautiful and so talented too. We look up to them as people beyond our reach. They're that good and you have no idea how many people would kill to be in your shoes, Ayra."

"Yes," Ibtiha's voice lacked emotion and came out flat as she stared at the photo. "We can imagine."

If you saw them for who they really are, Ayra wanted to ask, would you still love them the same way you're doing now?

She didn't ask though; she knew better than to do so. Staring at Ibrahim for a minute longer, Ayra looked away and asked Stace if there were members of the faculty who'd stayed at De Montfort for as long as a decade back, when the squad were still enrolled as students. Stace nodded, her face still bright.

"There are! You two are in luck because all five to six of them came in to work today. Come on." She turned around and marched forward. "I'll take you first to Professor McGonall. She's the best place to start from."

Professor Maureen McGonall was a woman in her early sixties whose every attribute screamed "Mother!". She first engaged in little conversation with Stace, feigning sternness, before she asked who Stace had come along with. When Stace introduced Ayra and Ibtiha and then stated that Ayra was Ibrahim Fahad's wife, the older woman gasped and the way her expression softened had no reason making Ayra tear up.

Professor McGonall stepped forward and pulled Ayra into a very warm hug, patting her back with soft strength. "Oh my God..." She pulled back, looked at Ayra for a minute, and then hugged her again. "It's so nice to meet you, Ayra. When the squad visited in June, I was out of the country for my daughter's wedding and all I heard was how hushy Ibrahim had been about the woman he'd married."

Stace snorted. “They’re all like that. Even Engineer Harun.”

Professor McGonall pulled back and glared at Stace. “Do not ever speak about Abdulmanan like that, young woman.”

“Yes ma’am!”

The hug the older woman gave Ibtihaj was just as nice as Ayra’s had been and Ibtihaj savoured it the way Ayra did. When Professor McGonall asked why they’d come to the university, Ayra let her know – with practiced shyness – that she and Ibtihaj just wanted to peep into Ibrahim’s past and hear all the “embarrassing details he wouldn’t share”.

Professor McGonall laughed heartily, her head thrown back. “God, I love you both.” She then took Ayra’s hand in hers before taking Ibtihaj’s in her other. “Come, let’s go find the others. We’ll gladly indulge you two. The stories of Ibrahim and the squad are our favourite ones to share.”

Stace went along with them. “I hope you’ll indulge me too.”

Professor McGonall sighed wearily. “Yes, Stace, we’ll indulge you too.”

Unable to help it, a small laugh bubbled out of Ayra and it made Ibtihaj smile. It made Professor McGonall smile too. She – Professor McGonall – took them to other offices and just as she’d been, the professors and associates who’d worked with her for as long as she’d been in De Montfort were genuinely happy to see Ayra and Ibtihaj. They also loved the fact that Ayra was there to learn about Ibrahim’s life as a student of the university and so they led three of them – Ibtihaj, Ayra, and Stace – to a tearoom where there were more than enough chairs to take them all.

Tea was made and passed around, Ayra appreciating how warm her fingers became as they stayed wrapped around the cup. One of the male associates began once they were all comfortable, his smile fond as he went down memory lane. He sighed. “Ah, Ibrahim and the squad...Ibrahim’s always the one who stands out to us, right?” The others nodded and he went on. “We call him our evolver. After all, the Ibrahim who came into De Montfort wasn’t the same one who’d left. He’s also not the same person who came back here months ago too.”

Professor McGonall nodded. “True.” She then smiled at Ayra. “Don’t worry, we’ll explain.”

Ayra could only offer a grateful smile. Sitting there in that tea room, surrounded by her best friend, their university tour guide, and men and women who’d reached the peaks or the near peaks of their careers, Ayra heard the story of the man she’d married.

Ibrahim, they told her, had been a quiet seventeen year old when he'd first stepped foot in De Montfort. Back then, he lacked excitement towards the course he'd selected, they said, and he did not like it when voices got raised, especially if it was going to lead to a scuffle or a near fight.

"It was the first thing that told us there was more to him than he was letting on." One of the female professors said. "But he never wanted to talk about it and we know when to prod and push and when to take a step back."

Ayra's chest squeezed. The story continued. A month into classes and he slowly began opening up. Ibrahim still didn't talk as much as the others but the excitement about studying Software Engineering showed little by little and then he met Bella. For their first assignment as a class, the both of them – Ibrahim and Bella – had been paired and according to the professors and associates, that was what began Ibrahim's change.

"Oh he was smitten alright." Professor McGonall told Ayra, Ibtihaj, and Stace once she'd asked if they – Ayra and Ibtihaj – knew Bella and Ibrahim had dated and both women nodded. She sipped her tea while the others nodded in agreement. "I couldn't blame him. Isabella Valentino was a sensation. If you think she's turning a lot of heads now, you should have seen her then."

"Seventeen, bright eyed, drop dead beautiful, and wild." A male said and then shook his head. "She caused chaos with the guys within and outside the university environment...I've never seen someone who hated her middle name the way she did."

"And it fit her so well." A female said, her smile small but pretty. "Isabella Mariá sounded so perfect but she hated it and now that I think about it, she never really said why."

"It was her grandmother's name." Professor McGonall revealed. "And according to what I'd been told, that particular grandmother wasn't a role model. However, that's by the side. She's dropped the name now so..."

They got back on track and told Ayra, Ibtihaj, and Stace about how the grouping had been the perfect example of two opposites coming together. According to them, Ibrahim was as cool as ice while Bella was a volcano always on the verge of erupting. They also mentioned that Bella liked things going her way and she did everything possible, even when it didn't seem as though she would be able to. Bella, they said, was one to go to whatever lengths for her own gain.

They told Ayra and the others how Ibrahim's crush had been so obvious that the whole school noticed and people used to place bets on whether or

not Bella and Ibrahim would end up together. People rooted for the both of them, they told Ayra, and little by little, Ibrahim came out of the shell he'd been as at the time he resumed on his first day.

"It was a blessing and a curse, Ayra." The most vocal male said. "Especially when Bella and Anneth became friends and Ibrahim got roped into their circle which expanded to fit Tobi and Jalal before they met Nathaniel who fell head over heels for Anneth."

"Ibrahim was actually consistent in pursuing Bella, to the extent that it almost got painful to watch, but it eventually paid off when she accepted to be with him. However, that was the start of what would be their good and bad days here on campus."

Professor McGonall sighed. "I had grey hair because of those children."

The professors laughed and some of them said "Tell me about it."

Bella being Ibrahim's woman, they said, made him insanely popular and when it was noticed that together, the six of them – including Nathaniel when he came around – made a hell of a team, their popularity skyrocketed. The period was crazy, the professors and associates continued, and it became obvious that the squad had to be paired together for projects if the university wanted good results and they – the squad – never disappointed. When they weren't doing anything academic, the squad did everything they could; parties, clubs, a stint with drugs that they narrowly escaped, fights, graffiti, trips...Everything.

"And you should know that these plans were always made by Tobi, Jalal, Anneth and Bella. Nathaniel was a goner for Anneth so he went with them once he could but Ibrahim though..." The male trailed off and then he exhaled, his shoulders dropping slightly. "Ibrahim didn't like those outings at first but the thing with having friends like that is that you'll always get influenced and he did. There was a time their grades tanked and I don't know how they did it but they pulled themselves back up."

"Thank God they did." Professor McGonall said, putting her now empty teacup away. "I don't think I've ever had my heart in my throat for as long I did back then because of that man and his friends. Calling his parents didn't do much because they didn't want to do the needful and that kind of explained why Ibrahim had been the way he'd been when he first resumed."

"Anyways," Another female continued. "Some days with them were good, some days were bad, and others were just disastrous. More times than we could count, we asked them to slow down. They never listened but they always learned, to the best of their abilities. Thankfully, they stayed on track

too and started making plans to establish their company. We cheered them on, of course, because we knew they were going to make it but...”

Ayra, whose chest was cut way too many times, held her cup even tighter. “But...?”

The male professor who’d not said so much in the time they’d spent in that room sighed heavily. “We were worried about how long they were actually going to last. Final year was a lot for all of them, not just the squad and Ibrahim, but when it came to the six of them, that year made some things clear to us.”

“Like?” Ayra asked. “Things like what?”

“Like how they were good as a work or business team.” Professor McGonall replied, her voice steady and nearly flat. “They made the best ideas and had the best implementation plans but that year, they argued a lot and they went on bad behaviour streaks a lot. As partners, they were good but as friends, they seemed like a mix of the wrong people and it wasn’t always obvious but there were times when Ibrahim didn’t quite fit. He didn’t see it though so...”

“Also,” The most active male added. “We noticed that while Ibrahim and Bella made a good couple, they lacked the type of chemistry that’ll keep you and your partner together for a long time. Then, Ibrahim had promised he’d marry her and just like we’re sitting here now, we sat then and said that in the long run, Ibrahim wasn’t going to marry Bella.” He then smiled at Ayra. “And we were right.”

“I’m glad they’re still together though.” A female professor stated. “All of them as a squad, I mean. I’m glad they’re calmer too and they’ve done well.” She smiled at Ayra. “I’ve seen pictures of you with them. There aren’t any recent ones but it’s nice to see that you all are so tight knitted. I hope it’s beautiful.”

A knife was twisting in Ayra’s chest but she smiled and nodded. Ibtiḥaj, who also smiled and nodded, was the one who replied. “It is.”

“Then we’re glad.” Professor McGonall said, sincerity lacing each word. “Ibrahim’s life here was a rollercoaster honestly, but you should know that while he came in as an overly introverted seventeen year old, he left still as an introvert but as one with an extroverted side that scared us when it came out in its full glory.”

They laughed and Ayra cracked a small smile. Professor McGonall spoke when they were sober. “Those were how his days were. If you want to

know even more, we can point out places around the campus and also around town that were his and the others' favourites. Do you want that?"

Ayra nodded, feigning eagerness. "Yes please." The lie slipped past her lips easily. "He already listed a number of places so let's see if those places tally."

Professor McGonall laughed and nodded. "Very well."

Many of the places they called were already on Ayra and Ibtihaj's list and Ayra added the names of places that were absent, her façade slowly crumbling. They – the professors and associates – went on to share more memories about Ibrahim and the squad, laughing in between. They made mention of Serkan and Aliana and how both of them were a match made in heaven. They spoke about how surprising it had been for them when they – Bella, Ibrahim, Serkan, Aliana, and the other members of the squad – returned from the one trip they had to Turkey courtesy of the Yilmazs and Bella began calling Ibrahim Serkan while he called her Sevgilim.

Ayra could picture it all so clearly and it hurt so much as it clashed with the life she'd always mentally conjured about him, even before his marriage proposal had come to her.

Eventually, duty called for them and the crowd had to disperse. They took photos though and Ayra said she and Ibtihaj would be in touch when she knew very well that she was never going to do so. When they left the tearoom and Stace – who had been stunned with how much new information she'd gotten – asked if the tour could continue, Ayra asked for a break to use the restroom. Ibtihaj said she'd use the restroom too and Stace nodded, her smile still so bright.

The best friends were the only ones in the female restroom so Ibtihaj secured the door lock in place before turning to face her best friend, her heart breaking at the sight of Ayra gripping the edges of the marble sink slabs so tightly that her knuckles paled.

Ibtihaj felt the raw pain licking at her heart. "Ayra..."

Ayra, her lower lip trembling, lowered her head and let her tears fall, hoping and praying that the pain stopped although she knew there was a high chance it was only going to get worse. Her shoulders shook and when a sob broke free from her throat, she let go of the slab and brought her hands to her mouth just so she wouldn't make another sound and it was so, so hard.

Ibtihaj closed the space between them and hugged her best friend, blinking back her own tears. "I'm so sorry, Ayra. It'll be fine soon In Shaa Allah."

Ayra could only keep crying, her hands still by her mouth while her head rested against Ibtihaj's chest.

Back in Aomi, Ibrahim sat on the loveseat in Ayra's room, staring at the phone in his hands. He'd cried so much that there was a sort of numbness that deluded him into thinking his chest wasn't torn open and that he didn't have wounds that would take a lot of time to heal.

Breathing in and out, he unlocked the device and pulled up his contacts, scrolling until he got to the particular one he wanted. He clicked on the call icon before he could think himself out of what he was about to do; something he'd never done, at least not in a very long time.

The line rang for a little bit before it was picked up on the other end. Ibrahim heard ruffling before his father spoke. "Hello, Ibrahim."

"Hi, Dad." Ibrahim swallowed. "Please I need your help."

A moment passed before Salim spoke again. "I'll be right there."

The relief slamming into him brought tears to Ibrahim's eyes. "Thank you, Dad."

"You're welcome."

In the places she and Ibtiḥaj visited and through the words of those who'd known the squad personally (and from a distance), Ayra lived through what Ibrahim's life had been while in Leicester. It was a very painful ride.

They visited the libraries where she pictured Ibrahim reading with Bella and the others. In cafes, she learned what had been his favourite things to order and how he was rarely alone. If he wasn't part of a study group, she was told, then he was with Bella or he was with the others and if they weren't coming up with a plan they wanted to bring to life after graduation, they were catching up on what they'd missed or they were neck deep in mischief.

In clubhouses and bars, she found out what Ibrahim's drinking pattern was once he and the squad went to party or when he went alone with Bella; one glass of one expensive wine or the other which he nursed throughout the time they spent, taking little sips. They told her and Ibtiḥaj that Ibrahim was always the most sober, except on rare occasions when the squad got him to join them in drinking to stupor.

In alleyways and in shops, she found out spots where he kissed and had been kissed, all of the kisses shared with none other than Bella. In restaurants, she found out where they'd gone on dates and how he always had a flower; a classic red rose or when the celebration called for it, a bouquet of whatever it is she'd been talking about.

Ibrahim Fahad, she learned, was held in high regards by those who knew him and those who knew about him. When it came to his relationship with Bella, there were only two sides; those who could die on the hill that they were endgame and then those who saw them as a beautiful couple but were sure they wouldn't end up staying together until the end of time. There was no in-between.

Although Ayra told herself she didn't care, she sometimes found herself wondering how things would have been if life had turned out differently and both of them – Ibrahim and Bella – had been allowed to get married to each other.

Maybe they would have been happy, she told herself, or maybe they'd have realised they didn't quite fit and maybe they would have gone their separate ways when they didn't have more they could do to keep their relationship going.

At the end of the day, she would never know. Things didn't happen differently and she was living in the reality of all of it.

On their last night in Leicester, Adil invited them for dinner at an upscale restaurant downtown. When he said he was alone as Ayman had gone to

Manchester to sort out a few things, Ayra decided to back out of the dinner and didn't rest until she'd convinced Ibtihaj to go and make the most of it.

After all, Ayra said, Adil was going to make a move to marry Ibtihaj one day and she wasn't going to let what had become of her own love story stop her from ensuring Ibtihaj's love story bloomed in the best of ways. Ibtihaj had done way too much for her and she was always going to be grateful.

That night, as she lay in bed, Ayra thought about Ayman for the first time and how throughout the ride from the airport to Leicester, he'd been different from the man she met in the café. He smiled the same way and had the same manner of speech but throughout the ride, she'd learnt that he was more of a listener than a talker and somehow, being in that same vehicle with him brought a calmness she appreciated more than anything. She wanted to tell him thank you but he was in Manchester, according to Adil, and she had no way to reach him. So she put it at the back of her mind to say thank you when next she saw him. If all went well with Adil and Ibtihaj, she had no doubt she and Ayman would see themselves more.

She rolled over to lie on her back and for the longest moment, she stared at the ceiling, her mind blank. When a thought crept in, she found herself wondering how things would unravel on Ibrahim's end, especially with how the dynamics of the squad was changing, heading towards a situation where they'd have to decide if they were going to move forward together or apart.

With how he'd been acting before she and Ibtihaj left and with all she'd found out, Ayra knew deep, deep inside that he would have been one of the best souls out there if he'd gone through the right ways. She had no doubt that he was going to set things right in his life and for everyone around him but when it came to what they had, it was a summer dream. They were never going to be the same and she wasn't going to subject herself to all of it, no matter how it was going to kill her to leave behind the man he'd be evolving into and everything they had shared which she'd held dear.

Blinking back a fresh wave of tears, Ayra rolled back to her side and curled up into a foetal position. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself cry, praying that she fell asleep that way. She prayed she didn't dream and that she actually rested. They – she and Ibtihaj – had a train ride to London the very next morning after all.



Bella tied the sash of her robe and brought the security screen to life so she could see who had rang her doorbell at such an early hour of the morning when the sun was barely breaking through Aomi's horizon.

The sight of Ibrahim had her raising a brow and she stared at him for a moment longer before she sighed and proceeded to open the door. The snarky remark that had formed died on her tongue when she realised he wasn't alone. Standing behind him were handymen, all with cardboard boxes yet to be assembled for the things they were to carry.

With wide eyes, Bella swung her gaze to Ibrahim whose expression was impassive, the only flicker of emotion being the sadness in his eyes. She tried to sound calm and it took a lot, especially since her heart had dropped, her chest squeezing in a funny way. "Serkan –"

Ibrahim cut her off. "It's Ibrahim, Isabella. Serkan's gone and you of all people should know that."

"Ibrahim –"

"I'm here to pack up every item of mine." He told her, not finding it in himself to care much about the shock that appeared on her face. "I wanted to come in without ringing the doorbell but the last thing I wanted was to walk in with people into a scene I shouldn't see, especially if Jalal was sleeping over."

Bella's face was losing colour. "Ibrahim –"

He pushed her aside, doing so carefully although he didn't see the need to. He then asked the handymen to step into the apartment. They complied, all six of them, and Ibrahim followed, leaving Bella in the foyer to try and wrap her head around everything.

When the situation made sense in her head, she went after him and met him in the living room, directing the handymen to pull down their photos and the paintings he'd done. She grabbed his arm and made him face her. "You're breaking up with me? Are you crazy?!"

"I could ask you that, Bella." Ibrahim said calmly. "After everything, do you expect me to stay?"

"So what?" She asked bitterly. "You're going to break up with me and think you'll go scot free? Did you forget what Nate said on Thursday?" Her smile was ugly. "You're going to lose everything, Ibrahim, even after all your efforts and your blood, sweat, and tears. Are you okay with that?"

In that moment it was so clear to Ibrahim that Bella wasn't a beautiful woman. She was a deceptive treasure and his father had been right to say he – Ibrahim – had been infatuated with the idea of having a woman like her by his side and not with her as a person. But not anymore.

“Yes, I am.” He replied, emboldened by the way her expression morphed into one of disbelief as she’d clearly not been expecting his reply. “If that’s the price of cutting myself off from all of you now that I know just how much I meant to each one of you, then yes, Bella. I’m ready to lose everything.”

She had no words to say in reply and she couldn’t even try. Ibrahim asked one of the handymen to leave a particular vase before he turned back to Bella.

“I’ve made peace with that, Bella. It’s what I’ve been doing since Thursday. You guys were right. I was a loner back then and I was so focused on filling up the void in my life that I made myself genuinely happy with you all even when things didn’t sit right with me until I became desensitized towards it all. I held you all dear, especially you, and I let you all have so much control over my life that it always felt right when you called the shots and I gave in because I was convinced I loved you and I loved everyone else. I was also convinced that you all knew better than I did. That stops now, Bella. I’m done with it all; with you, with the others, with the company...Everything. So I’m going to clear all my stuff and leave your lives so I can start afresh and build mine. I’ll be fine. I’ll make sure of it.”

At her hands, Bella balled her hands into fists, grappling at the courage she no longer had. “You won’t be fine. It won’t be long before you start crawling back to us to take you back. You’ll be the laughing stock, Ibrahim.”

He smiled and it was prettily small; one she’d never seen before. “We’ll just have to wait and see, right?”

Not liking how she was losing control of the situation, Bella switched to rage. “Ibrahim Fahad!”

He didn’t say anything else. He simply walked away, leaving her staring at the spot he’d occupied. As Ibrahim led the handymen up, his smile dropped and he told himself to stay strong. It was only the beginning. There was still a lot to come.



Before they got into their business in London, Ayra took a day to explore and visit attractions with Ibtihaj. For the entire day, she pretended as though her life was perfect and she made sure to revel in each moment.

At night, when Ibtihaj went to sleep, Ayra picked up her phone and quietly slid out to the balcony. She’d promised to call Ibrahim but had been putting it off for the entire day and the last thing she wanted to go to sleep with the

promise weighing down on her. The line rang for a bit before it was answered and her chest squeezed when he called her name. “Ayra.”

She didn’t want to notice that he sounded tired but it was a habit and she wasn’t completely sure how it made her feel. She leaned over the railing, watching people walk about down below. “Hi, Ibrahim. Was this a bad time?”

“Nah, not really. I had a busy day but it’s fine. I feel better now that I’m talking to you. I know that sounds cheesy but it’s the truth.”

The absence of butterflies in her stomach and the way her chest hollowed made Ayra smile sadly. “I’m glad.”

“So,” He moved something on his end. “Where are you and Ibty now?”

“London. We visited so many places today and she’s knocked out.”

“Oh really? That’s surprising. You’re usually the one to fall asleep first. Ibty’s an energetic person.”

In an entirely different situation, Ayra would have laughed then. “Well, today was a lot.”

“Are you tired?” The concern in his voice made her heart ache. “We don’t have to talk for long, Ayra. There’s always tomorrow In Shaa Allah.”

In that moment, Ayra found herself wishing he wasn’t changing. That he wasn’t now on the way to being the man she’d always wanted. *At least then*, she told herself, *it’ll be easier*. It would still hurt but it would be a little easier because she’ll have every reason to avoid and hate him. At least then she’ll be able to abhor him and not feel bad about it.

She swallowed the lump that settled in her throat. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t. “I can talk for a little longer.”

“Are you sure?”

She hummed in reply, using that moment to swallow again. She then asked “What were you doing? You said today was busy.”

He was quiet for a near minute. “I did.”

She straightened. “Ibrahim, what’s going on?”

Another near minute passed before he sighed. “I didn’t want to tell you until everything got settled but...” He sighed again. “The squad and I are going to split ways and that affects every aspect of our current lives. It wasn’t the easiest decision to make but like you said, love isn’t about me sacrificing a lot for people who won’t do the same for me. It’s been a

decade of us being together but we're different people now and we can't work out our differences so..."

The tears that surfaced blurred her vision and Ayra's chest squeezed. She apologised without even knowing. "I'm sorry."

"Oh come on, sweetheart. It's fine...I've been trying to clear my stuff from the places we've always hung out at as a squad. There are a lot of things to clear but I'm on it. I want to be sure everything's in order before you and Ibtu return. In Shaa Allah I'll be able to and then you and I can talk about these plans that have been coming together in my head. We also need to look back at how the past year has been and then set goals for a new year of being married."

Her chest squeezed again and Ayra quietly breathed just so she wouldn't cry. Ibrahim continued. "I don't want to get ahead of myself but I'm going to do everything possible to ensure we're good. I promise."

She nodded with her eyes shut although he wasn't there. "Okay."

"Are you okay? Your voice changed."

Her chest felt too tight. "The weather's cold." She lied. "And I'm standing outside on the balcony."

"Ayra, please go inside. You don't want to fall sick."

A tear slipped and she nodded again. "Okay."

"I don't hear you leaving the balcony."

She opened her eyes and turned around. She stepped back into the room and ensured she closed the door in a way that he heard it. She then spoke to him once she had breathed in and out. "I'm in now. Happy?"

"Very."

"I need to sleep now. I'm so tired."

He chuckled, the sound lushly deep. "Well done, sweetheart. I'll leave you be."

"Thank you." She walked in the direction of the bathroom. "You should get some sleep too, Ibrahim."

"I'll do my best, Ayra, I promise."

She stepped into the monochrome space and closed the door, securing the lock in place. "Goodnight, Ibrahim."

"Goodnight."

She hung up and put her phone on the floating marble slab before she squatted and burst into tears with her hands pressed against her mouth just so she didn't make a sound that could wake Ibtihaj up. It was the last thing she wanted to do.



In West London and around London itself, the stories of the squad differed from those in Leicester. In the stories shared in London, the members of the squad were older and more focused on getting their company started while testing and retesting what the world got as the application *Ink* which changed electoral processes first in Atlantica and then in other countries around the world.

Ayra and Ibtihaj heard stories of how the squad worked on their relationships when they weren't discussing business as the one year they'd spent in West London was the rockiest they'd had. On one hand, the stories said, Bella and Ibrahim had broken up due to her family's acceptance and his parents' rejection but were still finding their way back to each other with how intertwined their – Bella and Ibrahim's – lives were. On the other hand, Anneth and Nathaniel were cities apart and med school had been tough on him so there were a lot of strains.

"When they got through the year," One of their ex-mates told Ayra and Ibtihaj. "It was clear they would get through everything else. I was still of the opinion that the tensions then changed some dynamics in their romantic and non-romantic relationships but everyone ended up alright. Thank God for that."

Just like in Leicester, Ayra found traces of Ibrahim in places; in cafes, in shopping centres, in galleries and museums, and in restaurants that fit the posts on his and Bella's Instagram pages. Although she still had no idea how she'd come into the picture, Ayra took in every little detail and replaced every conjured image she'd had with the reality of what Ibrahim's life had actually been.

They did not stay long in London and before they left, Adil made sure he came over to say hi. Ayra could only smile nostalgically as she watched him laugh when Ibtihaj said he was obsessed with her. Once upon a time, she – Ayra – had been obsessed with Ibrahim too. Adil was a good man, she knew that, but that did not stop Ayra from praying that theirs – Adil and Ibtihaj's story – was one that would always be full of love, laughter, joy, and happiness. That was all her best friend deserved. Nothing else.

From London, the best friends moved to Amsterdam where they spent just one day watching Serkan Yilmaz and Aliana go about their real lives with

their daughters, Kehlani and Ayah. They were a beautiful family, Ayra wouldn't deny it, and she put it at the back of her mind that when everything was out in the open, she'll leave a message for the Yilmazs, telling them that playing a part in deceiving someone – especially for something that is to last for a while such as marriage – was not something to be taken lightly as it could always backfire. No one did know what the future held in store after all.

From Amsterdam, they moved to Turkey and there in Cappadocia, Ayra saw the places Ibrahim, Bella, and the others had always posted about. She also heard tales of how good the squad was and how beautiful Bella and Ibrahim were as a couple, even when things were hard.

A particular woman in her early seventies who ran a restaurant the squad frequented to the extent that she had a picture of them and their autographs on the walls told Ayra that the nicknames Serkan and Sevgilim had come up in her restaurant and that she'd never forget how beautiful Ibrahim's smile had been. According to her, Serkan Yilmaz had inspired them to take both nicknames.

“He would have given her the sun if she'd asked him to.” She told them in heavily accented English. “And she liked him, that much was sure, but it didn't compare to how far he would go just to ensure she was always smiling...On some days, they fought, and one thing that was constant was how his family wasn't going to accept them but even on those days, he never lashed back. Even if he did, he never got too loud and he made sure they were alright before they left.”

She then sighed, staring into space as she recalled everything. “They're good people. Crazy people but good all the same, especially Ibrahim. He has the best heart among them, God bless his soul.”

And that was all it took for Ayra to cry again.

On Tuesday October 19th, the world woke up to news of Ibrahim Fahad splitting from the squad and from The Hexad. There was also news of him claiming full ownership of certain applications the company had created, thereby buying out Bella, Tobi, Jalal, Anneth, and Nathaniel.

The squad, who had been finding it hard to wrap their head around the fact that Ibrahim didn't bend the way they wanted, barely had time to think of a response to the public before the spokesperson of the Fahads issued out a press statement, confirming the news.

"It is quite unfortunate that this has to happen, especially with how far they have come as a group both as partners and as friends." The statement read. "However, they have reached a point where they have differences that cannot be overlooked and the only way to settle things peacefully is for Ibrahim to leave and forge his own new path. We hope for the public's understanding and support and we ask that his privacy and that of his family be respected in this tough time."

It brought chaos, especially within the company, and the squad barely had control of the situation no matter how badly they tried to delude themselves. With the Fahad's legal team handling everything, it was a big issue and the first thing they got started on after the press statement was pulling out Ibrahim's shares from The Hexad and its partnering companies; just as Salim had advised Ibrahim to do as there was no way he – Salim – was going to allow his son walk away with nothing while the squad got everything.

Forced to give a public statement, Bella smiled tightly at the sea of reporters in the conference room and spoke with a calmness she definitely did not have.

"It's the toughest decision we've had to make as a group but it's for the best." In her head, she was wringing Ibrahim's neck. She kept her smile on as the cameras flashed non-stop, the sound of the shutters irritating her to the very core. "We, just like the Fahads, hope that the public understands and we ask that you allow us process everything at our own pace and in our ways. Thank you."

Questions were fired; what exactly had happened, the differences Ibrahim couldn't overlook, the future of the company and what would be left of the squad. Bella did not answer any one of the questions and once she stepped out of the conference room, she pulled at her hair and screamed.

Up on the executive level, the offices of the others were messes with broken vases and pieces and upturned furniture. Just like Bella, they pulled

at their hairs and screamed out in frustration, knowing with undoubted clarity that they'd underestimated Ibrahim in every way possible; just as they'd always done.



It was when they landed in Cape Town that Ayra and Ibtihaj got the news.

Ibtihaj's jaw hit the floor. "Ahl!" She turned her phone so Ayra could look at the article she'd been reading. "Omo, this is crazy!"

Ayra glanced through the displayed article before turning back to her phone. She put the device to sleep. "I knew about it. I just didn't think everything would be put into motion this soon."

Ibtihaj's neck should have snapped with how fast she looked Ayra's way again, her eyes unusually wide. "You say wetin?!"

Ayra offered her best friend a small smile. "Ibrahim mentioned it. He didn't go into details but I got the hang of it." She then sighed. "It was bound to happen with how things were going."

Ibtihaj blinked and blinked again. Her expression then softened. "Ayra..."

"Yes, Ibt, Ibrahim's really changing and yes, he's doing the yeye thing of falling for me but it's way too late. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt though because it does. It hurts more I can even say."

Ibtihaj's face softened further. She let go of her box and hugged Ayra. "He's still very mad sha. And don't you ever say yeye again. You're better off with good English. Leave the pidgin to me abeg."

Ayra couldn't stop her laughter. "I'm done with you, Ibt."

Ibtihaj began to pat Ayra's back. "You're going to be alright, Ayra. We're going to get through this and no matter how long it takes, you're going to find your footing and you're going to be happy again, and you'll shine just as brightly as you've always done."

The tears surfaced and Ayra blinked furiously, admitting what had been plaguing her mind. "What if it never happens? What if I'm never happy again no matter how hard I try or how hard everyone tries? What if I just become a shell of person who goes through life without having happiness that'll last as long as it should?"

Ibtihaj, who'd teared up, hugged Ayra tighter, shaking her head over the other's shoulder. "No, Ayra, no. You will be happy again. It might seem like it may never happen but you will be. You'll be happier than you've always been and we'll be there with you every step of the way, I promise. After

every hardship will come ease, Ayra, and know that Allah's promise will always come to pass. This is one hardship in your life and you will survive it, that I can assure you."

Ayra began to cry. "You have no idea how grateful I am to have you, Ibt'y."

That made Ibtihaj smile a little. "Me too, Ayra. I'm so grateful so have you too. We'll be fine and then you'll be on bridesmaid duties because if you allow any of my sisters do that job, I will kill you."

Ayra let out a watery laugh. "You're crazy."

"I love you." Ibtihaj held on for a moment longer before she pulled back, smiling. "You're going to be okay, Ayra."

Ayra managed a single nod. "In Shaa Allah."

"In Shaa Allah." Ibtihaj took Ayra's hand and her smile widened. "Let's go?"

Ayra nodded, smiling back. "Let's go...Thank you, Ibt'y."

"You're always welcome, Ayra. You're always welcome."



Cardboard boxes lined almost every inch of the living room but Ibrahim did not mind. By the end of the day every box was going to be taken away and by the next morning, all the paintings he'd wrapped up would be taken to their new destinations; some to a furnace where they'd be burned and others to galleries and foundation homes.

He sealed the last box shut and addressed it to a shelter he'd come across. The men and maybe even the women too at the shelter would have better use for the clothes he'd gotten from every house he'd shared with one member of the squad or the other. At least giving it out would be better than having them disposed of.

When the sound of unsuccessful attempts of the passcode being entered reached his ears, he pushed the box away and closed the marker he used in writing addresses. As he straightened, the doorbell rang and then rang again.

A moment later, the door was being banged on and he heard Tobi's voice clearly. "Ibrahim, open up, you bastard! We know you're in there so you better open up!"

Ibrahim made his way through the maze of boxes, his pace leisurely slow. He had actually expected them to show up earlier but with how everything had come out all at once as per the advice of his family's legal team,

Ibrahim knew the squad had a lot to deal with before they got the opportunity to flee the company and come in search of him.

He stopped in front of the door and let them ring the doorbell and bang on it for a minute longer before he unlocked the barrier and pulled it open, speaking immediately.

“If you lay that hand on me, a lawsuit would be at your doorstep by nightfall. With how much you all have to deal with, a physical assault case is the last thing you need.”

Tobi’s fist was frozen in air and he was burning with so much rage that he trembled. His hand dropped and he venomously spat out “Fuck you.”

Ibrahim didn’t flinch or bat a lid. “Thank you.”

Jalal pushed Tobi away and grabbed Ibrahim by fisting his shirt and pulling him closer so they were face to face, mere inches differentiating their heights. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Ibrahim Fahad?!”

“Leaving your lives and letting you have what you asked for, just like you said would happen if I didn’t cut my parents off, divorce Ayra, and then marry Bella.”

Anneeth screamed from behind Jalal. “This was not the plan!”

Ibrahim raised a brow and looked at her over Jalal’s shoulder. “Bold of you to assume there was a plan in the first place.” He returned his gaze to Jalal’s. His voice frosted. “Plans are agreed on by every involved party before they’re implemented but since we’re no longer working that way, I made plans of my own and got started on them. I’m not sorry for that.”

Nathaniel’s smile was ugly and twisted. “You think you’ll get through with it?”

Ibrahim pried Jalal’s hand from his shirt and pushed him back before he faced Nathaniel. He put his hands in his pockets. “Seeing how I’ve approved my shares withdrawal and I’m already buying you out of Ink, PayDay, and Little Walker, I can say that I’ll go through with it.”

“We worked hard on those!” Tobi shouted.

“So did I.” Ibrahim shot back. “But I worked harder on them because the ideas came from my head. I worked hard on the company too but you didn’t want to care about that when you threatened to take it all for compensation that you obviously do not deserve so there’s no need to care about you all now. We’re done, guys. My life is mine now and I’m not going to be stupid enough to let you all have a say in it again.”

Bella spoke for the first time, her voice a pained whisper. "Ibrahim..."

Ibrahim looked at her. "What? Don't try to be manipulative now, Isabella. It's not going to work. It's never going to."

Jalal laughed very dryly and it was clear that he so badly wanted to punch Ibrahim senseless but he was smart enough to know it wouldn't end well. Nathaniel's question had Ibrahim's heart dropping and his blood going cold.

"Does Ayra know why all of this is happening this way?"

Ibrahim would never understand how his expression stayed calm when he went into overdrive inside. He cracked a small smile. "What's there to know?"

Nathaniel took a step forward. "Does she know that everything you two have had was nothing but a lie? Does she know that the reason why we're splitting ways is because you betrayed us after everything we've done for you?"

Ibrahim smiled wickedly, his acting skills terrifying him to no ends. "Bold of you all to assume I'd not tell her about it. I'm not dumb, Nate."

Tobi scoffed. "And she hasn't called or thrown a fit? That's hard to believe."

Ibrahim's smile widened as he shrugged. Deep inside, fear like he'd never felt clawed at his entire being. "She's never been the violent person. The one you should be scared of is Ibty and they're on a trip right now so..."

Anne already had her phone out and unlocked. "I'm going to call her right now and we're going to find out whether you're —"

Ibrahim cut her off, hoping and praying that one of the favours he'd asked his family's team for had been done. "You won't be able reach her. You'll never be able to reach her. She's blocked you everywhere and you don't know where she is right now so..."

He watched as they all got out their phones and his chest squeezed while he held on so tightly to the rope of hope that his hands bled. Relief was like the oxygen he'd needed so badly when he saw the moment they confirmed all they had said. His family's team had gotten them barred from reaching Ayra, just as he'd asked, because he'd had a tiny hunch they'd use her as a lifeline when they knew they didn't have any more.

Anne stepped forward and pushed him. He barely budged and she hated it. "You're going to pay!"

Ibrahim kept his cool. “I’m already doing so. Instead of you all to be here, trying to find ways to get me to bend, you should head back to the company and focus on damage control. I’m a major shareholder and so I’m crippling you five to some extent. Also, some other stakeholders have reached out to ask if I’m heading into another company so they can join me. I didn’t know I had so many supporters but well, things are working out in my favour so...”

“You’re a monster.” Jalal said, his voice so low. “You’re a fucking monster.”

Ibrahim, although he found the statement ironic, smiled nicely. “I’ve learned from you five so...The student should exceed the teacher after all.” He then sighed. “I have work to do, guys. There’s a lot to clear up and settle, all thanks to five of you.”

Tobi grasped at straws. “We’ll leak it all to the press. We’ll leak out all the plans we made and expose the lies we’ve lived up until now.”

Ibrahim feigned consideration for a moment, deluding them into thinking they had something against him. He then shrugged, his smile returning. “Go ahead.”

Tobi’s shock was as clear as day, just like the others’. “W-what?”

“Go ahead.” Ibrahim repeated. “You’ll only make things messy and it would be against you five because you’ll be pulling yourselves through the dirt and the public will see you all for what you truly are; five people desperate enough to do anything to stay in control. Besides, you don’t have evidence. No recordings and no contracts. Concerning the texts we’ve shared all this time, we live in a world where deep fake technology exists and forgery is a thing so...It’ll be my word against yours. Suit yourself, guys, really.”

Having the upper hand over them did not taste sweet to Ibrahim, not when he knew he’d lied and gone to lengths to shelter Ayra from the truth. Salim had said there was a high chance he – Ibrahim – would have to tell Ayra the truth and although it seemed likely, Ibrahim was praying sincerely that it never got to that point. If it did, he prayed it ended well for them the way it had ended well for his parents.

Anneeth slapping him pulled him back to the present and she slapped him again before Nathaniel pulled her back. A sob tore free from her throat. “I hate you, Ibrahim! I hate you!”

Nathaniel pulled her with him, glaring at Ibrahim. “This isn’t over, Ibrahim. I’ll make sure of it.”

Ibrahim simply smiled while his cheek burned. Tobi repeated Nathaniel's words and so did Jalal before he took Bella's hand and said "Come on, *Amore*."

Ibrahim felt the pain of the betrayal again and it took him a lot to keep smiling and say "I'm wishing you two the best. You two deserve each other, really."

While Jalal flipped him off with the middle finger, Bella looked ready to burst into tears, her face contoured in pain. Jalal pulled her along with him and she didn't stop looking at Ibrahim until they were out of sight.

Ibrahim stepped into the apartment and locked the door before his knees gave way and he fell to the ground. Holding his head in his hands, he focused on breathing in and out, telling himself that he was going to be fine.

In Cape Town, Ayra stepped onto the balcony of the luxurious shortlet apartment unit she and Ibtihaj rented. Folding her arms on the railing, she leaned forward and stared at the property on the other side of the street, recognising the house nestled between the trees.

From where she stood, she saw the terrace and its wooden railing; the same place Bella and Ibrahim had stood and gotten their photo taken. The same photo that she'd left hanging in their – Bella and Ibrahim's – living room; one place she was never stepping foot into again.

The restaurant was one Ayra would have missed had she not done her research while trying to unravel all the lies the squad had told so she could piece the puzzle together.

It was a hole in the wall restaurant whose exterior was nothing extraordinary but its interior was so beautiful and cosy that she didn't feel the rush to leave or go through the regular motions as she'd done in the places she and Ibtihaj had visited in Europe.

Dark tiled floors, cream painted walls, dark topped wooden tables, and plush velvet seats came together to create a beauty, complimenting the warm lighting and the tall ceilings alongside the faux vines that were wrapped around pillars.

Apart from a couple in a corner, the restaurant was empty and Ayra knew she and Ibtihaj had arrived at just the perfect time; with half an hour left until its official closing time. Leading the way, she walked to one of the wall tables and slid into a seat. Ibtihaj did the same and together, they looked around, taking it all in.

There were paintings on the walls and a few pictures. The paint strokes were overly familiar and Ayra knew if she walked up to them, she'd see the signature of Serkan Fahad. Among the pictures, one was of Bella and Ibrahim looking cosy and loving with her leaning into his side while his arm stayed wrapped around her shoulders. Both their smiles were beautiful but Ibrahim's was warmer and he looked so at home and at ease that Ayra's chest hurt a bit.

Another photo that got Ayra's attention was one of two people who had their backs turned to the camera. The male was tall and familiar and Ayra could only stare at him for an entire minute before she turned to the female who he had his arm around her waist. The woman in the picture was captured looking sideways and Ayra recognised the side profile a moment later.

"Ayra," Ibtihaj asked, her eyes on the same photo. "Aren't those Ibrahim's parents?"

Ayra nodded, her chest back to being heavy. "They are."

"Oh wow... This restaurant must have a lot of history of them."

Ayra nodded again, looking from the photo of Salim and Fareeda to that of Ibrahim and Bella. "It must."

A minute later, they were joined by the owner of the restaurant; a Xhosa woman in her mid-sixties who radiated warmth in every way possible. From all she'd read about the place, Ayra knew the woman's name was Thandiwe; a woman who loved it when customers stayed behind to listen to her stories. She – Thandiwe – also made the best meals, especially soups, and the reviews she had online were nothing short of beautiful.

“Hello, ladies.” Thandiwe said, putting her hands together in front of her while a smile graced her face. “I’m sorry for the delay. I had to finish up something in the kitchen.”

Both Ayra and Ibtihaj easily smiled back and told her it was alright. When she asked what she could get them, Ayra's smile shrunk but stayed sincere with a hint of sadness. “We were hoping you could give us your best meal and that you'll be kind enough to indulge us in stories you have about a family that owns properties around here.”

Thandiwe stared at her for a long moment before her smile returned and she nodded. “Very well. I'll get started on your meal and close up so we can talk. Now, does a cold glass of freshly made mixed fruit juice sound good?”

Ayra nearly melted. She and Ibtihaj nodded at the same time and replied like twins. “Yes please.”

Thandiwe laughed. “Alright then. Just give me a minute.”

They told her to take her time. It took her an exact minute and half to have their drinks brought to their table, as though she'd prepared for their arrival beforehand. The couple who were the only customers in the restaurant finished up and footed their bill. Unable to just sit and watch, Ayra and Ibtihaj helped Thandiwe clear up the table the couple had occupied and once she finished locking up the restaurant, she forced them out of her kitchen although they tried to insist on helping her with the used dishes.

When they returned to their table, Ibtihaj opened a discussion. “After Maghrib, I said lemme search how the case between Ibrahim and the squad is going and omo! I always knew The Hexad was a big company but if you see how many zeros are in the estimated sales amount of Ibrahim's shares. This is going to cripple them Bella small sha, especially with the news articles speculating that some investors may leave with Ibrahim. People love him sha.”

Ayra smiled sadly, nodding. “They do. Ibrahim's a very loveable person. I would know.”

Ibtihaj's chest squeezed. “Ayra...”

“I’m actually glad he’s crippling them. I’m glad he’s splitting away from them too. He’s going to do well on his own, no matter what area he decides to venture into and I haven’t reached that point yet but I know when I can move on from all of this, I’ll cheer him on and wish him well. He’s been a part of my life despite him not knowing for years and while I can walk away, even while it’ll be in pain, I can’t just wipe away everything. It’s a fact that’s hard to swallow but one I’ll have to accept. Like everyone has said, Ibrahim’s a good person and he’s going to be fine. I’m sure of it.”

Not having much to say in reply, Ibtihaj simply reached across the table and took Ayra’s hand in hers. She gave it a gentle squeeze. With a small laugh, Ayra squeezed back and they continued repeating the action until Thandiwe got to their table, a wide tray in hand.

“I hope you don’t mind me having dinner with you two.” She told the best friends as she put the plates down one after the other. “There’s nothing like sharing stories over a warm meal.”

They told her they didn’t mind and she – Thandiwe – got them water and more juice before she made herself comfortable on one of the seats and gave them the names of the dishes she’d served them. There was *Bobotie* which was mainly spiced minced meat baked with egg-based topping, *Potjiekos* which was a stew with meat and vegetables that had been slow cooked over an open flame, and then the *Malva* pudding which she explained was made using butter, sugar, eggs, apricot jam, milk, flour, and salt.

Thandiwe recommended they start with the *Bobotie* first and after they – Ayra and Ibtihaj – had taken their first few spoons, she asked “So, what family are you curious to know about? Quite a number of families own properties here, each one of them wealthier than so many others.”

Ayra lowered her spoon and swallowed her food before she spoke. “The Fahad family.” She then pointed towards the two photos on the walls. “Particularly the ones in the picture. Fareeda and Salim Fahad and their son, Ibrahim.”

Thandiwe looked from the photo of Salim and Fareeda to that of Ibrahim and Bella and the smile that appeared on her face was a mix of emotions; sadness, nostalgia, and a slice of fondness. She turned back to Ayra and Ibtihaj.

“They’re a beautiful family but their tale is one that’s very, very sad. I’ve been opportune to hear both sides as told by Salim and Fareeda and then by their son, Ibrahim. They’re living proof that often times; the picture perfect families are the ones with the deepest cracks and the most strained

relationships. That picture perfect families are always the ones with the most flaws.”

Ibtihaj took small bites from her food. Ayra didn't. Thandiwe helped herself with a spoonful of her Bobotie before she spoke again. “Fareeda and Salim Fahad are fourth cousins. Before they got married, there wasn't much that brought them together apart from family events or certain gatherings. He's eight years older than she is and as at the time their marriage was arranged, she was twenty and he was twenty-eight. Do not think their marriage was one born out of love or out of their families thinking they complimented each other...Fareeda was given to Salim to hide the fact that he was a chronic womaniser who had no intentions to settle down despite the ambitions he had.”

Ibtihaj stopped eating. Ayra's heart sunk.

“Fareeda always said she was a naïve young lady who believed her parents knew best and as at that time, she'd not heard much about Salim's ways. They got married in 1988 and there was nothing in that marriage for her apart from infidelity and continuous heartbreak. Salim would be faithful on some weeks and back to his ways on others. It was a never ending cycle and she stayed until April, 1990 when she packed her things to leave. They said they'd started the divorce process when Fareeda found out she was pregnant and I'm sure you know what your religion stipulates should happen should the woman be with child.”

Ayra knew clearly and if there was one thing she was grateful for, it was that she and Ibrahim did not have a child together neither was she expecting one with him. That would have complicated things in so many ways and while having a child was a blessing, she knew she wouldn't have been able to cope.

Thandiwe continued. “Living in his house was no threat so she stayed, determined to wait until the baby was born before she left. Maybe it was the fact that a life had been added to theirs or maybe it was the fact that Fareeda wasn't going to put up with him for much longer. Whatever it was, Salim did his best to be better and by the time Ibrahim was born in December that same year, both of them had agreed to not get divorced and they tried to do their best as a couple. It was easier said than done though.”

Ayra sat with her spine as straight as a rod, afraid that she'd miss even the tiniest detail if she did as much as move by the slightest inch. Ibtihaj sat the same way, her gaze trained on Thandiwe.

“In February 1991, Salim's political career kicked off with him starting his climb up Atlantica's diplomatic ranks. It couldn't have been easy for

Fareeda to navigate through making their relationship work and raise their son on her own while cheering her husband on the way a wife is supposed to. There was also the fact that Salim fell back to his old habits once in a while. If he wasn't in one party or the other, there was a case with one woman or the other. They said Fareeda never let such issues slide and more often than not, it lead to them screaming in that mighty house of theirs where they lived with little Ibrahim and a few long-term housekeepers and chefs. Each time I try to picture it, it's ugly in my head and you should hear Ibrahim talk about all he could remember. It was really bad."

Ayra felt the familiar prickling sensation of tears, heading up towards her eyes. She did nothing to push them back. She wouldn't have been able to do so even if she tried.

Thandiwe's exhale spoke volumes. "I would love to tell you it got easier but it didn't. He was always out of the house and she was alone with a growing child. When a relationship is as shaky as theirs, there's no way one can be a perfect parent and even they know they weren't the best. They both had their dreams and most of it, especially the ones they couldn't achieve, fell on Ibrahim. When he tried to be stubborn, they used force as it was what they knew best, so when kids his age were doing one thing or the other, Ibrahim was being moulded into what his parents wanted. They wanted him to go into the sciences like them and when Salim got really popular among the Atlantican envoy to South Africa, they wanted Ibrahim to come down here to study but Ibrahim didn't agree. He went all the way to England and not even them gifting him the mansion with the tall coconut trees could change his mind and bring him back to where they wanted him to be."

Ayra blinked and a tear slipped, sliding down her cheek. Ibtihaj wasn't crying or moved to tears but it was clear the story touched deep. Thandiwe continued.

"From that moment, the stories had two sides to it. Fareeda and Salim were forced to reconcile the differences that had hung between them all along and Ibrahim wanted nothing more to do with them but he couldn't ever bring himself to cut them out of his life, no matter how tempting it got. He made friends in school and when they first came here, he pointed out the woman he was in love with; Bella. I didn't like her but I didn't tell him that. I never told him that."

Ibtihaj asked the question that sat on Ayra's tongue. "Why?"

"Don't get me wrong, they did look good together and he knew what he saw in her that made him fall in love with her but the first time they came here to have dinner, she seemed like a fake; as though there was a mask she

was wearing just so he didn't see who she was underneath. His friends had that same vibe too but he appeared happy with them and I didn't mind it."

A half smile lifted the edges of her lips. "His parents didn't like them for him but they knew better than to try to forcefully cut him off from them so they pretended as though they didn't know about a lot of things he did. They always visited the mansion when he wasn't around and Fareeda, God bless her soul, always ensured the house and its surroundings stayed neat so he never had to worry about anything when he came. There were days when she came here and she cried. On other days, she came with Salim and sometimes they argued. Other times they laughed."

She turned to the photo of them. "That particular day, they argued at first and by the time they finished eating, they were laughing. All of a sudden, she started crying and he let her. When they finished, they footed their bill and I asked if I could take a photo of them. They said they didn't want their faces to show and I said okay but Fareeda turned to look at me at the shutter went off and I couldn't bring myself to take another one. A week later or maybe even two weeks later, Ibrahim came with Bella and they weren't as lovey dovey as they'd been before. It was then I learned that they'd gone to Aomi to inform his parents they wanted to get married but Salim and Fareeda had refused. They said they'd never give their blessings and maybe it was wrong of me but I was relieved. They were still a lovely couple but he loved her too much and it seemed like she'd never be able to return it all. Two of them made up and got back together though."

She paused to take a large gulp of water. "They used to come at intervals, Fareeda and Salim and Bella and Ibrahim. His parents would go through their usual pattern of laughing on some days and arguing on a few others. Bella and Ibrahim would sit there in that corner table and talk in hushed tones and he always, *always* made sure she was smiling. There was very little he wouldn't do for her. I can swear it."

A moment of silence passed before she spoke again. "He's a very lovely soul, that Ibrahim. He just had it rough and like I always tell myself, he didn't settle with the right crowd. The first times the so called squad came, they were nice, but that changed over time. They used to be very disrespectful and so arrogant but Ibrahim...Even when he joined in their madness, he'll always come back on his own to ask if I was okay and if I needed an extra hand, he didn't mind. One time, that Bella scolded him like a child but he didn't mind. He got her smiling again and they left together. An hour or so later, he was back and..."

Her eyes had glassed over and she let out a small laugh. "He's the best soul, I swear it, but he loves the wrong people and God knows his parents

weren't good but at least, the last time they came, they had received sense. I haven't seen Ibrahim since early last year but I know he's been good. I heard he's married too and thanks be to God that it's not that Bella. I thank God for that every day."

Ayra's entire being hurt. She sniffled. "They're currently falling apart. The squad, I mean."

Thandiwe's smile was disturbingly wide in response to such news. She threw up her hands "*Enkosi Thixo* (Thank God!)." She let her hands drop. "He's better off without them. He can focus on himself and on that beautiful skill he had."

She gestured towards the paintings. "He made those and he's the one who picked out this colour for the restaurant. I had it repainted this year but the first layer of paint in this colour was painted by Ibrahim himself. When he finished, he and Bella had dinner and that's when that picture was taken. That should be in 2019. If he got married last year, then they should have broken up shortly after that photo."

"They didn't." Ayra said before she could stop herself. The pain was searing. "They didn't break up, not until recently."

Thandiwe's brows furrowed. "I don't understand. I thought you said..." When it clicked in her head, her confusion gave way for horror. She shook her head. "No...Please tell me it's not what I think it is."

Ayra choked over a sob while Ibtihaj nodded sombrely. "It is what you think it is."

Thandiwe shook her head, clearly in disbelief. "No...Ibrahim would never do that. I can swear it, he would never."

"He did." Ibtihaj told her. She then held out her hand, pointing it towards Ayra. "This is Ibrahim's wife, Ayra Abdulaziz-Fahad."

Thandiwe's horror returned and with a pale face, she turned back to Ayra who wiped away her tears with the back of her hands only for more tears to fall. Thandiwe shook her head slowly, her eyes filling with tears.

"He would never do it on his own. I would bet on everything I own that the plan to pull you into their mess didn't come from him. I can bet on everything I own that the others planned it. I wouldn't be surprised if it came from Bella herself or even that little devil named Anneth." She began to cry. "I knew you seemed familiar when you came in but I would never have guessed. I am so sorry, Ayra. I'm so, so sorry."

Ayra broke for the umpteenth time that month and sobbed into her hands, all of it too much for her to handle. *A beautiful soul*, every single person had said. *He'd just been with the wrong crowd*. A beautiful soul, Ayra would not deny it, but he was an adult and he would have been able to put his foot down back then. He would have said no to their plan to pull her into it all but he'd gone ahead with it all and it was too late. It was way too late.

She cried even harder and vaguely heard the legs of the chairs scraping against the tiled floor before she was hugged by both her best friend and Thandiwe. Ayra kept crying. They'd found out all except one thing; how she'd come into the picture. How the squad had known about her, to the extent that they could study her so well and mould themselves into what she wanted so they could fool her perfectly and fool her family, his family, and the Adeolas too.

As though the universe knew she needed the answer to that last question, her phone pinged with a new message much later when their tears had subsided. Ayra picked it up while Ibtihaj consoled Thandiwe who still had some more tears to shed. The message took her to WhatsApp and once she recognised the owner of the unsaved contact to be one of the exchange students they – she and Ibtihaj – had over at the University of Atlantica during their bachelor programme, Ayra hit the audio call button.

The call was accepted almost immediately and the familiar voice rang out. “Ayra!”

Ayra’s heart – a bit of it – pieced itself together. She couldn’t help but release a watery laugh. “Hannah. Oh my God, hi!”

“Hi! It’s been so long!”

“It has. I’m sorry I wasn’t in touch like I promised I would be as at the time you had to return to Ethiopia.”

“Oh please, Ayra, that’s fine. I would have kept in touch too but life has been so crazy. I said I would call since the time I heard you were engaged to Ibrahim Fahad but it’s been crazy here and I literally just got my life back on track. I saw the news about Ibrahim’s split from The Hexad and I said I had to make this overdue phone call. After all, no matter what anyone says, I’m convinced I played a role in you two getting together and I’m finally going to admit it to you.”

That got the attentions of Ibtihaj and Thandiwe. Ayra’s heart broke again and it went back to sinking. “Hannah, what are you talking about?”

Hannah laughed over the line. “God, this is so good.”

“Hannah –”

“I’ll tell you! You know I left U of A in January 2019. That same year, I think it was October, I went for this tech summit in Singapore with my brothers and we got to meet with The Hexad. Your love for Ibrahim Fahad was no secret to me, Ayra, and since he wasn’t with Bella the way some people thought, I decided I was going to tell him that a friend of mine actually really loved him and if he was interested in settling down, I had no doubt you would make a lovely companion for him. He was genuinely interested in who I was recommending so I told him your full name and then I showed him one of your Instagram posts. Remember the one of you and Ibty in traditional wear? I think it was for Nigeria’s Independence Day or so. I showed him that one and let me tell you the surprising part! He’d actually seen that same post on his explore page but he hadn’t paid any attention to it until I showed him the same thing. He even pulled his phone out and showed it to me. It was crazy!”

Hannah laughed again. “It wasn’t mere coincidence, I swear it. He promised he’d reach out to you and of course I told him you were from Nohea and that you were schooling at U of A. I gave him all your contact details that I had because a girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do once an opportunity presents itself on a golden platter. I know he kept that promise because a few months later I got the news that you two had gotten engaged and were set to get married. Had life not taken a very crazy turn for me then, I would have reached out and...”

Ayra had stopped listening. The phone slid from her hand and hit her lap before it slipped down her chiffon dress and fell to the ground. Before she could stop herself, she was thrown back to hers and Ibrahim’s engagement the previous year and how they’d sat across each other in the second living room of her parents’ home.

“Over the years it’s become hard for me to express my feelings,” He had said. *“So you can imagine how confused I was when I came across your post on my explore page on Instagram and all I wanted to do was to get to know you better. Also, your user handle was intriguing. It’s not every day you see a lady whose user handle is a rare flower. A beautiful one at that.”*

The prickling feeling was familiar and it went from every part of her towards her throat where it bubbled until it got to her lips. Ayra brought her hands up to her mouth at the last moment, muffling the shrill scream that tore out and broke the heart of every person who heard it.

Ibrahim, time and time again, had lied but to an extent he’d been honest and it killed her over and over. In Aomi, Ibrahim sat in the living room that

had been cleared. Displayed on his phone which he held with both hands was the screenshot of an Instagram post dated October 1st 2019; a photo of Ayra smiling so beautifully at the camera while dressed in burgundy *iro* and *buba*, her *gele* tied so well.

With a warm smile on his face, he quietly sent a word of thanks to the lady named Hannah who he'd met at the summit in Singapore who'd told him about Ayra and then shown him the same post he'd scrolled past mere hours earlier.

At that time, he knew getting details about Ayra had been for his and the squad's plan of getting him married to someone his parents would approve of. They'd gotten together for the wrong reasons, he knew that, but he had her and he was now appreciating her and he was going to do anything and go to any lengths to ensure he was worthy of her in any way, no matter what. It was a promise he made.

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On Friday October 22nd, Ibrahim Fahad officially pulled away from The Hexad. His position became vacant, his office got cleared, and his authority over the affairs of the companies ceased to exist.

A few stakeholders pulled out with him, choosing to invest in other companies until Ibrahim decided what he was going to do. It caused more damage to The Hexad and the squad had their hands full.

That same day, Ayra returned to Atlantica alone. She'd convinced Ibtihaj into going spending a day longer at Cape Town before going to Costa Casa to enjoy the reservation they'd made in the lovely resort. Ayra didn't want to go there and Ibtihaj didn't force it. At Raven Isle, she – Ayra – kept her face covered with a disposable mask and ensured her head stayed lowered. All through the ride to Aomi, she stared out of the window, her chest heavy and her tear ducts dry.

Instead of heading to Downtown Aomi, Ayra headed to the place she'd always called home. Muhsin was the one to open the door and although Ayra felt the urge to cry when he teared up at the sight of her, the tears didn't come.

He pulled her into the house and into his arms, holding her tightly against him and kissing her head repeatedly. Salama joined him there, both of them holding Ayra between them. Her head resting against her father's chest, Ayra listened to his heart beating and found solace in it.

She was only going to stay in Plum Boulevard for a few days and then she'll head back to Ibrahim. Their finish line had now been clearly drawn and she wasn't going back on her decision. They were never going to work; not when all had been said and done.



The masjid now had more plants and with the plants' flowers in bloom despite the coldness of the weather, the masjid was more beautiful than Ayra remembered.

Breathing in deeply and exhaling slowly, she adjusted the strap of her sling bag and headed to the back where she knew she'd find Maya and, if they were around, the other members of the sisters' circle the masjid had.

Maya was the only being in sight and her face lit up when she saw who it was. She put down the blanket she'd been crocheting and rose to her feet, her smile wide enough to split her face in two. "Ayra!"

Ayra laughed and it was sincere. The space between them disappeared and they hugged each other. Ayra soaked in the warmth offered. “Assalam Alaykum, Maya.”

“Waalaykum Salam!” Maya pulled back. “It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s so good to see you too. I see there are new additions outside. They’re so beautiful.”

Maya blushed. “Well...Yunus had them planted. Being present when they planted it helped with my mood swings. It’s been a lot since you left.”

Ayra blinked, unsure she was following. “Mood swings?”

Maya’s nod was small, her smile bashful. “In Shaa Allah, in the coming months, we’ll be having an addition to our family.”

Ayra gasped softly when it made sense in her head. “Oh my God.” She hugged Maya again. “Congratulations. May Allah keep you both in good health and bring him or her safely.”

“Ameen, Ameen. Jazakillah Khair, Ayra.”

“Wa anti.”

Maya pulled back and led Ayra to the sofas. They sat facing each other and made themselves comfortable before Maya asked “So how did your trip go? How’s your best friend? Ibty, right?”

Ayra nodded, crossing one leg over the other. “Right. She’s fine, Alhamdulillah. I actually came back to Aomi before she did but I had to stay with my parents so I could rest a bit and tell them the steps I would take from here on.”

Maya’s expression sombered. “You found out all you wanted to find out?”

“I did.” Ayra smiled sadly. “And things also happened here that are working well for me now.”

“I’m guessing you two would still end up splitting ways.”

Ayra nodded yet again. “Yes, we will. That much is set in stone now.” She then let a moment pass. “But I hope to do it in a way that’s not messy. Also, I’d like to help him with some things first. Despite the way our story went, Ibrahim’s making an effort to be better and although I’m going to leave, I want to help in the little way I can.”

Maya’s chest tightened and she blamed her hormones for the tears that surfaced. “And you, Ayra? Who will help you?”

Ayra teared up then but not once did she stop smiling. “Oh, I have a lot of people who are willing to help. I’m sure you’re on that list, Maya. You, your husband, and every other member of this masjid community.”

Maya let out a watery laugh. “Of course we are...You should know that the community expanded recently. There’s a new face that’s becoming consistent.”

“Are you serious?”

Maya nodded, her chest squeezing again. “It’s Ibrahim, your husband.” When she saw the other woman pale slightly, Maya continued. “He started coming in last week. At first, he had things he wanted to donate and well, Yunus was the one who attended to him alongside some of our brothers. He’s been making an effort to show up for prayers since then. I thought you should know. Like you said, he’s making an effort to be better, but for your sake, I wish he’d done so earlier.”

Ayra loosely gripped the floral fabric of the dress she wore. “Oh...”

“But like you said the masjid community is going to be there to help you, Ayra, no matter what.”

And it was funny to Ayra how she found some sort of painful contentment that Ibrahim would have them to help him too. She then sniffled. “Thank you, Maya. I’m really grateful.”

“Oh please, Ayra, it’s nothing. So, is there anything you need help with now?”

Ayra nodded, a little slowly. “I have two things actually. I was wondering if you had any idea of a house that’s currently up for sale. A small home with at most three bedrooms and a terrace or something that would be nice for someone to paint. I’d love it if the house was close to a masjid.”

Maya, despite her chest squeezing once more, thought about it for a long moment. She was about to shake her head when she recalled a discussion Yunus had a few days back with one of the brothers who had prayed with them. Her face lit up and she nodded.

“I do! There are some newly completed houses on the south end here in Downtown Aomi. They are all beautiful and cosy and there’s a masjid there. It’s called Masjid An-Nur. According to what I heard being told to Yunus, the houses have beautiful views of the beach. I’m sure that would be a lovely thing to paint.”

Ayra swallowed and wiped away the tear that slid down her cheek. “Do all the houses have their individual compounds?”

Maya nodded. “According to what I know, yes. If you want, I can get the number of the brother from Yunus. I think he said his name was Malik or something.”

“I’d love that.”

“Alright then. I’ll get it for you before you leave...What’s the other thing?”

Ayra breathed in and out. “I’d like to start working. Not immediately though. I was hoping you could recommend a place you can vouch for, preferably here in Aomi since my family’s still here.” She let go of her dress and laced her fingers together. “I studied communication so anything related to that wouldn’t be an issue. I just do not want to deal with anything social media related because when news of me separating from Ibrahim comes out, it’ll be the talk for a while and the last thing I want is to deal with that. I wouldn’t want to deal with much about the squad too.”

She paused to breathe. “I wouldn’t mind being an assistant or something in that category. I just need something to keep me busy once I’m able to head out of my house without being scared of bursting into tears at the littlest inconvenience. I also want a place where I can find peace and be able to practice Islam without any snide remarks or anything. Islamophobia, no matter how little it’ll be, won’t be good for me. An organisation that’s involved in charity would be nice too.”

Maya’s smile was pretty. She pushed herself off the sofa and rose to her full height. “You’re in luck. There’s a perfect opening for you. Give me a minute.”

Ayra could only nod. Maya left the room and returned with a brochure which she handed to Ayra before returning to her seat. “This is from Ayneese. It’s a fashion company that provides extremely modest clothing for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, especially those on a budget. They began in Bedfordshire in 2018 and then they expanded around Europe. However, they’re moving down here to Aomi because the owners – who I heard are cousins – are from Atlantica and they want to be back home.”

Ayra flipped through the pages, taking in the beautiful thobes, jilbabs, hijabs, dresses, shirts, two pieces for males and females, and accessories. The Aomi shop, which to be the new headquarters of the brand, was to be in between Plum Boulevard and Monwict and it was set to be opened in the first half of the coming year.

“I think you should go for the confidential secretary post to the president. Since they’re cousins, they’re two of them so you can go for any one. I personally don’t know the owners because of how private they are but the

masjid community is familiar with the brand. Most of our outfits are from them and they've contributed immensely to charity drives around the country. So, based on all those, I can vouch for them. I can also vouch for them based on their charity managers and those that have related with them. Ayneese's reviews are really good too so...And the best part is that they're not opening soon so you'll have all the time you need to prepare yourself and heal as much as you can. I think this is a lovely opportunity, Ayra, and you should take it."

The second to the last page had Ayra freezing. Displayed was a milk coloured thobe, one that she'd definitely seen at the East Mainlands Airport on none other than Ayman Hakeem Bello, Adil's cousin. It was then she realised why it'd seemed familiar on him that day. She'd stumbled across Ayneese's Instagram page while searching for jilbabs during the period she'd found out about the lie that had been her life with Ibrahim.

She blinked and snapped out of her trance. She closed the brochure and raised her head. "Can I keep this with me?"

"Of course! You should think about it but I hope you make up your mind soon. Applications end mid-November and interviews would be conducted before the year runs out In Shaa Allah."

"In Shaa Allah. Thank you, Maya."

"Oh come on, Ayra. You're always welcome. I promise."



Ayra pulled her box along and stepped into The Oasis, feeling bittersweet as she recalled how excited she and Ibtiyah had been the first time they visited to tour the apartment Ibrahim had gotten; an apartment Ayra had been so thrilled to call home.

Coming back to the residential building after the trip she'd had showed Ayra just how much The Oasis had lost its shine in her eyes. They could have done better with picking out a home but she had been in too deep in love with Ibrahim to realise it.

The receptionists were familiar faces and after welcoming her back, they let her know Ibrahim was out. Ayra should not have been so relieved but she was. Thanking them, she walked to the elevator and headed up.

The tenth floor was quiet and the sound of her inputting the passcode was louder in her ears. Drawing in a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped into the apartment. The lights came on as the door closed and the

first thing she took note of was how the apartment scented like a garden of flowers in full bloom.

She let go of her box handle and took smaller steps in, noticing the diffuser sticks that sat in a square shaped glass jar of oil on the foyer's floating shelf. The living room seemed warmer and it took her a long moment to realise the cushions had been switched with those in warm tones. The sofas and chairs were the same and so were the coffee tables and the chandelier. The multi canvas painting she'd left with space between both canvasses had been moved so both canvasses sat side by side with no gap between.

She smiled sadly. "I guess you finally got rid of that itch, Ibrahim."

The kitchen was spotlessly clean and the fridge was stocked with food arranged in storage dishes. There were fruits in the basket on the dining table too. She ran her fingers along the edge of the waterfall island, reminiscing on every time she'd walked into the space, excited to whip up something for him or to watch him whip up something for the both of them.

Her heart sinking and her chest heavy, she exited the kitchen and walked back to the foyer to grab her box before she made her way up. The family lounge had her freezing in her tracks. The paintings she had left – all of which he'd done and signed as Serkan Fahad – were gone. In its place was a framed portrait from their wedding; both of them captured so beautifully in black and white staring at each other with soft and radiant smiles.

The sight of it and the fact that it'd taken them a near year to have a wedding picture of theirs in the apartment broke Ayra painfully and she had to swallow back a sob. She walked to the wall that held the portrait and stared at the picture as though it was a scene pulled out of a dream. It'd only been a near year since they'd been married but as she stared at the portrait and how happy she was in it, Ayra felt as though it'd been ages and that she'd grown older than she even knew.

When she finally brought herself to look away from the painting, she moved in the direction of his room. It was the same as she'd left it but some things were gone such as the painting of Bella. In its place was a painting of her and she knew with painful certainty that it was the same painting he'd talked about. It was perfect; the strokes and colours artistically done. She walked up to it and just like she'd expected, his signature was on the bottom left corner; Ibrahim Fahad, and not Serkan.

Ayra broke a little more.

His walk-in was a little emptier than she remembered and a bunch of papers clipped together on the top of the vanity caught her attention. It was information about newly completed houses and as she went through them, she realised they were the same houses Maya had spoken about; the ones at the south end of Downtown Aomi with views of the beach that gave every other property in town a run for their money. His scribbles felt like tiny knives and they hurt so much as she read them.

Maybe Ayra would like this one???? This one definitely seems like a storybook home she'll kill to have. I'll ask her.

This one seems too big. I'll have to check back with her.

This! This is perfect!

The last comment had been scribbled next to the picture of a two storey house with three bedrooms, four baths, a back patio that had a stunning view of the beach, and an immaculate front porch. Like he said, it was perfect and it killed her that they didn't start their lives there. It killed her more that she even entertained such thought.

She put the papers back down when her vision blurred and then noticed that his perfume drawer was half open. She wiped away her tears and pulled it open, unable to recognise the brands she saw instead of his usual Tom Ford Oud which she'd known as his signature scent.

The sob that broke free wrecked her frame and Ayra ended up crying there. A while passed before the familiar tell-tale sound of the passcode being inputted reached her ears. She hurriedly wiped away her tears and breathed in and out, wondering if she'd be able to rush to the bathroom and splash water on her face before he came up to meet her.

Without dwelling on it, she made a beeline for the bathroom and did just that while outside the dark themed space, he called her name. "Ayra?"

The water was cold against her skin but she welcomed it whole heartedly. By the time he got to the doorway of the bathroom, she'd slipped on a part of her mask. Smiling, she turned around. "Hi."

Ibrahim felt his chest expand like a balloon being pumped with air. He'd planned to come home and call her to ask just when she was returning to Aomi but there she was, right in his bathroom. Her eyes made his brows furrow and he took a small step in. "Ayra, were you crying?"

She nodded, still smiling. "I was." She managed a nonchalant eye roll. "I go away for a few weeks and you turn the house around. The portrait in the

family lounge? Stunning.” Her heart was bleeding. “And that painting of me in the room! God, Ibrahim. You know how to make a woman cry.”

Relief hit him square in the chest and he laughed. He closed the space between them and hugged her, holding her tightly against him and burying his face in the crook of her neck. She felt and scented familiar and he felt extremely complete and safe. He felt at home.

“God, I missed you.” It was his honest truth. “I don’t even think I know just how much I did.”

Ayra blinked back a fresh wave of tears and hugged him back. “Missed you too, Ibrahim.” A lie. “I hope you’re okay, especially with everything that happened with the squad.”

He pulled back, his smile a near ghost on his face. His hand came up to cradle her cheek, his thumb moving in a soft caress. “I’ll be fine. So far, so good. You’re home now with me and that’s the only thing I want to think about. I can think and worry about everything later.”

She choked out a watery laugh. “You’re sounding so cheesy.”

His smile widened. “You can’t blame me, can you?”

She shook her head. “No.” A part of her wanted to; wanted to blame him for everything and anything. “I can’t.”

They stood there, an arm of his around her waist while his other hand stayed on her cheek while her arms stayed wrapped loosely around his middle. The air shifted and like a punch in the gut, Ayra saw her engaged self in him. She saw the way he looked at her and how badly he wanted to say the same words Ibtihaj had warned her against saying back then until he had proved himself worthy of them.

Ibrahim sincerely stared at her the way she’d always wanted and instead of the happiness she’d always experienced when she had no idea his looks were not sincere, Ayra felt herself crumbling to dust. He said nothing, his thumb still caressing her cheek, but Ayra heard him loud and clear.

Ibrahim’s lips moved and he whispered. “There’s so much I want to tell you, Ayra. There’s so much I want to say.”

The words that formed her reply slipped past her lips before she could stop them, killing what was left of her when she saw how much anguish they put him in.

“I know, Ibrahim...” She whispered too. “What else is there to feel?”

When Ibrahim told her he'd been thinking of them getting a house they wouldn't have to share with other people by having their own compound, Ayra backed up the idea. When he brought the same papers she'd seen in his walk-in, she stepped into her acting shoes once again and delivered the perfect gasp when she saw the house he'd called perfect; the house she knew was perfect too.

"How soon can we get it?" She asked, looking up at him with eyes that she prayed shone brightly. "And how soon can we move in?"

Ibrahim, sincerely happy that she'd bought the idea, smiled down at her. "You're that excited about it?"

She nodded. "Yes! Look at the house, Ibrahim. We have to get it before someone else does and I don't care what anyone says but we are going to move in as soon as we can. We're also picking everything it'll contain from scratch."

He laughed and pulled her close, kissing her hair. "We'll go tomorrow In Shaa Allah and close the deal. Is that fine?"

"Perfect!"

He laughed and kissed her hair yet again before his hand found hers and he squeezed gently before leading the way in the direction of her room. "Now, come and tell me how your trip went. And don't leave any detail out."

She laughed, nodding. "I wouldn't dare."

She told him half-truths and half-lies; that she and Ibtihaj had explored places and cities in England with their favourite being London before they briefly passed through the Netherlands and proceeded to Turkey. She told him about the coffee flavours she loved and the ones she hated; about the dishes she would love to try again and those she despised; about the hotel memories she would hold dear and how the flight attendants were always nice; and then about the resort in Costa Casa that she never visited.

Ibrahim listened to her every word, his expression nothing short of beautiful. He stared at her as though he had enough time to memorise every inch of her face and also as though he only had that one moment left to live. It nearly made Ayra cry.

Along the line, after he told her she'd had a lot of fun, he closed the space between them and kissed her. Ayra let him, his new scent of wood and spice painfully intoxicating. He kissed her like his life depended on it and she kissed him back, aware of every cracking sound coming from within

her. He pulled her closer and her fingers weaved through his curls; a pattern she memorised one more time. Her zipper got pulled down and she helped him with his shirt, her hands a little shaky while his stayed steady. Ayra told herself not to cry, especially when he smiled at her, tracing her lip with his thumb, before saying she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Then he kissed her again, moving things further one step at a time.

In his every movement and every kiss, Ayra heard clearly all that he was saying; that he missed her; that he loved her. It broke her over and over. He was gentle and he was kind and she took it all, giving back what she had left to offer; broken pieces that may never mend; a heart that was beyond battered.

They found their releases together and his kiss swallowed her small gasp. Ibrahim held her close until they caught their breaths and then they lay on their sides, faces mere inches apart.

"You okay?" He asked softly.

She nodded. "I am." Another half-lie and half-truth. She then put her hand underneath her head and smiled at him. "What do you plan to do with your shares and with the applications you both from them?"

He raised a brow. "We're having business talks now?"

She let out a small laugh. "Answer me, Ibrahim."

He grinned. "Okay." He mirrored her position, his hand going under his head. His grin then shrunk to a small smile. "My shares have been liquidified so the money's sitting pretty in my bank accounts and God, the sum is so huge. I'm being told to invest in a company or establish my own solo company but those ideas aren't appealing to me. I don't know what I want to do yet and I don't want to be in a rush. I want to take it one day at a time, with you."

Ayra focused on asking the next question, her voice a near whisper. "And the applications?"

"For now they're running well with their latest updates. If I need to draw up a team anytime soon, it'll be solely for the applications so they don't go out of the market. They're too important to die a sad death and I can't let that happen."

A silent moment passed before she reached out with her other hand. Ibrahim's small smile vanished when she pushed his curls back, away from his forehead. So many emotions swirled in her eyes and he wanted to take

his time to unravel them all. His heart raced beautifully and a small swarm of butterflies fluttered in his stomach.

“You should establish a small company, Ibrahim.” She told him softly. “It would be nowhere near even half of The Hexad, just big enough to keep the applications running and develop some more. Big enough to also have a mentorship programme because even if you can’t see it now, I have no doubt that you’re going to be a fantastic mentor to so many young people who look up to you and would die for such a chance to learn from you.”

Ibrahim could only stare at her, listening to her every word which built beautiful mental images in his head. Her hand didn’t leave his hair and it was so, so soothing.

“You should also think of partnering with a number of galleries or opening one, no matter how small it may be.” Ayra continued, taking in how beautiful he was as he stared at her as though she was plucking out the moon from its spot in space just so she could give it to him. “You paint so beautifully, Ibrahim, and the world deserves to see those artworks which you’ll sign as Ibrahim Fahad or even with a pseudo name just in case you don’t want people to know you paint. I even think the pseudo name is better.” She smiled, using every ounce of energy she had. “A dash of mystery is always good.”

He smiled then. “You should go into marketing, Ayra. You’ll do well convincing so many people.”

Her smile stretched while she bled within. “Does that mean I’ve convinced you?”

“Oh you definitely have. You’ve overthrown everyone else’s advice and I definitely wouldn’t mind coming to you when I need advice. You’re so good at it.”

Ayra struggled to keep her smile on her face but she did try with every part of her. Ibrahim’s other hand moved and he patted her cheek, tempted to poke her dimple. “I’ll think about it although there’s already a high chance I’ll do everything you’ve just recommended.” His smile widened. “You’ll be there beside me every step of the way, yeah?”

She nodded once. “I will.” *I won’t*, she said in her head, *not like you think right now*. “You don’t even have to ask.”

“Perfect!” He moved closer and pecked her lips. “Thank you, Ayra.”

The last piece of her crumbled. “You’re welcome.”



If the house had been stunning on paper, it was a dream brought to life in reality. The compound was nothing big but it was perfect and Ayra focused on breathing in and out just so she did not burst into tears when a treacherous part of her imagined how it would have been lovely to have hers and Ibrahim's son or daughter run around the space, squealing at the top of their lungs.

The front porch was breath-taking; dark wood floors, two pillars which artificial vines were wrapped around, and beautiful lighting. Ayra pictured vases with flourishing plants on both sides of the door and a foot mat that welcomed guests right in front of it. The image made her heart hurt.

The interior of the house was even better than its exterior. The spaces were nowhere as big as what they had at The Oasis but every corner screamed home a million times more than The Oasis ever would and also there wasn't anyone else picking out things for them the way Bella had done. It was just her and Ibrahim; no one else.

The house had a coastal neutral pallet – taupe, ivory, and beige – with pops of beachy blues. The wooden floors shone and they were felt so nice beneath Ayra's feet when she removed her shoes. The living had double height ceilings and space for a nook as the realtor explained. The staircase leading up was mounted on one side of the space while the other side flowed into the dining space that then flowed into the kitchen which had white cabinets, a patterned blue backsplash, and a marble topped island with warm wooden sides.

Each bedroom – all three of them – was nothing short of warm and inviting and the patio begged to be occupied. The views, as promised, from every part of the house were to die for and everything came together so well in Ayra's head. Ibrahim was going to thrive there, there was no doubt about it, and – as painful as the reminder was – she was not going to be with him. She was never going to be with him.

He joined her on the patio, his hands in his pockets and the cool breeze from the sea ruffling his hair. His smile was soft. "Perfect?"

She nodded, managing to smile back. "Perfect. We're making a down payment, Ibrahim."

"Oh that much is already set in stone. There's someone else who has eyes on the property and there's no way I'm going to let them get it."

She choked out a laugh, her chest as tight as it'd been since she returned to the apartment they were both going to leave. "Exactly. Let's ask if they

offer interior services. If they do, then I hope they're ready to have this furnished before this new week runs out."

Ibrahim's eyes widened. "Ayra!"

"I'm serious, Engineer Fahad." She walked past him, heading back into the house where the realtor stood waiting for them. "They have to make it happen. We are moving here during the week and that's it."

She heard him follow her. "Yes ma'am."

Luckily for them, the company that owned the properties ran an interior service and each house already had a curated template just in case the new owners wanted such. The curated template for that particular house had Ayra blinking back tears as it was everything she would kill for in a dream home; from the sofa set to the patio furniture, it was perfect, and she told the realtor they'd take it even before Ibrahim could say he loved it too.

When Ayra asked if they could get the house furnished in a week or even less than, the realtor smiled and nodded. "If you can get the money paid this very hour, you'll get a fully furnished home in three to four days. All the pieces are available and lucky for you, the interior designer – Stephanie Kraus – is still in town."

Ayra turned to Ibrahim and no one had to tell him to say to the realtor "We'll take it."

It took them two hours to sign the papers that gave ownership of the house and meet with the interior designer, Stephanie, who ran over the designs with them. Apart from a few additions Ayra had, they were good to go and Stephanie promised her team would not disappoint.

When the meeting with her ended and they returned to the car, Ibrahim faced his wife. "You're that excited to move in?"

"You have no idea, Ibrahim. You can't have a house like that and not decide to move in. It's going to be so lovely here. You'll have so many things to paint and then there's a masjid nearby. It's the best place."

He folded his arms on the steering wheel and rested his head on them, staring at her as lovingly as he now always did. "And you? What would you do?"

Ayra rolled her eyes, as though he'd asked the most useless question the world had ever seen. "Do you think it's easy to have a supporter like me?"

That brought a laugh out of him. "You're usually not the cocky type, Leilani."

Her façade trembled on a shaky foundation. She mimicked a hair flip, hiding how badly damaged she was. “Ibty’s great influence.”

His amusement was as clear as day. “I can see that.” A minute passed with him watching her before he asked “While they work on giving us a fully furnished house in four days, what should we do?”

“We’ll stay glued to each other.” She replied without missing a beat. “We’ll work on clearing out our current house and then on putting the apartment back on the market alongside all the furniture it contains because we won’t need them anymore. This new house is going to be a fresh start and the only things we need to move are our clothes and our other necessities. Everything else can be sold.”

Ibrahim would never tell her that in that moment he was grateful for the fresh start she mentioned. With all that had happened and all he knew she didn’t know about, a fresh start was all they needed and he was going to make sure nothing thwarted it especially with how bright and beautiful the future with her seemed with no more lies between them.

“And when we’re not doing those,” Ayra continued. “I want us to do everything you want. Dates, movies, drives, walks to and fro the masjid, shopping...All of it!”

His chest warmed ever so lovingly. “Why is it just all I want? What about you?”

“Let’s do all you want, Ibrahim, and then we’ll do everything I want. When we get that point, you better not say no to whatever I ask for.”

“As long as it isn’t going to lead to any injuries or anything overly crazy, then I won’t.”

Ayra told herself not to cry. “Promise?”

He did not even hesitate. “I promise.”

“Thank you!”

He straightened and brought the engine to life, his chest warming further and the butterflies in his belly taking flight. “Come on, sweetheart, it’s nothing. Prepare to get sick of me this week because we’re doing everything like a couple that’s just starting to date.”

In her head, Ayra began the countdown. “Perfect! I can’t wait.”

He put the gear in drive, his smile a knife that stabbed her heart. “Me too, sweetheart. Me too.”

While the world kept up with The Hexad and how things at the company were on rocky ground with fluctuating values, Ayra and Ibrahim focused on clearing out their apartment at The Oasis so they could be fully ready to move into their new home.

They packed up the things they needed and put aside the things they no longer wanted to keep, choosing to have them donated rather than throwing them out. Clothes were folded, books were arranged in boxes, and shoes were put into their allocated storage spaces. The paintings and their wedding portraits were wrapped up protectively and so were certain ceramics Ayra wanted in the new home.

When they weren't clearing out the space, just as she'd asked, they did every activity he came up with. They walked to and fro the masjid for most prayers, he took her on the most random drives and held her hand in his between the seats throughout, he took her up to The Oasis's pool to swim one night, and instead of taking her to restaurants for dates, he brought the dates home and most times, they ended up cuddling and talking about the most random things while a movie they'd ditched half way played in the background.

For Ibrahim, those moments were worth more than everything the world had to offer and he appreciated them, knowing he'd always taken them for granted for more than half of their marriage; something he'd promised he'd never do again. Without her knowing, especially when she was asleep, he worked on the ideas she'd given him; a small company with a mentorship programme for mainly youths but inclusive to other age grades and then collaborations with galleries to showcase the paintings he couldn't wait to get started on. He also considered the possibility of opening a foundation. He just didn't know what exactly he wanted the foundation to be for yet.

The week passed perfectly and once they checked on the house when it was fully furnished, Ibrahim got flooded with so many images he wanted to turn into memories with Ayra and with the family they'd have; something he wanted to talk about with her when their wedding anniversary came along.

They – he and Ayra – decided they'd start moving on Saturday morning and that they'd tell their parents on Sunday. However, the last thing Ibrahim had expected was getting a phone call that his attention was needed at The Hexad for the final signings which officially cut him loose from the company and cut the other members of the squad he'd loved being a part of away from the two applications he'd ended up buying from them.

It ruined the feeling of happiness the week had brought and Ibrahim was tempted to ask a representative go in his stead but Ayra wasn't having it.

She pushed herself to the tip of her toes and pecked his lips softly. “Go and get it over with. I’m just going to get started with the handymen. I’ll move what I can until you return.”

“I really don’t want to go... Besides, today is a weekend so –”

“Ibrahim.” She held his face in her hands and smiled prettily. “This is the final rope you need to cut. So, go there and sign what you need to and then come home. I don’t mean this place. I mean our new home. I’ll be waiting for you, like I’ve always done. Okay?”

He smiled and nodded, feeling better. “Okay. I’ll try to not stay out too long.”

“Take your time, Ibrahim.”

He raised a brow. “That’s sus.”

“You better stop saying that.”

He decided to rile her up further. “That’s suspish.”

“Ibrahim!”

He laughed and wrapped his arms around her waist just so she wouldn’t be able to leave him standing there. “I’m sorry. You telling me to take my time is making me feel as though you have something planned.”

She smiled sheepishly, her cheeks staining with colour while her dimples shone in their deep glory. “I will neither confirm nor deny so take your time.”

Warmth that was always associated with her bloomed in his chest. “Ayra –”

“You better start heading out, mister, before I change my mind on what I have planned.”

She didn’t need to tell him twice. He stole a long, soft kiss before he left and Ayra only allowed lowered herself to the floor when the front door of the apartment shut behind him, the soft click of the lock in place louder than it should normally be. She brought her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth, letting all the tears fall out as she needed her glands dry so she could get through all she had planned for the day.

She made no sound and the tears flowed like a river while her mind replayed the seven years she’d spent loving him and the year they’d spent with each other; from the moment she admired him from behind the curtain in her parents’ living room down to that very moment when she knew he was convinced sincerely that they were both happier than they’d ever been.

Ayra cried for herself and for him; for the love she'd had for years, for her blind trust, for the love she let grow as she wanted to give it all to him, for the pain that had come with pulling apart the lies they'd tangled her in, for the way he'd been forced to see that he wasn't valued by the people he held dear, for the life he'd lived and the choices he'd made, and for the man he was becoming. A lovely soul she would have been so happy with had things been different. A lovely soul she was going to hurt just as he'd hurt her too.

Ayra cried until her shoulders shook and there were no more tears to flow down her cheeks. She stayed on the ground, rocking herself back and forth until little by little, every part of her numbed to an extent, muting everything she'd felt. The memories in her head stopped playing and her rocking came to a slow stop.

She stayed in that position for a minute longer before she got off the ground, dusted her sweatpants, and proceeded to the guest bathroom. She ensured the water running from the tap was cold before she washed her face and got her act together. Her reflection felt as though she was staring at a stranger and she forced herself to not dwell on it. She left the bathroom and shut the door, knowing she was never going to open it again.

With half an hour left to spare before the handymen were to arrive, she went to the kitchen and pulled out a chair by the dining table on which her laptop sat. She brought the device to life, connected it to the Wi-Fi, and opened the tab she'd closed the previous night. A moment later, Ayneese's application page stared back at her.

She took in a breath and blew it out. She repeated the process, said Bismillah, and got started on the application, clicking "Confidential Secretary to Ayneese's President" as her desired position.

At The Hexad, Ibrahim parked in what had always been his designated parking lot and killed the engine. Breathing in and out, he prayed for strength before he opened the car door and stepped out, hoping that everything went fine.

On the outside, The Hexad looked the same; an elegant glass structure with enough floors that housed every department and unit that kept the company running for years. The interior though, Ibrahim noticed, was now a near shadow of its usual self.

The company was bustling, that was not different, but rather than people moving around with excitement, they moved around hurriedly, as though they had a timeframe to beat just so they could survive the next hour. Ibrahim knew that pulling out his shares and buying out two of the most popular applications had done a lot to the company's stability but it was one thing to hear about what was happening and another to see it play out. However, despite the stab of guilt he felt, he knew that if he had to go back in time, he'd still pull out his shares and buy out the other members of the squad. He was happier without them anyway.

He crossed the lobby with quick, graceful strides and smiled politely – but tightly – at those who said hi and said it was nice to see him. The elevator ride up was long and he flexed his fingers within the pockets of his coat. The executive floor which was usually quiet was a flurry of activities and Ibrahim focused on breathing to attempt to ease out the tightening of his chest as he made his way to Bella's office where he'd been told they'd be waiting for him.

He realised then that he had no idea whether or not Bella still stayed at The Oasis. He had not seen her around, not like he was looking, and he had not bothered to ask. After all, the apartment was now solely in her name and like he'd told her the day he cleared out his things, she could do with it what she saw fit.

He knocked once and pushed the door open before stepping in. All eyes snapped to him and he stayed calm as he pushed the door shut before turning to properly take in every person in the room. His former friends and partners looked as though they'd aged since the last time he saw them. They all had dark circles and the men had day old stubbles they were yet to shave. All of them had messy hairs and stress was etched quite clearly on their faces.

Apart from the five of them, their legal representatives – one from his side and one from theirs – were present, both men looking smart in well-tailored suits. Ibrahim put one leg in front of other and walked to the table they were all seated around. He pulled out the empty by his legal representative and sat. A moment barely passed before Anneth scoffed, her tone bitter when she spoke.

“You must be having the time of your life, Ibrahim. You’re literally *glowing*.”

Ibrahim crossed his legs at the ankles, nodding slowly. “Compared to the five of you, I can say I am. I don’t have to worry about much and I’m taking one day at a time so...”

Jalal’s tone was like ice. “Ibrahim Fahad.”

Ibrahim smiled with ease. “I would say it’s good to see you too, Jalal, but I’d be lying so let’s save ourselves the stress.” He turned to the legal representatives. “Let’s get started, please. Today’s a really busy and important day for me and I’d like to be done with this as soon as possible.”

Tobi’s laugh was dry. “You’re a selfish bastard.”

Ibrahim ignored him and it made Tobi angrier. He slammed a fist on the table. “You’re the reason we’re this wound up, you asshole, and you think you have the right to just waltz in here and demand that we wrap up things because you have a busy and important day? Do we look like we don’t also have things we should be doing, Ibrahim?”

Ibrahim took the papers his legal representative handed and then reached into his pocket to pull out a pen. He spared Tobi a glance. “I’m not the reason anyone’s wound up, Tobi.” He turned back to the papers and glanced through the first page, ensuring everything was stated clearly. He wasn’t stupid enough to blindly trust them again. “Besides, this would have happened if you’d been able to push me out. I just made things a bit faster for you all and removed myself from the mess. You can’t blame me for anything.”

Nathaniel moved to rise to his feet. “Why you little —”

Their legal adviser cut in then. “Gentlemen and ladies, please. You promised to be civil so we could get this over with once and for all.”

Anneth told him to go kill himself while Nathaniel sat back down, his jaw set with how hardly his teeth ground against each other. Tobi and Jalal had looks that could kill while Bella sat quietly, not once looking away from Ibrahim. She watched him flip the page over before she said “Ayra must be back home.”

Ibrahim stopped, halfway done with the page’s contents. Telling himself it was better to keep his mouth shut, Ibrahim continued reading. On her laps, Bella’s hands became loose fists. “Ibrahim, I’m talking to you.”

“I have nothing to say to you. Whether Ayra’s back home or not is none of your business.”

Nathaniel scoffed and stood. “You really think you’re on to something, huh? You’re ditching us for that lowlife, even after everything we’ve done for you. After everything we’ve done with you. And you still think you get to be selfish. You’re the most ungrateful person I’ve ever met and you should know that I’m going to spend as much time as I can hoping things turn out badly for you.”

Ibrahim flipped to the next page. “Worry about keeping the company afloat first. You can wish whatever you want for me after that.”

Anneth was starting to see red. Her nails dug into her palms as she said “Go ahead and act all high and mighty, Ibrahim. You have no idea that this is just a phase. We have each other to rely on and you have no one except your God forsaken family and that so called wife who’ll never be able to offer you anything more than her naivety, her so called love, and her despicable skinny body. The tides are going to change and –”

The cap of Ibrahim’s pen snapped under the force of him pressing against it and silence immediately descended. The legal representatives rubbed their temples, holding back exhausted sighs. Ibrahim raised his head, eyes ablaze with undiluted fury.

“I can listen to whatever you want to say about me, Anneth, and I can allow you pick at me for as long as you want just because you only feel better by stooping lower and lower.”

A vein ticked in Nathaniel’s jaw. “How dare –”

Ibrahim ignored him. “But what I’m no longer going to tolerate is one bad word about Ayra. In the time I didn’t know better, I let you all run your mouths and I even joined you but that time has passed now and I respect her, more than I’m ever going to respect you five. So, from this very moment, watch how you speak about my wife because I won’t hesitate to press charges for defamation and I will make a mountain out of what you consider a mow hill. Just one more word, Anneth. I *dare* you.”

The silence was heavy and it thickened with each second that passed. Ibrahim waited for Anneth to say something. She never did but her eyes spoke volumes and he ignored every silent message she was passing across. He turned back to the papers, half-heartedly ensuring everything was in place before signing on the very last page; cutting every last rope that tied them together.

There was no sadness, no guilt, and no major happiness. There was only a bit of relief and a little pain that over a decade’s worth of knowing each other was going down the drain. He stared at his signature on the page

before he closed the papers and handed it back to the legal representative. He used the damaged cap to cover the pen tip and then Ibrahim pushed his chair back, rising to his feet.

He put the pen back in his pocket and then turned to the people he would no longer sit with, laugh with, travel with, eat with, make memories with, and hold dear to his heart. He opened his mouth to say one last goodbye but decided against it. Clamping his mouth shut, he smiled tightly, nodded at the legal representatives and then turned to leave.

He was at the elevator when familiar hurried footsteps reached his ears. A moment later, a slender hand closed against his wrist, forced him to stop and turn around. He came face to face with his former lover and the tears in her eyes did not move him in any way. Once upon a time he would have done everything possible to ensure she stopped crying but in that moment, he felt nothing.

“Ibrahim.” Her voice was soft and he detected a hint of a plea. “Please don’t do this.”

He stared at her for a moment that stretched before he pulled his wrist free. “Don’t do what exactly, Isabella?”

“You know you’re not going to be happy with her. You’re not going to be happy without us.”

He nearly scoffed at the absurdity. “And I’m going to be happy with you? Is that how much you’ve deluded yourself?”

“Ibrahim —”

“I loved you, Bella. Even though I’ve seen that at some point I was more infatuated with you than anything else, I was ready to put everything on the line for you. If you asked me to jump, I never asked you why. I always asked you how high you wanted me to go and even when I didn’t feel comfortable, I pushed myself to do stuff until I got desensitized and went along with the flow. I did everything I could for you and how did you pay me back? By being controlling, by giving me ultimatums, and by being with Jalal.”

“You cheated too! You cheated on me with Ayra.”

He smiled bitterly. “You knew for a fact I wasn’t going to be celibate in my marriage, Bella, so is that really cheating?”

She couldn’t give him a reply and he did not miss the way her hands flexed, as though she was stopping herself from fisting them. He put his hands in

his pockets, asking “Why did you follow me, Bella? I hope it’s not because you wanted to tell me that I’m better off with you and with the squad.”

“Ibrahim –”

“I don’t know what else you need me to say or do to make it clear but...We’re done. You and I don’t have a relationship anymore. I have nothing to do with the squad anymore. I’ve cleared out my stuff and apart from the mansion I have in Cape Town, I’ve removed myself from everything else. There’s nothing that binds me to you or the others anymore so you should accept that now. We’re never going back to what we used to be.”

A tear slid down her cheek. “Ibrahim, don’t do –”

“Does Jalal know? That you’re having quite a hard time letting me go even after all the ultimatums?”

Her face contoured in pain. “Serkan –”

He laughed, more in disbelief than anything else. “You can’t be in love with me now, Bella. It’s not going to work and it’s definitely not going to bring me back. We’ve all laid our beds and now it’s time we lie on them. You picked Jalal so you should stay with him. After all, I was just the man who humoured you until you warmed up to me. That’s all I am always going to be...Goodbye, Isabella.”

He turned around and pressed the elevator call button. It was four floors down and as the carriage came up, Bella venomously spoke from behind him. “You and Ayra aren’t going to last...You may survive this year but you’re always going to be the liar, Ibrahim. You’re always going to be the man who used her to hide the fact that he was dating and fucking his best friend when she thought he was nothing but faithful to her. You’re always going to be a tainted human to her, Ibrahim.” Her voice frosted. “Just like your father.”

The elevator arrived on the floor while Ibrahim’s chest twisted painfully. The carriage doors opened and he blew out a shaky breath before stepping in. He turned around, towards her, and held the doors open. He offered her a painful smile.

“You’re right. I’m always going to be the liar and I’m always going to be the man who did everything you’ve listed. And you’re right, I am like my father, but you of all people should know that like my father, I’m going to do everything possible to make up for the months I erred. I’m going to make sure that she knows that every moment from now on, I’m always going to choose her before anyone else.”

He swallowed the growing lump in his chest as his chest tore open, bleeding. “And if she leaves for any reason, at least I’ll be content that at some point I learned to love her. And you should know, Bella, that loving you can never compare to loving Ayra sincerely and wholeheartedly. She’s the best thing the world has given to me and I took it for granted until now. I know better than to make that mistake again, no matter what happens, and no matter what it takes.”

Bella’s anguish was as clear as day. Ibrahim told himself to keep smiling. “So stop trying to pick at my injuries, Bella, or at places that you think would hurt. Live your life and I’ll live mine, and should our paths ever cross again, I hope we can walk past each other without you or the others being spiteful.” He released the hold button. “It’s tiring.”

The doors began to close and Bella took a step forward. “Serkan —”

“Goodbye, Isabella Mariá.”

“Ibrahim —”

The doors shut and the carriage began its descent. Ibrahim squatted in a corner, holding his head in his hands and breathing in and out just so her words and his fear would go away.



Their new home was like a beehive and the busyness of it brought a serene smile to Ibrahim’s face and placed genuine happiness in his heart. Smiling and greeting the handymen who moved all they’d brought from The Oasis, he stepped into the building and searched for Ayra.

He found her in the kitchen, instructing the handymen on how she wanted their new dishes placed in the open cabinets on the wall with the blue patterned backsplash. It was way too easy for Ibrahim to hug her from behind and place a soft kiss on her covered shoulder. “Hey, sweetheart.”

She leaned into him, causing his heart to soar. “Hi. You stayed a little long.”

“I thought you said I should take my time.”

“I did. It gave me time to settle into all of this madness and...” She turned around in his embrace, her smile small and pretty. “So far, so good.”

He looked around the space. “I love it.”

“Not any more than I do.”

He nodded, nearly laughing. “Not more than you do.”

“Come on.” She took his hand. “I have something for you.”

He grinned. "I had a feeling you had something planned!"

She laughed, leading him to the patio. "Get away, Ibrahim."

"Never!"

When they stepped out onto the patio, Ibrahim's laughter died and surprise spread to every part of him. Ayra let go of his hand and smiled at him. "I told you that you're good at painting and I want you to paint as much as you can with the beautiful views in front of you."

Blank, brand new canvasses sat perched on brand new easels, the beach in the distance a beautiful backdrop. Ibrahim took small steps forward, quite in disbelief. He traced the edge of the biggest canvas, slowly wrapping his head around the fact that she'd gotten all of it for him, simply because she wanted him to paint as much as he could and not because of anything else.

"I reached out to a gallery in Nohea to confirm the sizes." She told him. "And they were also the ones who helped me place the order. They arrived yesterday and I was glad you left this morning. It gave the movers time to help me set it up before you arrived. Take it as an early birthday gift from me."

His laugh was watery due to the tears in his eyes. His hand fell back to his side and he faced her, his chest expanding. "Ayra...God. Thank you."

Her smile was radiant. "You're welcome." She walked away before he could make a move to hug her. "Come on, Engineer Fahad. We came with only your things today and I'm determined to get everything of yours arranged before we get my stuff tomorrow In Shaa Allah."

When the words made sense in his head, he followed her with furrowed brows. "Ayra, what on earth are you talking about?"

In reply, she simply clapped her hands together once. "Chop, chop, Ibrahim. There's no time to dilly dally."

Amused, he nodded and shed his coat before rolling up his sleeves to his elbows, ready to do whatever she asked for. "Yes ma'am."

She shot him a deep dimpled smile and it was natural for Ibrahim to smile back. They worked hard with the handymen and ensured they cleared as much as they could. They set up his computers in the only room downstairs which they'd agreed to turn into a home office/studio until their plans had to change. They arranged every newly purchased cutlery and appliance in the kitchen, filled up every container in the laundry room, hung up his clothes and arranged the folded ones before arranging his shoes. They laid the bed together and Ayra's smile hid everything she left as she stared at

how well the navy blue duvet and pillowcases went with the lavender purple sheets.

They arranged his cosmetics on the vanity and arranged his toiletries in the master bathroom before they went out to move in the easels and canvasses as the weather had gotten cooler, the breeze a notch stronger. By the time Maghrib rolled around and the handymen left for the day, most had been done and there were no more boxes overflowing with stuff.

Ibrahim, tired but satisfied with how much progress they'd made, faced his wife. "What now?"

"Maghrib, a walk, Isha, and then dinner. I'm not cooking."

He chuckled. "I wasn't going to ask you to."

"Good."

He pulled her close and pecked her lips. "Good."

They made wudhoo in the house and then walked to the masjid in the area. Masjid An-Nur, just like its name, was bright and beautiful and Ayra loved it so much. The prayer brought her a sense of peace and calmed her heavy heart to an extent. When they finished, she and Ibrahim walked down the beach, their hands swinging back and forth between them. It was then she asked how the meeting with the squad had gone.

He told her it went well and then told her bits of his conversation with Bella by the elevator; leaving out so much and only saying the things he wanted her to hear. He told her he was glad he was officially done with them and that he knew he was going to thrive without them. He was going to better than he was before, he promised, and Ayra had no doubt that he meant it.

They prayed Isha at the masjid and on the way back to their home, Ibrahim placed an order for their dinner from a nearby restaurant. It wasn't long before their delivery arrived and they – Ibrahim and Ayra – sat in the kitchen, on both sides of the island and helped themselves with all they'd gotten.

Although she knew she would not be able to eat anything, Ayra unwrapped her disposable fork before she opened the takeout pack that held her peppered boneless chicken wings. Across from her, Ibrahim was unwrapping his pack of chicken quesadillas. She let a minute pass, contemplating whether or not she wanted them to eat first or if she wanted them to get it all over with. Another minute went by and she lowered her fork, just as Ibrahim set the maxi sized plate of rice between them.

Seeing that she wasn't eating, he raised his head. His frown was small, his concern clear. "You okay?"

Ayra moved her hands to her laps, trying to understand why or how she still felt the tell-tale signs of tears when she'd cried them all out that morning. She nailed a neutral expression to her face and cracked a small smile. "Today was a day."

His expression relaxed and he smiled. He didn't touch his cutlery. He simply leaned forward, folding his forearms on the cool top of the island. "It was. These past weeks have been a lot."

Ayra committed the image to memory; a sincere Ibrahim staring at her with that beautiful smile of his in the kitchen of what would have been their forever home had things not gone the way they did. She kept the small smile on her face. "I travelled, you left The Hexad, and cut the squad off. We got a new home and here we are..."

His expression was the softest she'd ever seen on him. "Here we are...I wouldn't trade it all though. Sure, the past weeks have been a roller-coaster and I'm sure you can attest to that but it's brought us here to this very moment so I wouldn't change it for anything as long as I get to accomplish all of this with you and sit with you like this without having to worry about anyone or anything."

A knife buried itself in Ayra's chest and twisted. It took her everything to keep smiling. "That's sweet, Ibrahim."

"It's the truth." He smiled a little wider and then looked around. "But you're right. Today was a day and we did a lot." He turned back to her, the kitchen's lighting giving him a soft halo. "I still don't know why you had them bring only my stuff but I know by this time tomorrow In Shaa Allah, this home is going to be complete with all your stuff beside and between mine." His grin was bright and so were his eyes. "I can't wait."

The knife in Ayra's chest twisted further and she swallowed painfully, telling herself there went nothing. On her laps, her hands were tightly clasped together. She pushed back the tears, refusing to break down until it was all done and said. "Ibrahim."

He propped a hand up and rested his chin on his palm, not breaking their eye contact. "Hmm?"

Ayra held her hands tighter together, her chest bleeding all over again. "My things are going home tomorrow In Shaa Allah."

He nodded, still smiling. "They are. They're coming home, here."

The knife kept twisting. She shook her head. “No. My things are going home, to Plum Boulevard. Only a few things are coming here and they’re essentials I’ll need for a little while. Everything else is either going to Plum Boulevard or they’re going to the organisations we singled out for our donations.”

Ibrahim’s smile was gone and he could swear the hands of the clock stopped, time suspended. Slowly, nearly excruciatingly, he straightened and his propped up hand lowered back to the top of the island. His heart was at the pit of his stomach and his face was losing colour.

“Ayra...” He barely heard himself. “Ayra, what are you talking about? This is home. Why do you need to send your things to Plum Boulevard when we’re supposed to live together here?”

Ayra forced back the tears with all she had, wondering how people sat down so easily to tell their other halves that they were leaving and that they were not coming back. She had to do it and she had known it would hurt but nothing had braced her for how much it did.

“I’m not going to live here with you, Ibrahim.” She said, her voice cold while she screamed within. “I’m not going to live here with you longer than I have to. This house is yours and that’s why I refused to put down my name as a co-owner. It’s never going to be mine.”

Ibrahim’s chest began to close up and so many emotions held him hostage that he did not even know where to start from. The pain, though, was searing. “Ayra...” He shook his head, fear clawing at him. “Ayra, don’t do what I think it is you’re trying to do. Ayra, don’t do this. I’m *begging* you.”

She nearly succumbed to her tears and her pain but somehow, she kept going. She smiled but it had no warmth. It had no other emotion but resignation to her fate; to what they were to become. “I want a divorce, Ibrahim...*Please*.”

And just like that, the world Ibrahim had started building for the both of them, cracked and crumbled; shattering into too many pieces he’d never be able to put back together no matter how hard he was going to try.

“I want a divorce, Ibrahim...Please.”

Ibrahim couldn't breathe. Not when the pain was cutting him into way too pieces. Not when every part of him screamed yet nothing came out of his mouth. Not when Ayra sat on the other side of the island, staring at him with a smile that killed him inside while her eyes reflected everything she was trying to hide.

His voice was raw when he finally found it. “Ayra...Ayra, please. Ayra, I'm begging you, please don't do this.”

She stopped smiling and it killed him even more than her smile did. Her eyes glassed over with tears that she held back and Ibrahim had never wanted so badly for the ground to swallow him up or for it all to be a nightmare he'd wake up from.

Ayra spoke with the strength she knew she didn't have. “I'm not changing my mind, Ibrahim.” Not even with how she internally tore apart over and over with how hurt he was and how hurt she'd been for months. Not when a part of her that she didn't know existed begged her to stay; begged her to forgive him. “I've had a lot of time to think about it so please do not think I just came up with it because I don't know better. I want a divorce and I'm not going back on that decision.”

“Ayra...” He moved on his body's instructions. The legs of the island chair he occupied scraped against the ground as he pushed it back and stood but he didn't care about the sound. He walked around the island and fell on his knees. “Ayra, please. Ayra, I'm going to do anything you want and I'll give you whatever you want, no matter what it is, but please. Please. I won't survive this, Ayra, please...” His sob wrecked him whole. “Ayra, *please*...”

Ayra looked away, blinking furiously so no tear slipped. There were more knives in her chest and all of them were twisting with all their might, hurting her all at the same time and ensuring she knew what pain actually felt like. Letting out a shaky breath, she sniffle and turned back to him. His tears were arrows and they hit their every mark. His pleas were deadlier weapons that ensured they worked perfectly well.

“There's only one thing I want, Ibrahim, and you really can't give it to me no matter how hard you're going to try.”

“Let me just hear what it is, Ayra, please.”

Salt rubbed on her wounds and it stung, in every part of her. “Take me back to where I was before I met you, Ibrahim, and then leave.”

Ibrahim died a thousand times in that very moment. “Ayra...” He couldn’t do that. He knew that all too well. “Ayra, please...”

“On that day in August, I had plans to surprise you with lunch or dinner.” Recalling everything that happened that day had never hurt so much. “I was over the moon, Ibrahim, and all I wanted was to have that one meal with you and tell you just how much I loved you and how much I was grateful to have you. You came home early and I hid behind the wall that separates the foyer from the living room, waiting to jump on you once you walked in and then laugh in your ear. But that never happened and do you know why?”

A tear slipped and slid down her left cheek. “Because you were so into Bella and making things right between the both of you with sex and everything else that you had no idea I was right on the other side, listening to every single thing and doing my best to not make a single sound.”

If her asking for a divorce and then asking that he took her back to where she was before he came into his life had been painful, finding out she’d been right inside the apartment that day in August was a death by beheading sentence for Ibrahim. Shame, regret, pain...everything rolled into one and he had never been sorrier in his entire life.

“You have no idea how it felt listening to the both of you. You have no idea how it felt to not recognise the both of you; people I’d loved and looked up to you for most of my life. You’d called me Sevigilim before and I had no idea it was by accident and that it wasn’t meant for me until that afternoon. And then to find out that the trip to Santorini was never meant for the both of us? That killed me, Ibrahim. Everything killed me!”

Ibrahim’s entire being was bleeding. “Ayra, please...”

“Then you left and as if that wasn’t enough, the camera I had put in the foyer to capture your reaction had captured everything and even if I wanted to delude myself that all of it wasn’t real, the footage was there and I couldn’t turn a blind eye to it, no matter how much I wanted to do so. That was how badly I wanted it all to be a dream, Ibrahim. The world didn’t even give me a break because from that moment, I started to catch up on all the lies and each time I thought it wouldn’t get worse, you all proved me wrong. You have no idea what all of that did to me. You have no idea, Ibrahim.”

His head could only drop while he fell apart over and over again.

“It was a whole web, Ibrahim, and I was right in the middle of it, trying to find my footing on my own while you went with Bella and the others to

Costa Casa and lied to me that there was a business issue to sort out; the same way you'd always been lying. The same way all of you had been lying!"

His flinch was small but she didn't miss it and she hated it so much that it hurt her. She hated it more than she was supposed to.

"While you were living your best life and doing God knows what, I was right there in what I always called home, picking out one line from the other and trying to understand what I was to do with my life while finding myself. I had tangled myself with you to the extent that once I pulled you out of the picture, I had no idea who I was or what I was supposed to do. That was my life in the time you went away and it drove me insane to the extent that I tore apart our interior because while I couldn't erase Bella from it, I could ruin it for us both, just like you'd ruined the sanctuary of the place I loved from the first moment I walked in."

Ibrahim's frame shook with his sobs and his apology came from every part of him. "I'm so sorry, Ayra."

"Do you know what hurt most when you came back? It was the fact that all along, I'd loved you with every bit of me yet you'd only seen someone else and all I had to do was act a little different for you to notice me and see me clearly. All I had to do was stop being the woman you knew, at least to an extent, for you to see me clearly and start paying attention to know me well. That was all I had to do for you to decide you wanted to spend more time with me, not because you had to, but because you wanted to. That hurt a lot, Ibrahim, and you have no idea how much it did. I loved you since I was thirteen and you only began seeing me for who I was as from the last week of August. It always killed me, Ibrahim. You always killed me."

Ibrahim wanted to carve out his heart just so the pain would stop but he knew he'd never be able to. The pain was a part of his karma and he couldn't run away from it, especially when he knew it would only get worse.

"Even when your feelings shifted, you still tried to hold on to both sides. You still tried to keep the squad and be loyal to Bella while keeping me and getting to sincerely know me better. You tried to do that, Ibrahim, until it got too hard and you just wanted to break free which eventually led to everything that played out in the past weeks; from that disaster of a dinner with Serkan and Aliana down to your family's fathering and up until this very moment." She forced out a shaky breath. "It's been a struggle for you until now and it's been my whole life being turned upside down for me."

"I'm sorry." He cried, painfully and sincerely. "I'm so sorry, Ayra."

“That trip that Ibtu and I went for? It was to unearth everything I didn’t know before and you should have seen how everyone spoke about you, Ibrahim. You should have seen how many people thought you were better off without the squad and that you were better off without Bella, especially when your history with your parents was taken into consideration. And on many of those days, I wondered how beautifully you would have been and how much more I would have loved you had things not happened the way they did but those were just thoughts because our reality was way different and there was nothing I could do to change it.”

Her words were knives that stabbed him repeatedly so every part of him had a hole from which he painfully bled from. The pain was raw and searing and his emotions were a cocktail aimed at drowning him and making him pay for all he’d done.

“And do you know what’s funny? The fact that even after finding out that the only reason you’d gotten to know about me was because Hannah met you in Singapore and told you about me, I couldn’t bring myself to just come to the place we called home and tell you straight up that I wanted to leave and that I wasn’t coming back, not after everything you’d done. I couldn’t bring myself to do that because I’d heard how so many people saw you and I’d seen how beautiful you were going to turn out to be and whether it’s the love I had for you or whatever it was, it made me want to help you to find your footing and get settled to an extent in your new life before I packed my bags and left because I know I’ll never be able to stay with you. Not after everything. I can never do it.”

He moved forward on his knees until he was right in front of her. He hugged her legs and rested his head against them, his sobs giving way for heart-wrenching and hollow – yet soft – wails.

“Ayra...” He hugged her legs tighter. “Ayra, please. If you want me to apologise every single hour of the day, I will. If you want us to leave Aomi just so you can be convinced I have nothing more to do with Bella or the squad, we will.” His voice broke and he cried harder. “I’ll do *everything* and *anything* you want no matter what it is, Ayra, just please...Please don’t do this. Please don’t leave me. Please. I’m begging you with all I have, Ayra. Please.”

She closed her eyes and the tears fell. She then bent at the waist so she could kiss his hair, not caring about the tears that fell there. She cried and he did too, pain, heartache, and regret a bubble wrapped around them both.

“Ayra, please...”

She rested her chin on his head, sniffing. She then opened her eyes and stared at nothing in particular. Her voice soft yet filled with every emotion she felt, Ayra told him the truth.

“I can’t stay, Ibrahim. It’s not because I don’t want to, because there’s a part of me that wants nothing more than to do that. However, you need to understand that the sanctuary of our relationship has been tainted, soiled, and broken and I *can’t* look past it no matter how hard I’ll try. I’ll never be able to.”

His entire body shook with his cries while her tears flowed silently, streaming down both her cheeks and dampening his hair. “I have no doubt you’ll do everything and anything, Ibrahim, no matter how or what it is but the thing is that I’ll always wonder if you’ve done this before, long before I came into your life.”

He shook his head. “Ayra, no...”

“I’ll wonder if Bella enjoyed this too and each time you look at me, especially during and after intimacy, I’ll wonder if you did this with Bella too and then try to count just how many times she’d been blessed with the beautiful view of your sleeping face while she laid by your side. I’ll do all of that, Ibrahim, and each time you paint, I’ll be reminded that you painted her first and that the entire time we were married, until you brought yourself to take the painting out, her face took up a space in your room and in the apartment you two owned until you fell out with the squad. You painted the both of you and hung it in so many places while we didn’t even have our wedding portraits on any wall until recently.”

Ibrahim had nothing left to hold on to but he kept trying, to reach out to something – anything – no matter what it was. “Ayra, please.”

“That’s not how I want to live the rest of my life, Ibrahim. I don’t want to kill myself little by little until I’m an empty shell and I don’t want to kill you too because we’ll both be miserable. You’ll do everything to make it right and I’ll see it all, no matter the lengths you’d go to, as too little; as though it’ll never be enough. I can’t do that, Ibrahim, so please...Please let’s end this, no matter how painful it’s going to be. This is me begging you, Ibrahim. Please.”

He wanted to hit his chest so badly, over and over again, but he didn’t. He kept his arms around her legs and shook his head yet again, refusing to let go. “Ayra please...” His confession which he had been saving until he was worthy enough to say it to her after ensuring he showed it through his every action slipped past his lips in a whisper she nearly missed. “I love you.”

That was Ayra's final nail in the coffin and if she'd been repeatedly killed before, she was resurrected then only to be murdered again. She shut her eyes tightly; knowing what she was going to say next was a half lie and a half truth that would hurt them in different degrees and in different ways but with pain all the same. It was the only way.

"I don't love you, Ibrahim." The knives in her chest moved and sliced her to pieces. She felt him still and although it was the worst thing she'd ever done, she delivered the next words. "Not anymore."

A moment of eerie silence passed before Ibrahim wailed and there was no doubt the sound – laced with raw pain, devastation, and sorrow – was going to haunt her for a very long time.

She pushed back the tears and then made one final request. "I need you to tell me the truth, Ibrahim. Please...All of it."

Knowing there was no going back from any of it, Ibrahim told her everything; from the earliest childhood memory he had down to that very moment where the both of them fell apart.

Two hours later, two doors in houses in two different parts of Aomi went open. In Monwict, Fareeda's smile disappeared when her son raised her head, beyond broken with a face that was still devoid of colour and eyes that had cried until his tear ducts dried. Her chest squeezed and she let go of the door handle just so she could step forward, reaching out to cup his face. "I-Ibrahim? Ibrahim, what happened to you?"

Not knowing how he still had tears left, Ibrahim began to cry.

In Plum Boulevard, Ibtiyah's heart broke at the sight of her best friend. Ayra managed a smile, her every façade broken and tossed aside. Her hands were together, in front of her, and her eyes shone with fresh tears. "Hello, Ibtty. Sorry I came here so late. I –"

Ibtiyah hugged her and made sure her embrace was tight. "Let it all out, Ayra. It's alright."

Ayra did not need to be told twice. In her parents' home, which she was to return to in a little while, Salama lay in her husband's embrace, allowing him repeatedly pat her back while she prayed that their daughter was alright.

The car came to a stop in front of the Abdulaziz compound at Haven Estate and Ibrahim was certain he did not want to leave the vehicle, not when he knew he was not ready to face his in-laws; not when he'd broken their daughter after promising to love, cherish, and honour her for the rest of their lives.

A warm hand closed around his and slowly, as though his body was still booting like a freshly powered machine, he turned to look at his father who sat beside him. Salim offered a small smile, his squeeze gentle. "You can do this, okay? We'll be right there with you every step of the way."

In the front passenger seat, Fareeda had turned to look at both men that she loved. She nodded, her smile as small as Salim's. "We'll be there, Ibrahim. We promise."

The tears slightly blurred Ibrahim's vision and he had to blow out a breath, following it with another just so he didn't break down there and then for the umpteenth time in less than twenty-four hours. He took two minutes to gather courage before he nodded at his parents; a small nod but a nod all the same. Salim squeezed his son's hand once more before he let go.

The car doors went open at the same time and each member of the family of three got down, leaving the driver within. They all wore black; Fareeda in a black abaya and its complimenting veil while father and son wore matching trousers, turtlenecks, and the same coat with boots on their feet.

They helped themselves into the compound and their footsteps seemed louder as they ascended the front stairs. Before Salim could ring the doorbell, the door went open and Salama – with eyes that showed just how much she'd cried and skin that was a near shade paler – managed to give them a small smile.

Ibrahim felt a fresh stab of pain and it twisted. He wondered what he would say or how he'd address her because he no longer felt worthy of calling her Mum, not when he'd tainted his image and the trust they had in him. The silence stretched until Fareeda broke it. Her smile was smaller than Salama's and a sheen of tears made her eyes glassy. "Assalam Alaykum, Salama."

Salama swallowed and tears began to well up in her eyes which only further made Ibrahim feel worse. "Waalaykum Salam, Fareeda." She stepped aside. "Please come in. Everyone is waiting for you in the living room."

Fareeda stepped in first and Salim followed. Ibrahim, in shame, lowered his head and stepped over the threshold. The memories hit then; the first time he'd stepped into the house back in 2013, his and Ayra's engagement party,

the way he'd rushed back when his family members nearly blew up the plans he and the squad had which caused him to act fast, the times he came over to drop her – Ayra – off and to also discuss the wedding plans with Salama and her team, the wedding itself, and every time he'd visited since then.

The house was unusually quiet and it weighed down on him. His mind went back to his and Ayra's wedding and how beautiful it'd been although he'd paid attention to the details just so his acting wouldn't slip, knowing that when it was over he was to go spend the night with Bella and the others while Ayra stayed at home. Back then, the thrill had been exhilarating and the lies had been perfect. In that moment, as they stepped into the living room, Ibrahim regretted it all and wished – with everything he had – that he could turn back time to make every wrong right.

Muhsin, Al-Amin, and Falilat sat in the living room, the atmosphere sombre and the space quiet. Salama stepped in after the Fahads, her small smile still on. "Please have a seat. There's tea if you'd like."

Salim and Fareeda offered salams which were responded to before they – clearly humbly – sat on a loveseat, knowing better than to be overly comfortable with the situation at hand. Ibrahim stayed standing and Salama's smile disappeared as she sat beside her husband, her hand naturally finding his. "Ibrahim? Why don't you –"

Ibrahim went on his knees, the impact of his knees hitting the ground producing a soft thud that was louder than normal with the silence of the room. He brought his hands together just as his tears broke free, a sob slipping past his lips. "I am so sorry...I'm very, very sorry."

Falilat looked away, blinking back tears while Al-Amin squeezed her hand gently. Salim and Fareeda lowered their heads, keeping their tears at bay. Muhsin and Salama just stared at Ibrahim, their pain as clear as day. Remaining on his knees, Ibrahim cried harder. "I'm sorry, Mum and Dad. I'm really, really, really sorry."

The minute that passed was silent and long. With a sigh, Muhsin let go of his wife's hand and pushed himself off the sofa. Kneeling in front of the male he'd welcomed into his family with open arms, Muhsin hugged Ibrahim and let a moment go by before he began to pat Ibrahim's back.

"It's okay, Ibrahim." He said softly. "In Shaa Allah it's going to be okay."

That was Fareeda's breaking point and she buried her face in her hands as she began to cry. In Muhsin's embrace, Ibrahim simply cried harder, drilling it into his head that he did not deserve the Abdulazizs. Muhsin held him

while Salama did well in holding most of her tears at bay, wiping each one that slipped free. Salim rubbed his wife's back while Al-Amin consoled Falilat who cried quietly.

A long while later, when tears had been shed and tea had been served, Muhsin exhaled. He was back to sitting beside Salama while Ibrahim occupied a single seater, his handkerchief tightly clutched in his hands.

"Last month," Muhsin began. "When Ayra let Salama and Falilat know she was travelling and why she was travelling, I wasn't home. Coming home to the news and to meet my wife in too much shock that she couldn't do much except cry is not something I'll wish on anyone, not even my worst enemy. As a family, both mine and the Adeolas, we welcomed you, Ibrahim, because our families had known each other for years. Also, Ayra had loved you for so long and it made us happy to know that at the end of the day, her one sided love wasn't going to end up hurting her. At that time, we were convinced that all was going to be okay. That's how genuinely happy we were for the both of you, Ibrahim. That's how much we never thought this would happen, especially with how sincere your intentions seemed."

Ibrahim held the handkerchief tighter, keeping his head lowered. Muhsin continued. "It broke me, Ibrahim, and I pray such never happens again because there's only so much my heart can take, especially when it comes to Ayra. All she ever did was love you with everything had and if you were to repay her with anything, it shouldn't have been this. Even if it had been someone else, it should never have been this. You can't chain someone to a commitment for selfish reasons and you can't make promises you know you'll never be to keep unless your feelings shift. You can never do that. You should never do that."

Ibrahim let his tears flow, pain his trustworthy companion. Muhsin had more to say.

"No matter who had come up with the idea back in 2019, you should have put your foot down against it. A lifetime commitment is a big deal whether it is for genuine or insincere reasons and it's not something that you and your friends should have taken lightly. At the end of the day, see how it all played out. In trying to outsmart everyone, you got tangled up in your lies and you lost yourself until you decided to take back charge of things. The friends you'd married Ayra for are no longer with you, the relationship you married Ayra to hide has broken, and now you and Ayra are on your way to separating. Do you see the consequences of your actions now, Ibrahim? Do you see why such things shouldn't be done?"

Ibrahim saw it all too well and all he wanted was one more chance to make everything right but that was a farfetched dream and even he knew it. Where he sat, Salim was shaken by Muhsin's words and he recalled how time and time again, he'd nearly lost Fareeda. Both of them – he and Fareeda – had been lucky to make it out of their sad history but Ibrahim wasn't lucky and it repeatedly punched Salim squarely in the gut.

“If this meeting had happened before Ayra travelled with Ibty, I can assure you that we wouldn't have been so calm. But Ayra –” Muhsin's voice broke and he held onto his wife's hand for dear life. “Ayra, may Allah bless her soul, asked us to be patient and to wait until she'd uncovered everything. Until she found out all that had happened and why she'd come into the picture.”

He paused to breathe. “When she was away, your issue with the squad and with the company happened and I told Salama, Al-Amin, and Falilat that maybe this was Allah already dealing with you and carving out another path for you. When Ayra returned, she wasn't mad or even angry about all you'd done. She was broken, that much was inevitable, but the same woman you'd hurt only wanted to help you get back on your feet because she'd heard and she'd seen that without the squad and without the whispers of your past and the rocky relationship with your parents, you were the sweetest soul. This is the woman you hurt, Ibrahim, still wanting the best for you even when it killed her inside. This is the person who genuinely loved you.”

Ibrahim had thought he'd reached his threshold limit for pain but every word Muhsin uttered and the gravity of the truth the words held proved him wrong.

Muhsin sniffled, the tears in his eyes shimmering. “When the person who was hurt has such a mindset, what then can we do? We can't scream at you, we can't even physically try to harm you, and we can't even just cut you off. We can't make a scene and ruin your reputation. We can't do any of that, no matter how tempting some options were, because that would have been us acting out of character and it would only have hurt Ayra more.”

Ibrahim reminded himself again that he did not deserve them, at all.

“If all of us could turn back the hands of time to ensure this didn't end up happening, we would. However, all has been said and done and we can only move on to this best of our abilities. So on that note,” Muhsin put his hands together, tempted to go on his knees. A tear slipped and slid down his cheek. “This is me begging you as a father, Ibrahim, and as a man who'd

do anything for his family. I know, with the man you're turning out to be, this would hurt you but...Please let my daughter go."

Ibrahim cried harder and every other person in the room did one thing or the other to curtail their tears and sobs. Muhsin sniffled again, his hands still held together in front of him. "Please let Ayra go. I have no doubt that you're ready to do everything possible to make it up to her but please...Please don't make this any harder for the both of you, especially her. Please, Ibrahim. I am begging you. Please let my daughter go."

Unable to stop his broken pieces from shattering further, Ibrahim buried his face in his hands and just like he'd done the previous night with Ayra, he wailed.



Ayra knew who it was when a soft knock interrupted the peace and quiet of her room. She didn't think anything more could hurt her but Ibrahim's voice – frail and unsure – did.

"Ayra?"

She let a moment pass before she pushed herself to a sitting position, causing Ibtihaj's hand to fall from her hair. Ibtihaj reached for her lycra cap and covered her cornrows with it as she said "If you want me to tell him you don't want to see him, I will, and if you need me to knock sense into him, just say the word. Let me know what you want, Ayra, and I'll do it. I promise. I owe him a slap anyway."

Ayra shook her head, cracking a small smile. "Please just help me open the door. I can't avoid him forever."

"And I'm guessing you'd want to talk with him alone."

"Yes please. Sorry, Ibtty."

Ibtihaj got off the bed, her smile warm and sincere. "Come off it jor. I'll still slap him sha. I cannot have been angry all this time for nothing."

Ayra's chest twisted as she said "Don't let it hurt too much, please."

Ibtihaj's smile turned sad and she simply nodded before she walked over to the door and pulled it open. Ibrahim raised his head and for a brief moment, Ibtihaj felt genuinely sorry for him; for all he'd gone through and for all he was going to go through. Pushing down the emotion, she masked her expression and raised a brow. "Ibrahim Fahad."

Ibrahim couldn't bring himself to even fake a smile. The apology rolled off his tongue without any hesitation. "I'm really sorry, Ibtty."

“I know, I know.” Ibtihaj said. She sighed. “I know you are but I’ll still do and say what I wanted to do and say as at the time I found out. I hope you can understand.”

Lowering his head, Ibrahim nodded once. “I can.”

“Good.”

A moment later, her hand harshly made contact with his cheek and although she’d softened it slightly, the slap stung Ibrahim and broke him even more. He swallowed, knowing he deserved it.

“You were a very wicked person, Ibrahim Fahad.” She told him. “And if this encounter happened back when you dropped Ayra off for that sleepover, I would have murdered you in cold blood. However, a lot has happened between now and then, and even though I want to beat you, I can’t bring myself to do every single thing I wanted. It’s only for you sha because if I jam those your former friends, *walai* it is in police station I will end up for the crimes I’ll commit.”

Ibrahim stayed quiet, keeping his blurred vision trained on the ground. Ibtihaj sighed. “You all have done enough and while I don’t really pity you for everything that happened, I’m just glad you got sense. It still vexes me that you fell in love with Ayra when everything had gone wrong and I’m sorry but I don’t feel bad for you that this is ending in tears. The only person I feel bad for is Ayra. I hope you understand that.”

Ibrahim nodded again. “I do...I’m sorry, Ibtj.”

“Abeg it’s okay.” Ibtihaj did not like how her chest squeezed. “It’s okay *éjor*. Don’t apologise again abeg.” She then stepped away from the door. “She’s inside. I’m sure our parents have already pleaded with you to let Ayra go so I won’t repeat all they said. Just, please...Ayra’s been through too much with you and let’s not make things harder for the both of you. You’re better off apart, not together, so please don’t be difficult. Ayra needs to heal from all of this and...And so do you. So please, Ibrahim. Please let my best friend go. It’s God I’m using to beg you.”

He could only nod, a lump in his throat that was thick with emotions. She walked a minute later and he sniffled, inhaled and exhaled thrice, before he pushed the door further open and stepped into Ayra’s room. In the few times he’d stepped into the space, he’d barely paid any attention. However, right in that moment with the painful realisation that they were facing a separation, Ibrahim took in everything; from the pastel shades that went well together to the little things here and there that screamed Ayra!

She was the last thing he focused on and seeing her without the mask she'd been wearing for months was extremely humbling. It was damaging too. Her eyes had lost their colour and she was a shadow of the woman he'd married. He saw it clearly; the hurt, the exhaustion, and the sorrow. Knowing he was the main cause of all of it shattered him to pieces.

Ayra sat on the edge of the bed, her hands on her laps. Her hair was in a single braid and she wore an ombré boubou which Falilat had gifted her the previous year. She tried to smile but did not fully succeed. "Hello, Ibrahim."

Ibrahim sniffled and forced himself to put one leg in front of the other. When he stopped in front of her, he squatted and just like her, he tried to smile but failed. "Hi, Ayra."

A fresh wave of pain hit and she held her hands tighter together. Ibrahim simply stared at her, committing every single detail to memory; her flawless almond brown skin, her doe eyes and how bright they could be, her button nose, her heart shaped lips, the dimples that flickered on both cheeks now that she was not smiling, the collarbones that deserved to be classified as royalty, her slender hands and nails she always kept short, and her feet which would always amaze him as they were way smaller than his, perfect enough for her size.

He stared at her for a moment before he brought his gaze back up to her face. A dull cramp began in his legs so he moved from squatting to kneeling. Unable to help himself, he took her hands in his and stared at them, committing the image to memory too. He was going to paint her for a long time. That much was clear.

Every little memory his brain had stored played in his head then; her every laugh, her every gasp, her genuine interest in every single thing he had to say, her selfless acts which had all been for him, and then her every tear. It played like a movie that he loved and hated and when it finished, it played again. When it finished the second time, he raised his head and his eyes met hers.

He swallowed. "I love you, Ayra."

Her hurt killed him. "Ibrahim –"

"I'm not asking you to say it back, Ayra, and I'm not telling you because I want you to change your mind as that's not going to happen. It's clear now."

Her chest twisted again while he continued. "I'm telling you because I want you to know that although I didn't love you for months, I love you now and I'm sorry it's coming too late. I'm sorry for not seeing you although

you were right in front of me until you changed due to what you discovered. I'm sorry, Ayra. I'm really sorry."

Her tears were impossible to hold back so she let them be. He let his be too.

"I hate it so much that I've hurt you more than I even know and like you said, I'm ready to do everything and anything to make it right but..." The knives in his chest dug deeper and deeper. "But I don't want to hurt you even further. It's going to kill me to let you go, Ayra, but...But it's getting clearer and clearer that I'm going to have to. I can't burn the world for you if all it's going to do is hurt you even more. I've done more than enough, Ayra, and I don't – I can't do more."

Her tears flowed. His did too.

"This hurts a lot, Ayra, and I don't know how I'm going to survive all of this but you're my main priority now and if this is the only way to make things right, then I don't have any other choice. I'm so sorry, Ayra. I'm so, so sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

And just like the previous night, she held him close with her lips in his hair and tears streaming down her cheek while his new scent stuck to her; wood and spice, a combination she would associate with him until she moved on; if she ever moved on.

When Ibrahim's tears subsided, he raised his head to look at her, their faces mere inches apart and it struck him that she was a very beautiful woman. He'd just been too blind for a long time to see it.

"Please give me three days, Ayra."

Her stomach dipped. "Ibrahim..."

"I'm not going to try to change your mind, I promise, and I'm not going to do anything funny. Just please..." He brought his hands up and put them together, pleading. "Just please stay with me for three more days and let me get to say bye. Just three days, Ayra, I'm begging you and then I'll do whatever you want. Just three days, Ayra. Please...Please."

She wanted to say no because she knew that if she gave in and the three days came to an end, it'll leave them with too much heartache and pain. It was going to end in tears and she should have said no but...she couldn't, not when he begged so earnestly and not when the pain in his eyes reflected hers.

"Please, Ayra."

She sniffled and nodded once. “Three days, Ibrahim. Nothing more.”

He nodded, too deep in everything to even feel much relief. Excitement was a non-existent emotion and it terrified him to realise that he may never feel it again. He rested his head on her laps and allowed her kiss his hair. His words were a whisper.

“I love you, Ayra. In Shaa Allah I’m going to love you for as long as I can.”

“I know.” Her reply hurt her too. “I know it all too well.”

And deep inside of her, a part of her screamed at the top of her lungs with tears in her eyes that she loved him too.

Ibrahim took Ayra home that evening and the thrill of the new place had disappeared with the events that had happened and the events that were yet to happen. With only mere hours to their end, Ibrahim was determined to make every moment count.

They watched the sunset together, as quiet as they had been throughout the ride from her parents' house to what would have been theirs, and Ibrahim committed to memory how perfectly they'd always fit with her sitting between his legs and her back flush against his front.

They prayed both Maghrib and Isha in the mosque and they had dinner together at a restaurant, talking about the things that caught their attention just so the silence didn't continue. When they got back to the house, they showered together and when they kissed, their tears stained it, and Ayra let him lead her out of the bathroom to the bed where he proceeded to make love to her, ensuring he got everything right.

When she fell asleep much later, Ibrahim stared at her for the longest time and then he cried until there was no more tear to shed and a headache threatened to split his head in two.

Dawn took its time to arrive and they caught the sunset while sipping tea. Silence had once again descended between them and Ibrahim did all he could to curtail his tears but they still broke free and he occasionally moved his hand away from the mug to wipe them away. In the chair she occupied, Ayra cried too. They ate breakfast, took a long walk on the beach, and then painted the scenery together; stopping at intervals to pray, eat, and cry while thinking the other person couldn't see.

On their second day, Ayra asked to visit The Hexad as she'd never been there before and she wanted to know how it looked like before she added it to the list of places she'd never visit unless it was extremely important. Although it was the last place he wanted to go in his life, especially when he remembered what Bella had said about Ayra leaving him, Ibrahim got dressed and drove her there himself. Thankfully, the squad was out to meet with some board members concerning the future of the company so Ibrahim took Ayra round and showed her every single nook and cranny of the structure he knew like the back of his hand.

In every office that belonged to a member of the squad, she dropped letters that Ibrahim didn't know she'd written and then she let know that she'd sent Serkan's and Aliana's to them in Amsterdam.

"I never planned to write." She told him. "But the words wouldn't leave my head and I didn't want them to keep disturbing me. I don't care what they

do with the letters, honestly. It's just me seeking a closure and this should be good enough."

Ibrahim found the nearest restroom after that and cried. After Zuhr, they had lunch at a pizzeria and then aimlessly drove around Aomi, their hands held together between the seats. They didn't return home until long after Isha had been prayed. They had their bath and then returned to the living room and with his chest still torn wide open, Ibrahim asked Ayra to explain to him the process of *Khula'* where a Muslim woman requested a divorce from her husband.

Ayra explained it to him the same way Yunus and Maya had explained it to her; in the simplest form so everything was clear and there was no confusion. The silence that followed when she finished was heavy and it weighed down on the both of them.

It felt like forever before Ibrahim quietly asked "What if I don't want the *mehr* back?"

Her stomach – and her heart – dipped. "Ibrahim –"

He held her watery gaze with his. "I don't want the *mehr* back, Ayra. It was my gift to you and although I wasn't completely sincere then, I'm not taking it back. I can't take it back, not with everything that has happened between us; both the good and the bad. It'll kill me to do so, so please...Please don't give it back, Ayra. I'm begging you."

It was a long moment before Ayra brought herself to nod, sniffing before she said "Okay, Ibrahim, I won't give it back."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

That night, neither of them slept much but they stayed in each other's embrace, none of them willing to let go unless it was necessary. After Fajr, they made their respective cups of the tea. Their movements were slow as they knew it would be their last morning making tea together.

The sunrise was stunning but they barely saw it with how hard both of them tried not to cry. When the magic of nature passed and the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, Ibrahim mustered the courage to ask what Ayra's next step was going to be.

It took her a minute to give him a reply. Her line of sight did not leave the deep blue ocean in the distance. "I have all my plans written out on a piece of paper but I can't say I've gotten around really looking at them. I've been exhausted for a long time now, Ibrahim, especially with all the acting I've

done so the most pressing need for me now is to rest as much as I can. I can deal with everything else later. I just want to rest now.”

Once again, Ibrahim felt like a monster. “I’m sorry.”

Her smile was small but extremely sad. “I know, Ibrahim...I’m sorry too.”

“You have nothing to apologise for, Ayra, so please never say sorry to me. I’m the one who should be apologising for the rest of my life.”

She turned her head to look at him and he did the same. A minute passed with their gazes locked before they looked away, back towards the sea. She then asked what his plans were and he told her the honest truth.

“I’m going to make myself someone you’ll always be proud of, Ayra, no matter what.”

Her chest – torn and battered – squeezed painfully. She wrapped her fingers tighter around the mug she held, wanting to cry once again. Ibrahim blinked his own tears back, his smile as small and sad as hers had been.

“I’m going to take my time to draw up my plans, using the ideas you gave and then I’m going to ensure I become someone you’ll always be proud of, Ayra. That’s what I’m going to spend the rest of my life doing, I promise.”

A tear – despite how hard she tried to hold it back – slipped and slid down her cheek, glistening when a sun ray hit it. She sniffled. “I have no doubt you’re going to do well, Ibrahim. I have no doubt about it at all.”

Ibrahim – once again – was bleeding. He stared at his tea which had long gone cold. “I have no doubt you’ll do well too. You’ve always been a shining star, Ayra, and I’m so sorry I dimmed your light with everything I did and every lie I told. I’m always going to be sorry.”

Her tears kept coming and they fell into her mug, mixing with her tea. She sniffled again. “I’ll be okay, Ibrahim.” She didn’t believe her words one bit. “No matter how long it takes, I’ll be okay...You’ll be okay too.”

Ibrahim began to cry all over again.

Throughout the day, he held her in his embrace no matter what they did. He told her over and over that he loved her and that he was always going to for as long as Allah spared his life. Then he apologised over and over, telling her he was sorry for every single thing he’d missed and for every single thing he’d said and for every single thing he’d taken for granted. He promised, over and over, that he’d do better every single day and then he blessed her with little kisses, committing every inch of her – for the

millionth time – to memory as the memories were all he would have left after the day ended.

He cried repeatedly and Ayra did too, saying it deep, deep inside that she still loved him too; not as much as she used to but she loved him all the same. Like he wished her well, she did the same for him and she had no doubt that he was going to do well. He was going to be alright too, no matter how long it ended up taking.

After Isha, while others left Masjid An-Nur, Ibrahim walked to the empty female section where Ayra was and knelt in front of her, his movements that of a man resigned to his fate while his heart – and every other part of him – painfully wailed.

He smiled at her, his eyes shining with tears. “Assalam Alaykum, Ayra.”

Ayra smiled back, her eyes just as bright. “Waalaykum Salam, Ibrahim.”

“I hope someday, no matter how much time passes, if our paths cross, we can sit together to have tea and talk about how our lives had gone. We can do that, right?”

Her smile stretched a little. She nodded. “Of course we can. I’d love that.”

“I’ll look forward to that day.”

“In Shaa Allah.”

He committed her every detail – yet again – to memory and then looked away to blow out a breath. Regaining composure and keeping a tight leash on his tears, he exhaled once again and turned back to her, the words “*this is it*” loud in his head.

They smiled at each other and a minute passed before he nodded once. Exhaling shakily, Ayra nodded too. Another minute passed before Ayra requested for her divorce and Ibrahim uttered the words of separation although every syllable punched him squarely in his gut and killed him inside.

He let her go and the rope that held them as one snapped, never to be joined together again.



The divorce of Ayra Leilani Abdulaziz and Ibrahim Fahad was announced to the public two weeks after the actual separation, as requested by both Ibrahim and Ayra. The two weeks had given them time to clear their social media pages (in Ibrahim’s case so he could start on a fresh slate) and

privatise their accounts (in Ayra's case and for Ibrahim's new accounts he didn't want the world following). It gave them time to grieve too.

The news shook the world and so many people had questions although the press statement released by the Fahads stated that the separation had been mutually done and that both Ibrahim and Ayra were on good terms with each other. The family, just as they did when Ibrahim cut the squad off and left The Hexad, asked the public to leave both Ayra and Ibrahim alone so they could deal with everything at their pace without having to deal with the ever prying eye of the media.

It was easier said than done though as media personnel flooded Haven Estate and The Oasis, having no idea Ibrahim no longer lived there. When it got really bad, security teams were deployed to keep the media personnel out and lawsuits were filed which made a lot of the media houses pull back their reporters and camera men and women.

The squad – what was left of it – reached out to Ibrahim and taunted him with their haughty messages. He ignored the messages but it only made them angrier and they intensified their attempts to reach him, telling him that the woman he'd left them for ended up leaving him and that he wasn't going to survive on his own. They told him he'd die a lonely man locked in the confines of his own prison with nothing and no one to mourn him.

When it became obvious they were not going to stop stooping lower and lower, Ibrahim had his legal team hit them with one lawsuit after the other and also with restriction orders. It damaged The Hexad's public image and led to a roll crises that went beyond what the squad could control and so many people – stakeholders, investors, and even members of the public – asked Ibrahim to make a comeback, no matter how small he wanted it to be. They promised to wait for him and to support him once he was ready.

On Friday, December 3rd which was the same day Ayra received an email for her interview at Ayneese, Ibrahim called for a press conference after Jumma'ah. As it was his first public address since the divorce, every person looked forward to it. When the time came, Ayra left her room at her family's home and headed down to the second living room so she could watch the press conference too.

At his parents' mansion from where he was to address the general public, Ibrahim stepped out of the main doors and smiled at the sea of journalists and reporters, the camera flashes momentarily blinding. He was in his signature outfit; loose trousers, a turtleneck that had been tucked into the trousers' waistband, and boots on his feet. He had chosen to forgo his coat. His hair was longer and the curls were more pronounced. His stubble was

as neat as ever and while he seemed the same, there was a beautiful humility that wrapped itself around him like a cloak and pulled people in.

His smile was small and he spoke into the microphone that had been set up while Salim and Fareeda stepped out of the house and stood on either side of him, their smiles small too.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming out here even on short notice.” Ibrahim said, his words coming out calm and collected. He put his hands together behind him. “I’d also like to thank the public for the comeback requests I have received and also for the support I’ve been promised. I appreciate all of it although I feel undeserving on most days. I’m working on it so hopefully, you’ll be hearing from me soon.”

He paused to exhale. A moment passed before he spoke again. “Before that, there’s an initiative I’ll be launching by next week and that is the main reason I’m here today. It’s a foundation to help mostly women but also inclusive to any person who needs it. It’s to cater for those who are not privileged enough to cover one expense or the other. I don’t want to generalise any person in that category a needy person but sometimes there are circumstances that are beyond our control which may cause a restraint or the other so...”

He scanned the sea of reporters present. “I hope this foundation can come to the aid of such person and help ease the burden, no matter how little it’ll be. It’s also for people who have loved but had to leave because they deserve better. We hope to help you find your footing and get you settled on your new path, just like how the woman I love did for me.”

The cameras kept flashing and the reporters typed and scribbled furiously, not willing to miss a single detail. Some of them were teary-eyed and around the country, many of those watching were teary-eyed too. In the second living room at the Abdulaziz home, Ayra’s small smile stretched when Salama put her hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently.

Back at the Fahad mansion, Ibrahim smiled a little wider and stared straight into one of the cameras.

“Out of every initiative I’ll have from this very day, I hope this one gets your full support...Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you The Leilani Foundation, in honour of the woman I was privileged to be married to; a woman I’m going to love all my life, no matter what...”

Epilogue

Tuesday, December 21, 2021.

Aomi, Atlantica.

"...On tech and business, it has been confirmed that The Hexad would be pulling out of Atlantica by December 31st. Speaking in a press briefing in the early hours of this morning, Acting President of the company, Isabella Valentino, stated that the company's move out of the country was for greater good. The Hexad has been in crises since late November following the series of lawsuits filed against the company and the remaining members of the squad by former president and squad member, Ibrahim Fabad."

Ayra parked properly and then killed the car's engine, automatically turning off the radio. She leaned back in the seat and shut her eyes, breathing in and out and repeating her new mantra in her head as recommended by her therapist; that she was beautiful, brave, strong, capable of overcoming every obstacle life threw their way, and worthy enough of everything good.

She was able to repeat the mantra twice before her watch beeped, informing her that it was time to go. She opened her eyes, pulled down the driver seat's mirror and ensured she looked presentable enough before she put it back up. As she reached for her bag and file which sat on the passenger seat, her phone vibrated and she spared a minute to read the new text from Ibtihaj.

Ibty: *You can do it! If they don't pick you, then something is wrong with their heads. You are more than fit for the job and if they disagree, I will bathe them with acid! But on a more serious note, love, you can do it. I believe in you and so do my sisters, Mummy, and Daddy. When you come back, let's go shopping. And just so you know, Adil is arriving next tomorrow. I'm happy! Oya bye, bye. Do well o!*

Smiling, Ayra put the phone to sleep, grabbed her stuff and headed out of the car. Atlantica as a whole was cold and although she wore a coat over her teal green two piece jilbab she'd purchased a near month earlier from the same brand she was about to be interviewed by, she still shivered a little at the slight chill.

She locked the doors and made her way into the Japanese restaurant. According to the email she'd received, Ayneese's new headquarters still had some finishes that needed to be done so every interview was held outside it; something she didn't mind one bit.

The restaurant's interior was warm and Ayra sighed in relief which amused the female receptionist who asked "It's very cold outside, right?"

Ayra nodded, blushing due to mild embarrassment. "It is."

“We’ll be alright...Do you have a reservation?”

Ayra nodded. “Yes. I’m supposed to meet with someone from Ayneese.”

The female made a few clicks on her system. “Ayra Abdulaziz?”

“Yes.”

“Your companion is waiting for you at Table 12. Immediately you walk in, take the right. It’s the last table for two by the windows.”

Committing the directions to memory, Ayra nodded and smiled appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Do have a nice time.”

“I will.”

Stepping beyond the reception area, Ayra entered the wide eating space. As directed, she turned right and headed down the path, straight to the last table by the wide windows that gave a lovely view of a part of the Eastside district. A male sat with his back turned towards the door so she walked past his seat, to the other side of the table.

“Assalam Alaykum...”

He raised his head and the rest of the greeting died on Ayra’s tongue. Her heart did a little flip while her stomach dipped. Surprise and disbelief held her captive and all she could do was gape at the man seated at the table.

Warm ivory skin; full hair; full brows; lashes that framed hazel-green eyes; a straight nose; a full beard; a warm smile; and a name she’d always remember. Just like the first time they met, he was in thobe but this time it was black in colour with embroidery done in grey thread. Although she couldn’t see, underneath the table, he was in crocs and they had jibbitzs; sunflowers instead of Leilanis.

Ayra finally found her voice. “A-Ayman?”

Ayman Hakeem Bello smiled wider, his hands together on his laps. “Waalaykum Salam Warahmatullah Wabarakatuh. Hello, Ayra. It’s really lovely to meet you again.”

THE END

From Latifah, With Love

"I want to write a book that doesn't have a happy ending because some men honestly don't deserve the women they're paired with."

Those weren't my exact words back then but that was the summary of the conversation I had with Nana Hauwa back in June or July, when I was finishing up *Mrs Ahmed Shehu* and bringing a close to the Dantata series.

As at that time, I had read books such as Catharina Maura's *The Wrong Bride* and boy, I was pissed that Raven ended up with Ares because there were so many times I told myself "She deserves better". Scenes from Lucy Score's *Things We Never Got Over* made me think that way too and also some other books I can't name off my head right now. The bottom line is that I wanted a story of a tainted man and a woman that knew she deserved better and I made sure to write it.

This book? It killed me. The Ibrahim I had in my head is way different from the one I ended up creating but I don't regret it because if this Ibrahim killed me, then I'm not sure I want to know how the original Ibrahim would have made me feel, especially with the scene I imagined when he lashed out at Ayra and called her a leech who did nothing more than enjoy his money while he worked hard for every single penny. I know, I know...That Ibrahim would have been heartwrenching and cruel and as wicked as I might seem, I wouldn't have been able to take it.

To women like Ayra, and women like me who have loved sincerely for years but things didn't work out because reality was way different from our fantasies, I hope you know that you deserve the entire world and everything it has to offer. The sky's only your beginning and you're going to shine brightly, no matter what and no matter how long it takes.

To every single person, I hope you know that it's okay to forgive but it's also okay to walk away, especially when you know that things would never be the same in the long run. It takes a lot of work to maintain a relationship whose sanctuary has been tainted and ruined but if you're strong enough for it, then I'm cheering you on. And if you know that you can't do it, then know that (no matter what anyone says), you're not a wicked person for walking away. You matter and you should ensure you take care of yourself before anyone else.

You're loved and In Shaa Allah, you're always going to be.

This is me wishing that this book means the world to you the way it meant the world to me. Thank you for your time and emotions and soon – by God's grace – I'll see you with book two where we'll have new characters and beautiful love stories. There's nothing better than presenting endless

fluff (and a little angst!) to cure broken hearts. I'm excited to get started on that.

Until then, In Shaa Allah.

Love and Duas,

Latifah Efua Anavberokhai.

Thank You

Lea, you've been a dream. Thank you for the constant ideas, for the constant battle against imposter syndrome and for being the best you can always be. Thank you for the visualisations too!

Munah, Jidderh, Nana Hauwa, and Sumayah, you four really make the best team. Thank you for listening to all my ideas and for never making me feel bad about myself even when I spammed you with pictures, audios, and the randomest messages. Thank you for keeping up with me and for giving me ideas to help with the plot of the book. This book exists because of you all and I look forward to meeting you on the journey to book 2 In Shaa Allah. Thank you for being the best Alpha readers too!

Fatima Bala, thank you for your words of encouragement. They mean more to me than you'll ever know.

Kimmie and Iris, for being sweethearts and providing every Yoruba translation I needed (and highlighting the ones that best fit the scenes with the attitudes)! You too, Elizabeth. For Italian, Google Translate to the rescue and I hope I got them right.

Canva and Big H Studios? You both are life savers and I really don't know where I'd be without you two because the cover ideas I have in my head are always hard to come to life and then you both appear like my fairy-god-mothers. Thank you!

To you, dearest gentle reader, thank you too. Thank you for giving me to chance to tell you stories (and break your hearts too). Thank you for reading Ibrahim and Ayra's story and I hope I see you in the next book In Shaa Allah.

Until then...

Love and Duas,

Latifah Efua A.

About the Author

Latifah Efua Anavberokhai was born and raised in Ekpoma, Edo State. She has a bachelor's degree in Mass Communication and is currently working on her master's. When she isn't writing or reading, she can be found working (as there are bills to pay), watching dramas, exploring the world of food and drinks, taking walks, daydreaming about the day she gets married, and sleeping.

Too Little, Too Late is her sixth major novel. Her other works include:

- Letters for Abdul
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Lovestruck in the Capital City: When Manan Met Mahnoor
- Architect and Mrs Dantata
- Being Mrs Dantata
- Mrs Mahmud, Mrs Mas'ood
- Mrs Ahmed Shehu

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