

The Imperial Family



"Chapter One:
Casting the Dice"

ANISHA NAMUTOWE

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ANISHA NAMUTOWE

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Chapter One: The Die is Cast

“Sometimes we are tested. Not to show our weaknesses, but to discover our strengths.”
Unknown

Kaleya, Mazabuka, Zambia; 2001 - 2004

Ten-year-old Trinhah bolted up, awakened by the thunderous sound of the pouring rain that had, as usual, easily found its way through the unsuccessfully multi-surgically-enhanced roof of their one-room cottage. Sleeping next to her on the mat was her little brother, Enock. At five years old, the little monkey had somehow mastered the art of snoring like a drunken sailor. They say that if you live with pig’s vomit long enough, eventually, you stop smelling it. It was the case with little Enock’s snoring. Trinhah was responsible for the boy’s nickname - ‘little monkey’ which she thought was quite fitting given his unusual obsession with bananas.

Lying on the other side of Enock was Petronella, their mother, her state of rest unwittingly bearing witness to the idiom about pig’s vomit. The peacefully sleeping woman looked nothing like a twenty-five old should. Trinhah reached over to her and gently removed the silk headwrap that had moved halfway through her thinning pale hair. The years of toil she had experienced after becoming pregnant at the age of fifteen had surely taken their toll on her. It was a wonder how she was not the one prone to aggressive snoring. Perhaps she had transferred the stress onto her son during pregnancy when yet again, a man had disappointed her.

Using the little light sipping through the spaces between the blocks serving as curtains on what was originally supposed to be a window, Trinhah managed to locate the little oil lamp and matches strategically placed a few feet from the mat. Once the lamp was lit, her eyes followed the nearest sound of water dripping into a bucket. There were four buckets well-placed around the room in anticipation of the rain. The one furthest from the mat held her attention longer. She counted the drops as they landed in the almost full bucket. When she had reached fifty, she pushed the bedding aside and stood.

Emptying buckets of water at ungodly hours had become a ritual for Trinhah. With inexplicable energy for someone who had just been unceremoniously awakened a few minutes earlier, the ten-year-old carried the bucket to the door. Once at the door, she placed the bucket down to move the heavy bag of sand holding the metal barricade acting as a door in place. She said a silent prayer, asking the gods to keep any night monsters away before quietly lifting the barricade to the side and pouring the water out. She placed the barricade and bag of sand back.

When she turned, her mother was seated up, a grim expression on her face. “I told you to let me do that Trinhah.”

Trinah smiled, placed the bucket back in its place and joined her family on the mat.

“Trinah,” Petronella stared sternly at her daughter.

“I didn’t want to wake you up,” the girl said. “That evil woman makes you work the whole day without giving you food.”

Bewildered, Petronella gaped at her. "Where did you hear that from?"

"I overheard you talking with Teacher Agatha," she said.

That was three months ago when the teacher went to enquire about Trinh's lack of school uniform, for the third time that term. There was nothing new Petronella could have said that could have excused her daughter's lack of many things. Even though she worked from 6 am to 7 pm, her salary was never guaranteed. Her boss paid her whatever she felt was enough and whenever she felt like it. Sometimes that meant going for three or more months without pay.

Working from dawn to dusk did not allow her to take on any piecework. So on most nights, she stayed up late to crotch children's clothes for sale. She had been looking for another job for months but finding work within Kaleya or nearby areas was a challenging endeavour.

Evalina doesn't suit to be her daughter. She is so nice," Trinh said. Evalina was the teenage daughter of Petronella's boss.

Petronella laughed. "You only like her because she gives you books." That was one of the few things that made her job bearable.

"She also packs spaghetti, chicken and Fanta for us. I like her," Trinh said, grinning.

"I know you love those things," Petronella said.

"But I love the books more!"

"I know that too."

They both laughed.

In those books, Trinh discovered worlds that were far greater than the world where she lived, places she longed to visit and people she aspired to be. And on nights such as that rainy one, Trinh put her mother's worries to rest by telling her a story about a girl named Anne of Greene Gables.

"Silly girl. You should go back to sleep now."

"Good night mama."

Petronella was not an ordinary woman. Her status as a high school dropout did not stop her from having ambitious dreams for her children. Trinh's teachers had told her that she was raising a brilliant child whose level of intelligence was beyond that of her peers.

"If you invest well in your child, she will do great things in future," teacher Agather had said to her.

Since then, Petronella put all her hope in her daughter. Although her job as a housekeeper was mentally and physically exhausting - with nothing to show for it, she worked extra hard to ensure that Trinah went to a good school and that both her children had food to eat and decent clothes to wear.

From the time she had gained active use of most of her senses, Trinah had come to develop what most would consider a reverence for her mother. Her friends and teachers called her a dreamer for the crazy things she passionately talked about after reading her growing collection of books. Her mother never discouraged her. If anything, she allowed her to dream even more audacious dreams.

“Anything is possible as long as you can imagine it and work hard to bring it to life,” Petronella would say to her daughter.

She is the one who had first taught Trinah how to read even before she was old enough for school. She was saddened by her inability to send her daughter to preschool so she home-schooled her until she was old enough to access the government’s free primary education. She supplemented her lessons with books donated to her by her former boss Bina Mwanza who used to be neighbour’s with Evalina’s mother before she moved to Choma following her husband’s transfer.

When morning came, the rain had gone and in its wake were puddles of water that were a living nightmare for mothers of little boys and girls. On such days, Enock never disappointed. While her mother was at work, Trinah allowed Enock to join his friends who were playing in the water puddles closer to their home which overlooked the highway. The thirty seconds she took to take the plates she had just finished washing into the house were enough to alter the course of her life forever.

The first thing she heard was the sound of screeching tires against the tarred road and then the bang. When she looked up, she saw the lifeless body of her brother flying in mid-air before landing on a tree branch that pierced its way right through his stomach. The seconds that followed moved in slow-motion, accompanied by the silence of a tomb. By some speck of divine intervention, she had made it to where Little Monkey’s lifeless body hung. The blood dripping from it to the ground echoed in her ears just like the beads of rainwater falling into the bucket. Plop. Plop. Plop. Like a crescendo, her senses had reached their peak. She passed out.

Days later, Trinah would say to her mother, “At least he didn’t starve to death mum.”

Petronella, who had been going through an out-of-body experience that held her speech in captivity since the passing of her son had looked up at her daughter, dazed. It took her a moment to grasp the meaning of those words.

“I shall not let my children starve to death,” had been her mantra since she became a mother.

She burst out laughing. Trinah laughed with her.

“I feel like you’ve changed my daughter,” Petronella said to her once they had sobered up. They were seated on a mat behind the house, away from the mourners gathered under the tent in the front yard.

“What do you mean?”

Petronella closely studied her daughter. “I don’t know...something about your eyes. They just look...different, like they belong to someone else. You also never called me ‘mum’,” she jokingly added an accent to the word. “I used to be ‘mama’. I think those books you read have finally gotten to you.”

For a moment, Trinhah remained silent, her expression grim. “I can’t get Enock’s body out of my head mum,” she finally said before breaking into sobs.

Petronella tightly wrapped her arms around her.

Enock’s burial saw the arrival of an unexpected guest, Bina Mwanza, Petronella’s former boss.

“I moved back into my home yesterday and Bina Evalina told me about your loss,” she said.

She knows yet she hasn't come, Petronella thought.

“You moved back?” Petronella asked.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

The long story was that Bina Mwanza was divorced from her husband. To deal with the heartbreak, she had turned to religion. If Mary’s faith allowed her to have an immaculate conception, many whispered that Bina Mwanza’s newly-found faith would do even greater things - like reverse all the six pregnancies she had carried for her ex-husband who turned out to be Lucifer’s first cousin. It did not take long for her extreme religious ways to rub off on Petronella who was happily working as her new housekeeper. Soon enough, Trinhah was conscripted.

Petronella never missed a church service or activity, much to her daughter’s chagrin. She believed that absence from church led to God deducting days off of her life on earth.

“That is why my Enock went so early,” she would say. “I never took him to church.”

Happy to have a devoted partner in faith, Bina Mwanza committed herself to picking up Petronella and her daughter in Kaleya and driving them to the Anglican Church on the other side of town. Trinhah hated waking up at 5 am to prepare for church. The only thing she looked forward to was playing on the swings outside the church.

Petronella must not have accumulated enough days because she died two years after joining the Anglican Church. She went to bed in the night and never woke up. It would take ten years for Trinhah to realize that her mother had died from exhaustion.

Bina Mwanza kept Trinhah for a year before sending her to her rich sister in Lusaka who needed a maid.

“They’re one of the richest families in Lusaka,” the woman said. “They have promised to send you to school and give you a comfortable life.” When no response came, Bina Mwanza added, “You don’t have to worry about a thing. They’re good people. My brother-in-law is a pastor and owns the biggest church in the country. They live in a mansion and own so many cars. That is the kind of life an intelligent girl like you needs if you’re to make something of yourself.”

“What type of work will I be doing?” Trinah asked.

“The same as you’ve been doing here; cleaning, washing, cooking, and oh, they have a newborn baby. Only months old so you will have to help my sister with that.”

“I used to look after Enock, so I guess I’ll manage.”

Once it was decided she would be Lusaka-bound, Trinah’s mind raced with adventures she hoped to pursue in the country’s capital. As far as she was concerned, Lusaka was going to be a Heavenly experience.

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