



THE
RIVERVIEW
WITNESSES

BOOK TWO:
OF LOVE AND BETRAYAL

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Dedicated to Jehovah, and my lovely spiritual family

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CHAPTER I

"Congrats, Akira!"

"I haven't even gotten baptized yet!"

Alicia Clarke and Charlene Benson only smiled widely as Akira Wilson huffed, blushing from the compliment. There was only a month remaining until the Regional Convention in June and already she felt like she couldn't escape the ever-growing attention.

Just two weeks prior, she learned that she had passed her baptism questions. Gladly, her friend Thomas Thompson had gotten the same results, since he had been reviewing his questions at the same time she did.

No one expected for them to exclaim in happiness once they left the parking lot of the kingdom hall that day.

And news of her reaction hadn't spread like wildfire, which she was grateful for.

But news of her results did.

It had barely been a week before Maria finally told someone.

And while Akira was happy, she truly, truly hated her shyness sometimes.

"See?" Charlene announced. "I told you that you would make it!"

Akira didn't say anything in response, knowing that she was right.

When they finally withdrew, Akira sighed, beaming. Spotting Thomas, she gave him a quick wave from across the kingdom hall. He smiled back just before getting ambushed by the infamous duo who just spoke to her. Turning around, she spotted Cyra Clarke and Jordan Tyson chatting amongst themselves.

"Hey there," she said, a hint of mischievousness in her voice. "What are you two up to?"

Cyra gave her a blank stare, while Jordan snickered. "Not telling."

"At least right now anyway," Cyra quipped.

Jordan facepalmed. "I forget you two are best friends. How much do you actually know about me?"

"More than you think," Akira admitted, but noticing the expression on his face, added, "But not too much..."

"I'm scared to ask what."

"Really, Akira?" Cyra asked. Akira only licked out her tongue.

"Hey, where are your parents, Jordan?" she asked.

He glanced down at the floor. "...Mom's here. Dad...he's a bit under the weather..."

"Hey, not prying," Akira said. "Just wanted to know."

He nodded.

"Congratulations, Akira!" Anita called from across the hall. Akira shrank back into herself a bit, her face turning pink. Cyra snickered.

"I say that we throw you a surprise party!" Alicia announced as she entered the lobby. "For both of you!"

"Guys, I really don't think this is necessary..." Thomas started to say.

"You do realize that it's not a surprise party anymore once you say that," Charlene noted. Alicia glared at her best friend.

"But ye still second the notion, don't ye?"

Both girls turned to see a beautiful woman with dark green eyes, wavy red-brown hair and peach freckled skin. Arranging her glasses, she crossed her arms and continued with a strong Scottish accent, "Ah wouldn't put it past ye not tae."

"Well, you see, what had happened it was...." Charlene jokingly started.

"You going out today, Mom?" Jordan asked. Malvina only shook her head.

"Not today, sweetheart," she answered, sounding tired. "Ye enjoy yourself, hm?"

Jordan's smile seemed to fade with his mother's reply. His mother leaned over and whispered something in his ear, squeezing his right hand. She then bid goodbye to the teens and headed towards the front doors of the kingdom hall.

"Is Sis. Tyson ok?" Akira found herself asking before she could stop herself. Jordan only nodded.

"Are you okay?" That question came from Cyra. Jordan blinked for a moment and only smiled, a bit of pink highlighting his cheeks.

"I'm fine," he said. "C'mon. I don't wanna miss the meeting for service."

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"To think Tuesday's the very day there's a traffic jam."

"At least we're out of school."

"Yeah, but Tuesday's not your Family Worship night."

"True. We do ours on Monday."

Trey Thompson only sent a blank stare Alexis Steele's way and she giggled. "Hey, stop bothering my fiancée," Marlin Wilson called from afar. Sighing, he shook his head and leaned back on the stairs he was sitting on, returning to his previous thought process.

In just two months, he would step off school grounds as alumni. No longer a student. This excited most of the seniors he knew.

It's not that he wasn't excited. Who wouldn't be?

It just seemed that everyone, including those around him, seemed to be prepared for the days ahead. From the first step they would take off that campus after graduation.

In his case, he acted cool and calm about it...

But, honestly, he was terrified.

The irony of this was that Trey was not one to let things bother him that easily (unlike his brother, something he loved teasing him about). When something did, however, it never left him alone until he found some way to calm down.

Trey bit his lip in thought.

It wasn't that he didn't want to graduate.

It was all the unknowns that came afterward that frightened him.

He huffed, looking towards the students who spread out in groups in the school courtyard. A black and white scoop neck shirt with jeans entered his vision, causing him to look up and smile. Cyra plopped down next to him on the stairs.

"Deep in thought?" she asked, putting her chin in her hands. Trey only nodded.

"What about?"

He shrugged. "Adulthood."

"Ah, the wonders of having a job, paying bills, keeping up with your own housekeeping," she replied. "Fixing your car..."

Trey frowned. "Cyra..."

"Not to mention possibly raising a family..." she continued. "At the same time, you might have more freedom in your service to Jehovah. You won't have a little brother to look after. By settling down before you get married, you'll already get used to managing a household so you won't be thrown for a loop as much. More freedom to travel and such. Less to clean with just yourself...and your future wife..."

Trey was beet red by now. "Both sides of the coin, huh?"

"Yep..." She nodded, looking at him. "What is it?"

"You're not exactly delicate..." He murmured. Cyra's eyes twinkled.

"Aw, you were thinking about Mikoto, weren't you?"

"Of course, I was," Trey replied. "Why wouldn't I? Besides, I know who you're thinking of..."

"That won't work, Trey," Cyra said, looking away as she flushed.

"One month..."

"Stop. It." Cyra smiled through clenched teeth.

"You and your shyness," Trey joked. Cyra only rolled her eyes.

"So..." Jordan squeezed between the two, causing Trey to jump.

"Will you two stop being ninjas?!"

"Ninjas?" Jordan raised an eyebrow.

"You just come outta nowhere!" Trey exclaimed.

She blinked. "You saw me."

"But I didn't hear you!"

"...He has a point," Jordan said. Cyra deadpanned, huffing. Trey smiled, his ears perking up when he heard feet...

He was pretty sure that they were high heels. Pumps, to be exact.

And he knew exactly who they belonged to.

Trey leapt up from the stairs and held out his arms. Sure enough, the incoming sound was Mikoto Wilson, who emerged from the lessening crowd of students and leapt at him once close enough. He caught her and spun around, eliciting giggles from his girlfriend.

"Your mood changed super quickly," she said. "Are you only happy when I'm around?"

He smiled, acknowledging the warm feeling it gave him in his heart. "What are you getting at?"

Her usual cheery expression changed to one of thoughtfulness. "You looked pretty down earlier."

"Yeah, I guess I was..." He admitted solemnly, averting his eyes. Mikoto gently squeezed his right hand.

"Did you talk to Jehovah about it? Whatever was on your mind?"

"Don't you wanna know what it is first?" he wondered.

"Who do you think wants to hear about more?"

Trey sighed, sounding exasperated, but sporting a bright expression. "Ok, ok. You have a point." Mikoto didn't say anything in response, raising an eyebrow. Taking that as a cue, Trey bowed his head and briefly conversed with his heavenly father about his current feelings.

"So, what is really bothering you?" she wondered.

"Just...our lives," Trey admitted. "I mean, sure. I'm legally old enough to make my own decisions, but it's different when you're on your own than living with your family."

"True," Mikoto admitted. "But I understand how you feel. I'm kind of surprised that you're worried about it."

"Oh, I'm just oozing with confidence, babe," he said.

"Remember where the confidence comes from."

"Alright," Trey said. "But, admittedly, it helped me feel better. A lot better really..."

"Hmm..." Mikoto tapped her lips with her finger. "Maybe we can study up on it later. There should be something in the Watchtower Library. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a good idea..." Trey said. "Are you okay with it?"

Mikoto's face went blank. "I'm the one that suggested it..."

"Isn't it going to be your job to help others feel better? How can you do that if you're depressed all the time?" Cyra asked. "Indirectly, with what you want to go to school for, anyway. What was it again?"

"Physical Therapy." He placed an arm around Mikoto's shoulder. "And she's going to be a nurse. Wait, nursing assistant."

"Wait, really?" Cyra asked. "I thought it was the other way around..."

"What were you and Jordan going for again?" wondered Mikoto.

"Graphic Design," Cyra announced, holding up two fingers. "Two years."

"Huh," Trey said. "I wonder what Marlin and Alexis are doing..."

"You're what?!" All heads turned to see Alexis facing Marlin with her arms outstretched. Her fiancée leaned back from the sheer force of the outburst. "And you're just now telling me?!"

"Nothing was final yet," Trey heard. "I didn't want to get your hopes up just to dash them to pieces if I didn't get it..."

"Didn't get what?" Cyra asked.

"An apartment!" Alexis answered. "He's moving out!"

Silence.

"You're WHAT?!"

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"Are those buses ever going to come?"

"I doubt anytime soon."

"Yeah, they're probably just trolling with us..."

"Give them a benefit of a doubt, Ken!"

The brunet only smirked. Émilienne Moreau shoved him in the arm. They were inside the front lobby of the school with a good bit of students, a few bored and restless from waiting around for their ride home. Ken leaned against the wall and shifted his weight a bit. Émilienne copied the gesture.

It hadn't been very long since they had met, but Émilienne quickly found that Ken was rather interesting. Easy to talk to, witty and interested in the Bible to boot. He also loved music and had a knack for making others smile.

"Man, these walls are so comfy," he said, causing Émilienne to giggle. "I bet I could take a nap right here ..."

"I'd like to see that..." Émilienne challenged.

"Okay." Leaning his head against the wall, he closed his eyes and began to snore.

"Really?!"

"Don't you know not to walk up an insomniac?!" he exclaimed. Émilienne only rolled her eyes at the statement. Ken chuckled and they settled into a comfortable silence.

"Question."

"What's up?"

"How come...well..." He scrunched his face in thought. "Your Bible...the New...uh..."

"New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures," she finished.

"Yeah, that," he said. "Um, do you know why other Bibles call God, Lord, in certain scriptures and yours calls him Jehovah in the same verses?" He questioned, looking curious.

"Well, Jehovah is God's name," Émilienne said. "And the main reason is to bring praise to it, hold it sacred and to give the original Author the proper respect. You can't do any of those things if you don't know it. We also want to draw close to him and get to know his qualities. Just like with a friend, it's not easy to get know someone without knowing their name."

"That actually...sounds logical..."

"Also, one of the major reasons as to why they removed it in other versions is because in Leviticus, there is a Scripture of a law that states that you shouldn't use God's name in vain. Some took that superstitiously and took it as you shouldn't use his name at all. Others say that because we don't know how it's pronounced, it shouldn't matter whether we use it or not."

"In vain?" He wondered aloud.

Émilienne racked her brain for a proper answer. "Basically, not giving God's name the proper respect that it deserves."

"Huh..." He rubbed his chin. "I think I get it."

A low chuckle aroused Émilienne's curiosity.

"What?"

"It's kinda funny," he said. "I mean, just being stuck here in school, waiting for the bus and all. Usually..."

"Yeah?" Émilienne prodded, leaning in instinctively.

"Well, y'know..." Ken brushed some bangs behind his ear. "I'd be bored...just waiting here. Not knowing how long it will last. And then..."

"And then?"

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Might sound crazy. But now, I don't mind staying here a while."

"And why is that?" wondered the French-American brunette.

"Well, it's because I have..."

"Ken!"

Both heads turned to see a portly boy with dark brown hair and glasses running towards them. He hooked an arm around Ken's neck.

"I've been looking all over for you!"

"I texted you, man," Ken replied. "How come you didn't answer?"

"...Phone's dead," the other teen said.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "Right..."

"Don't look at me like that!" The other exclaimed. "And who's this? If this is who I think it is, she's too good for you, dude."

Émilienne raised an eyebrow while Ken started to sputter. "It's n-not like that..."

"Look, uh..." The other boy motioned towards Émilienne. She realized that he wanted her name.

"Émilienne..."

"Oh, you're French, too? Oui, oui. Anyway, if this guy asks you to be his girlfriend, just say yes. I mean, he's cool, but he's already desperate as it is..."

Admittedly, she kind of liked the thought...

"Mark!" Ken's face was beet red now and Émilienne chalked that up to embarrassment. Mark looked outside and smiled.

"Well, look at that," he said, pointing outside. Both teens followed his gesture to see a few buses start to pull up. When Émilienne looked back, he was already at the front door. "See you later!"

"Mark! Wait!" Ken exclaimed to no avail. He sighed, turning back to Émilienne.

"Sorry about that..." he mumbled, his cheeks still pink. He was probably just uncomfortable.

But there was that nagging thought maybe...

"It's okay," she tried to assure him. "Uh...what were you saying earlier?"

"Huh?" He blinked, his eyes lighting up with recognition. "Oh, yeah! I was saying that, y'know, I don't mind waiting because I have...friends to hang out with."

Émilienne smiled despite herself. "I'm surprised you consider me a friend."

"You're easy to talk to," Ken responded. "Who wouldn't?"

Émilienne bit her cheek and blushed a little.

"Émi!" She turned to see Alaya holding one of the front doors. "Your bus is here!"

"He's actually early this time?" Émilienne asked sarcastically as she walked towards her friend. "Oh! Later, Kenny!"

He gave her a short wave as they left.

"So, that's Ken?"

"Huh?" Émilienne realized that Alaya was addressing her. "Oh, yeah..."

Alaya didn't respond at first. "Did Chris meet him yet?"

Émilienne shook her head. "Not yet. I've been trying to get them to meet up. Hasn't been easy."

"Well...if he's interested like you say he is, you'll see when they do..."

"True..."

Alaya then bid her goodbye and Émilienne walked up the steps into the large vehicle. Once she got to the seat, she plopped down and leaned against the window, her thoughts drifting back to her earlier encounter with Mark and Ken.

For some reason, the idea of being Ken's girlfriend didn't sound all that bad.

She bit her lip. He was interested, right? Would that make it wrong to have a romantic relationship with him?

While something told her that maybe it was...

A little part of her was hoping that it wasn't.

And that thought didn't seem to be leaving her alone anytime soon.

CHAPTER II

The white Impala slowly rumbled into the driveway and came to a complete stop. When the car turned off, the front door opened, revealing its driver. Jordan closed the door behind him and sighed heavily, glad to finally be home from his new part-time job. Serving coffee was a bit more complicated than it seemed.

He slowly walked up the steps to the porch and fished his keys out his pocket, making sure not to make much noise. He had to be sure that the peace surrounding his home was real...

And lasting.

However, when he opened the door, he was hit by the familiar sound of two voices going back and forth at each other, one feminine, but gruff and intimidating and the other masculine and softer, but just as piercing. They were muffled, however, and Jordan's mood sunk lower than it already was.

The shouting matches were still going on, just in his parents' bedroom.

Jordan decided to make his presence known. Once inside his bedroom, he loudly shut the door behind him. The voices immediately quieted down and his parents started to converse quietly. Jordan took off his bag and apron, letting both drop to the floor, and flopped down on the bed. About a minute later, he heard footsteps approach and a knock on his bedroom door.

"Come in."

The door slowly opened to reveal a tall, lean brown-skinned man with a dark brown buzz cut. He made his way towards the bed and leaned over it, a half-smile on his face.

Jordan already knew that this was Darell's way of avoiding the current situation. Having practically half of his father's genes, he sometimes did this as well. Despite himself, the young man smiled back in the same way.

"You tired?"

"I'm sprawled out across my bed," Jordan replied. "Proof enough?"

"Good answer," Darrell said, sitting on the side of the bed. "Rough day, huh?"

"Oh, it was fine," Jordan responded, sitting up on his elbows. "Until I walked in the back door of Starbucks. Some of the customers thought that it was mandatory for me to memorize their order by the very next day. Let's see them try to remember what the usual was on the second day on the job."

Darell chuckled softly. "True. True. Well, that's the working world for ya."

"Huh," Jordan looked down. "Good thing we have Jehovah to help us out, huh?"

His father hesitated, something that was starting to become less and less of a surprise.

"Yeah."

The phone rang, interrupting the slightly uncomfortable silence. Jordan picked it up immediately and a woman's voice asked for Mr. Tyson. "It's for you."

Darrell grabbed the phone. "Hello? Oh! Hello, Bar-I mean, Ms. Worthing. I don't care whether we're at work or not, you're still my boss."

He walked out of the door as he continued to talk, nearly bumping into Malvina. She came into Jordan's bedroom and sat down in the black office chair near his desk. She crossed her legs and took a long look at her son, her face showing weariness from the earlier ordeal.

"Fit like min?*" she finally asked, folding her hands on her lap.

"Tired," he groaned. "If this is the career world of Satan's system, I don't want any part of it..."

"Unfortunately, we hae tae be," Malvina sighed. "'n', na, it wasn't about ye."

Jordan sat up straight. "I didn't say that..."

"But ye were wondering it," she said.

Jordan silently admitted that the thought did cross his mind.

"Mum, I hate to ask..." Jordan started, scratching his neck. "But...why didn't Da come to the meeting?"

"...Ah wish ah knew masell," Malvina admitted. "But ye know how yer faither is. He loves avoiding th' subject, especially serious ones."

"Does he seem a little less motivated to do spiritual things?" Jordan leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "It might be my imagination, but..."

"Ye've noticed it tae?" Malvina looked up towards the ceiling. "A've been trying tae encourage him, but...it seems that ever since he wis read off as a pioneer two weeks ago 'n' even before then...Ah guess he juist got knocked off his rocker a bit."

Jordan only raised an eyebrow at his mother. She returned the stare.

"What?"

"Maw, you're 34..." he said. Malvina sent him a sharp look.

"'n' what's that supposed tae mean?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"Nothing..."

"Right..." She stood up and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. "A'm worried about him juist as well as ye are. But what Ah don't want ye tae dae is start tae go doolally with stress from being concerned."

"Yeah, I know," Jordan sighed.

"...Wantae pray about it?"

He nodded. Grabbing a cap as a head covering, Malvina grabbed Jordan's hand and bowed her head in prayer.

"Heavenly Faither, Jehovah. Please help mah husband. Both Jordan and Ah know that he's spiritually strong 'n' loves ye completely. But we also know that spiritual setbacks can happen. So, Ah know that now Darell is a bit unsteady, so we humbly ask that ye help him tae stay oan his feet. 'n' please help us tae give him th' support

he needs tae stay oan track as well. We ask for this in th' name o' your son 'n' reigning King in Heaven, Jesus Christ. Amen."

"Amen." Jordan lifted his head and looked at his mother just in time to see her forcefully place the cap on his head. He only sent her a blank look and prepared to respond, when a call was heard from his father, asking for the family to assemble for family worship. Malvina only motioned her head towards the door way and walked out of the room. Jordan took off his cap, wringing it in his hands for a moment before placing it on the bed and grabbing his Bible off his desk. As he rose from the bed, he hoped that their prayer could be answered and his father would regain his spiritual footing.

He didn't dare to think of what might happen if he didn't.

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Akira jerked up, looking around quickly to see if anyone had noticed her dozing off.

She then remembered.

It was Friday.

She was in Study Hall.

Sighing, she returned her focus on trying to stay awake while reading the Young People Ask book. Currently, it was the only thing really keeping her eyes open, if only for a moment. But at the same time, a quick nap before her last period seemed tempting...

"Whatcha reading Akira?"

Scratch that. Turning around slowly, she noticed Esmeralda standing behind her, trying her best not to look nosy. Smirking a bit, she only passed her the book and put her head down on the desk, waiting to hear the other girl's reaction.

Ever since the day she answered Esmeralda's question on pedophiles, the young Latino had been showing increasing interest in the scriptures, asking questions now and then. She was still coming out of her shell, though, for Akira had noticed that Esmeralda was still scared as to whether she would offend her with the questions she asked.

"So, is this is the teenage advice book for Jehovah's Witnesses?" Esmeralda wondered, taking a seat next to her at the table. Akira lifted her head and yawned.

"Umm...kinda. Depends on what you're looking for in terms of topic. Really, it was written with all teenagers in mind, not just Jehovah's Witnesses. That's why it doesn't go too much in depth about our beliefs and focused more on Bible principles that pertain to the questions asked."

"Oh, I see..." Esmeralda continued thumbing through the book. Her face paled and she showed Akira the page she was looking at. It was the beginning of Chapter 5, Why Stay A Virgin? Akira only nodded.

"Yep. I was surprised too when I first read it."

"Really? Huh." Esmeralda's face turned into one of curiosity. "Weren't you always a Witness?"

"Actually, no." Akira stretched. No use getting back to sleep now. "But that was the very book that got me interested. That's why it's my personal favorite."

"Huh..." Esmeralda pursed her lips in thought, flipping through the pages. "Do you...have an extra copy that I could borrow?"

"Hmmm...I don't," Akira admitted. "But I could get an extra one that you could have."

"You don't have to buy another one!" Esmeralda exclaimed. "I'll pay for it!"

"Buy?" Akira scoffed. "It's free. I'll get one from Kingdom Hall since we have a meeting tonight."

"Oh," Esmeralda said, looking relieved. "You sure it's okay?"

"It's fine!" Akira said. "I gotcha covered."

Esmeralda relaxed completely.

"Esy!"

The brunette smiled as the source of the voice approached them and waved eagerly, a tall, lanky boy with curly black hair and blue eyes.

"Ken!" Esmeralda greeted. He gave her a big smile in response and held out his hand, a pair of keys in it.

"My keys!" She quickly snatched them up. "How did you..." Her eyes narrowed. "You had them the whole time, didn't you?"

"No!" Kenny put his hands up. "That was Sandra's doing! I swear!"

Esmeralda only deadpanned at Ken, who looked at Akira, directing the next statement to her. "Help me out here!"

Akira only scooted away.

"Really?"

"Anyway," Esmeralda continued, putting the keys down and placing her chin in her hands. "So, Kenny, tell me about the girl you're raving about."

Ken's face turned a bright red. "W-what are you talking about?"

She winked at Akira, who only smirked. "You know, her name begins with an E."

"Oh, her." He began scratching his neck. "We are talking about Ém, right?"

Akira raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Ém!" she exclaimed. "And since when did you guys get so close that you gave her a nickname?"

"Uh..." He looked away, rocking back and forth. "Two days ago?"

"You see here, Akira?" Esmeralda pointed out. "Romantic desperation at work. Only 5 weeks and already he's given her a nickname."

Ken glowered. "I'm not desperate!"

"But you are loud!" Esmeralda countered. Ken only facepalmed, muttering under his breath.

"Do you have to deal with this with the guys in your religion?" Esmeralda asked. "Particularly, if it's obvious when they're in love?"

Akira tapped her fingers to her chin. "No. Well, not that I know of. I hope. Guys and girls, no matter what age, are encouraged not to be desperate in matters involving love and dating. No, Ken. I was not indirectly insulting you."

The mentioned teen backed down from his defensive stance, uncrossing his arms.

"I didn't say anything..." he muttered, diverting his eyes. Esmeralda chuckled while Akira only shook her head. As the other two continued to converse, Akira's mind drifted to a question that she wouldn't get to ask that day.

Ém.

Émi.

Émilienne?

Akira frowned.

Émilienne had mentioned that there was a teen who asked her about telling her about the Witnesses. But she didn't say a lot. And that was a little over five weeks ago.

Could Ém and Émilienne be the same person?

Akira looked back at the two teenagers and ruled out that possibility. Wouldn't he be more interested in the Bible if that was the case? Of course, the Bible wasn't exactly the most interesting thing to talk about in the open...

The bell rang, jolting her out of her thoughts and the other two out of the conversation. As they picked up their bags and left, Akira decided that this probably wasn't the person Émilienne was talking about.

Hopefully.

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Émilienne was not known for being a daydreamer.

Due to her flowery personality, she was not easily distracted, especially when it came to spiritual things. If you knew that, you could tell if her mind was somewhere else rather easily. Her face betrayed everything.

So, Alaya couldn't help but notice that Émilienne forgot her notebook this morning. Proof came when the brunette asked her for paper. Émilienne started to write, only to eventually stop taking notes and get that spaced-out stare in her eyes...again. Alaya's mouth formed a thin line and she forced herself to stay focused on the meeting. Émilienne would surely get questioned later.

"I didn't hear you comment today."

Point proven.

"Hm?" Émilienne blinked, apparently getting out of her daze. The statement had come from her aunt after the meeting. Bedelia looked concerned, but her eyes were also saying that she was bit suspicious. They also told Alaya not to leave just yet and she sat back down.

"Émi?"

Okay. This was really starting to worry her. Never had Émi *ever* spaced out just after someone asked her a question. The brunette started to play with her hair and her eyes darted back and forth. Bedelia's expression softened.

"Are you alright?" she asked. Émilienne only nodded, but her aunt didn't seem convinced.

"What was the public talk about?"

"What?" Émilienne asked, confusion lining her features.

"What. Was. The. Public. Talk. About?" Bedelia repeated.

Émilienne lit up immediately, dissipating Alaya's concerns a little. "Oh! It was about...Uh..."

Scratch that.

"Can you at least remember the title?"

If Émilienne was not her best friend, she might have taken Alaya's straightforward question personally. She tapped two fingers to her chin, eyes rolled towards the ceiling as she racked her brain.

"Uh...Be Aboveboard in Your Associations?" she answered, smiling hesitantly.

"Close enough," Alaya sighed. Bedelia's face was a complete blank, rare for her.

"Émi's not socializing? That's a rare sight." Alaya turned to see Brian and Chris, both looking rather puzzled. "You didn't comment today, either," Brian continued.

Émilienne's mouth formed a thin line. "Is everyone going to comment on that today?"

"Well, geez, it's not like it's a normal thing," Chris said.

"I feel like you're implying that if I'm not yakking everyone's ear off, something must be wrong."

Alaya and the others all nodded, only causing Émilienne to become even more exasperated.

"Is there?"

That question came from Chris who was now looking really concerned. Brian even looked a little worried, his expression covering just how much he really cared.

Émilienne hesitated and looked away, her cheeks lighting up a bright pink.

"N-no..." she stammered.

"Émi..." Bedelia said. "Look, if you don't feel comfortable about it..."

"No!" Émilienne nearly exclaimed, causing the others to jump. "It's nothing! Really! I'm okay. I just..." She wrung her hands together. "I'm just trying to sort some stuff out as all..."

Blank faces all around.

"What?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You're usually blurting out what that 'stuff' is when we ask," Chris said, emphasizing 'stuff' with his fingers.

"I don't have to tell you everything that happens to me, y'know..."

That statement had more bite in it than planned and Émilienne's expression softened almost immediately. Alaya turned to Chris, who crossed his arms.

"Oh, I see..."

"Chris..."

"Guys."

All heads turned to Alaya.

"Let's not do this," she said. "Really. Nothing should be getting in between our friendship like this, okay? Émi, I'm not going to press if you really don't want to talk about it and Chris, could you be a bit more tactful? A little?"

Chris sighed and nodded, muttering. Brian jabbed him in the arm and Chris repeated the statement louder, apologizing to Émilienne. She responded with an apology of her own. Huffing, Émilienne looked at all of them.

"Look, guys...I'm just going through a few things," she said. "I kinda want to talk with Alaya and Bedelia about this later in private..."

Brian and Chris exchanged glances.

"...but, thanks for being worried about me, though..."

Both boys turned a bit pink at this, causing Alaya to snicker. It wasn't a secret that Émilienne was cute when she beamed at others.

"Well, I guess I wasn't needed then," Bedelia interjected. "You guys still going out?"

The boys nodded.

"Good," Bedelia said. "Brian, you're my partner. You three fight it out among yourselves."

Brian seemed to mind this suggestion, even frowning a bit. The others exchanged amused glances. Alaya then felt her phone buzz and the screen lit up with a message.

I'll tell u. i promise.

Alaya smirked.

U better.

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Cyra bit her lip, her eyes steeled in determination. She could get through this. She just had to concentrate...

Only to get hit by Samus Aran's kick and watch Fox McCloud fly off the stage. Her mouth forming a thin line, she stared blankly at her laptop screen, where a live video showed a familiar boyfriend-to-be shrugging innocently.

"What?" he asked. "For the record, I had no idea that that was going to happen. You were doing way better than me! I honestly thought I was gonna lose."

Cyra only chuckled and shook her head. "Whatever you say."

"Hey, you're the one playing Super Smash Bros. all the time," he remarked smugly. "I can barely pass Normal mode without losing all my lives at least once."

"True."

Jordan put on a face of mock insult. "Why I never!"

She only rolled her eyes and focused on the game. After about a minute of silence from Jordan, she turned her attention back to the Skype call, only to be met by a thoughtful face.

"What?"

"You," he replied after a few seconds. "You know that it's not too long 'til you turn 18."

Cyra blushed. "Don't remind me. I can hardly wait either."

"Your face says it all."

"Hey!" She pointed an imposing finger at the laptop. "Don't push it." Jordan could be heard chuckling.

"By the way..." Cyra began, starting another match on the game. "Are you okay? Well, are your parents okay? Particularly your dad?"

Silence.

"You don't exactly look thrilled whenever I mention them lately."

Jordan sighed. "Ah...it's...nothing really."

"You're not convincing me a bit," admitted the seventeen-year-old.

Jordan rubbed his neck, looking up in thought. "Well, Mom's actually fine. She's just dealing with...Well, you know what happened to Dad a couple of weeks back."

"You mean when he was read off as a pioneer?"

"Yeah..." Jordan replied. "It's just, ever since then, he hasn't exactly been himself. Mom and I are trying to encourage him, but it's like he's slowly slipping. And then, their conversations have been getting more and more...escalated."

Cyra could relate. She could remember the days when almost every week her parents argued about something.

"Have you tried talking to them about it?"

Jordan shook his head. "Not yet. It's not like it's been going on long and I've just been waiting it out, I guess. And you know how Dad is."

"Do I." Cyra noted that his face had turned solemn. "Hey."

The Black-Scot looked up, his gaze met with a thoughtful face.

"Please don't start going crazy over this, okay?" Cyra asked. "Things will work themselves out. You know how strong your parents are in the truth. Everyone in our congregation knows."

"Yeah...I know..." Jordan looked like he wanted to say something else, but decided against it. "Thanks."

"Anything."

He then smirked.

"You still haven't proven to me that you can beat me with Princess Peach."

Cyra waved towards the TV.

"Shall we?"

CHAPTER III

April sighed.

This was not a sigh of defeat, nor irritation. She was rather elated...

And sad.

As she watched her younger sibling pack things into boxes, April could only wonder just how things would be without Marlin around. Sure, he would be close by as always, but he wasn't moving out just for her to pester him all the time.

Like she didn't do that on regular basis.

April smiled. She was proud, of course. He would be getting married in about six months. And the only reason why he didn't get a house was because he wanted to start regular pioneering as soon as he got out of high school, or at least by that September. The smaller, the simpler.

"What?"

She snapped out of her reverie to find Marlin staring at her rather curiously. She only shook her head and uncrossed her arms, standing up straight.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"You usually think out loud," he remarked.

"Need some help?"

"Nah, I got it," he replied, going back to packing.

"I meant in dealing with whatever's buzzing around in that head of yours."

Marlin only sighed. By this time, April had assumed his position, kneeling beside him.

"I guess...it's kinda hard to believe," he said. "I mean, it feels like a dream sometimes. A little bittersweet, I guess."

"Bittersweet?" She tilted her head.

"Yeah." He began to close the flaps on the box. "For one thing, I'm leaving one of my best friends."

Before she knew it, Marlin was jokingly saying he couldn't breathe. She didn't dare loosen her grip on his shoulders and he eventually relaxed, returning her hug with his own. When she finally let go, she ruffled his hair and stood up.

"Is Jordan still coming to help you move?" She asked, pulling her cell out.

"Yeah..." She had left the room by this point. "We're gonna get up at 6."

"6?" April scoffed. "I don't believe it..."

"Believe it."

"He's sleeping over. You guys are best friends. That's a bad combination which equals staying up late."

"We'll be up!" Marlin could be heard loudly retorting.

"Better be." She sent a text to Mikoto and Émilienne as to whether they would there to help Marlin move out.

"Well, let's us hope that you're ready on Sunday."

April sat down on the couch. "Are you implying that I have a problem with being ready on time?"

"No, I'm saying that you won't be ready at time," Marlin quipped.

"And yet you tell me you'll be up early in the morning."

Her phone buzzed with two messages. *Of course ;p!* and *Let me check with B.* She then sent a message to Akira.

I cant believe that in 2 days, ure gonna b in that water!

More like 4, but thanks!

Akira was a fast texter.

What? I thought...oh. It would be 4.

Yea, that proves ur Dad's niece.

Seriously, cuz?

"What's more important? My moving or our cousin's baptism?"

"Stop dodging the point," April called.

"Dodging?! You didn't even answer my question!"

"Alright!" April exclaimed. "I'm ending it there."

Marlin didn't respond, the only sound being a box being plopped on the ground.

"Akira will be so disappointed..."

April leapt up from the couch, grabbing a nearby pillow.

"I'm so glad you're not allergic to feathers."

"April, wait-!"

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Alaya felt the bed move as her friend leapt atop it, crossed her legs and hugged a charcoal teddy bear. Émilienne only gazed at her friend, curiosity crossing her features.

"So..." she began, rocking back and forth a bit.

"Well..." Alaya shrugged. "What's up? I'm amazed that *later* comes in the form of a few days."

"This is not something that can be just discussed over the form of text messages," Émilienne countered, leaning on the bed.

Alaya resisted to urge to prove her otherwise.

"...Alaya, how would you feel if I said that I have a boyfriend?"

"...What?"

Émilienne snapped up, only to be met with the surprised face of her best friend.

"When did this happen?!" Alaya blurted out, leaning forward. "Who is it?! Chris?! Brian?! A guy from another congregation?!"

"Hold up!" Émilienne put her hands up. "I never said that I *had* one. I just wanted to know how you felt."

Alaya deflated. "The way you phrase stuff, I wouldn't be surprised if you did. Way to kill my joy, Émi."

"Well, it's nice to know you were happy for me," Émilienne giggled. "But really, I just wanted to know."

"Hmmm...There are two reasons why you're asking this. One, you're interested in someone. Or..."

Émilienne only looked away, smirking.

"You're actively looking for someone," Alaya continued. "Since you've been baptized a few months and all."

Émilienne only shrugged.

Alaya deadpanned. "Well?"

Émilienne started looking at her nails. "It *maybe* the first one..."

"Oh." Alaya had crossed her legs by this point, placing her elbows on her knees, chin resting on her knuckles.

"May I ask who?"

"...Nope..."

Alaya blinked.

"I don't want to say anything yet," Émilienne said. "Y'know, just... wanna keep my options open and all..."

"Huh," Alaya mused. "Well, then. First thing, about your futur mari..." *

"Alaya!"

"...how is he in the truth?"

Émilienne hesitated. "Not like he should be admittedly...but before you write him off, he's...making progress."

"Alright," Alaya said. "How are his morals? In line with the Bible, I mean?"

"...Pretty good," Émilienne replied. "Our consciences agree on a lot."

Alaya was trying her hardest not to smile as her idea of who Émilienne admired started to form in her head.

"How much do you know about him?"

"Quite a bit."

If you want a hint of who she thought it was, his name begun with a C.

Alaya figuratively held her breath. "Is...Is he baptized?"

Émilienne shook her head.

"Émi..." Alaya began, smiling mischievously. "I think I might have an idea of who you like..."

She expected Émilienne to smile and look away, to even blush and subtly nudge her to guess.

Instead, the younger girl's face paled. Immediately.

"Oh...really?"

"Hey, hey," Alaya called. "I didn't mean anything. I just have an idea as all. I'm probably wrong."

"It's okay," Émilienne said. "Just for that, I'm not telling you."

Alaya pouted. "Mais je suis votre meilleur ami ..." **

Émilienne shook her head. "Not working."

*future husband

**But I'm your best friend

"I'll get it out of you one day," Alaya replied.

"You girls better be working on homework," Hansu could be heard saying.

"Naam, Baba," Alaya replied after giggling. "We will."

"Good. Hungry?"

"If I say yes, can we get take out?" Émilienne asked.

"Eh..."

"...Is that a yes?"

"Just come to the dining room."

"Stop teasing Daddy like that!" Alaya said, sliding off the bed.

Émilienne placed the teddy bear back on the pillows. "Why? He's my Dad, too. I practically live here!"

"Yeah, yeah," Alaya said, opening the door. As the girls headed to the dining room, a thought kept going through Alaya's mind.

She was sure that Émilienne liked Chris. By that description, she was certain if it.

But Émilienne wouldn't have looked like that if she did...

Right?

Could it also mean that it was someone else? Alaya knew that Émilienne was rather sociable... Hopefully this brother would be getting baptized fairly soon.

If not...

Well, the only thing she could do was tell her best friend to be careful.

She just hoped that she would heed the warning.

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Well, hey. Thats just me I guess.

Just u?

Wats that supposed to mean?

That ur cool. What else?

Dude.

Sorry for trying to give u a compliment.

Sure. Sure. But srsly...

Well, I mean, it just explains a lot. With u being different from other grls n all...

Why do u say that?

I just noticed it, I guess. Ur pretty unique as it is. I like that.

Huh. :)

Hey, Emi?

Yeah?

Look. I know we haven't know each other long and all, but I really like u. So...can I ask u something?

...What?

Will u go out with me?

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Peaceful, blissful sleep.

She dreamt of being surrounded by a grassy meadow, the wind blowing through her hair, her hand being held...

Wait, where did that last one come from...

But alas, before she could even get a proper answer, it ended all too soon.

The first thing that greeted her when she opened her eyes was the sunlight pouring into...the room...

Wait, what?

Squeek!

"Ack!" Akira nearly jumped out of bed as a fanfare of toy horns and bells fully jarred her from her slumber. The ragtag band was led by Mikoto herself as she, Mark and Maria paraded around Akira's bedroom. Before Akira could complain about the ridiculousness of it all, she remembered something.

It was Sunday. The day of her baptism.

And as her ears surprisingly got attuned to the noise, she noticed something else.

All three were trying their hardest to perform their own rendition of Song 59, To God We Are Dedicated.

Akira could only smile. After about a minute or so, they finally finished with a flourish. Maria walked up to the side of the bed, toy horn in hand and her father's radiance shining from her eyes.

"Did you like it?"

Akira could only laugh as she gave her sibling a hug.

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Thomas fidgeted.

No, he wasn't bored. Nor sleepy. Restless, yes. Impatient even.

Or maybe it was the fact that all eyes would be on him and the other baptism candidates at the time of 11:35 AM that morning, which happened to be in about...

He checked his watch.

...10 minutes.

Thomas frowned a bit and went back to taking notes. He had no idea how to feel right now. Sure, he was excited. That was obvious! It was just...

A hand came over his and squeezed it.

He looked over to see Akira quickly withdrawing her right hand, not even returning his gaze. After a few seconds, she smiled, and Thomas' expression softened. He had forgotten that there were a good 20 plus other people sitting around him, who were pretty much going through the same mix of emotions that he was now. They had all come together for the same reason.

Somehow, that made things a lot easier to deal with.

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Do u even kno how to hold a camera?!

Trey frowned and looked behind him at the sender of the message. Cyra only smirked and went back to steadying her father's tripod, her eyes focused on a certain foursome sitting on the Assembly Hall floor. Trey went back to recording. He hated the fact that he couldn't zoom in on his iPad, but it was better than nothing.

Shut up. At least u hav a tripod.

His phone rumbled his lap again.

My sis has an extra pole if u need one.

He looked behind him to see Alicia waving, mentioned iPad tripod pole in her right hand as she balanced her mother's iPad on the other selfie pole in her left hand.

Leave it to Cyra to sound sarcastic and actually be nice.

"I'll get it," Troy whispered. Trey only glared at him for invading his privacy, but his younger brother was already on the way.

Hopefully his youngest sibling would be in that very pool someday...

He refocused his attention and iPad camera on the three brunettes and the blond who were currently sitting among the baptism candidates, all (hopefully) paying rapt attention to the baptism talk.

His father was helping to prepare the baptism pool.

And his mother was trying her hardest not to cry. It wasn't obvious to anyone else but her family.

Troy returned with the pole and Trey thanked him, readjusting the tablet on the end.

Huh, it really did help.

Especially when the small crowd of 24 rose to answer the two most important questions that they had to answer in their entire lives.

Treena had already given up on hiding her emotions by this point.

And Trey didn't even try to when they all responded to both with a loud, "Yes."

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Alie looked like she was going to die.

Akira failed to hide a snicker as Kevin gently coaxed her towards the water. The usually bold woman now seemed paralyzed with fear as she gingerly placed her feet into the liquid and lowered herself down into the pool. She cautiously headed to the other side, where another brother waited. Kevin then beckoned Akira forward.

"You not scared of water, too, are you?"

Akira only smirked and went up the ladder, handing a towel to Bro. Clarke beforehand. She dipped her foot in and cringed a bit. She had no idea that the water would be so warm. Before she knew it, Kevin's hand was on her back, supporting her. She took her right hand and pinched her nose, while her left hand held the wrist of her right.

"Ready?"

Her heart was beating a thousand miles a minute.

A bunch of thoughts were running through her mind.

But she felt like she was flying.

She nodded.

One second, she was looking at the ceiling, the next she was underneath the water's surface. In the next two, she was up, gazing at the water-tight curls of the older woman in front of her (and still looking like a frightened cat by the way). Soon, her own hair would draw in completely, already becoming wavy from being exposed to the liquid itself.

But her appearance wasn't that important right now. She couldn't stop herself from smiling as she climbed out of the pool and patted Thomas' shoulder as she went past him.

As soon as she entered the dressing room, she was bombarded by a wet bear hug. Alie clung to her, both females crying their hearts out in happiness.

When she finally returned to the auditorium, she was nearly bowled over by her older cousin. Mikoto was hysterical, but this was one of the rare times that Akira fully relished in her cousin's emotions. Before she knew it, however, she was engulfed in a large group hug, mainly of consisting of Émilienne, Chris, Mikoto and Marlin.

"Guys...I can't breathe..."

"Don't worry, you'll be resurrected," she heard Émilienne joke.

After they disbanded, Émilienne grabbed Chris' sleeve and left, calling out to Alie and Tarrant. Akira adjusted her clothing.

"You're not all hugged out, are you?"

She turned to see Cyra, who wasn't looking serious for once. Her best friend immediately wrapped her arms around her waist and choked. Once they pulled away, Akira found herself pulled into a surprise hug from her mother and father. Bruce openly voiced his pride, while Amy simply sighed. When Akira finally broke the hug, she looked around.

"Where's Mark and Maria?" she asked.

"They're with April," Amy answered. "Don't worry. They didn't miss a thing. They just went with her to get our lunches from the car."

"Hey, I wasn't wondering..." Akira pouted.

"Oh, your face betrayed everything, hun," Amy said, smirking.

Akira prepared a retort, only to feel her hair being ruffled by a large hand and smoothed out by a smaller one. She turned to see Kevin and Treena, who held her hands on his hips.

"Told you it wouldn't be long," she said.

Akira could feel herself starting to blush from all the attention, but was quickly picked up and spun around to face Alaya. It took her a second to realize that she been engulfed again, this time by her and Brian.

"Guys, this is honestly starting to get mushy..."

"Would you mind one more embrace then?"

Akira, being the short person that she was, could barely see Thomas standing close by, arms folded. Alaya and Brian had let go at this moment and once again, Akira was in the air, not that she minded. He was happy and they were best friends, after all. The moment was ruined when he suddenly pulled back and began shaking out his hands after patting her shoulders.

"What...was...?" Akira questioned.

"Your hair is still wet!"

She deadpanned. "Really? Don't use my clothes to..."

"Ah, we're finally back!"

"Congratulations, Akira!"

April arrived with Mark, Maria and three others that she didn't recognize in tow. Placing the bags down, Akira's older cousin rushed over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"You better live up to that dedication!"

"I shall!" Akira declared, her face full bloom from everything that ensued. Mark and Maria presented her with flowers they picked, which led the brunette to finally declare that she needed to calm down before she got any more gifts or hugs.

"Who's this?" she heard Amy ask as she arranged the flowers in her daughter's hair.

"This..." April announced dramatically, "is Abayomi Marias, Dae-Jung Lee and Zac Efron...er, I mean, Zachary Taylor."

The brother who she referred to only deadpanned.

The young woman, Abayomi, was beautiful with a head full of black wavy curls. She had dark brown skin, brown eyes and looked to be about 5'8" in height. She approached Akira with arms outstretched, but then pulled back.

"Uh...I usually greet sisters by hugging, but I heard what you said earlier, so..."

"I'll make an exception," Akira sighed, returning the embrace. "I'm Akira."

"Congrats on your baptism, today," she said. "Nice to meet you. This..."

She beckoned the shorter of the two brothers, a teenage Korean with jet black hair with bangs that hung off the side of his face, dark green eyes and a lanky figure. He seemed to be about the same height as Abayomi. Abayomi put her arm on his shoulder.

"...is my best friend, Dae-Jung," she proudly continued. Dae-Jung responded with a shy greeting of his own, giving Akira a half-smile. Akira returned it.

"And since no one decided to properly introduce me," Zachary said, sending a look in April's direction, "I'm Zach." Akira raised an eyebrow at his Australian accent. He was a tall, handsome young man with cropped dark brown-black hair, light skin and hazel eyes.

"And if you're wondering, I'm Chinese-Australian," he sighed, smirking. Akira was surprised that he even knew what she was thinking.

"And I'm every color in the rainbow," she said with complete seriousness. Looking at her parents and then to her, he gave her a thumbs-up.

"Akira!" She turned to see Anita speeding towards her like a bullet, arms in front of her. Her husband, along with the Steeles, was trailing behind her, not running, but the joy on their faces spoke volumes.

Looks like the hug-fest wasn't stopping anytime soon.

CHAPTER IV

"You ready?"

She nodded, looking around cautiously. She was glad that they were in another part of town. Any closer to her neighborhood and her hair would be a dead giveaway. Of course, she had on a cap and her hair in a side ponytail just in case.

"Hey."

He placed a hand on her waist, a calming and welcome gesture.

"It'll be okay," he assured her. "Believe me." He called out behind him. "I'm headed out, Mom!"

An older woman was heard bidding him goodbye as he closed the door to the apartment. He took her by the hand and began leading her to his car. She relaxed a little. There was no one familiar around, so there was really nothing to worry about.

Getting into the passenger seat, she was almost surprised that she agreed to this. But it was fine, right? He was learning about the bible and their new relationship could make it easier for her to help him to love Jehovah.

As they pulled off, she sighed happily.

There was nothing to worry about.

At least as far as she was concerned.

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"WHAT?!"

"You'll be able to handle it? I mean, I intended to tell you earlier, but after Marlin and I decided to put off the wedding by three months, we wanted to wait until..."

Before anymore could be said, Alexis was enveloped in a bear hug.

"Yes!" Mikoto screeched happily. "Yes! Yes! Yes! I would love to be your maid of honor!"

Ignoring the stares of the few students surrounding her, Alexis clasped her hands together. "And you'll ask Trey about being a groomsman, right? I know that Marlin wants Jordan to be the best man."

"You guys go way back! I gotcha!" Mikoto nodded.

Alexis nodded.

"I know Trey will be honored," Mikoto said. "And I am especially! That means I gotta tend to you and the other bridesmaids and stuff, right?"

"If you wanna put it that way," Alexis agreed. "Remember to ask Akira and Cyra about being in the wedding. I already asked Bedelia and she agreed immediately."

"Oh, cool! Who's going to be her escort?"

"One of Marlin's old friends," Alexis said. "I think his name is Chuguel Marias."

Mikoto squealed. "This is gonna be so exciting!"

"Yeah, I guess it is..."

"You okay, chica?"

"I'm fine," Alexis replied truthfully. "I know I may not sound like it, but I mean, everything's happening and...it just seems like such a dream..."

Alexis sighed. "We're graduating, Miko. I'm getting married. You and the others are heading off to college for at least a year. I know Marlin and I are planning to go to SKE so we're going to pioneer together...and..."

Alexis trailed off, a little unsure of how to express her thoughts.

"Life is like a reaction time video game."

Alexis blinked. "What?"

"It's dawning on everyone that everything is going to change quickly. Seemingly overnight. And right now, it seems like our choices are on a head-on collision course with us where we should make a decision or risk getting hit. Gladly, life doesn't end if you get hit...but it still pays to be prepared I guess...."

Alexis mused for a second. "I guess I get what you're saying...I think. Which reminds me..."

"What's up?"

"Are you and Trey going to be moving out to attend college?"

"Totally commuting," Mikoto said. "We already talked about it and no way are we even tempting ourselves in that environment. We're trying to do early enrollment as well and a few online classes. I want to be off that campus as much as possible."

"That's a relief," Alexis admitted.

"Why you doubting?" Mikoto asked.

"Can't I be worried?" Alexis admitted. "I swear Marlin was trying his best to be nice when I kept asking him all those questions about the apartment."

"Oh, yeah!" Mikoto nodded, leaning against the wall. "April texted me about helping him move in. Have you seen it yet?"

"Nope," answered Alexis, shaking her head. "Marlin refuses to divulge any details about where it is or what it looks like..."

Mikoto gasped. "You think he wants it to be a surprise gift for your wedding?!"

"I'm going to be helping him move in, remember?" Alexis smiled. "Even though that would be nice..."

Mikoto giggled. "Knowing him, you'd probably know about all of your wedding gifts."

"Hey...but I was totally surprised when he proposed..."

"Sure..."

"I'm serious!" Alexis huffed. "Sorry for having a dad that's smart..."

Mikoto only smirked, which only served to further Alexis' short-lived irritation. She then heard someone gasp and a pair of hurried footsteps. Looking behind her, she saw no one.

"Mikoto, did you hear something?"

"I'm not being an owl for nothing."

"What?" Alexis furrowed her brow at the other young woman. Mikoto was crooning her neck towards the noise, a curious expression lining her face.

"Might sound crazy, but I think I saw Émilienne..."

"Émilienne?" Alexis echoed. She walked towards the hallway that the sound had come from and looked down it. At the other end was a tall boy with black curly hair. His back was turned towards them and he was standing behind the locker at the end of the hallway.

"Guess I was wrong..." Mikoto mused quietly, having followed her. "I was sure that was her, though..."

"You sure you didn't see him?" Alexis questioned.

"Now that I think of it, I might've seen two people..." She rubbed her chin for a moment and then leapt, waving her arm back and forth and causing Alexis to jump back. Hey!"

The boy jumped and panicked, flailing a bit before placing a hand to his chest. Turning around, he slowly pointed towards himself, a clear look of confusion on his face.

"Yes, you!" Mikoto called. She waved him over and walked towards him. They eventually met each other halfway. The boy's eyes darted from left to right.

"Quick question," Mikoto began. "Have you seen a girl about average height, green eyes, vase-shaped, caramel hair..."

Alexis silently marveled at Mikoto's choice of words.

"...and wearing something along the lines of denim shorts, v-neck, white flats and a gold necklace?"

"Er..." The boy shifted a bit on his feet. "Maybe a girl with brown hair, but I don't r-remember that much..."

"Guys?"

Both looked past the boy to see Émilienne, looking a little disheveled. She jogged up to them and stopped, rocking back and forth on her feet.

"What's up?"

Mikoto blinked. "So, I did see you!"

"You did?" Émilienne asked, sounding less surprised than Alexis expected. "When was that?"

"Like a minute ago!" Mikoto said. She then smiled widely. "You saw us, too, didn't you?"

Émilienne seemed to pale a bit at this. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought I saw you turn around at the end of the hallway and run away from us...okay. Truthfully, I didn't see the last part, so I don't really know...but still!" She pointed a finger in a flourish. "Why? Are you hiding something? Hmmm? "

Émilienne seemed nervous. "No--."

"Then why'd you turn around?"

Émilienne huffed, smirking. "I left something in the restroom and went back to get it."

Mikoto kept her gaze pinned on the other girl, but then relaxed. "Okay. I believe you...I think."

"I'll be honest and say I'm not sure how that works..."

"Um..." All heads turned to the boy. "Can I..."

"Oh, yeah!" Mikoto said. "Sorry. Didn't mean to bring you into this."

He shrugged. "No harm done. Longer I'm out of the class the better, am I right?"

"Yep...but it's better with no class to go to," Mikoto mentioned. The boy's eyes widened and he shook his head.

"Seniors..." he muttered. "You..." He pointed towards Émilienne. "...need to get back to class."

"You're one to talk!" Émilienne snapped back, smiling. "See you guys later!"

With that, she waved, walking around the girls in a hurry. The boy had turned down another hallway by this point and turned the corner.

Mikoto sighed. "This is probably me being absolutely nuts, but Émilienne seemed a bit ancy. She even looked relieved when I let up on her..."

"I'm pretty sure everyone feels that way..."

She got a blank stare in response. Alexis only giggled and the girls continued their previous conversation, with Mikoto asking Alexis about applying for a part-time job.

All the while, Alexis couldn't help but wonder if it was all a coincidence.

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"I had no idea April invited you guys..."

"Dad and Mom invited themselves..." Akira noted, gesturing behind her. Amy only sent her daughter a blank look.

"Who's watching the twins?" Marlin asked.

"That would be Treena," Bruce answered truthfully, putting his hands on his hips. "So, what needs to be done here?"

Marlin pointed to his car. "There's boxes in there. Zach is bringing his truck and that'll have my bed on it plus a couple of other things. Right now, I just want these boxes moved inside before I truly decide on anything..."

Bruce nodded and headed to the car, Amy tagging along. Marlin sighed, looking at the apartment complex. Just last night, he was conked out in his own bedroom right next to his older sister's.

Now, he was truly on his own.

He honestly hoped he wouldn't get too lonely.

"Well..." He turned towards Akira, who shrugged.

"What's my agenda?"

"You...get to see the inside of the apartment first," he announced, heading towards the front door.

"Wait...seriously?" He heard after a few seconds.

"Yep." He took the keys out of his pocket and unlocked it. "In all its unfinished glory."

Akira could be heard snickering, but she followed obediently.

"Thanks. You guys didn't have to give up your Saturday for this."

"Don't even worry about it."

They came inside and both looked around. The apartment was completely bare, cream-colored walls with white trim. There was no wall between the dining room and living room, while the kitchen could be peeked into by the half wall that separated some of it from the dining room. A narrow hallway led from the living room to the kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and closet, which contained the furnace. A small patio extended from the living room, separated by sliding glass doors.

Akira nodded. "Yep. I can imagine the lap of luxury here."

"Most expensive one I could get on a budget," Marlin replied. "I mean, I know it's not much and I'll finally have some actual furniture in here after a few weeks..."

"Alexis is gonna love it," Akira said, placing an arm around his shoulder. "You know how she is. And once you guys get married, she's probably going to add her own flair to it, right?"

Marlin couldn't help but smile as his heart swelled at the thought of living together with his future wife.

"Your face is red."

"That won't work on me anymore," Marlin remarked smugly.

"You ruin all the fun."

"If I had known that you two would be lazy, I wouldn't have agreed to this," Amy could be heard saying from the front door.

"Coming!"

Akira left Marlin alone to help her parents carry in the boxes. He sighed and went outside, looking up at the sound of a car horn. Coming into the parking lot was a dark blue truck and a crimson Honda. April immediately leapt out of the first vehicle, waving enthusiastically. Mikoto leapt out from the bed of the truck and rushed forward towards the apartment, nearly mowing Marlin down with a hug in the process. He still landed on his backside anyway.

"One of these days you're going to get imprinted in the ground, querido," he heard Alexis say as he felt her put her arms under his and help him back up.

"And I won't even be angry," he admitted, brushing himself off. After sharing a light kiss with his fiancée, Marlin went to greet the others, waving to the Steeles and Émilienne and giving Jordan a high five. April and Zachary had started to remove the ropes tying down the furniture on the latter's truck.

"I can hardly believe that you guys made it here early," she remarked. "I didn't have to drag you out of bed."

"Hardy har har," Marlin quipped, smirking.

"Marly!" Marlin jumped at Mikoto's screech and whipped around to see her bouncing on the balls of her feet. "I can't wait 'til you bring everything together! You already ordered the other furniture, right?!"

"Not too loud, sis," he said, placing a finger on his lips. "My fiancée already knows half the stuff I was gonna surprise her with when we started dating."

"What was that?" he heard Alexis call out.

"Nothing!" Mikoto skipped over to her closest friend and hooked arms. "C'mon! Let's get some of these boxes out!"

Alexis only raised her eyebrows, but didn't object. Marlin heaved a sigh of relief and clasped his hands together. "Okay...Zach, April, you guys are fine. Bro. and Sis. Steele, do you mind helping them?"

"That's fine," Alex agreed, him and Rosalina immediately getting to work.

"Émi, can you... Émi!"

She jumped, looking up from her phone.

"Is texting Alaya that important?" he asked. "Anyway, you mind getting some boxes in?"

Émilienne didn't say anything, but nodded and scurried off.

"And you..." Marlin clasped a hand on Jordan's shoulder, "are gonna help me unpack some boxes and arrange some stuff. C'mon."

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"So, what's up, dude?"

"What do you mean?"

Jordan watched as Marlin eyed his dresser, deciding where he wanted to position it

"I mean, I'm not trying to dote or anything," Marlin said, waving him over. He positioned himself on the right side of the piece of furniture. "But you haven't exactly been yourself lately."

Jordan frowned a bit, going to the other side. "How do you figure?"

Marlin looked at him, clearly not convinced. "You're avoiding the question."

Images of his parent's earlier dispute entered his mind. Pushing them away along with the dresser, Jordan remarked, "I'm fine. Nothing's wrong--"

"We haven't been able to play together in a couple of weeks," Marlin interrupted. Jordan gave him a blank look.

"I told you," Jordan began, "I've been busy."

"And the times you weren't, you barely picked up your guitar!" With one final push, they finally got it into place.

"I just...wasn't inspired," Jordan weakly retorted. "Artist's block, man."

"First of all," his best friend mentioned while grabbing a box, "you only use Scottish slang around me when you're bored, excited or trying to hide something."

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

"And second..." Marlin placed the box atop the dresser and opened it, "Cyra told me about your parents' arguments ever since your dad got read off."

Jordan's eyes widened and he slowly looked towards Marlin, whose confused and concerned expression spoke volumes. "Why didn't you tell me this was happening?"

I didn't want you to worry.

I didn't want to burden you with my problems.

I didn't want to bring anyone down by talking about my bad day while they're enjoying theirs.

Jordan shrugged. "I don't know."

Marlin didn't respond, but he was clearly not convinced.

"You know," he began, taking some things out, "I can't say that I understand. I mean, I wish I could but I can't. But I know you. And you usually don't act like this. Even when you are stressed about something."

"You act like you've never heard of an argument..."

Marlin deadpanned. "You forget April is my older sister."

"I heard that!" Both young men cringed at the voice and April appeared in the doorway. She took two fingers and did the "I got eyes on you" gesture, narrowing her eyes as she did so. When she left, both couldn't help laughing. Jordan sighed, feeling a bit better about the earlier situation.

"Look, jimmy," he saw Marlin smirk at his use of Scottish slang, "I...I really appreciate that you guys are worried about me. Really. I'm not letting it get to me."

"My parents died. You think I got over that in one night?"

"Point is..." interrupted Jordan. "I think things might be getting better."

Marlin started looking worried, closing the box. "You mean they were worse than we thought?"

Abort. Abort. Abort.

"No, no..." Jordan followed his friend to the bathroom. "Maybe? Mom and Dad still go at it at times and Dad kinda dropped off Family Worship for a little while. I guess the announcement shocked him more than we originally thought at first. We're getting back on track with it, though." Finally.

"But?"

This was of the rare times that Jordan hated that Marlin could read him like a book. He sighed. "Dad still seems...distant. Like something's lacking. It feels more like he's taking the lead spiritually now because he's obligated to than because he wants to. Of course, I could be wrong...."

He hoped that he was.

"And therefore, I asked about your playing," Marlin said, emptying the box onto the counter. "I'm not saying it's a cure-all or anything..." They headed towards the living room, but nearly ran into by Émilienne and Zach carrying a nightstand through the hallway.

"But it helps relieve your nerves," he continued. "Along with prayer, association, meetings, ministry." He rubbed his neck. "Have you talked to your parents about it?"

Jordan shrugged. "Of course. With Mom. Da just..."

"Take a deep breath."

"What?" Jordan sent Marlin a look and the other teen only repeated the same phrase.

"Because you're starting to talk fast," Marlin replied.

"Dad just avoids the subject," Jordan continued, leaning against the wall. "I mean, I know eventually that he'll tell us, but...it just feels...different for some reason."

"I'll be honest," Marlin remarked. "The only thing I can do is be there for you, man. Just like everyone else. You know you got us and Jehovah."

Jordan smiled, trying his best to relish in the fact that he had support. Just then his phone rumbled. Taking out his Android, he noticed that it was from Darell, stating that he was on his way home and that work ran a little overtime. Jordan simply stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

"Who was that?" Marlin asked, walking outside.

"Dad. Saying that's he's done from work and all..."

Marlin frowned, a bit of concern showing on his face. "Uh, I'm probably wrong about this, but hasn't your Dad been doing overtime at his job quite a bit lately?"

Jordan was about to deny it with his usual answer of Darell being asked to work one Saturday a month in exchange for having Thursdays off, but stopped. Marlin's question did make some sense...

"Get that look off your face, replace it with a smile and help your girlfriend move my bed frame out of Zach's car."

Jordan blinked. "What?"

"I'm not about to have you going crazy with worry right now," Marlin said, heading outside. Both stopped at the fact that more of their friends had joined in helping Marlin move.

"I'll be honest enough to say that it seems like you invited the whole congregation."

"That was probably April's doing..."

Jordan smirked. Greeting Cyra with a hug, he proceeded to help her move the mattress from the back of Zachary's vehicle.

Even so, he couldn't help but wonder about Marlin's question.

And if maybe there was some truth to it.

CHAPTER V

"That movie was...incredibly cliché."

"Can't you just say you didn't like it?"

"I'm not saying I didn't like it. I cried, remember? I'm just saying that it's incredibly cliché."

"What's the difference?"

Kenny only fake frowned with Émilienne, who giggled. The two were at a Japanese restaurant, enjoying some salad before their main meal.

"Okay, so you didn't enjoy *The Fault in Our Stars*. I get it."

"Let's just drop the subject," Émilienne remarked.

"Can I just say one more thing?"

"What?"

"Do you think...you know, we could have a phrase like 'okay'? Like our forever?"

Émilienne blushed, looking down. "Maybe..."

"Maybe?!" Ken exclaimed.

"It's only our third date, Ken," Émilienne mentioned.

Ken huffed and muttered something under his breath.

"What was that?" Émilienne wonder aloud, stuffing some lettuce into her mouth.

"I agree with you..."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Alright, here you go." The sweet voice alerted her to the waitress that brought them their food, placing down two plates of chicken hibachi on the table. Grabbing her chopsticks, Émilienne split them open and prepared to eat.

"Ken!"

Émilienne flinched.

Don't let it be someone they know. Don't let it be someone only he knows.

Worse, don't let it be someone only SHE knows.

"Esy!" Ken waved towards his friend, a short, teenage Mexican girl who was a little chubby. Her curly black hair bounced as she headed towards them.

"Émilienne, this is Esmeralda," Ken introduced. "Esy, this is Émi...my girlfriend."

"Aw, you're even prettier in person!" Esmeralda said. "Well, it's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too," Émilienne said, feeling relieved. "Wait...you told her about me?"

"That doesn't bother you, does...Dh..." Ken deflated visibly and clenched his teeth. Émilienne only sighed. Esmeralda seemed a bit confused by the situation.

"Um, did I say something wrong?"

"No, no," Émilienne said. "Just...we don't want too many people knowing about us dating and all..."

"Don't worry. Unlike Mr. Blabbermouth over here, I won't tell anyone..."

"You're one to talk!" Ken said, snapping up almost immediately. "You told that other girl about Émi..."

"How many people know about this?"

"She's the only one!" Esmeralda said. "I swear! I was just joking around with Akira..."

"Akira?!" Émilienne almost exclaimed. Both of the other teens jumped back and she composed herself. "Uh, what does she look like?"

"...Black hair, tan skin, brown eyes, maybe about 5'4" in height?" Esmeralda squeaked.

"Yeah...that's her..."

"Look, I'm sorry," Esmeralda replied. "I knew you guys weren't dating at the time, so I thought it was okay..."

Émilienne pressed her lips together. "No, I'm sorry for overreacting. It's okay. You didn't know."

"Esmeralda!"

"And that's mama." Esmeralda turned on her heels. "Enjoy your date, guys! My lips are sealed."

With that, she hurried back to her family. By this time, Émilienne was playing with her food with her chopsticks, a little miffed over the turn of events. Ken turned towards her.

"Hey...I didn't mean to..."

"Ken, it's okay," Émilienne started, looking up. "Akira doesn't know that it's you, anyway. I didn't give her too many details."

Ken seemed to perk up a bit at this. "If you say so."

"Oh! About our earlier convo..."

"Uh...you mean about God, right?" Ken asked.

"Yeah! That's it!" Émilienne remarked, smiling. "Before we got interrupted, I was trying..."

"Émi..."

Émilienne blinked at the sound of her name. Ken's face was a bit of a blank.

"I don't mean to be rude, but can you just concentrate on our date, right now?"

It was Émilienne's turn to deflate. "But...I thought you said that we could talk about it...now..."

Ken grimaced a bit. "I...I thought I did, but now, I just don't feel up to it." He took her hand. "Later, okay?"

Émilienne managed to smile, pushing back her disappointment.

She had too much fun to remember to bring it up later that night.

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"Mikoto is...rather giddy tonight."

"She's graduating on Saturday! Why wouldn't she be?"

Akira, Alicia and Thomas watched as Mikoto bounced from brother to sister, greeting them all excitedly.

"How's Trey doing?" Thomas heard Akira ask.

"He's better," Thomas said. "I was surprised he was even worried about graduating."

"He looks just as excited as Mikoto is," Alicia remarked, gesturing to Trey on the other side of the Kingdom Hall, giving a random secret handshake to Charlene.

"Charlene's probably more excited than he is," Akira admitted. Alicia nodded.

"I see your Dad is getting his beard back." Bruce and Amy chatted with the Williards.

"Ah, he just needs to shave," Akira said.

Thomas sighed. "Are we really that bored that we're just pointing out stuff that's obvious?"

"Yep." Alicia smirked. "It's even better when you imagine them having convos..."

"What the heck, Alicia?" Akira asked, giggling.

Thomas only shook his head. Turning around in the lobby, he noticed Jordan behind the magazine counter, looking rather...

Well, to be honest, he couldn't really tell.

"Uh, Jordan..." Thomas slowly approached the counter, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, what's up?" The older teen immediately perked up, placing his hands in the countertop.

"You don't fool me that well," Thomas said. "What's on your mind?"

Jordan sighed and only motioned to the closed door of one of the other smaller schools. Thomas only looked in the direction and raised an eyebrow. Right on cue, the door opened and Malvina and Darell could be seen leaving, the latter clearly not pleased. Both shook hands with the elders who came out after them and went their separate ways, Malvina going to the auditorium and Darell heading to the men's bathroom. Upon seeing Thomas, he gave him a quick greeting, but didn't stop in his tracks. Thomas frowned.

"I feel like there's a piece of the puzzle that I'm missing here...This isn't what I think it is...is it?" Thomas asked in a hushed voice. Jordan shrugged.

Jordan only shrugged. "Dad didn't tell us until we came into the Kingdom Hall." He looked down. "...I hope not."

"You and me too, Jordan," Thomas asked. "I hope I didn't pry or anything..."

Jordan shook his head. "No. It's bit more too it."

"Um, Thomas?"

He looked behind him to see Cyra standing behind him, hands behind her back.

"You mind if I speak to Jordan for a minute?"

"Go ahead," Thomas said, motioning towards the counter. Moving away, he nearly bumped into Akira, who he quickly took by the arm and led away.

"Uh...I know it's almost time for the meeting," Akira began, "but is all this necessary?"

"I'm just giving them some privacy," Thomas whispered, motioning his head towards the back. Akira looked behind him and her face lit up with understanding.

"Ah..."

"So, it seems the thing that is bothering Jordan involves his parents," Thomas remarked, putting his hands into his pockets.

"Cyra hasn't told me all the details either," Akira said. "I think if I was closer to Jordan she would. It's strictly between her, Marlin and Jordan."

"I see..." Thomas looked at the conversing couple. "Well, it wouldn't be right to pester them for information..." He watched Cyra quickly scurry towards the woman's bathroom, nearly bumping into Bro. Tyson. As Jordan exited the magazine counter, his father quickly said something to him and headed towards the front door of the Kingdom Hall. The look on Jordan's face spoke volumes as he watched his father leave. Even as he accompanied Cyra to her seat and took his place on stage with the Draw Close to Jehovah book in hand, it was obvious to Thomas and a few others that he was trying to hide his distress.

The announcement of Darell being read off as a ministerial servant that night helped everything to make even more sense.

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"Émilienne?"

The mentioned girl stopped in her tracks.

She was hearing voices.

Looking around the apartment, she squinted her eyes. Bedelia had better not be playing tricks on her again...

"Émilienne! Over here!" Émilienne followed the sound of the voice to Bedelia's bedroom. Cautiously opening the door, she looked around but saw no one...

"Laptop."

"What are you..." Émilienne turned her attention to Bedelia's desk. She quickly covered her mouth when she noticed a familiar face with black, wavy hair. Abayomi only smiled widely.

"Finally!" She said over the video stream.

"I swear I thought Bedelia was trying to prank me again," Émilienne said, sitting down in front of the computer desk.

"You mean the time when she placed a walkie talkie in each room when you were younger and freaked you out?"

"Yeah!" Émilienne exclaimed. "Wait...she told you about this?"

"Nope," Abayomi admitted. "Chuguel did."

"Chuguel?"

"Bedelia hasn't told you yet? He's my..."

"I'm back!" Before she knew it, another face popped up on the screen, one with dark brown skin, a curly black hair, large ears and hazel eyes. Émilienne's eyes widened a bit as she quickly realized how cute he was. The young man narrowed his eyes a bit at the screen.

"Uh..."

"This is Émilienne, Bedelia's niece," Abayomi announced. "I met her at the convention. Émi, this is my brother, Chuguel."

"Oh!" He smiled widely. "Nice to finally meet you in person... well, kind of."

Émilienne blinked. "Um...what..."

Two hands clasped down on Émilienne's shoulders, causing her to jump. Bedelia only laughed at her reaction and Émilienne shook her head, sighing.

"Why, Bel..."

"What? I was just playing."

"Yeah, yeah," Émilienne said.

"She has returned to grace us with her wonderful presence!" Chuguel was heard saying.

"Aw, Chuguel, stop it!" Bedelia looked down, her face turning pink. Émilienne felt a bit too exasperated to ask at first, but ended up doing a double take anyway.

"The look on Émi's face isn't reassuring," he continued. "You still haven't told her yet?"

"Told me what?" Émilienne sent a look in Bedelia's direction, crossing her arms.

"Eh..." Bedelia placed her hands behind her back. "Remember that guy I told you about? The one who's my escort in Alexis' wedding?"

"...Yeah..." Émilienne admitted.

"This is him..."

"Bedelia..." Chuguel coaxed.

"Stop rushing me!"

"You guys are acting really...funny...no..." Émilienne's eyes widened as the realization dawned on her. "You're dating, aren't you?"

"Well, not officially..."

"Yes."

"Chuguel!" Bedelia exclaimed. He only laughed.

"So..." Émilienne said.

"Bedelia said that we're not official until Abayomi and I finally moved to Riverview," Chuguel said casually. "It's the same to me."

Not official...

"Émilienne, are you okay?"

Émilienne realized that she was spacing out and nodded eagerly. Abayomi smiled, looking a little relieved.

"You're still coming to the movies on Tuesday?" Émilienne asked. Abayomi nodded. "Yep."

"Movies?" Bedelia questioned, giving her niece a suspicious look. "When and where?"

"Only when you answer my questions about you guys dating," Émilienne replied, smirking. Bedelia blushed and frowned. "That's blackmail..."

"Says the girl who does the exact same thing."

"Chuguel!"

Émilienne only watched as the couple 'argued.' She soon found herself frowning, though and eventually excused herself, her mind going to a certain secret boyfriend. For some reason, she could only think of the fact that while Bedelia and Chuguel had the ability to reveal their relationship, she couldn't...

Didn't.

That word didn't feel quite right.

And she had a feeling she knew why.

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"Hold still."

"I am! I am!" Mikoto proclaimed. "I just can't help it!"

Akira shook her head playfully and continued to pin up Mikoto's hair. Placing the last pin in the updo, she stepped back.

"Well?"

Mikoto didn't answer, her face a complete blank as she stared in the mirror.

"Miko?" Akira asked. "You don't like it?"

She watched as Mikoto lightly fingered her hairstyle, a small smile forming on her face.

"I love it," she squeaked. Before Akira could say anything, Mikoto had turned and enveloped her in a bear hug.

"O-M-GEE! I'm graduating today! I can't believe it!"

Akira could only smile as Mikoto pulled back, small tears having formed in the corner of her eyes. Grabbing the orange grad cap of the counter, she placed it on Mikoto's head.

"To complete the ensemble."

"Thanks," Mikoto said. "It's really weird, though. I had no idea how I'd feel today. And here I am. I just...no more school and...it's gonna feel empty now. Even with the fact that I'm headed off to college."

"Be glad." Akira crossed her arms. "I still got a year to go."

"Oh, believe me! I am!" Mikoto announced. Akira sighed.

"I'm proud of you, cuz," Akira remarked.

"I'm not a total failure, am I?" Mikoto asked, smiling. "I'm just glad that I'll be free to pursue spiritual goals. What you got lined up for you?"

"With what?" Akira leaned against the wall.

Mikoto adjusted her cords. "Spiritually, I mean. Any specific goals at the moment?"

Akira bit her lip. "Um...well..."

Mikoto turned around and grabbed one of Akira's hands, enclosing it in both of hers. "Hey, no rush. The fact that you're baptized is a great first step, believe me. You don't have to have your life figured out spiritually as soon as you're out of the water. I sure didn't." She chuckled. "In fact, I'm still figuring them out now."

"It's just...so many options, y'know," Akira sighed. "It's hard to know where to start."

"And Jehovah will narrow these options to your liking," Mikoto mused. "It may surprise you where he wants you to go."

Akira blinked. She often forgot how insightful Mikoto was. With swish of her gown, Mikoto made a quick pose.

"How do I look?"

"Like I will," Akira said, smirking.

Mikoto raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

"An overjoyed idiot."

Mikoto giggled. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Mikoto!" Amy called. "Trey's here!"

"Doo! Coming!" She called, opening the bathroom door and running out. As Akira followed her, she watched as Amy's hands flew up to her mouth. Trey only turned to see and cleared his throat, his cheeks turning pink. Bruce jabbed him in the arm and Trey jumped, only to chuckle immediately after.

"Ready?" Trey asked. "We got like 45 minutes."

"Yep!" Mikoto waved. "See you guys at the football field!"

"Right behind you, sweetie," Bruce called. "Akira?"

"Let me grab my purse," she said, rushing towards her room. Sighing, she grabbed the needed item off the dresser.

She had a feeling that things were going to change rather quickly really soon.

CHAPTER VI

"Hey, guys!"

Brian followed the source of the voice to the front of the movie plex. Émilienne enthusiastically waved as he and Chris approached her.

"Hey!" Chris called back. "Where's Alaya?"

"She said she's almost here," Émilienne replied. "I just texted her. You heard from Abayomi yet?"

Brian shook his head. "Nope. Not in the last ten minutes and..." He noticed Chris' dumbfounded expression. "What?"

"When Abayomi told me that she owned a red and black Kawasaki, I thought she was kidding..." Chris muttered.

He followed both gazes to see that very motorcycle with two riders pull up next to his car. The rider in the back carefully unwrapped their arms from the driver's waist and pried off their helmet, revealing a rather frazzled Dae-Jung. Abayomi then took off her helmet and after hanging it on the handle, jabbed him playfully in the arm.

"Why do I even bother? Oh, hey, Brian," Dae-Jung said, sounding shaken.

"Hey," Brian replied calmly, raising his eyebrows a bit. Abayomi had leapt off the bike by this time and gave the larger boy a fist bump.

"Dae-Jung's just acting," Abayomi replied.

"Yeah, yeah..." Dae-Jung muttered.

"Mm-hmm. Naelewa. Asante kwa kuchukua yangu."*

Brian looked up to see Alaya, who exited her father's car and waved shyly at the group. Abayomi excitedly greeted Alaya in Swahili, immediately starting a conversation between the two.

"And...my head officially hurts," Émilienne announced

"You're one to talk," Chris mentioned. "My head hurts when you and Alaya start chattering excitedly in French!"

"You took Latin in tenth grade..." Émilienne grumbled. "You should at least have an idea of what we're saying."

"But you talk so fast, no one can hear what you're saying," Brian said calmly. She deadpanned. He shrugged in response.

"OK! So, what are we going to see?" Abayomi asked, clasping her hands together.

Brian mused. "I want to see *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* myself, but I'm not picky."

"I've already seen *The Fault in Our Stars*," Émilienne noted quietly. Alaya pounced in her direction.

"Aw! Why didn't you tell me?"

"It-It was at the last minute!" Émilienne exclaimed, sounding shaky. Brian raised an eyebrow at her behavior.

"I'm sorry! Bedelia...she only had two passes to the movies! But...I don't mind seeing it again..."

Alaya pouted and sighed. "It's okay. I can see it another time..."

"Too bad *The Hundred-Foot Journey* isn't out," Abayomi mentioned. "I would love to see that."

"You and me both," Brian admitted, getting a surprised look.

"I would say *Guardians of the Galaxy*...but I know Brian and I are going to see it with Dad and Alie next week," Chris said.

"*How to Train Your Dragon 2*?" Dae-Jung suggested.

"I haven't even seen the first one," Alaya admitted. "Émi has..."

"Okay, this is starting to get complicated," Émilienne announced. "I'm the one who texted you guys about which three movies you guys wanted to see the most. And if I'm correct, it was Spider-man..."

She looked at her phone, seemingly scrolling through the windows. Behind her, a lanky, blue-eyed teen with black, curly hair walked by, stopped and purposely started to look over her shoulder. The others exchanged looks until Émilienne jumped and punched the other teen in the arm.

"Ow!"

"Seriously, Kenny?!" she exclaimed.

"Geez, you're stronger than you look," he muttered, rubbing his arm.

"*sigh* Goodness..." She seemed to finally notice the strange looks she was getting. "Oh! Guys, this is Kenny," Émilienne announced, sounding somewhat reluctant to do so. Chris seemed to brighten up at this announcement and he introduced himself. The two boys almost immediately seemed to hit it off rather well. As the others slowly approached, Alaya stood off to the distance, wringing her hands together.

Her nervousness was high off the charts.

Slowing shuffling over to his other best friend, Brian stood silently next to the girl. She was currently biting her nails, her thumb resting on her lip while her elbow rested in her other hand. She soon noticed his presence and hid her hands under her arms.

"What's up?" he asked after a moment.

"Uh...nothing really." Alaya gave him a side glance. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Has Chris..." She rubbed her neck. "...talked about anyone lately?"

To be honest, he had no real idea how to answer that.

"Uh...what do you mean?" he wondered.

Alaya bit her lip. "I mean...uh...just about people that he...may or may not be close to?"

"As in...romantically?"

Alaya shrugged, looking in his direction.

"Maybe."

Brian took a moment before answering, watching her movements. He already knew Alaya was not the person to regularly talk about romantic things, even with Émilienne. Also, while she was nervous, for some reason, it didn't seem to be because she liked Chris in any way. Just more like she was asking because she was curious.

But in that case, why would she ask?

Alaya was looking at him now and her face dropped a bit when their eyes met.

"Sorry..." she quickly started. "I didn't mean to..."

"No, no," Brian said, still sounding surprisingly calm even though he felt otherwise. "I was just thinking. Well, for one thing, you know Chris. If he liked someone, it would be obvious whether they were around him or not. He's not that good at hiding his emotions." Alaya shrugged, nodding.

"Also, to be honest, he hasn't really talked about anyone in particular to tell the truth. I mean, hey, we're guys, but he's still dealing with some stuff. "

"True..." Alaya sighed, deflating a bit.

"You okay?" Brian asked.

Alaya quickly nodded, smiling. "I'm good. And no, I don't like Chris."

"I kinda already knew that..."

"...You're scary..." Brian only chuckled as she took a step away from him. He turned his attention back to the others. Émilienne seemed rather giddy, while Chris, Abayomi and Dae-Jung stood off to the side. She looked at her phone, her mouth forming an 'O.'

"All the texts list Spider-man as one of the picks," she said. "So, what do you guys say?"

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Brian frowned.

Remember Kenny? Yeah, he...

He was rather...interesting.

And it unnerved him. A lot.

First, he and Chris seemed to hit it off well. That wasn't bothering him. He was glad that Chris finally got a chance to meet someone who seemed to take an interest in the truth so that he could continue to "water" their interest.

Everything else, however...seemed a bit off.

Ken somehow ended up seeing the same movie as the group did. Which meant he was near them almost the entire time.

He even ended up on the same exact row as them.

No, he wasn't a loud and obnoxious moviegoer. He was very friendly.

It was just...sometimes he seemed a bit *too* friendly.

And for some reason, whenever he was getting *too* nice or just a little bit *too* casual, most of the time he was talking to Émilienne.

Wait a minute...

"Bro?"

He looked down to see Chris. The movie was over, but the teens decided to hang out in the arcade a bit while waiting for Émilienne's and Alaya's rides to arrive. Abayomi and Dae-Jung were currently engrossed in an arcade version of *Rock Band*, while Kenny was watching Alaya and Émilienne play air hockey.

"We're not officially bros yet," Brian answered good-naturedly, trying not to let Chris onto his feelings.

"Geez, you're uptight," Chris replied, smiling. "I can see it in your face, man"

This was one of those rare times when he didn't wish Chris was his best friend.

Brian sighed. "Anyway...uh..." He leaned down, looking towards Kenny. "Does he seem a little weird to you?"

"Ken?" Chris asked. "Maybe. A little. What? You noticed something?"

"Yeah..." Brian answered truthfully. "Random question. Are you interested in anyone?"

Chris frowned a bit. "First, don't remind me of my old, stupid crush on Akira. Second..." He pondered for a moment. "Admittedly, Alaya, Émilienne and a few of the others in our congregation are attractive and all, but I only think of them as friends...Really." He added the last part when he saw Brian giving him a questioning look.

"Besides, I would've told you way earlier if I liked anyone. Knowing you, you probably would've already figured it out," Chris said. "Wait...why are you asking this?"

"Just wanted to know," Brian answered, leaning against the wall. Chris gave him a look, but didn't say anything else on the subject. They returned their attention to the others. Ken and Émilienne had moved to a motorcycle racing game. Ken playfully kicked at Émilienne, who expertly dodged it and sent him a quick look, returning to the game at hand. Kenny's gaze seemed to linger a bit before he did the same, though, and Brian furrowed his brow.

A quick rumbling interrupted Brian's thoughts and he quickly answered a text from his mother. He glanced at Chris, whose face was now one of thoughtful contemplation.

"Has Émilienne been acting weird lately?"

"Hm?" Brian raised an eyebrow at Chris' question. "What do you mean?"

"Eh..." Chris rubbed his neck. "She's just been more secretive it seems. Like I ask her what she's doing and she might jump up or she may hide her phone and stare at me only to smile. I know that's what she does, but this just seems different."

"How?" Brian asked.

"She usually shows me what it is that she's looking at," Chris said, frowning.

Brian didn't say anything at first as the importance of that statement hit him. He, Chris, Alaya and Émilienne were all very close to each other. However, he knew for a fact that Chris was closer to Émilienne than he was, while he and Alaya were the same. Whether on Tumblr, Facebook or whatever, if Chris was around, she was showing something to him every second. She even showed him parts of conversations she had with others.

While he wasn't clingy, Chris could easily pick up on when he was being kept out of something.

And that usually worried him...

A squeal interrupted his thoughts and both he and Chris looked up to see Émilienne celebrating her win. Alaya only shook her head and smiled. Kenny and Émilienne shared a smile and when Alaya's head was turned, he whispered something towards her. She shook her head and shoved him playfully.

Brian and Chris exchanged confused glances.

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Jordan wrapped his arms around his knees, glancing at his phone.

It was 7:30 PM that evening.

Darell still wasn't home.

Malvina was clearly trying her best not to show her worry. She was sprawled out on the couch, staring at the TV, but her eyes clearly kept going towards the clock on the wall. Jordan stretched out in the chair he was in, sighing.

"Is Cyra still comin'?"

"Hm?" Jordan asked, quickly picking up on his mother's question. "Uh, yeah, yeah. She's on her way. Should be here soon."

"Huh..." She hesitated. "Anythin' from yer Da yet?"

Jordan shook his head no. "I could only get voicemail. I don't know if he has his ringer off or what."

A newscaster on television announced a traffic jam on Riverview's I-88 Interstate.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's the reason he isn't home," Jordan said without thinking.

"But he gets off at 5..." Malvina mentioned quietly.

Jordan watched as her shoulders deflated, frustration in her facial expression. This was happening more and more frequently lately, not just on Saturdays but during the week, too. This day, however, was the longest that it took for Darell to come home.

Jordan shook the lingering thought of something unspeakable from his mind.

A knock on the door jolted them both. Malvina got up and went towards the door, looking out the peephole. She then opened it to reveal Cyra. She quickly walked inside and hugged his mother after the door was closed.

"Hello, all!" she announced cheerily. "How is everyone on this fine evening?"

"Tired," Jordan said, truthfully.

"Good," Cyra said. "You can sleep on my shoulder."

Jordan only gave her a blank look and she giggled. Malvina had grabbed a book by this point and was back on the couch, trying her best to get engrossed in it. Cyra seemed to notice and her look turned in one of curiosity.

"Sis. Tyson, has Jordan run you ragged?"

She smiled despite her worry. "Na. But a certain husband haes."

"What's up?" Cyra asked. "Does that explain why his car wasn't in the driveway?"

The older woman nodded. "He's nae home yet."

"Huh..." Cyra bit her lip, turning to Jordan and directing the next statement to him. "The silence on your side tells me he hasn't called either."

"Nor answered," Jordan added.

"Well...I'm not about to be pessimistic," Cyra remarked. "Don't wanna judge before we know, right?"

"True..." Malvina could be heard saying. Jordan knew it was her way of dropping the subject.

"Weel, don't let mah worry distract ye from yer date," Malvina said, leaning back on the couch.

Cyra took this opportunity to squeeze into the large armchair that Jordan was sitting in. Malvina gave them a playful warning look, but didn't say anything.

"Where's the guitar?" Cyra asked, looking around.

"Is that the only reason you date me?"

"No...I just haven't seen you pull it out in a while," she said.

Jordan mused on this. He couldn't lie, especially since quite a bit of others had noted.

"Well...I guess I know how to solve that then."

Pulling himself out of the chair, he walked towards his room and grabbed his guitar off the stand. Cyra seemed practically giddy with excitement and Malvina placed her book on the couch in favor of hearing him play. Jordan picked at a few strings to ruse his memory for something he liked to play, but the thought of his father's whereabouts interrupted his thought process.

"Done already?" Cyra asked, pouting.

"Like your hands never get tired of creating artistic masterpieces," he remarked. Cyra blushed, "But...I wanna check on Da one more time..."

Malvina got up and stretched. "Ah will be right back then. Jordan, ye go ahead and try, okay?" Jordan nodded in response, pulling out his phone and going to the call log. After about five rings, he got voicemail and huffed.

"Where is he..." he mused aloud.

"Sister Tyson?" he heard Cyra ask. The young woman had gotten up by this point, but was stopped in front of his parents' bedroom, her expression one of worry. A loud thump sent her running into the room, calling out for the older woman once more. Jordan immediately jumped up from the couch and ran towards the room.

"Maw! What's-?!"

He stopped temporarily at the sight and sound of Malvina crying, hiccupping as her sobs elevated in pitch. Cyra had one arm around her back and was currently holding a cell phone, not moving except a finger scrolling the screen. As he got closer, he recognized that it was his father's. Jordan furrowed his eyebrows and kneeled. A much softer cry had joined Malvina's as Cyra silently handed him the phone and wrapped both arms around his mother. Jordan quickly noticed that there were five missed calls. His gaze went further down the screen, his eyes widening in disbelief at the series of text messages exchanged between Darell and his manager, Ms. Worthington. The further he went, the more romantic they got.

The final one he read suggested that the phone be left there at the house. The next text message he didn't even had the heart to finish...

But he already knew what it contained.

Jordan drooped. He slowly looked at his mother who had calmed down but was now practically cradled in Cyra's arms. The younger girl was still trying her best to comfort her as she struggled to keep her composure as well.

He was the only one who heard the approaching footsteps. His gaze slowly turned to see Darell, who looked confused at the scene happening until his eyes landed on the phone still clasped in Jordan's hands. He then looked like a deer in the headlights, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

He quickly rushed forward to grab the phone. "I can explain-!"

Jordan quickly whipped around before he could reach him, clutching the phone tightly to his chest. Malvina had heard by this time and was looking straight at her husband. Her lips formed a thin line, her eyes not showing any hatred, but rather surprise, hurt, sadness.

Betrayal.

All three pairs of orbs then gazed at him, asking *why why why*.

The only answer they got were his eyes never meeting their own.

CHAPTER VII

Émilienne looked over her shoulder for the third time in the past ten minutes. Narrowing her eyes, she returned to Kenny's car. She knew she wasn't well-known around the area, but never did she have the feeling that someone was watching her.

And she wasn't sure who.

Ever since the movies, Brian was always close by when the group was together. Chris, who was has bad at hiding, simply stood nearby. They were best friends, so one could easily conclude that they were hanging out. But Émilienne knew the boys too well. In fact, she was sure that she caught Chris peeking at her phone from behind Brian, only to quickly look away when she noticed. Or at least try to. Trying to ignore her thoughts enough to enjoy her date at the park, she nearly jumped when she felt Ken wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"Ken," she said between her teeth. "Don't scare me like that."

"What's got you so uptight, babe-?" Émilienne quickly pulled him down, forcing his face to be close to hers.

"Okay..." he said slowly.

"Sorry..." she said, smiling sweetly. "Look, some of my friends have been following me around lately. They have no idea that we're dating. But I think they're starting to get suspicious..."

"..." Ken didn't say anything at first, crossing his arms.

"What?"

"I didn't tell anybody else if that's what you're thinking," he stated.

Émilienne huffed. "No, Ken. It's...It's Chris and Brian."

"Oh," Ken said, perking up a bit. "So, what's the problem? People get suspicious all the time. We can just pretend that nothing's going on."

"Well, Brian has dyslexia," she continued quietly.

"...And..." Ken motioned for her to continue.

"The boy can read emotions like a page in a book," Émilienne hissed. "Sometimes just by looking at you. And if he's figured out that you like me and vice versa..."

"Woah, woah, woah," Ken put his hands up. "Are you serious? This sounds a little too unbelievable."

"Yes," Émilienne said, deadpanning.

"Another bump in the road," Ken sighed. "But hey, who doesn't encounter them while dating, right?" He grabbed one of her hands and gave it a quick squeeze. "They'll understand when we finally tell them. You'll see."

Émilienne ignored the pang in her conscience as he let go.

"Ém?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Really."

"Paranoia kills your spirit, y'know," he mentioned, wrapping his arms around her.

"Ken?"

"What's up?"

"You ever felt that there's this little voice in your head, but you don't always listen to it?"

"Yeah," he answered question quickly. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

"Hey." He used a finger to raise her chin. "We're gonna get through this. It's going to be okay."

Émilienne gave him a smile despite herself. Returning it with one of his own, he pulled her close, lying his head on hers.

Everything would be fine.

She would just ignore the ache in her heart.

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She was sure that her eyes were deceiving her.

The girl's face was turned away from her, but the hair, despite being in a ponytail, looked so familiar.

However, she recognized the boy immediately. Blue eyes. Curly black hair. Tall, lanky figure. That was Kenny. Even though it had been since middle school since she last saw him...

She veered closer. The girl had put on some sunglasses by this point and walked around the car, looking back and forth while opening the passenger door. She turned towards her and seemed to gasp but before quickly leaping inside. Ken seemed a little surprised at this and got in, closing the other door. She heard the two conversing rather loudly as they pulled off.

"Abayomi!"

She turned around to see Dae-Jung panting, hands on his knees. "Was that...?"

She grimaced. "I hope not."

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"Mom, do you need to take a break?"

"Didn't I say I'd tell you?"

"Yea..."

"I'm glad that you're concerned, sweetie. Just calm down. I'll be fine."

Cyra huffed as her mother continued to walk down the sidewalk, aided by her crutches. An older woman of 45 years, Elise had black, cropped hair and bright hazel eyes. She was only two inches taller than her oldest daughter and passed on her artistic streak, along with most of her personality. Cyra sighed, wondering if she would ever get even close to having her mother's immense faith.

Her eyes took her to the pair in front of them. Akira, Anita and Marlin were walking down the sidewalk to the next house. On the other side of the street, Jordan and Alexis were arriving from tackling another house. Jordan simply nodded to a question that the young woman asked, causing her to look a little concerned.

"Cyra?"

Elise was standing behind her in front of another residence. Cyra quickly apologized and walked back to join her.

"What's on your mind?" Elise asked as they walked towards the porch.

"Huh...oh..." Cyra said, looking down. "I'm fine..."

"Are you?" Elise rang the doorbell while Cyra grabbed some magazines out of her mother's bag and passed them to her. "You looked drained when you came home on Saturday. And you haven't talked about Jordan since. You didn't break up, did you?"

Cyra immediately pushed away the thought of the chaos that ensued at the Tyson household. "No, Mom. Just...Jordan's been going through some stuff. Nothing involving our relationship. Just..."

"Alright, alright," Elise remarked, putting her hand up. "If it's too hard to talk about, I won't pry."

Cyra only nodded as they turned away from the house.

As she rang the doorbell, she tried her best to keep her mind on field service, but couldn't help stealing a glance back at Jordan. He and Alexis were currently conversing with a householder. Alexis tried her best not to trail behind Jordan, voicing a thought that Cyra couldn't quite make out at first.

"...if you need to stop and take a rest, I understand. I was just..."

Jordan stopped and whipped around to face Alexis so fast, that if Cyra blinked, she would've missed it.

"I'M FINE!"

Cyra watched as Alexis' face paled, her face contorting into a deep frown and a cry escaping from her lips. Jordan's expression immediately turned from one of anger to regret. His hands hovered as Alexis cried into her hands. Cyra huffed, displeasure showing on her face. Elise had somehow moved to the other girl's side during that time. As Cyra slowly walked towards them, Alexis was currently trying her best to explain the situation while blubbering.

"Hey! What happened?!" Cyra cringed and she noticed Jordan visibly shrink into himself as Marlin jogged up, Akira and Anita on his heels. His face softened upon seeing his fiancée.

"Lexi?" He gingerly grabbed her hand. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't mean to..." She was sniffing. "I was just suggesting that he...that Jordan...take a break and..."

"Wait, wait," Jordan said. "It's my fault. I screamed at her because I was frustrated. Not at her, but just..." He trailed off, sighing. "Alexis, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have screamed at you."

Alexis only nodded, giving him a small smile. "It's okay. I figured you had something bothering you while we were at the door."

Jordan visibly flinched.

"Akira? Do you want to work with me?" Elise asked. "I think these three might need to talk about something important."

Akira seemed a little surprised at this, but nodded. Alexis agreed, asking if she could work with Anita, to which Anita didn't object to. She gave a knowing glance in Cyra and Marlin's direction and they left. Marlin and Cyra exchanged glances and then looked at Jordan, who rubbed his neck nervously.

Marlin sighed.

"Let's walk."

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"...That explains a lot."

Jordan gave him a tired look, but didn't say anything. As it turned out, the last house that he and Alexis were at contained a householder who was on the verge of tears since she just found her out that her husband was having an affair. Jordan found it hard to talk and Alexis quickly took over, giving the woman some words of comfort.

Marlin sighed. "Dude, why...no, I can't ask that."

Jordan blinked. "Ask what?"

"..." Marlin's frustration clearly started to grow on his face. "I feel bad for pushing you to talk about it. I mean...who..."

Jordan frowned. He hated seeing Marlin like this. Like Cyra, he could work himself into a frenzy with frustration. Unlike her, it was frustration over other's problems instead of her own.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Jordan asked.

"I was the one who...who asked about whether your dad was spending more and more time at work..." Marlin started.

"Hey, you didn't know," Jordan said.

"Yeah, but that didn't relieve any doubts, did it?" Marlin replied.

"Guys..." Both turned to Cyra. "Let's try to focus on the ministry, hm? I know it's not easy, but it'll help relieve some stress on both sides. And by that, I mean, let's get this next house."

Both boys agreed and decided to take her advice. Marlin volunteered to take over and Jordan was silently thankful for it.

"..."

Marlin rubbed his neck, distress clearly showing on his face. "...How do you, y'know feel about all this?"

Jordan bit his lip.

To be honest, he felt angrier than he ever did. He chalked it up to the fact that for the longest, his father had been loyal to his mother even before they both learned the truth, before he was even born...

But he couldn't let that affect him.

Jordan straightened his face and shrugged.

"I'm...pretty numb about it..."

He could see Cyra give him a funny look out of the side of her eye.

"I just...I guess the shock of everything hasn't hit me yet...I mean, it has...but..."

Jordan slumped as Marlin patted his back. "Mom and Dad aren't really talking to each other. Mom finds it really hard to gather her courage to, but Dad...it's almost like he revealed his true colors or something...and when that householder tried her best to turn us away...I just..."

"You wanna quit service early?"

Jordan looked up at the question. "Why?"

"Dude, this is going to distract you way more than it should," Marlin said. "You won't be able to focus."

Jordan huffed. The last thing that he wanted to do was head back home...

"I'm glad that you still tried, though," Marlin said, smiling sadly.

"How about lunch?" He heard Cyra ask. "I'll be honest. I don't feel like heading back home now."

"Good idea," Marlin replied.

"Uh...Marlin?"

"Yeah, man?"

"You mind if I crash at your place for a couple of days? If April wouldn't mind..."

"You forget I have an apartment," Marlin snickered. "Sure."

"I just need a break..." Jordan admitted truthfully.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence on the way to the car.

A good long break.

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Esmeralda was rather jumpy this Wednesday afternoon.

Cyra hadn't talked to the younger girl a lot. In fact, the most she knew about her was that a few months before, she asked Akira a question and once it was answered, it peaked her interest greatly. The younger girl even got some members of her family interested, if not all of them.

Esmeralda was in quite a hurry when they arrived. The girl was getting ready to go to a family outing and seemed rather excited, but was too polite to turn them away, allowing her and Akira to come in a brief visit.

However, it seemed that something else was on her mind.

As Akira talked to her, Esmeralda was wringing her hands, nodding a little too quickly. Her eyes darted around and she bit her lip, looking rather nervous.

"Esmeralda, is something wrong?"

Akira seemed to have caught on. Esmeralda perked up immediately, shaking her head.

"No, no! It's fine!" She put her hands up as an effort to calm their concern, even though she was the one that needed calming.

A voice broke through the clamor that the rest of the house was already in.

"Esy! Where are you?!"

Akira's face lit up in surprise. "Was that...Kenny?"

Esmeralda turned pale. "Uh...sounds like it..."

"Esmeralda!" the voice continued. "I don't have too much time! You already know that I have my date with Emili..."

"Hold on!" Esmeralda screeched a little too loudly. All three cringed.

"Sorry," she said quickly, slowly backing up to the hallway. "I'll be right back..."

She quickly scurried off. For the next few minutes, Cyra heard a hushed, but harried conversation of what seems to be Esmeralda's voice and a young man's.

"...Cyra..."

"Hm?"

"You don't think..."

"I'm back!" Esmeralda announced. She seemed calmer, placing her arms behind her back. "Hope I didn't make you wait too long..."

"Well, it's not like I have plans..." Akira stated, only to quickly apologize and state that she was joking when the younger girl seemed taken aback. Footsteps resonated through the hallway and a tall teenager with black curly hair entered. He blinked, seemingly confused.

"Oh..." He said quietly. "This is what you meant..."

"Hi, Ken," Akira acknowledged quietly.

"Hey," he said, sounding rather surprised. He then looked at Cyra, who greeted him shyly. They didn't have chance to say anything more because he was soon on his way.

"Ken, wait..."

Or he was. He turned at Akira's question.

"Yeah?"

"Who is it that you're going on a date with?" Akira questioned, placing a hand on her hip.

Cyra was sure she saw Esmeralda pinch the bridge of her nose at the exact same time that Ken stiffened.

"Uh, just my girlfriend," he answered, smiling.

"...Who is...?" Akira continued, eyebrows raised.

"Why do you want to know?" Ken crossed his arms.

"Her name sounded familiar," replied Akira, shrugging. "Just wanted to know."

"...Emili," Ken said. "Emili Melrose. Emili with an 'l'. Anything else you need to know?"

Akira relaxed a bit. "Oh...just thought it was someone that I knew. Didn't mean to pester or anything."

Ken waved it off. "No worries. Later."

With that, he was off. Akira looked thoughtful for a second, but her expression quickly returned to normal. Turning back to Esmeralda, she prepared to say something else, but Esmeralda's mother beat her to it.

"That's my cue," Esmeralda said.

"Next time, then."

They then bid her farewell, exiting the house. As they walked towards Mikoto's car, Akira slowed down and began to log the visit.

"Akira?"

"Sup?" she inquired, not looking up.

Cyra leaned her head to side. "For a moment there, I thought that he was about to say Émilienne."

Akira stopped writing.

"I did to..." she agreed. "Both he and Esmeralda seemed a little out of it."

"True..." Cyra mused. "I've never heard of Emily being spelled with an 'l', though...not that there isn't any one with the name. But still..."

Akira frowned.

"Hm."

CHAPTER VIII

"SURPRISE!"

A collective scream of varying pitches went off as the recipients of the surprise leapt back in fright. Then seven quickly composed themselves as the group began to gather around them, hugging and greeting each other as they went.

"Thank you!" Mikoto breathed as she hugged Alaya. "Did you guys plan all of this?"

The taller girl shook her head. "All I did was help put up decorations. Blame Anita. We were going to have a few separately but she got the big idea to put everything together."

Said young woman had her arms wrapped around Alexis as the shorter one bulldozed her with a grateful hug.

"So, it took longer to get together and was a bit last minute. I'm surprised we pulled it off."

"Well, thank you, anyways!" Mikoto chirped, looking around the room.

The graduation party was located at Anita and Daniel's house, a quaint beige little thing with a rusty brown roof, white panels, windows and posts. The living room had green walls and a white trim and was decorated with various red, white and black streamers. A colorful handmade banner with Congratulations across the paper was hanging on the alcove that led from the living room to the dining room. A small pile of presents sat

in the middle of the table, unopened. Mikoto couldn't help but be touched by the efforts that her friends made for her.

Speaking of friends, essentially the whole gang was there that Friday, along with Dae-Jung and Abayomi who she had met through Akira at the convention. Charlene was among the guests of honor, cheerfully arguing with Cyra, with Alicia on the sidelines. Bro. and Sis. Clarke, Thompson and Wilson were there, along with the twins and Troy. Bedelia and Bro. Okebe conversed with a tall dark-skinned brother with curly black-brown hair, while April and Zachary conversed with each...other...

Mikoto squinted. She was sure that someone else was there. Shrugging, she quickly turned back to Alaya, only to see her conversing with the brother in question. Strangely enough, he was about the same height as Alaya, if not shorter. Short, cropped hair framed a slender, handsome face. The man had a lean build that reminded her of Dae-Jung somehow...

"And this is my friend, Mikoto," Alaya introduced.

"Oh!" Mikoto said, a little caught off guard. "It's nice to meet you, Brother..."

"Lee," he finished smoothly. "Wan Ji Lee. Dae-Jung's uncle."

"Interesting name," Mikoto admitted.

He blinked. "That's one I haven't heard before."

"Wan Ji!" Dae-Jung called. "You playing WarioWare or not?"

"I'm coming!" he called. "Nice to meet you as well, Mikoto."

She watched as he went to join Abayomi, Brian, Amy and his nephew in front of the Wii U.

"Would you believe that he's in his thirties?" Alaya casually asked.

"Seriously?" Mikoto exclaimed. "He looks more like he's in his late twenties! What's with all these old people looking young..."

"I heard that!" Bruce sent the girls a harsh, playful look before returning to his conversation. The girls giggled among themselves before Alaya excused herself. Looking around, Mikoto noticed Jordan on his phone, out of ways of the others. Quietly sneaking up beside him, she slowly started to lean over his shoulder.

"I can see you, y'know," he stated quietly, but somberly.

"Marlin told me you've been going through some stuff lately," she mentioned. "So, I just wanted to cheer you up."

Jordan seemed surprised at this but managed to smile bashfully anyway.

"Thanks," he said sincerely. "Really? Has...everyone noticed?"

"Admittedly, I don't really know," Mikoto replied. "But...don't take it the wrong way. You're pretty good at hiding things."

Knowing that she did and didn't mean as a compliment, Jordan deadpanned. "...Thanks." Mikoto smirked, snickering.

"So, how are you?" She asked. "I mean, really."

He sighed. "Better. And get that skeptical look off your face, I'm serious."

Mikoto was really tempted to feign innocence.

"I'm not trying to pry or anything," she remarked. "But the look on your face while you were on the phone wasn't promising."

At that, his mask seemed to shatter and he sighed heavily. Mikoto noticed the dark lines under his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It's... I'm..."

He seemed to have a hard time getting his thoughts together. Mikoto only waited patiently for him to get his thoughts out.

"It's...not easy."

Well, that was obvious.

"I just haven't been getting a lot of sleep lately."

Mikoto furrowed her brow a little.

He was stating the obvious.

"I..."

"Jordan..." She interrupted gently. "Can you tell me something I don't see? Just one?"

"...You and Marlin aren't all that different..."

"We are twins," Mikoto said, deadpanning. "But whatever you're dealing with, it just seems that it was brewing for a while, huh?"

"Yeah," Jordan admitted. "I didn't even see it. And I...we just didn't expect it I guess. And Dad..." He trailed off. Taking that as her cue to stop him, Mikoto placed both hands on his shoulders. He looked at her, a look of confusion on his face.

"Let's not think too hard about this, okay?" Mikoto asked. "Is it something that you can do anything about?"

"I wish I could..." He was reminded of her presence by her shaking his shoulders, his head flailing.

"Is it something you can do anything about?" repeated Mikoto firmly.

"No..." he huffed, looking dazed.

"Then, what's the use in worrying about it?" Mikoto shrugged. "I know it's easier said than done and that's with everyone, but why not try to enjoy the festivities? At least while you're here."

Jordan seemed to try to take this to heart, closing his eyes in thought. He suddenly lurched forward and Mikoto jumped back, placing her hands out in front of her. Cyra peeked out from behind Jordan's shoulder and wrapped her arms around his torso.

"Your Mom's here," she announced nonchalantly. Jordan let out a sigh of relief and gave his girlfriend a kiss on the forehead, causing a muffled sound of protest. Malvina then entered the living room and greeted everyone. Mikoto noticed that she looked weary but glad to be among the others, a tired smile lining her features as she greeted everyone.

"Mikoto."

Jordan was staring in her direction.

"...Thanks."

Before she had a chance to answer, he had turned around. Mikoto only sighed and shook her head. At least he seemed to be feeling better. Jordan had broken away from Cyra's grip, his arm around her shoulder as they headed in Malvina's direction. The Scot wrapped her arms around the redhead tightly. Jordan then took the time to introduce his mother to Dae-Jung, Abayomi and Wan Ji. Mikoto then turned around, her eyes landing on a wavy-haired brunette. Émilienne was currently engrossed in her cell phone, her little smile embellished with slightly pink cheeks. Mikoto slowly made her way over to her, trying not to make her aware of her presence. Émilienne seemed to notice however and sent Mikoto a playful glare, cupping her hands around her phone and clutching it to her chest.

"Why is everyone so nosy today?" She asked good-naturedly.

"Maybe because you're uncharacteristically keeping to yourself," Mikoto pointed out, plopping down on the sofa beside her.

Émilienne didn't respond to that, her smile fading a bit.

"What's up?" Émilienne seemed to jump at this.

"Nothing..." she said after a moment.

"...You sure?"

"I..." Émilienne bit her lip. "Have you ever tried something thinking it would be successful but ended up regretting afterward?"

"I'm gonna need an example..." Mikoto admitted, the question not striking any real chords.

"Like starting a Bible study with someone or trying to talk to them about the Bible and at first it seems promising, but then it..."

"Turns sour?" Émilienne nodded in response.

"Well, not necessarily regretted," Mikoto said. "Disappointed and let down, of course. But I try to comfort myself by the by fact that it wasn't my fault and that they wanted the world more than the truth."

"Huh..." Émilienne said. "I guess I understand..."

"I'll tell you this, though," Mikoto said, trying to cheer up her friend. "Have you ever gotten those guys who seem interested, but make no progress?"

"...Yeah..."

"And then it turns out that the only reason that they started the study was just to get into a romantic relationship with you! Ugh! I hate it when that happens..." She giggled and looked at Émilienne, whose mood seemed to have sunk lower than before. "Émi?"

"...I'm okay...it's just..."

Mikoto leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees.

"There...there was someone that I was interested in and...well, he's a Witness and all, but..."

Mikoto softened her position. "He's not serious like he should be?"

"At first it seemed like it..." Émilienne mused. "But...he keeps going and back forth...I kinda regret my interest now..."

"So, that's what you mean by regret...why didn't you just come out and say it?"

Émilienne opened her mouth to speak, but Alaya's voice beat her to it.

"Émi, come on!" She called. "The karaoke's starting!"

Émilienne seemed to brighten up at this. Mikoto gently grabbed the other girl's hand as she rose.

"Have you told Alaya?"

Émilienne nodded. Mikoto thought for a moment.

"We'll talk more about this later, but pray to Jehovah, okay?"

Émilienne nodded again, this time a bit more slowly. Mikoto hesitated, then pulled Émilienne with her towards the karaoke machine. Alaya only looked at them in confusion until Mikoto spoke.

"Is there a third microphone?"

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"That was nice."

Jordan nodded.

"...Sweetie, I'm on the phone," Malvina said. "I can't tell if you're shaking your head or waving your hand. Use your mouth."

"It was, Maw," Jordan confirmed.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" she asked.

"I did."

"You sure? I wasn't seeing things when you and Cyra sang Woodkid's *The Great Escape* or when you and Wan Ji were in conversation for nearly 45 minutes?"

Jordan raised an eyebrow at his mother's use of Brother Lee's first name. Looked like she made another new friend. "No, Mum. You weren't seeing things."

"I'm not pestering you," she said good-naturedly.

"I didn't..."

"Ye were thinking it," Malvina interrupted. "Sorry..."

"Stop reading my mind," Jordan groaned.

"I would if you weren't so easy to read," she responded.

"Mom..."

Malvina snickered as they turned the corner that led to their street. Jordan's face scrunched in confusion when he noticed that the porch light was off and Darell's car was gone.

"Guess your Dad hasn't returned home yet," Malvina said, a sad edge to her voice. They pulled up and exited the car, Jordan flicking on the switch that turned the porch light on from the outside. Malvina put the keys in the door, but it pushed opened with ease. They exchanged a look and cautiously entered the house.

"You did lock the door...right?"

"...Yes," Malvina said slowly.

Jordan looked around the living room. Things were strewn about...in fact, a few were missing. "...Where's Dad's guitar?"

"...The house wasn't broken into while we were gone, was it..." Malvina started to ask.

They continued their quiet trek through the house. Oddly enough, the living room was the only place where things seemed out of place. Malvina then turned towards the master bedroom and stopped short, still as a statue in the doorway. Noticing this, Jordan walked up behind her, immediately noticing why she froze.

The bedroom was in shambles.

The two slowly entered the room, Jordan looking around for any suspicious noise or sound. Malvina went towards the closet and opened the door. His confusion only heightened when he noticed that the room was starting to look less like it was broken into and more and more like a disorganized mess. Only a few things were missing off the dresser and the drawers looked as if they had been closed in a rush, for some clothes hung out of the sides.

"Sweetie..." Malvina's voice rang out from the closet. It sounded like she was in disbelief. "Check the dressers, will you?"

"What's up, Maw?" he wondered.

"Just check..."y

Jordan obeyed, pulling open the drawers in the dresser. As he rummaged through, it didn't seem like there was anything that was out of place except...

Wait a minute.

On the third drawer, his suspicions seemed to be confirmed. His father was always very organized, even when sharing a space with someone else. The space in question was the dresser. The things to organize were the clothes...

And his father's, which were always on the left side of every dresser drawer, were not there.

Jordan quickly opened to the fourth drawer to make sure that he wasn't dreaming, that the very thing that he dreaded wasn't happening. But the fourth drawer only seemed to solidify it...

"Mom, do you...?" he asked, trying to stop his voice from breaking.

"...Yes..." She had emerged from the closet by this point, her face betraying the same thought he was thinking.

Jordan stood up slowly, not wanting to voice his thoughts. Maybe...maybe...

His thoughts were interrupted by the crinkling of paper. Jordan had inadvertently backed into the bed and sat on it without even thinking. Picking up the note that lay on the sheets, he immediately recognized his father's handwriting.

I'm sorry.

But I can't do this anymore.

I love you both but, I can no longer pretend to be a Witness. I have kept this secret away from you for over eight months now.

The room's look is no coincidence. Don't expect me to come home anytime soon, for I've already gone to move in with Barbara. I have already contacted the brothers about this.

- *Darell*

Jordan heard his mother drop to the floor just as the letter ended. He expected her to break out in tears, a cry to shatter the eerie silence in the room.

Nothing came. Malvina simply hunched into herself, hugging herself tightly. Jordan slid off the bed and looked her in the eye.

Her face was blank, but her eyes betrayed everything that went through her mind.

"...This isnae real. This cannae be real..." Malvina slowly descended into mumbling, her Scottish brogue obscuring her words. Jordan wanted to say something, anything...

But nothing came out.

He sighed and reached out for his mother...

Only to be pulled into her arms, his head against her chest.

He wouldn't cry.

He couldn't.

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"Dude, I gotta admit. You're more excited for this than I thought you'd be."

Brian raised an eyebrow in Chris' direction, who only shrugged. The boys returned to watching Tarrant and Kevin as they talked tuxes with a salesperson.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Brian asked, a smirk on his face.

"Don't pretend you don't know how you reacted when they first started dating..." Chris started.

"Yeah..." Brian admitted. "But that was the old me. The new me..."

"Would've still stood in between them for five minutes, staring Dad in the face and trying to intimidate him."

Brian deadpanned at his best friend.

"Hey, just saying," Chris said truthfully.

"I was going to say that while I wouldn't be happy at first, I would try and do a much better job of respecting Mom's wishes..."

"While drilling holes in the back of his head..." Chris interjected.

Brian huffed. "Don't act you're off the hook either, man. I don't remember you being all excited for it..."

At that, Chris rolled his eyes, his smile falling a bit. Brian frowned.

"...What's up?"

"Hm?" Chris looked up at Brian.

"What's up?" Brian asked again.

They were never going get back together.

Too bad his heart didn't agree with him on this.

Dad was happy...

Chris looked away again, pushing away the earlier thought. "N-nothing. I'm good."

Avoiding his gaze, Chris returned to watching his father talk to his future best man at the two styles they had finally settled on. With the wedding's colors being white and gold, a gold vest might be a little flashy, but it didn't look too bad...

A familiar head of brown wavy hair passed by. Framed by a head of tight black curls.

Wait.

Chris looked beyond the two men and his expression quickly mirrored his shock. He barely heard Brian ask what was wrong before stopping short, probably indicating that he saw it, too.

Émilienne and Kenny.

Walking hand-in-hand.

Outside the store and into the depths of the mall.

Chris started to panic.

"Chris..." He looked up to see Tarrant, who looking at him in concern.

"You alright, there?"

"Uh..."

"Can we head to the restroom for a second?" Brian asked. Tarrant nodded, asking that they don't take too long. Both boys briskly walked out of the store, only for Chris to break out into a run once they were out of sight of the store. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that he had lost sight of the couple. Guessing at where they went, he weaved through the crowd and spun around in all directions.

"Chris, hold it!"

A large hand clamped down on his shoulder, pinning him in place. Brian looked back and forth.

"Which way did she go?"

"Like I know!" Chris exclaimed. "Let's split! I'll go this way!"

"Dude, wait..."

Brian was out of earshot before long. Chris jogged down the hallway, hoping, even begging Jehovah that he was seeing things.

And if he wasn't...

He stopped short.

He found Émilienne, standing by herself in front of the restrooms. She was looking through her phone, her hair held back by a headband.

"Émi..."

She quickly looked up, her expression mirroring a deer in the headlights.

"Chris..." she said, putting her phone in her purse. "I didn't know you were here. I thought you were still at the party..."

"No, we left soon after you did to get some stuff figured out for the wedding..." He walked towards her. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh..." She looked down. "I, uh, I just got out of the bathroom. Bedelia just went to the car to get something and..."

"Alright, babe, we better get going. The movie starts in..."

Kenny stopped just short of grabbing Émilienne's hand.

Chris' breath caught in his throat.

"So...this is what you've been hiding..." Chris began.

"What...Chris, this is..." Émilienne stammered.

"What...do you like her or something?" Kenny said, sounding surprisingly jealous. Completely different from the cheery guy he met before.

"No..." Chris murmured.

"Kenny, you of all people should know that this is just for a school project," Émilienne interjected.

Chris was not convinced.

"Émilienne, do you have any idea what you're doing?" Chris asked.

"Chris, look, I'm teaching him about Jehovah..."

"Are you?" Chris asked, folding his arms. "If that were true, why didn't you tell me? In fact, why didn't you show me?!"

"Show you?" Kenny asked. "What is he talking about?"

"When did I ever have to show you everything?!" Émilienne demanded.

"I'm not saying that..." Chris started angrily.

"Oh, really?" Émilienne crossed her arms. "Isn't that what you're implying?!"

"Wha-?" Chris gaped at her in disbelief. "That's not it at all! I'm just trying to help..."

"You're in no position to help me with everything you're working on!"

Chris stopped, his eyes widening as the statement struck his heart.

"Émilienne, why are you acting like this?" Brian appeared at Chris' side. "There's no need to get on the defensive."

Émilienne didn't respond, her anger melting a bit as she looked down.

"Of course, she would get defensive," Chris quipped. "Who would want to ruin their perfect reputation just after baptism?"

"Woah." Brian now stood between the two, his expression serious. "Dude, that was totally uncalled for. Can we just..."

"At least I am baptized!" Émilienne fired back. "You're just going to make excuses every time the topic comes up..."

“Émilienne?”

All heads turned to see Alaya. Abayomi was standing next to her, both of their expressions lined with confusion.

But Alaya’s was lined with utter heartbreak.

“This isn’t what I think it is, is it?”

An uncomfortable silence filled the air as the group refused to exchange glances.

Then Émilienne turned and ran.

Before he knew it, Alaya and Abayomi had already ran off after her, calling her name loudly. Kenny had disappeared by this point, nowhere to be found and probably have escaped all the craziness while he and Émilienne were arguing. As what had just transpired hit him, Chris’ expression softened a bit.

“Chris...c’mon, man, let’s go find her,” Brian said, looking rather solemn.

Halfheartedly, he nodded and followed suit.

As it turned out, they couldn’t find her. Alaya and Abayomi stayed behind to continue to look for her, as the boys had to return to the wedding prep, deciding not to inform Kevin until enough time had passed to signify that Émilienne wasn’t going to do it herself.

To be honest, Chris didn’t care whether Émilienne stopped dating Kenny. She deserved whatever she got anyway.

...He didn’t care at all.

CHAPTER IX

Akira was positive that something drastic had occurred Thursday at the Kingdom Hall.

For one thing, Malvina came in looking like she was dead on her feet. Her hair was put in a very messy bun, her ears and neck devoid of jewelry. Her eyes were bloodshot and heavy with rings. She rushed into the bathroom without a word. A few minutes later, Jordan entered, his expression a complete blank.

He looked almost pale.

He barely noticed her and Cyra that evening, managing a small greeting when Cyra tapped him on the arm gently. After a moment, he asked where his mother was, only for Malvina to emerge right then and there. The two entered the auditorium without another word, a despondent air surrounding them.

At the end of the meeting, a letter was read stating that Darell Tyson was no longer a Jehovah's Witness. She saw Malvina shudder. The older woman left during the song and Akira could see the tears streaming down her cheeks. In an instant, Rosalina was seen skittering after her former Bible study teacher and Akira barely heard a feeble cry escape the lips of the normally outspoken woman before the front door of the Kingdom Hall closed. Once the prayer was over, she could've sworn she never saw Cyra move so quick in her life as she was almost instantly by Jordan's side.

Sunday would only add to the tension.

The best friends decided to visit the Riverview West congregation. Being among the first to arrive, they say Brian sitting on the bench in the foyer.

And his face was lined with worry.

As this was rare, it immediately caught Akira's attention. She was about to ask what was wrong when Alaya entered, looking exhausted herself. She sighed and placed an arm on Brian's shoulder. Before any words were spoken still, Émilienne quickly flitted by. She stopped upon seeing Cyra and Akira, avoiding their gaze and turning towards the direction the bathroom. Chris exited the restroom and he and Émilienne made eye contact. Akira saw a quick look of anger pass over his face and he passed by Émilienne and the others without a word. His friend over entered the bathroom wordlessly.

After Alaya explained that the two had an argument, Cyra and Akira quickly found themselves standing alone.

"...What just happened?" Cyra asked incredulously.

Akira could only agree.

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If there was one thing that Brian knew about himself, he wasn't good at expressing his feelings.

When it came to others, he had a knack for figuring out what they felt, whether he knew the reason or not.

But talking deeply about them. Especially his own.

That was a different story.

Bro. Fuji easily noticed.

The older Japanese brother closed his Organized book and looked at the younger brother. Brian immediately looked down at his book, trying to refocus on the questions at hand.

"What's wrong, Brian?"

"Oh, nothing," Brian said, shaking his head. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he continued. "You seem deep in thought. You're getting all the questions right, but your interest seems to be somewhere else."

Brian sighed

"I'm worried."

"About what?"

"My friends," Brian said. Choosing his words carefully, he continued, "One of them just made a really bad decision and when we tried to talk her out of it, she got defensive. My other friend, he...he didn't take it so well and started arguing with her. Even since then, it's been really awkward around both of them. I kinda feel like I'm caught in the middle..."

"Have you tried talking with them since the argument?" Bro. Fuji asked.

"Oh, yeah...both are being really stubborn right now," Brian huffed. "I'm trying my best not to get fed up with them..."

"Patience is a fruitage we must all master," Bro. Fuji replied. "And that would be one of the best qualities to have in this situation. In this case, if both want to please Jehovah, they must make their own decision."

"I know..."

"You can't force anyone to do anything that they don't want to," Bro. Fuji. "Has she talked to the brothers about this?"

"Not that I know of," Brian stated.

"Mmm..." Bro. Fuji leaned back. "Eventually, she would have to talk to them. Or someone else would have to inform them if she doesn't."

"..."

"Brian, if they truly love Jehovah, they will listen to you and whoever wants to help them to get this straight," Bro. Fuji. "From what you've told me, Chris and Émilienne are never mad at each other for long."

Brian blinked and looked up. "I..."

"Oh, I know," Bro. Fuji said. "It's not hard to notice. And my wife was worried as well. She told me that Alaya informed her of the situation indirectly. I'm not going to pry until I feel the young sister has waited too long to get this resolved and needs help."

"Yeah..." Brian mused.

"Brian, when we are done with this, I want you to look up Matthew 18:15. It just may help all three of you in this situation." Bro. Fuji reminded. "Jehovah will see to it that this matter is resolved in due time, so leave it in his hands."

"Easier said than done, Bro. Fuji," Brian remarked, managing a sad smile.

"Much," Bro. Fuji agreed. "Would you like to finish your questions later when you're in a better mood? Or would you like to continue?"

Brian rubbed his neck. "I think we can go on."

"Alright, then. Where were we..."

As Brian continued his final set, he couldn't help but wonder what Jehovah would do to help them. And if Émilienne or Chris would accept that help.

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Babe, are u sure you don't want to talk about this?

I don't know...

Look, I'm sorry for not standing up for you back there. And I understand if you're mad about that...

I'm not angry about that.

Really?

Yea.

Then what's up? I want to help.

...Chris was my one of my best friends. I just...I don't know why he would react like that, but...

Yeah. I agree.

What do you mean?

What kind of best friend would make comments like that? If he truly was your best friend, wouldn't he try to understand your situation? Or at least support you?

Ken. He was just...he was just scared as all.

Wait...you don't think he was wrong?

For the way he reacted. He was just worried about me

Its not like I was gonna hurt you or anything. So, what's there to worry about?

...

Babe. U OK?

Em?

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His smile concerned her.

Greatly.

While this may seem like an odd thought, a person must consider the fact that Jordan had lost a father, spiritual head and brother at the same time.

You'd think with the way he was acting out, he'd be devastated right now.

So, Cyra was greatly surprised and worried when after deciding to visit him, she arrived to see a happy face.

"Cyra?" She snapped to attention. Jordan's face was lined with slight curiosity. He didn't seem to be worried...

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Cyra said. "I just came to check on you guys..."

"Well, I'm okay," he answered calmly. "Mom is..."

"Who's that sweetie?"

Cyra stopped.

She never heard Malvina sound so heartbroken before.

"Malvina, I'm going to call Alex really quick..." Rosalina appeared behind her younger companion. "Oh, hello Cyra."

"Hi, Sis. Steele," she said. Malvina appeared soon afterward, looking a bit disheveled. Straightening up and running a hand through her hair, she sighed.

"Get that boy something to eat," she said rather firmly.

"Mom, I..."

Jordan almost never said Mom.

"You haven't eaten all day," she said. "Go. I'll be okay."

Cyra highly doubted it, but there was a firmness on her voice that let her know not to argue. Saying that they wouldn't take long, the couple left the house.

"Cyra..."

She looked up.

"I'm sorry about Mom," Jordan said calmly.

"For what?" Cyra asked. "Being worried about you? If you're not eating..."

"I've just been busy today," he continued.

"So busy you haven't eaten breakfast AND lunch?" Cyra asked.

Jordan pouted. "I was about to eat lunch..."

Cyra ignored his facial expression in order to stay serious. "Regardless, it's close to 4 o'clock. Your Mom's not one to lie. Where do you want to go?"

Silence.

"Jordan?"

"Oh, uh..." He rubbed his neck. "Waffle House, I guess..."

"Jordan, what's really on your mind?" Cyra huffed.

"I already told you..."

"No, you haven't," she said, poking him in the chest. "You've told us what's going on, but you haven't truly told how you feel. How this is truly affecting you..."

"There's nothing to feel, okay?"

She stopped at his cutting tone. His face softened and he sighed. "Sorry. I don't really know how to feel... So, smiling helps me to feel better. I'm okay, really." He smiled seemingly to prove his point.

Five minutes later, he was passed out in the passenger seat of his car, having done so after Cyra insisted in driving due to his poor performance behind the wheel. As the car hummed, Cyra glanced over to her potential husband, his sleeping face betraying the inner battle he was trying to hide.

Her grip on the steering wheel steeled.

He didn't know what to feel?

He was trying not to feel.

And that was worse than the former.

And he was going to need a hard intervention to get him to stop holding everything in before he got worse.

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"Bruce!"

"What?" He shrugged innocently. April snorted out of frustration, prompting Amy to giggle. Zachary snickered.

He could get used to this peace.

He had to admit he was glad that he went to April's congregation today. She was pretty...impulsive. Pretty impulsive, but her intentions were good. He would have to visit more often.

Walking into the foyer, Zachary's phone rumbled and he looked at the caller ID...

And promptly frowned.

Shaking his head, he exited the Kingdom Hall and took the call.

Ignoring the comments that his father made, he tried to focus on the root of the conversation. He breathed a sigh of relief once it was over with.

He nearly jumped when he saw a tall, lanky young man walk right past him.

The young man apologized and excused himself, heading towards the parking lot. Noticing some voices, Zach turned to see a rather short, brown-skinned girl with red hair, looking out after him, her face twisted in unease. She looked familiar. She then looked at Zachary in surprise.

"Sorry."

He often spoke the first thing that came to his mind.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, it's fine. Zachary, right? "

"Yea... Oh, you're Akira's friend... Cyra," he said, slapping himself mentally for the slip. "And yeah."

"Yep, that's me," she sighed, her earlier expression slowly returning.

"Um, hope I'm not prying," he started. "But a penny for your thoughts?"

"...How to help someone who doesn't realize they need help... "

"This concerning the bloke who just walked out?" Zach questioned.

"Yeah," she said. "For someone to just leave out of your life like that... Oh, now it's my turn to say sorry... "

"No, no," he started. "In fact, I can relate..."

"He won't...he always tells me not to worry... "

"That's the worst thing to tell someone... "

She cracked a small smile and it disappeared just as quickly as a thoughtful look emerged on her face.

She then looked him dead in the eye.

He stared back, raising an eyebrow.

"Um, I know this is out of the blue, but..." She bit her lip. "Maybe he'll listen to another angle that he hasn't heard..."

Zachary only nodded. "How can I help?"

CHAPTER X

Bedelia sighed.

As the meeting continued, she looked over at her niece. To think only 10 years separated them, so whatever she was dealing with, she hoped she could relate.

If Émilienne would tell her.

Émilienne was very good at hiding her feelings...

In front of those her feelings weren't directed at.

So, seeing her and Chris basically snub each other was something she was surprised the congregation didn't really notice. And those that did informed her of the situation. Bedelia was just happy that the friends were not ones to take sides in this congregation.

But Bedelia had no idea why she refused to divulge any details like she usually did. Émilienne was one who voiced her problems verbally. Sometimes Bedelia felt more like a big sister than an aunt.

She returned her focus to the meeting that Sunday afternoon.

"And so, we must be careful not to let our associations with non-believers fool us into thinking we're not getting too close to those outside of the organization," the brother continued. "Even if they seem to be

decent, as you might reason with yourself, they still have no love for Jehovah. So, we must heed the admonition here at 2 Corinthians 6:14-15, which states, 'Do not become unevenly yoked with unbelievers... "'

As the brother read the scripture, Bedelia couldn't help but notice that Émilienne seemed to have frozen. Her brow furrowed, she continued to stare at that page for a few minutes. Giving in to the urge of concern, Bedelia nudged her shoulder.

"Are you ok?" she mouthed.

Émilienne looked up at her aunt, grasped Bedelia's hand and tugged. Bedelia immediately rose and followed her niece to the bathroom. Before she knew it, the younger girl was on the floor in tears.

"Woah, woah," Bedelia cooed, gently lifting her off the floor. "My goodness, did you and Chris have that big of a fight?"

"It's not just Chris!" she wailed. Bedelia shushed her and coaxed her to continue.

"I... I have something to tell you," she said, gasping. "I'm... I'm dating someone... "

Bedelia froze.

That wasn't what she expected at all.

"And he's not a Witness, he's not even studying and I thought that maybe I could get him to learn about the truth and..."

"Stop," Bedelia said, holding the bridge of her nose. "Is this about that Kenny guy?"

Émilienne nodded.

"Émi... I... We'll, I feel like if I scold you it wouldn't do any good," Bedelia said. "You already know. And you let your heart override your head. "

Émilienne nodded.

"Now, if I may ask, what does this have to do with..."

"They caught me," Émilienne said. "At the mall. Alaya, Chris and Brian and Abayomi..." she trailed off. "And I got defensive and Chris and I started arguing and...they were just worried and I... "

"Hmm..." Bedelia said. "You wouldn't have brought it up if it wasn't for the talk."

Émilienne nodded.

"It's amazing how our heart can seem to be in the right place but still be wrong," Bedelia said. "Sorry..."

Émilienne shook her head and hiccupped. "No. You're right."

"Well, you know what? Bedelia said. "I know that you're beating yourself up right now. But the fact that you went and told me this proves that you still love Jehovah and you want to do the right thing."

Émilienne sniffed.

"Look, how about we go back to our seats and afterward, we can ask if the elders can talk to you, okay?"

Émilienne's eyes widened a bit at the last statement.

"You haven't done anything scripturally wrong, have you?" Bedelia asked.

"If you consider holding hands and hugging wrong..."

"Then you'll be fine," Bedelia said.

Émilienne blanched. "I know..."

"Well, goodness, you freak out so easily..."

"Says you..."

Bedelia squeezed her niece's shoulders affectionately and pulled her into another hug.

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"Ello, there, mate."

Jordan blinked.

When Cyra mentioned that here was going to be a new chaperone for their date, he had no idea that it would be a brother he never met before. A young adult one at that.

They were having an inside date that day. Jordan admittedly wanted to go somewhere else because...

No, don't think about it.

He would be fine.

"Eh, you okay there?"

Jordan jolted out of his reverie only to see the brother staring at him, a worried expression on his face. Jordan nodded.

"Yeah, yeah," Jordan lied, waving his hand. "Um, I'm Jordan."

"Zachary."

He held his stare for a few moments and Jordan quickly broke it, turning towards Cyra to ask her what they wanted to do that day.

"Is that what you're going to keep telling yourself?" Zach asked, folding his arms.

Jordan furrowed his brow as he turned back towards the brother.

"What?"

"That you're okay," Zachary continued. "But you're actually not."

Jordan frowned and directed his gaze toward Cyra.

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing he didn't need to know," she responded, folding her arms.

"The part I don't know is going to come out of you, mate," Zachary added.

Jordan bit his lip to keep quiet, his anger siding a little. "All it's going to do is make things worse... "

"Jordan, how?" Cyra asked. "Why do you keep putting on this front? Why can't you just tell me?"

"It's not a front..." Jordan started.

"How can anyone smile..."

"It's not a front!" Jordan insisted angrily.

"It's a mental block."

The Black-Scot stopped short of making another statement, looking at the Chinese-Australian incredulously.

"It's a form of self-protection," Zachary stated. "Only it's back firing."

Jordan stopped.

Zachary was right.

"You're so scared about confronting your real feelings because you feel as if it's not what you're supposed to do," Zachary continued. "And by telling yourself that, you're making yourself suffer for something you didn't even do... "

"But, but how..." Jordan began. "You don't know. You... never had to deal with this... I have to stay... strong. I can't let this affect me..."

"Jordan," Cyra coaxed. "If you say that, it's already affecting you."

"You don't understand," Jordan interrupted.

"You're right," Cyra said seriously. "I don't. My parents aren't going through divorce. My Dad didn't just up and leave while hiding his spiritual downfall. Remember when I told you that Dad and I used to argue a lot? How once I started to try and change my attitude I bottled up all my grief instead of letting it out? "

Jordan looked up. Cyra had grabbed his hand now and rubbing small circles on the back of it.

"Because I thought that if I allowed it to affect me, I wasn't worthy of being happy afterward? I had to bear it alone? "

Jordan nodded, her shoulders shaking.

"I know it seems unrelated, but I had to let things go and trust that Jehovah would carry me through the situation," Cyra said, her voice shaking. "Because if I didn't... If you don't, it's only going to get worse... "

Jordan..." Zachary started. "You have to trust that Jehovah sees all. And he understands. There is nothing wrong with whatever you're feeling. "

"But..."

"Strength doesn't come from suppression. It comes from support."

"Jordan, we're saying this because we love you," Cyra said. "Jehovah does, too."

He did.

He does.

Before long, Jordan found himself scooped up in a hug, Cyra holding his head against her shoulder. He found that he couldn't say anything else in response, tears streaming down his face as he cried...

And cried.

And cried.

"Let Jehovah know," Cyra quietly said. "How you really feel..."

And so, he did. He voiced his frustration, begging Jehovah as to why his father would do this and why he would hurt their family. Why was Satan so powerful?

Why did it hurt so much...?

A few minutes later, Jordan had calmed down.

Admittedly, he felt a lot... freer.

"You know," he felt and heard Cyra say, "I didn't expect you to cry to Jehovah out loud like that. You kinda interrupted me...."

"Oh, sorry," Jordan apologized.

Cyra shook her head. "It's fine. I'm shoving you off once you start screaming, though."

Jordan chuckled.

"Hey," he said, looking at Zachary. "How did you know?"

"I have an absentee father myself," Zachary said, shrugging. "Just happened much earlier in my life. Cyra only gave me the basics of your situation, though."

He suddenly felt really sheepish. "Hey, I'm-."

"Apology accepted a long time ago, babe," Cyra said.

Jordan blinked.

"You never call me babe... "

"Don't start," Cyra griped.

Jordan chuckled sadly.

"I feel like a dagger is going through me..."

"I know the feeling," Cyra said. "It cuts your heart. And you can't stop crying."

Jordan smiled genuinely for the first time in a long while.

It felt good.

"I love you."

He heard Cyra sigh gently. "Love you, too."

"Let's never leave Jehovah, okay?"

Cyra smiled.

"Okay."

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"..."

"..."

Treena sent Brian a raised eyebrow to which he shrugged.

"Do I look that country to you?" his mother's maid of honor asked.

"No, it's just unexpected as all," Brian said. "You're the last person I think would go for more an elegant look..."

"I was a bride once, too, sweetie," she sighed.

"Treena..." Alie drawled out. "Help..."

She peeked inside the dressing room. "Eh..."

"Just take a walk, boys," Alie groaned.

Chris and Brian immediately obliged, heading towards the entrance of the bridal store. Chris heard Treena questioning Alie's predicament, to which she immediately responded, "Don't ask!"

Once outside, the boys lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

"Uh...Émilienne called me last night," Brian started, rubbing his neck.

Chris decided not to respond.

"She said she wanted to apologize," his older friend continued.

Chris rolled his shoulders back.

"...She just wanted me to let you know since you didn't answer her calls..."

"You know, I consider it amazing that you're trying to draw out my feelings when you hate talking about yours..."

Brian visibly bristled at this comment and didn't say anything else, discomfort actually showing on his face for once. Ignoring the nagging feeling in his heart, Chris turned into the food court. Chris quickly scanning the restaurants for a quick snack. Anything to distract him...

A sharp whistle went through the area.

Chris ignored it at first, but Brian placed a hand on his shoulder and nodded his head towards the sound. Following his direction, Chris turned and stopped cold.

Right behind them was Kenny with a rather tired look on his face, his feet propped up on the table. Placing them underneath it, he gave the boys a curt wave.

"Yd."

CHAPTER XI

"So, I know one of you is really happy."

Both boys blinked, confusion mirrored on their faces.

Kenny frowned a bit and sighed.

"You don't have to play dumb, y'know," Kenny sighed, running a hand through his hair.

Chris only raised an eyebrow. Kenny was admittedly one of the last people he wanted to see right now.

"About what?" Brian asked.

"Ugh, you know," Kenny said, waving his hand for emphasis. "You win. You got your chance. You might as well take it."

"Dude, in English, please."

Chris was silently glad that Brian was being talkative right now.

Kenny looked at them, seemingly incredulous.

"She... She told you guys, right? "

If a light bulb could turn on above Chris' head, this would be the perfect moment.

"Émilienne?" he asked, his brows furrowed.

At hearing that, Kenny's position seemed to soften a bit.

"You really don't know, do you?"

Both boys shook their head. At that, Kenny sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair.

"She broke up with me."

Oh?

Oh.

Oh.

With that, everything clicked into place and Chris started feeling increasingly guilty very, *very* quickly.

Kenny continued. "So, here's your chance. Go catch her while she's down and make her yours or whatever..."

"Uh, dude," Brian said, "I know that despite that you're hurting immensely, you think you're helping by suggesting that one of us go after her, but neither of us like Émilienne in that way..."

Kenny's turn to blink.

"...How did you..."

"I have dyslexia, but that's not important," Brian said.

Kenny pursed his lips. "Okay, sorry for making things awkward, I guess..."

"You didn't."

Both Kenny and Chris deadpanned at Brian.

"Okay, okay," Brian said, rolling his eyes. "I'll stop. You happy? But seriously..."

"What happened?" Kenny finished. "Uh... To be honest, she called and told me that we needed to talk and so we met at the park and her aunt came along. She told me that we needed to break up, the reason being..." he huffed. "Her spirituality being first and that a relationship with me would hinder that..."

Kenny was visibly irritated by this point, twiddling his thumbs as he laid back in his chair.

"I... I just don't get it," he continued. "I told her that I had no problem with her being a Witness... How could she just end like this? No concern for my feelings..." He then looked at the two boys, looking a little worried. "Uh, sorry. Wasn't trying to bad mouth her or anything to you guys. Wouldn't be surprised if you were mad at me."

A moment of silence passed between the three. Kenny kept looking down at his hands and sighing.

"Dude, this wasn't exactly the easiest decision for her to make, you know."

Kenny turned his attention to Brian who calmly returned his gaze.

"Well, she handled it rather well from what I see," Kenny quipped angrily.

"Maybe because she needed to," Brian said.

"What do you mean?"

Brian sighed, his face actually looking thoughtful for once. "It wouldn't do anyone good if she didn't keep her composure. She saw what happened between her and Chris and I don't think she wanted a repeat of that with you. Émilienne probably agonized over this because she knew that this would not only affect her, but you as well. How you would take it, how you'd react towards her afterward. She knew that there would be hurt feelings and she's not the person who would want to hurt people intentionally."

Kenny didn't respond at first, taking it all in.

"Huh. I never thought about it like that..." He looked at Brian. "Personal experience? "

"Not really," Brian admitted, crossing his arms. "Also, when we date, we date for marriage. And it's better for us to be with someone who is a Witness. They would be more likely to share our beliefs and goals. Not that you won't ever, but..."

"You mean like...celebrity relationships when the guy and the girl break up because they each want to do their own thing? Not because they're, like, incompatible as people? "

"Uh, kind of," Chris chimed in. "But it's more than that. Émilienne loves Jehovah. She wouldn't do that if she didn't. She knew she would be happier and better off spiritually. Hence, Brian's recent point about us dating other Witnesses..."

"...so, if I was more interested in being a Witness...would it work?" Kenny asked. "I mean... It's kinda hard to understand, but I guess meshing too completely different lifestyles would be hard. And I wouldn't want Émilienne to stop doing something that made her happy just to make me happy..."

Kenny continued to contemplate.

"I guess it wouldn't be right for me to force her... If she feels that her relationship with God is more important, it's not my decision to keep her with me..."

Kenny dropped his head on the table in frustration.

"They say follow your heart, but my heart is being really stupid right now..."

"I think we all suffer from that," Brian chuckled. Kenny looked up at that.

"I'm amazed that you guys aren't angry at me or anything..."

"Why be angry?" Brian said, shrugging.

"Because she's hurting?" Kenny asked.

"Being angry at you isn't going to help anything..." Brian mentioned.

"Oh..."

Three heads turned. Émilienne, Alaya and Bedelia stood behind them, the first looking a little worse for wear. She fidgeted under their gaze, wringing her hands together.

"Um, I, um..."

"Ém, er, I mean, Émilienne."

Kenny stood up, clasping his hands together. "I'm sorry for the way I acted when we broke up. I, uh, I wouldn't want you to do anything that you don't feel is right for you."

"It's okay," she squeaked. "You were upset, so it's understandable."

"Ugh," Kenny complained jokingly. "You guys are too likable for your own good. Why can't you just get mad like regular people or get irritated or whatever?"

At that, Émilienne smiled a little. She then turned to Chris.

"Chris... Did Brian tell you that...?"

"Mm-hmm," he replied.

Her lip quivered.

Chris fell back into old habit.

He panicked.

"Wait, wait, it's okay!" he yelped, hands held out in front of him. Émilienne sniffled, struggling to hold in her tears.

"But...I was... And I just... I can't believe I-!"

"Émi, he forgives you," Brian said.

"What... "

That came from Chris, by the way. Brian shrugged. "Isn't that what you meant?"

"Uh, yeah," Chris said, rubbing his arms. "When Kenny told me you guys broke up and Brian told me that you called him, along with the fact that you called me like 50 times... I knew that you wanted to apologize. And admittedly, I was holding on to a grudge against you for what happened. And so, I want to do that, too so... I'm sorry. I mean, I shouldn't have reacted like that. "

"B-b-but, I st-started it!" Émilienne choked.

"I didn't exactly help," Chris said truthfully. "So, can you... "

"I already h-have!" Émilienne squeaked. She wiped her eyes, trying her best to clear her face. With that Chris sighed, walked over and placed a hand atop her head, rubbing her hair back and forth as she cried. Finally, he gave her a brief hug, which was followed by Brian giving her a hug and Alaya giving her an even longer one, complete with back rubbing. Bedelia sent Chris a warm smile.

Everything seemed right with the world.

And Bedelia screeched.

All heads turned as she whipped her around to see her attacker and promptly calm down as he laughed. Wriggling herself out of his grip, she whipped around and slapped his arm.

"Ow!" he yelped. The young man was about 5'10 in height with brown curly hair, hazel eyes, large ears and skin a little lighter than Abayomi, who just happened to appear out of nowhere and give Émilienne a hug. Dae-Jung appeared behind them, looking a little deadpan with an ice cream cone.

"You just ruined a perfectly good moment!" Bedelia scolded.

"You mean involving this little lady," Chuguel said, sounding serious. He turned to Émilienne. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. "Abayomi told you?"

"She just said she was worried about one of her friends," Chuguel said.

"Um, I hope I'm not interrupting anything..."

Oh. Kenny. That's right.

"But I gotta go," he said. "Sorry for all the trouble I caused."

"I think it's already in the past, especially with what just happened," Bedelia said.

"I mean, I guess I'll never understand it all, but..." He got up and looked over his shoulder. "But let's just say that I'll never be against you. People could really learn forgiveness from you guys. And boring? Where'd that come from? Later."

He gave a wave, which Émilienne and a few of the others returned. Soon, all attention was back on the newcomer.

"So, is there a reason as to why his arm is around your shoulder?" Brian asked Bedelia casually. She blushed and glared at the boy behind her, who only gave her a winning smile... Which in turn only turned her face redder and made her more frustrated. As shown by her rubbing her palms into her eyes. As she introduced her significant other to them, Chris exchanged smiles with Émilienne.

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"Do you want take this door? Or would it better for me?"

"No, I'll take this one. You've been knocking all morning..."

"I'm just glad you're out this morning."

"Same here."

He squeezed her hand.

"Thanks for sticking with me."

"Ah, you know I will."

...

"Aren't you going to knock?"

"Oh. Yeah."

Cyra smirked and rolled her eyes lovingly. No one came to the door, so they left a tract and walked away. Alaya was waiting for them at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Anyone?"

Cyra shook her head. Alaya shrugged and wrote it down on the house-to-house slip. She kept glancing at Cyra and Jordan, a little wistful smile on her face.

"Something wrong?"

Alaya blinked, a little surprised. "Caught in the act. You guys just look so cute together and rather supportive of each other, too. I guess I'm just a bit lonely."

"You weren't one to talk about marriage," Cyra admitted.

"I know," Alaya said. "It's just nice to think about sometimes."

She leaned down to Cyra and whispered. "And sometimes pray about."

"Jehovah will give you the right guy," Cyra whispered back, smiling.

"You guys are sooo secretive..."

"Jordan!" Cyra cried out.

"I didn't hear anything," he said innocently.

"Sure, you didn't... "

The three chuckled and continued down the street to the last house. The street had been rather long...

"Looks like there's someone outside..." Jordan said, pointing to the couple standing in front of the door.

"Nooo..." Cyra whined, hiding behind him.

"Oh, no, you don't," Jordan said. "It's your turn to get the door. You will conquer this fear... "

Cyra pouted and did what was told, silently praying for Jehovah give her courage.

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"How are you feeling?"

He shrugged broad shoulders

"I'm okay."

"You're scared, too."

"Why wouldn't I be? We haven't seen them in six years."

Broad fingers squeezed slender ones. The slender ones made little circles in the larger palm.

"It's going to shock him... "

"Of course. You talk to him. In my case... "

"It's not like you don't try. We've contacted the family..."

"I know, sweetie, but it still hurts."

He sighed.

"We'll get through this and if we can't, we know exactly who to call on to help us."

"Would probably best to alert him first, don't you think?"

She smiled a pretty, perfect smile.

"Hello!"

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Oh.

Oh, this was so NOT helping...

She was ready. Cyra was so ready to speak and then...

As she and Alaya approached the sidewalk, and turned onto it, she quickly noticed that the guy was getting taller...

And taller...

And taller...

"Hello!" she forced herself to squeak. The couple turned around. Cyra immediately felt more intimidated than before.

The man looked to be about 6'6" in height with broad shoulders. His hair was blonde and wavy, struggling to stay in the tame hairstyle he managed to get it in. He was muscular, but unlike Kevin Thompson, was built more like Brian, being a little larger than the redhead. He had glasses and blue eyes that had a familiar gleam to them.

The woman who held his hand was strikingly beautiful. With rich brown eyes and sleek black hair, she had this elegant air about her with mascara on her lashes, polish on her nails and bracelets on wrists. She looked considerably younger, not too much. Their age gap seemed closer to about 7 or 8 years.

"My name is Cyra and this is Alaya. We were just speaking with our neighbors and sharing a scriptural thought from the Bible," Cyra said bravely, trying to keep her voice steady. Tall people made her feel really small.

The couple looked at each other and shook their heads.

"It's okay, dear," the woman said, her voice smooth like silk. "Besides we've already been baptized a good year now."

And with a broad smile, the tension dropped. Alaya made a quiet happy shriek in response. Cyra breathed a sigh of relief.

"How are you two doing?" the woman asked, smiling widely.

"We're fine," Cyra answered. "Tired, but fine."

"This is a long street," the man rumbled in a quiet way. "David. David and Nia Shulster. "

"We know a Shulster!" Cyra said. Jordan had come up by now, standing beside her.

"Maybe you guys are related," Alaya joked.

"Maybe we are..." Nia said slowly.

"I'm Jordan," the Scot mentioned and motioned towards the girls. "This is Alaya and Cyra. What congregation are you guys from?"

"Well, originally, we're from Fireside in Nortoch some 3 hours from here, but you guys tell us," Nia replied cheerfully. "We're moving in."

"Oh, great!" Alaya said. "Perhaps you'll be at mine..."

"Pfft," Cyra said. "You know ours is better..."

"Why are we even discussing this?" Jordan moaned.

"We'll choose soon enough," David announced.

"This might seem a little weird..." Alaya started. "But you guys remind me of two other people, but I can't even put my finger on who they are..."

Cyra blinked. She had a point.

A car horn sounded in a distance and up came a silver van. Bro. Okebe leaned out.

"Daddy's here," Alaya replied. "I think we need to get going."

"We won't keep you waiting," Nia said. She sent a wave in the direction of the van. "I hope we'll be seeing each other again soon, brother!"

Bro. Okebe blinked and smiled, getting the message. The three teens then headed to the van and piled in.

"Where are they from?" Malvina asked.

"Nortoch," Cyra answered.

"Ah..." Malvina remarked. "Visiting?"

"Nope, moving in."

"Oh! That's nice."

"I... Ugh!" Alaya said.

"What's wrong, *dear*?" Bro Okebe asked.

"They are... They just seem so familiar," Alaya said. "I know I've never seen them before in my life and yet..."

"Yeah, I know," Jordan said. "It's weird..."

Alaya sighed. "Oh, well. It'll come to me sooner or later..."

She then asked Malvina if she was feeling alright. Malvina nodded and smiled slightly, to which Bro. Okebe announced that he was glad that both Jordan and Malvina seemed to be doing better and he was very glad to see them out as it encouraged him. Cyra tuned out the conversation, as Alaya's words lingered on her mind.

She was right. She never saw them before in her life. But...

There was just something about them...

CHAPTER XII

"I see him!"

"Of course, you do. He's the largest guy there... "

Émilienne wrinkled her nose at Chris who only gave her a sarcastic smile, complete with teeth.

"So, what about you?" she asked. "When do you plan to take the dip?"

Chris mused for a second. "It might be later rather than sooner... "

"Oh, c'mon, " Émilienne said, putting her head in her hands. "Are you scared?"

"No..." Chris said slowly. "I do want to get baptized, but I prayed and I honestly think I should wait. Still some stuff I have to work on... "

"Okay," Émilienne said, sounding disappointed.

"It'll probably be in about six months, though... "

Émilienne pinned him with the glare. "And when were you planning on telling me this?"

"Uh, just last week, " Chris replied, raising an eyebrow. "I wanted it to be a surprise... "

"Sorry..." Émilienne said. Chris sighed. She had been more sensitive ever since they reconciled.

"I'm good," Chris said. "I gotta get a tougher skin, anyway."

She smiled.

"He's here!" He heard Alaya say. Brian gave then a smile as he went up the ladder into the Baptism pool. Alie was trying hard not to cry, her hand holding an iPad as she recorded her son's public dedication to Jehovah.

"So, he's part of the crazy people now," Chris remarked. Émilienne elbowed him playfully, knowing he was referring to the time before the boys started studying, when they had no real idea who Witnesses were.

"Don't wait too long," she liked. "We wouldn't want to be crazy without you."

Chris smiled widely. That perked him up ...

Wait...

As Brian received a round of claps around coming out the water, Chris narrowed his eyes, his sights landing on a head of sleek, black...

"Chris?"

He jolted out of his thoughts to see his father.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I'm..." He glanced back. Maybe it was his imagination... "I'm good."

Tarrant nodded, his face unreadable.

Chris felt Émilienne pulling on his sleeve and he blindly followed, his mind somewhere else.

He pushed it to the back of his mind upon seeing his best friend.

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"Congrats, congrats!"

Brian gave an amused smile as Mikoto hugged him and clasped her hands together. Trey then gave him a bro hug and Akira winced. That sounded like it would hurt anyone else. She saw Thomas scoot over into her peripheral vision.

"Oh..." she said, flexing her fingers. "Alexis has told me that she and Marlin have reserved the place for the reception hall."

"Oh, cool," Thomas said, putting his hands behind his back.

"Yeah," she continued. "She also said that we're all going to check out the place out in a couple of weeks, so she wanted to know on what days it would be best that so we can all meet up easily. The sooner you tell her the better."

"Of course," Thomas said.

Akira nodded.

"What you got in mind after graduation?"

"Hm?" Akira asked. "You mean as in goals?"

He nodded.

"Admittedly, nothing in particular yet..." Akira said. "I am interested in foreign language, though."

"Really?" Thomas asked. "Cool."

"You?"

He stretched. "Need greating. Not sure where yet. "

"Huh..." Akira mused. "But I guess I'll start...!"

"...guess I gotta start... "

....

Both looked at each other.

"...pioneering... "

Blank stares.

"Don't copy me!" Both echoed.

"What?! You're the one that's copying me!"

With that, Akira slapped her forehead while Thomas held the bridge of his nose. They then chuckled at the silliness of it all.

"Whatever," Akira sighed. "That's good, though. I do plan on auxiliary pioneering next month with the circuit overseer coming and all..."

Thomas smirked. "Are you sure you're not copying me?"

"Alaya's auxiliary pioneering, Cyra's auxiliary pioneering, Jordan's auxiliary pioneering..." replied Akira, counting her fingers.

"Okay, okay," Thomas said, putting his hands up. He then furrowed his eyebrows. Akira followed his stare, but didn't see anything...

Wait...

Tan skin...

Wavy hair...

Thomas beat her to it.

"Is-is that..."

"Hey, where's my congrats?" Brian asked, looming over them incredulously. Akira only copied his stare.

"Congratulations, man," Thomas said.

"Yeah, congrats," Akira echoed, giving him a toothy smile. Brian then patted her head. He then patted Thomas shoulder and looked between them.

Akira was the first to break the silence. "What?"

Brian shrugged. "Like I know."

Both blinked as he left, watching as he was getting being congratulated by his congregation.

"What was that about?" Akira asked.

Thomas didn't answer at first. He then shrugged. "Beats me. There's Alexis. I'm going to go ahead and talk to her, okay?"

"Sure," Akira said thoughtfully. She felt that something was a little off ever since Brian arrived, but decided to ignore the feeling.

If only she could figure out what it was.

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Thomas huffed as he headed over to Alexis. Brian had that questioning look in his eyes again and this was not a time he wanted him to...

"Hey, Alexis," he said.

"Oh, hi, Thomas," she greeted.

"Akira told me about the place you guys choose for the reception hall," Thomas remarked. "I'm free on Saturday afternoons, Tuesdays and Fridays."

"Because you're working, yeah," Alexis finished. "Okay, thanks"

He glanced from Alexis to Mikoto who was currently jabbering with her beau, Alaya and Brian.

"How is it that you and Mikoto became best friends?" He asked. Alexis blinked in surprise at the question and smiled.

"I was her Bible study teacher."

Thomas silently mouthed 'Oh'. That made sense.

"She would ask me all sorts of questions and things and I just found myself answering them and one day, I asked her if she wanted to go to the movies. I swear she almost cried on the spot because she then told me about how many times she wanted to ask, but felt like maybe she wasn't spiritual enough. To which I scoffed and told her I was scared she would reject me. I guess I can understand what you mean, though. We are opposites. After she got baptized, we just stayed close, I guess. Oh! "

Thomas looked down at the sudden gasp.

"Mikoto wants you to tell Akira that we want to meet with her about the dresses for the bridesmaids. Jordan wants to meet with the guys too soon. Just to finalize everything. "

"Yeah, sure."

"Are you alright, Thomas?"

Alexis was looking at him inquisitively now.

"Why do you ask?"

She sighed. "You just seem really thoughtful."

She was right.

"Well..." How could he phrase this?

"Marriage... I mean, it might sound crazy, but I've just been thinking seriously about it."

Alexis smiled. "Hmmm... As in, it sounds fun to do or as in you want to find a truly spiritual marriage mate?"

"As in, I want to find a truly spiritual marriage mate," Thomas responded, deadpanning.

"Mmmm..." Alexis mused, nodding as if she was very wise. "Interesting. And one more question..."

Thomas continued to give her a blank stare, to which she giggled.

"Did you start considering this when you became interested in someone?"

Thomas decided not to answer right away, his face turning pink. At that, Alexis giggled even more, hiding her mouth with her hands.

"Okay, okay," she joked. "I won't torture you anymore by asking who... "

"Thank you..." Thomas said slowly.

"I'm not surprised with you being a hopeless romantic and all... "

"You're pushing it," Thomas playfully warned.

"Pushing what?"

Marlin approached him and stared in him in the eye with a rather unconvincing serious gaze. He looked from Thomas to his fiancée, who only waved it off and said she was just joking around with Thomas. Marlin only raised an eyebrow and shook his head.

"Alexis, what did you do?"

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked innocently.

"His face is as red as a beet!" he exclaimed. Alexis quickly shushed him, sending a look of apology Thomas' way.

"She's just being her cheery self, Marlin," Thomas said, rolling his eyes. Alexis crinkled her eyes at him. Maybe she was silently thanking him for not blowing her cover.

Marlin glanced between them with a look of suspicion. He then asked Thomas about getting together to try on tuxes and to help Jordan decide the style (the colors we're already decides to be gold and red). As they conversed, Thomas couldn't help but gaze at the couple.

If there was a chance.

If Jehovah granted him that chance...

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The times that Brian smiled was rare.

This was one of those times.

His hair was still damp, his mom's genetics being the blame for that, and his mouth was filled with a sandwich as he laughed from one of the jokes his soon to be stepfather passed along the table. Alie gave Tarrant a playful scolding for it, to which he apologized and kissed her nose. She squealed (a rare sound) and sent him a look of mock protest.

Brian would be lying if he said he wasn't happy for her.

Things seemed to be picking up for her and her bitterness changed soon after they started dating and especially when they started studying. Brian was glad that he eventually caved.

Which recalled another thing...

Brian's smile faltered a bit as he remembered a few days back, a familiar number on his phone's caller ID. Before Alie had a chance to see it, he deleted it.

They only called once a year and that was through his grandfather. Why call now? Just at the beginning of their new happiness...

"Brian!"

He snapped out of his reverie and looked at Bro. Fuji. "My wife just asked what your plans were going to be now that you've got baptized!"

"Oh, sorry I didn't hear you, Sis. Fuji," Brian apologized, adding a little bow for emphasis. "Well, actually, I would like to become a ministerial servant."

He received a few smiles and voices of pride.

"Really?" Alaya, who sat on his left, put down her fork. "I didn't know that."

Brian shrugged.

"If I may ask," she started, "what is it that made you want to be one?"

"Well, if you want to be honest, it was more of your Dad's doing," Brian admitted, feeling a little bashful. "I would love to become an elder someday, so I figured aiming for being a ministerial servant would be the first step... "

Alaya was smiling wistfully now.

"What?"

"Oh, no, it's just..." She tapped her fingers on the table. "That's nice. Rather touching actually. You don't mind me telling my Dad that, do you?"

Brian smirked. It warmed his heart when you she did things like that, something he just recently started to notice more and more. "Go ahead."

She smiled wider.

"Just make sure you don't go all soft when you become one, okay, sweetie?" Alie joked. "I know how much of a softie you can be..."

"And no one would have to tell him what's bothering them since he'd know it already," Chris said.

"Hey..." Brian said, frowning at them as they laughed at Chris' joke. He didn't feel like scolding anyone so he rolled his eyes and went back to eating.

"Oh, I forgot to ask," Émilienne started, gesturing with her fork. "When are we meeting to rehearse?"

She was referring to the wedding. She and Alaya were to be escorted by Chris and Brian respectively, which prevented them from being in Marlin and Alexis' wedding.

"Ah," Alie said, pointing a finger. "That's right. I'll be sending a text to everyone about that this week. I think I finally was able to get Dad down here and your parents said they had free dates during this time, too, right, honey?"

"Yeah," Tarrant agreed. "So, we'll definitely get back to you soon on that."

Brian smiled on the inside. It's been a while since he saw his grandfather. Would be nice to...

His train of thought stopped when he saw Chris, lightly stirring his soup, a forlorn look on his face. His gaze was partially directed towards his father and soon-to-be stepmother, who were currently whispering among themselves lovingly. Brian nudged his best friend and he immediately jolted, sending a surprised look in his direction.

"Something up?"

Chris only shook his head and smiled, albeit a little sadly.

"I'm good," he replied. "Just thinking..."

A silence.

"We're gonna be stepbro, soon."

Brian smirked.

"I know."

Chris didn't say anything else after that, but by the time Brian wanted to ask why, the blonde was engaged in conversation with Émilienne. Brian gazed at the group around them.

Akira and Thomas were currently engaged in a rather animated conversation, complete with fork pointing and incredulous expressions. He knew something had changed between them but he couldn't figure out what just yet. Anita and Daniel joined in just as crazily.

Beside them, Cyra, Jordan, Malvina and...Wan Ji...Brother Lee, he believed was the name, were conversing as well, mother and son looking much better than they had in a long time.

At another table, Alexis and Marlin were currently holding hands, she leaning onto his shoulder, eyes closed as he talked with Bro. Steele from across the table, whose wife, strangely enough was doing the same thing with her own mate. April and Zachary would each give their own little tidbits. Zachary had found a father figure in the older man and Brian wouldn't be surprised if he saw him along hanging out with Marlin and Jordan more due to their musical prowess.

Mikoto, Trey, Abayomi and Dae-Jung somehow found themselves at the same table with Bro. Okebe, Chuguel, Bedelia, but none seemed to mind as their energetic conversation showed. And finally, old friends as they were, Amy and Bruce conversed with Kevin and Treena.

Brian sighed happily.

What could truly cause a division in this group? Brought together in the most unlikely of ways by Jehovah?

Nothing, he hoped.

And with such a bright future, he hoped it would stay that way.

IN THE NEXT VOLUME....

"My mommy and daddy are coming in! You look just like them!"

"Nice to see you again, short stuff..."

"You actually, truly, honestly, LIKE SOMEONE? As in, I don't know, MARRIAGE?"

"Well, hello! It's like you guys switched personalities or something! How else are we going to react?!"

"It just...feels like a weird dream. Of all the times for them to come back..."

"I'm just...confused and delighted, I guess. It's all happening so fast..."

"Believe me, that's the last thing you want to do..."

"I don't care what you say about me, as I'm worth less than dirt, anyway. But you will NOT treat her this way..."

"This is bad. I just feel like something's off..."

"Well, that's just perfect. We're less than two months away from these weddings. And already we have more drama than what's truly necessary! Not to mention the wedding party possibly being split..."

"Thanks. It helps more than you know..."

"After all we been through, you want to say THAT?!"

"I love you. No matter how you feel about this, I love you. We love you so much. And I know sorry just won't cut it..."

"Jehovah, we all need help. PLEASE..."

While one side is being torn apart...

More and more, Jordan finds himself in the middle of arguments between his parents. Respectfully, he keeps his distance, but as his family situation gets worse, the young man closes himself off from the others, trying to find strength within...

...another side is coming together...

Meanwhile, Émilienne has found a rather interesting acquaintance in a boy from school who seems to be interested in the Bible. The more they meet, the closer they get and she starts to ignore her head instead of heart when she agrees to a proposition from him...

...and neither for the right reasons.

As both rely on their own understanding, they fail to seek out the help they need as they try to pull through on their own experiences. When things start to come to a head, will they turn back to Jehovah and their friends before it's too late?