

The Imperial Family



CHAPTER FIVE: "The Prodigal Son"

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Chapter Five: The Prodigal Son

“We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers,” Bayard Rustin.

It was six in the morning and Akende, the Imperial’s fourth prince was just getting home...well, almost. Despite knowing the storm that awaited him home, Akende grinned from ear to ear at the memories of the night as he drove along the long driveway leading to the Royal Land.

It had clearly been a great night out if the rigorous bumping of his head to the rhythm of Vincenzo’s ‘Ma Reasons’ were anything to go by.

After finally escaping the two watchdogs his mother had secretly set to tail him the previous night, as she did all other times he left the house, Akende had made his way to a friend’s housewarming party on the other side of town. Three steaming hot women off of his buddy’s guest list and a comfortable bed in one of the newly built guest bedrooms were enough to call the night a success.

Akende brought his red Lamborghini Aventador to a stop in front of a high-rise gold-plated gate with the words ‘The Royal Land’ neatly placed at the top.

A guard in the security booth stationed in between the two giant gates turned the camera to view inside the car through the monitor. After confirming that the ‘fourth prince was alone in the vehicle, he pressed a button on the wall and the entrance gate automatically opened. He peeped through the window and pay his respects and watched in amusement as Akende sped through, completely ignoring him and the road sign cautioning motorists to ‘Slow Down. You’re Entering a Private Resident Area’.

Akende sped through the almost empty street, if not for the few joggers spread out across the eerily clean networks of newly-tarred long-winding streets. They were all dressed in elaborate sportswear with expensive gadgets sticking from their arms or legs like well-raised lab rats.

The Royal Land was a city built within a city - Lusaka, the bustling nation’s capital where all flavours of sin were manufactured and distributed to the rest of the provinces in generous proportions. Built in 2000 by Richard Nkole on over 500,000 square meters of land in Chamba Valley, Royal Land was an ultra-modern high-tech city reserved for the country’s uber-rich. It was home to fifteen families and had one secondary school, a hospital, a cathedral, a shopping mall, and enough recreational areas to drown out any anti-social tendencies.

At the intersection, Akende turned on fifth street, the only street marked with a second checkpoint that he easily navigated without having to stop. There could only be one place it led,

Elegantly groomed and perfectly spaced Italian cypress trees about thirty feet long lined both sides of the driveway. Akende slowed down his vehicle upon noticing drops of rain on his windscreen. He hunched forward and looked to the sky. A dark and heavy cloud angrily loomed over him. He opened his window and stuck out his hand, letting the showers fill his palm before shaking them off and rolling the window back up.

"It's gonna be one heavy wet morning," he said in a grave tone.

As the line of cypress trees leading up the driveway came to an end, neatly manicured lawns and gardens of about 100 acres played crescendo to the imposing figure of the Imperial Palace.

Modelled consciously after the Palace of Versailles, the palace's design was fused with African-inspired traditional finishings that stuck above the roofing. The centerpiece, an imposing and majestic stone building surrounded by six annexes on either side all uniformly built and commanding in their own right greeted Akende as he drove around the turning circle and straight towards the main entrance to the palace.

"Let the war begin,' he said as he handed his keys to the valet.

There was no escaping what awaited him on the other side of the golden door.

At least I made it home for breakfast, Akende thought.

Polished wood floors partly covered by Persian rugs, high blinding white walls complemented by colourful oversized paintings by dead artists were the first noticeable things in the two-story grand foyer. There was white everywhere! An orchestra of angels...

You would think angels lived here. They burry them here, Akende mused.

Imposing half-landing staircases separated by looming pillars, also white, leading all the way to the second story defined the entry hall. A pendant-shaped crystal chandelier complimented the light from the large windows on either side of the staircases. Akende ignored both the set of staircases and lift and turned right into a long hallway with marked with numerous passageways leading to the various areas of the palace. The smell of freshly prepared bacon lingered in the air the closer he got to the door at the far end of the hallway.

He paused at the door before opening it. He took a deep breathe, put his hand over his mouth and then his nose and smelled his breath.

"Shit." The shisha from the previous night had overstayed its welcome. He quietly cleared his throat and opened the door.

"Well, at least I made it for breakfast," he reminded himself.

One of the many unwritten rules of the Imperial Family was that the whole family must gather together for breakfast and dinner.

"It strengthens the family bond," the senior Mr and Mrs Nkole would often remind their children and grandchildren. Each time, Akende would scowl and roll his eyes. He would swear so did many other family members. Nevertheless, keeping up appearances was one thing the Nkole family was very good at.

It should be illegal for any table to sit this many people at once, Akende thought as he took in the scene before him.

As expected, three generations of the Nkole family were gathered at the breakfast table, from the oldest to the youngest, except Towela who had just come in carrying a bowl of scones. Akende rushed to help her with the ball.

“Give me that,” he said and didn’t bother waiting for a reply before grabbing the bowl from her.

Towela simply chuckled and went to sit next to her husband Derrick. He kissed her on the cheek, took her hand and whispered into her ear, “thank you for always doing this my love.”

On the other side of the table, Situmbeko was glaring daggers at the lovebirds.

“What’s wrong with you?” Her brother Derrick asked. “You look like you just swallowed a frog.”

Stumbeko rolled her eyes and shapeshifted her facial muscles into a pinched ball until the room started spinning around the axis of her eyebrows.

“How kind of you to join us at the table AK,” the queen mother said sarcastically as Akende sat in his usual spot at the table, directly opposite Towela.

It was a disco of glaring daggers at the breakfast table.

“Thank you mother,” Akende replied.

“She was being sarcastic you dimwit,” Situmbeko said.

“If you didn’t notice, dearest sister, so was I,” Akende retorted.

“Son of-”

“How many times have I warned you about using that sort of language in front of the kids Stu?” Dave asked sternly.

“Don’t use that tone with me,” Situmbeko warned. “I’m not one of your kids or employees.”

“Actually, you are one of his employees,” Leah said. “My brother is second in command at Imperial Holdings where *you* work as the Media Director.”

“Akende, pray for us,” Richard commanded, the mere sound of his authoritative voice bringing the room to a still. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, people listened.

Akende was dying to give his old man the response he deserved but because he was already in trouble for sleeping out without permission, he relented.

But what was he possibly going to say in prayer? He wondered. The last time he prayed was when he was ten and had just overheard his parents talking about how different he was from the rest of his siblings.

“God punished you with a stupid son for hurting your wife dear, so don’t complain. Sometimes children suffer due to the sins of their father,” Inonge had told her husband.

"I don't hear you saying the same thing about your kids," Richard countered. "Have you forgotten how we met?"

"I have a few good products myself," she said proudly. "If all of them were brilliant, then this family would be perfect. That Akende boy took after his mother. God knows what you found attractive about that uneducated woman in the first place."

"Dear God, please make my parents like me," Akende had prayed.

He had been told at Sunday school that God answers all prayers. What they forgot to tell him was that sometimes his answer was no.

Before coming upon that conversation, Akende had always suspected that he was different from his siblings. His parents treated him like he was an inconvenience. His birth had already determined what sort of fate he would have in the Imperial Family and at some point, he completely stopped trying to be better...to be accepted.

He was never going to be one of them.

Richard Nkole was more of a master than a father to all his children. The identity he was most proud of was being the rich, powerful and influential man that he had turned out to be. Coming from a humble background, it had always been his dream to rise above his circumstances and become the sort of man his father could never be. He believed his father Arnold to have been a weak, delusional and unambitious man. It was these feelings about his father that drove him to work hard so his own children would never look at him the way he looked at his father.

He gave his children the dignity, power, and influence they needed to survive in the cutthroat world where only those willing to take certain risks and make certain sacrifices thrived. But he was not deluded. Even though his children enjoyed the lifestyle he was able to provide for them, he came to accept that developing a relationship with any of his children was something he simply could not afford. He saw weakness in affection and he fought the sentiment with aggression. He could never be brought down to the same level as his father.

"Greed is seductive, but a man must know his own limitations lest he loses it all trying to hold on to it all," he often reminded himself.

His father taught him how to be an affectionate man and how to care about his loved ones, but he never taught him how to be a man. To become the man he became, he had to forsake everything his father had taught him to be. Only then did he succeed. When it came down to it, Arnold Nkole could not protect his family using hugs and prayers. Richard had watched his old man run from house to house begging his pastors and church friends to save his youngest son from the snares of leukaemia. It was then that he learnt that the church was only there to serve one purpose; to give sinful humans an appearance of perfection because what mattered most was not reality, but rather, the appearance of it.

"Thank you Lord for the lives of the people who made it possible for this family to enjoy this kind of food. Accept the souls of the departed and look with favor upon those still living and toiling to enable this family to sustain this lifestyle. Amen."

Richard Nkole glared at his son so hard that Akende could feel the heat of his fury despite his lowered profile.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Inonge snapped at him.

“I mean, what did you expect when you asked someone like me to pray? A miracle?” Akende scoffed.

“Can we eat now?” Asked Andrew, the family’s oldest grandchild.

Everyone at the table looked at the matriarch for a response. She was the one who decided matters in the home. Her husband was the authority on all matters related to business, but usually in consultation with his wife.

“Towela, help the young ones with their food,” Mama Inonge said.

“Enough with the Towela this, Towela that!” Akende snapped, and turning challenging eyes to Derrick, “For how long are you going to let this family treat your wife like a maid? Are you even a man?” He asked.

Derrick turned desperate eyes at his mother.

“It’s alright AK, I can do this,” Towela said, smiling. She moved over to where the children were and started dishing for the youngest, her own daughter Nadia before moving to the rest.

Akende was glowering at his mother the whole time while she and the rest of the family ate.

“You know Tee,” Chiza delivered the family from the pregnant silence hanging over them. “You should consider it a privilege that Mama Inonge lets you run some of the affairs of the palace. You have zero career, no job, and nothing to your name except your marriage. You should be happy to be adding some value to this noble family, even if it’s nowhere near what the rest of us bring to the table. I don’t understand why you carry yourself like a victim.”

Akende looked at Derrick, challenging him yet again to defend his wife but the man remained quiet. Akende shook his head in disappointment, thinking to himself how his half-brother did not deserve a good and hardworking woman like Towela.

Derrick had forced his wife to quit her job as a primary school teacher due to his insecurities. And now she was stuck at home, fully dependent on him and his ungrateful family all because he had not liked how one of her male colleagues had looked at her once when he went to pick her up from work.

For months, Towela had argued her case to keep her job. She had pleaded and cried and in the end, her husband and his parents decided that she would choose between her job or her marriage.

“I don’t understand why you insist on keeping a job that pays peanuts babe,” had been Derrick’s comforting words to his wife.

But Akende understood why Towela needed that job.

He had once visited her at the school during the early days of her marriage. He had watched her play with the kids and it was the happiest he had ever seen her. It was never about the money.

Derrick watched on the sidelines while his mother turned the once vibrant woman into a boring subservient maid. Seven years was enough time for him to have come to his senses but it was clear to Akende that Derrick would forever be a mama's boy. If he did not do something about the situation now, he would have to watch the woman he loved live such a pathetic life for the rest of her life.

"Every woman should be honoured to take care of her family and home. It's how God intended it," Pumulo said, earning himself a kiss on the cheek from his wife.

"It's not like *your* wife does any of that honourable stuff, bro," Leah said. "In fact, none of the women in this house do, including Mama S.H."

"Who's that?" Kalenga asked, only to feel his foot under the table get stumped by his wife Situmbeko. "What's wrong with you?" He asked under his breath.

"Since grandpa wouldn't let her use a certain phrase, she decided to use initials instead," thirteen-year-old Chipasha happily explained, proud of herself for understanding something that some of the adults at the table couldn't.

Dave gave his sister a look of disapprobation for exposing his children to such language.

Kalenga turned to Chipasha and mouthed, "What does S.H. mean?"

"Side Hen," the girl mouthed back, laughing.

Kalenga stifled his own laugh. If there was one thing he enjoyed about his wife's family, it was the free entertainment he got from watching them come alive, especially at the breakfast and dining table. It was so unfortunate that he could not use any of that material at work. He could open his own news network with the sort of information he had on the country's pseudo-first family.

"Behave yourself and eat your food," Lister scolded her daughter.

Lister preferred working in the background to help her husband secure and cement his position in the family. She did not want her children to be caught in the crossfire whenever the childish adults decided to lose their manners in their presence. After being married into the family for sixteen years, Lister had used her legal wits to conclude that In the Imperial Family, nothing was ever as it seemed and one had to play smart to get what they wanted.

Just because Dave was the oldest and first son did not guarantee he would be the successor. As long as Mama Inonge was still alive, she would do anything and everything to ensure that one of her kids, if not herself sat on the throne when the time came.

Richard stood and the room came to a still yet again.

“My office, now,” he commanded Akende.

Without protest, Akende followed his father.

“I’ll be travelling to the Copperbelt tomorrow to check on the new exploration sites we acquired,” Namakau announced. “Someone incited the villagers into protesting yesterday and the headman reached out to us to sort out the issue. I need to be on-site before this gets to the press.”

“He should be the one sorting out the issue for us after everything we paid him,” Situmbeko said. “Keep me posted on how things go and let me know if you need any help.”

“I got it covered Stu, no worries,” Namakau said dismissively.

Yeah right, Situmbeko thought. She knew her sister didn’t want her anywhere near the project. After all, this was her opportunity to prove herself after that bad investment she made with that woman of gold Prophetess Catherine or whatever she called herself. Situmbeko didn’t understand why her family, especially her parents, knowing exactly what a phony the woman was still insisted on associating with her. She could understand Namakau’s desperation to prove herself, but she could never quite understand her parents’ fixation with the woman.

Her phone rang.

“Yes Maybin,” Situmbeko answered. Maybin was her assistant.

“Akende is trending again,” Maybin said.

Situmbeko stood. “What did he do this time?” She said, looking at her mother who was also up. The woman had a way of sensing danger from a while away.

“It’s not good ma’am. You need to come to the office.”

- ❖ Chapter Six will be published on Wednesday, 30th November 2022.
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