

Part Two

Chapter Seven

As usual, every school child had to rise and prepare for the day. Robert did the same, though his movements carried a strange heaviness, as if each gesture demanded careful thought.

The bed he rose from groaned in protest. Its wooden frame, weakened by years of use, creaked beneath his shifting weight. The blanket he pushed aside was thin—too thin to fight the early morning chill that lingered in the room. He sat at the edge of the bed for a moment, hunched forward, staring at his uniform draped over the back of a chair that had lost one leg but still stood upright, balanced carefully on a folded stone.

The shirt hung there like a quiet reminder of duty. It was clean, though the fabric had grown weary from countless washings. The once-bright school badge sagged on the pocket, attached by a rough stitch of black thread Robert himself had sewn. He reached out and brushed his fingers gently across it, as if afraid the emblem might fall apart under careless touch.

A faint smile curved his lips, but it was burdened by something unspoken.

In his eyes lingered the silent struggle of a boy too young to feel old, yet forced by life to carry more than his share of weight. The small mirror leaning against the wall offered him a reflection he was still learning to accept. His hair stood unevenly, uncombed, curling into tiny stubborn knots. His cheeks, once rounder, had sharpened, shaped by hunger that visited too often. He lifted his chin and straightened his back, as if convincing himself that he could look strong even when he did not feel it.

His jaw tightened. Yet within his eyes flickered a glow that refused to fade—a quiet fire of dreams that still lived somewhere beyond the heaviness of the morning.

The room told its own story. The walls were stained with dust and charcoal smoke. On the wooden floor lay his school shoes, polished but old, one sole beginning to peel. He bent slowly and lifted them with care, as though even the shoes deserved gratitude for enduring the daily walk to school.

Robert wrestled with his tie for the third time that morning. It refused to sit neatly, twisting as if it possessed a stubborn will of its own. He sighed and flattened it against his chest.

“Perfect,” he muttered, staring into the cracked mirror. “I look like a detective who overslept.”

A sharp whistle echoed from outside. “Robert! Robbie!” a voice called.

He turned toward the door and stepped outside. Sharif stood there, his bag slung over one shoulder.

“Oh, Sharif, you’re early today,” Robert said.

Sharif shrugged. “Not really. I didn’t finish my classwork notes yesterday. I want to complete them before the teacher pretends to ask for them.”

Robert smiled knowingly. Within minutes, he was ready, and the two boys began their walk.

They moved along the dusty road lined with small vendor stalls. The morning air was cool, and their footsteps stirred fine clouds of powdery soil. Each held his bag strap tightly, their conversation soft but steady.

Sharif was a devoted Muslim, quiet yet firm in his faith. Robert admired that about him. Despite the hardships they faced, Sharif spoke of God with steady certainty. It was something Robert struggled with lately. Certain ugly experiences had shaken his belief that a bright plan truly awaited him.

Still, Sharif remained kind and consistent—a friend who could make silence comfortable and sorrow lighter.

“Shouldn’t we call him too?” Sharif asked suddenly.

“I think he’s still asleep, as usual,” Robert replied. “Let’s go.”

But as they approached the school gate, just being unlocked by the guard, they found Ali already waiting.

“Oh, Ali! Morning, man,” they greeted in unison.

Ali placed his hands on his hips dramatically.

“I think I should write this in my notebook—both of you arriving early on a Monday. History has been made.”

“At least when we come late, we bring something to eat at break,” Robert replied, raising an eyebrow.

The three burst into laughter as they entered the compound. For boys who shared so little, they shared everything.

On rare days—perhaps no more than seven in an entire term—it was possible for all three to have a coin each for breakfast. Those days felt like miracles. They counted them like festivals.

Today, it was Robert’s turn.

Ali swung his bag playfully. “My brothers! Tell me—is today the day we become billionaires, or are we still the proud owners of a single five-hundred-shilling coin?”

Robert smiled faintly and dug into his pocket. The lone silver coin rested there—their entire fortune for the day.

“Still the same empire,” he said, holding it up.
Ali gasped dramatically and staggered backward.

“You mean our kingdom is crumbling? Three great men reduced to one coin? The newspapers will call us the Broken Brotherhood!”

Sharif laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Better that than the Hungry Heroes.”

“Hungry heroes? No!” Ali declared loudly. “Crumbs of destiny! With this, we shall buy cassava and feast like kings in Paris!”

“Kings who fight over crumbs,” Sharif teased.
Nearby students chuckled at Ali’s exaggerated performance.

Robert laughed too, but as he stared at the coin, a memory surfaced—his mother the previous night, counting coins slowly under dim light. He remembered the way she had sighed before pushing one coin toward him.

“At least this will get you something,” she had said softly.

He had nodded, pretending it was enough. He knew she had not eaten.
Robert blinked quickly, forcing the memory back before his friends could notice the change in his expression.

Ali snatched the coin and held it high like a trophy. “Fear not! Today we dine!”
And just like that, the heaviness lifted a little.

That was their secret strength. They did not have much—but they had each other.
Each boy knew the other’s background. None of them lived comfortably. Ali, talkative and endlessly dramatic, lived under the care of his elder brother and his wife. He was older than Robert by two months—sixteen years of age—and carried humor like armor. It was his weapon against reality.

Sharif, the youngest by five months, dreamed quietly of becoming a leader someday—perhaps even entering politics. His faith steadied him in ways the others admired.

And Robert—Robert carried songs inside him. Songs no one had yet heard. Sometimes he imagined himself a soldier, strong and fearless. Other times, he dreamed of writing music that would speak for boys like them. He was self-motivated, thoughtful, and often quiet—but when he

joked, his laughter felt genuine.

None of them liked the life they were living.

None of them liked the hunger, the struggle, the uncertainty.

But they endured.

Especially Robert.

Because beyond poverty and hardship, beyond hunger and torn shoes, he carried something heavier still—the pain of watching his mother suffer in silence.

And that was a burden no coin could lighten

by Mutebi Robert 0746929839

to be continued.