A Rare Bloom

by Gileonnen

Summary

When Shuri finds evidence that the heart-shaped herb might still be growing wild in Jabariland, T'Challa and M'Baku embark on a quest to find it. As the journey takes them deep into the mountains, though, their newfound trust—and growing attraction—is tested.

Notes

This fic draws exclusively from MCU canon, and until I have my own copy of Black Panther for reference, my fics may be a rough approximation of that canon. Many thanks to Sath for an insightful beta! Any remaining errors are my own.

Shuri idly flicked through her music files as the scanner canvassed a virtual map of Wakanda. A few soft pings marked potential hotspots on the borders, but she'd already done a drone flythrough and found nothing but bean gardens. A couple of potted amaranths in the city had chemical signatures that were almost right, but so far, her gene editing experiments hadn't borne (ha) fruit. Her specimens were very pretty, but they'd stubbornly refused to integrate vibranium particles.

"Why is there never anything good to listen to," she asked herself, sighing. "Seventy-eight thousand music files, and I can't find a single—"
A loud chirp from the scanner cut her off. She jerked upright in her chair and closed her hand on her kimoyo bead, silencing the music.

At the very edge of the map, there was a zone of darkness where Jabari jamming posts blocked all other signals. But at the edge of that darkness, tantalizingly close, the scanner had picked up a familiar chemical signature.

Shuri dropped herself into her remote piloting chair, and the world reformed around her. The drone's cameras fed back into her laboratory display, creating a seamless sphere of which she was the core. Below her, the launch bay dropped away; ahead, the cloudless blue sky beckoned. She pushed forward on the controls to nose the drone into flight.

The city sped by, shining towers giving way to broad, grassy fields. Children on hoverbikes chased antelope across the plains, laughing as the herds split around rocks like river water. A cadre of Dora Milaje in training glanced up as the drone whined past, but they only shook their heads and returned to their practice.

Ahead, the mountains loomed like the lower teeth of a great beast. The snow-capped peaks shone in the sunlight, the glare almost disguising the glitter of the jamming posts.

She'd have to steer away from those. A single pulse would knock her drone from the sky, and then the rocks below would take care of the rest.

Chasing the arc of the mountain range, she fed her scan parameters into the drone's weak sensors. Not much foliage here, where the craggy stone made an impenetrable wall. Images flashed across her viewscreen, snapshots captured in the flythrough: a thorn bush clinging to a cliff face. Slick green water weeds where snowmelt made a spring. But there, in the gap between two jamming towers where the countersignal was weakest, she caught a blurred flash of green—

Then the spear struck her and sent the world spiraling.

Frantically, Shuri tried to compensate for the weight of the spear, but the rotors weren't responding—she careened toward the earth, tumbling, sky above and below. For a moment, she glimpsed the grinning face of a white-painted Jabari warrior. He waved. Then the rocks were all around her, and the camera feed cut out.

Shuri slumped back in her chair, which bled back into sand beneath her and deposited her gently on the floor. "Shit," she muttered.

She twisted one of her kimoyo beads, which gleamed red at her touch. "Brother," she said. "I think I've found the heart-shaped herb. The chemical signature is almost a perfect match."

T'Challa's face came into view, hovering over her palm. His eyes were wide with delight. "That's excellent news! But why do I sense a 'but'?"

She rolled her eyes. "But, there might be one teeny tiny diplomatic snag ..."

* * *

Last time T'Challa had been in the land in the Jabari, he'd been half-dead, his heart full of wrath and sorrow. He'd had little mind to appreciate the long white halls of M'Baku's home, or the bone-white branches suspended in constellations at every side.

Today, though, he noticed how the shifting, ethereal lines of the throne room guided the eye inexorably to M'Baku, heavyset and substantial upon a white stone chair. "Don't you have a country
to run?” asked M'Baku.

T'Challa couldn't help smiling. "Sorry to see me again so soon?"

"Just wondering what you want this time, since your life and my army clearly weren't enough."

"Great Gorilla—"

"So you do want something." M'Baku tapped his fingers on the arm of his throne.

"You will not interrupt your king," said one of the Dora Milaje sternly, but T'Challa raised a placating hand.

"In the land of the Jabari, I will show their lord the respect he is owed. I know that your people closely guard their borders, and that you do not welcome intruders lightly. I've come to ask you, not as your sovereign but as your friend, to allow me and my people safe passage through your land."

M'Baku laughed, but T'Challa could see his interest was piqued. Calculation glittered in his dark eyes. "Thinking of taking up skiing?"

"Botany," T'Challa answered. "Our sensors have discovered what we believe to be the sacred heart-shaped herb in your lands. We would like to take a few plants to restore the royal gardens."

For a second that stretched into a minute, M'Baku regarded him stone-faced. He enjoys the drama of sitting in judgment, T'Challa told himself. In another life, one where I yielded under his arm, he would be my king. He met M'Baku's gaze.

Slowly, M'Baku broke into a broad grin. He rose from his chair, towering over T'Challa—the Dora Milaje tensed—then swept him up in a crushing hug. "I would be willing to grant this request," he pronounced, "but on one condition."

T'Challa's bones creaked. From somewhere between M'Baku's enormous, surprisingly warm pectorals, he said with kingly dignity, "Name your condition."

"The heart-shaped herb is the bounty of kings," said M'Baku. He set T'Challa down, but his hands remained on his shoulders. His voice went low and grave. "Only those who have survived the royal challenge should undertake this quest. You and I will find the heart-shaped herb together, no guards or warriors—or no one will have it at all."

T'Challa looked from one of his bodyguards to the other. One raised both brows at him; the other faintly shook her head. He sensed, as he often did, that the Dora Milaje were a mere hairsbreadth away from restraining him for his own protection.

But now that he had made his request, there was no other way to gain the heart-shaped herb but through treachery, and he had no intention of betraying M'Baku's fragile trust.

"I accept your terms," he said. "But I have one condition, as well."

"Oh?" M'Baku tilted his head. "Let's hear it."

"I will need a warmer coat."

* * *

The Jabari did indeed provide T'Challa with a thick fur coat, as well as a pouch of trail rations and a bead containing a compressed tent with a sleeping roll. He cast the bead to the ground and watched
the tent expand on the smooth stone floor, curved vibranium struts holding up a surprisingly tough mesh fabric. "Nice, yeah?" said the Jabari who had been tasked with equipping him.

"Very nice," agreed T'Challa. "We'd welcome your scientists in the lowlands."

"And put us under a sixteen-year-old child?" A disapproving grunt. "Thanks, but no thanks. Got my lab just how I like it up here." The Jabari man caught T'Challa's eye and made sure he was watching, then knelt to pinch a tab on the tent between his fingers. The whole structure collapsed in on itself, leaving only a silvery bead no bigger than a nabe bean. T'Challa put it in his pouch with the rest of his supplies.

They gave him a pouch of piton beads, warning that the rock might be less strong than the pitons, and then brought him at last to the head of a mountain trail. There, M'Baku was already waiting, seated on a rock with his chest still bare beneath his fur-lined coat. He wore his knobkerrie at his side as though he expected trouble and was prepared to handle it. "I thought you'd gone back to Wakanda," he said.

"I thought the Jabari lands were a part of Wakanda," T'Challa answered, which made M'Baku laugh heartily.

"Maybe so." He uncurled, rising to his full height. The cold didn't seem to bother him at all; his arms hung loosely at his sides, and his shoulders were thrown proudly back. "But the Jabari lands are not kind to outsiders. We'll see how kind they are to you."

"Is everything a test with you?"

M'Baku grinned. "Not just with me—what did you think being a king was? Why do you think the first thing they ask you to do is fight for your life?"

T'Challa looked back, to where the Dora Milaje stood before an array of warriors painted with white clay. They looked like drops of blood on snow-covered rock; he tried not to see an omen in that. Then, taking a deep breath, he set out on the trail.

The road M'Baku had chosen had been carved many centuries ago into the mountainside, a narrow ridge of flat earth with a sheer drop to the right and an unscalable rock wall to the left. Ahead, he saw only mountains, with the road cutting through them in a razor-thin line. He'd heard stories of thick forests in the valleys of Jabariland, but from this vantage, he could see only snow and rock. Far away, the blocky silhouette of a jamming post pointed like a finger to the high, pale sky. T'Challa had never seen a place so grim or desolate. "Where does this road go?" T'Challa asked.

"Keep walking, and you'll see."

Together, they followed the rough path deeper into the mountains, while the sun wheeled overhead and the shadows grew long and deep. As the day wore on, T'Challa's lungs began to ache from the cold, dry air. The heat leached from his hands, even through the insulated gloves that Shuri had made him bring, and his fingers felt stiff and heavy.

M'Baku, though, practically gleamed with good health. When evening kindled the horizon with coral and gold, there was a spring in his step and a ready mirth in his voice that made T'Challa feel very tired indeed.

"Not far now," said M'Baku. Gesturing T'Challa to wait, he traced a complex pattern on the head of his knobkerrie. It flared like a torch, casting soft blue-white light all around. "Now, listen. What do you hear?"
In the silence, T’Challa listened to his own harsh breathing. He heard the distant stirring of small creatures in the shadowed mountains, the calls of birds returning to unseen aeries. And if he strained his ears to the very limits of hearing—“Water,” he said.

M’Baku’s teeth shone white in the gathering darkness. "Water," he agreed. "When we reach it, we’ll make camp for the night."

The road curled around an outcropping of fragile-looking stone; when T’Challa put his hand to the rock wall to his left, the stone crumbled beneath his hand. Experimentally, he dropped a small fragment over the ledge to his right, then listened for long, uncomfortable moments to the tick of the rock tumbling down. "Have you ever considered putting up a railing?" he asked, mostly to cover the ominous crunch of rock beneath his feet.

"Never saw a need."

Ahead, M’Baku’s torch picked out a cavernous opening in the cliff face. A stream flowed out from the cave mouth, cutting through the road to spill down the mountainside in a ribbon of glittering silver. "Here we are," M’Baku pronounced, and led T’Challa into the darkness.

He followed, one hand to the necklace of claws resting over his collarbones, and tried not to think about what an excellent place this was to be murdered. *M’Baku only tried to kill me once,* he told himself. *It's not like it's been a habit.*

Before him, the cavern opened up into a chamber so tall that even M’Baku could stand fully erect, the ceiling veined with faintly glowing vibranium. Across the floor of the cavern lay a dozen clear, shallow pools, rimmed with gleaming rock and steaming gently in the cool air.

M’Baku set his knobkerrie in a sconce on the wall, then threw down a vibranium bead on a dry ledge overlooking the hot springs. An enormous tent sprang up where the bead struck the rock, its red fabric walls gleaming with silvery embroidery; at the center lay a lavish bed of piled furs. *Vibranium filaments,* thought T’Challa. *There's no way his people could cram real furs into that casing.* "Pitch your tent, King," M’Baku laughed. "Then get out of those clothes and see how the Jabari go camping."

"After your throne room, I was expecting something more ... minimalist. Some elegant sticks, maybe, and a white blanket."

"I'm full of surprises."

"Clearly."

T’Challa shed his coat reluctantly, but to his relief, the hot springs kept the cave comfortably warm. His tunic came next, then boots, trousers, and underclothes. Feeling flooded back into his fingers and toes even before he dipped one foot into the blood-warm water. He sighed in pleasure, then lowered himself slowly into the pool and rested his arms along the rim. "This place is a rare treasure," he said. "How did your people find it?"

M’Baku stood a moment upon the ledge, surveying the cavern with its dozen mirror-smooth pools. His naked body gleamed, each muscle starkly etched beneath his skin. The light silvered his shoulders and cast his face into shadow. "The stories say that in the days before the Black Panther united the tribes, a lost Jabari warrior wandered the valleys for days, near death. He crawled to the bank of a stream and drank, and as he drank, his wounds began to close. He looked up at the mountainside, and he saw a family of white gorillas climbing the cliff face around the waterfall. He followed them here, and they took him in as one of their own."
"A good story," said T'Challa softly.

M'Baku threw back his head and laughed. "I'm fucking with you. I don't know how we found this place. I just know I wish it were closer." He stepped down into the water, closing his eyes in evident appreciation.

They sat like that in silence, while the water sang quietly over the ledge and the night sky outside blossomed with stars. To his surprise, T'Challa found that he felt truly at peace for perhaps the first time since his father's death. Even M'Baku's teasing was comfortable, irreverent in a way that felt friendly rather than disrespectful. Floating in the warm spring, stripped of his kingly regalia, T'Challa felt more human than he had in months.

After they'd soaked away the day's aches and dined on a hearty stew of white yam and nuts, they wrapped themselves up in furs and sat together at the mouth of the cave. There, they watched wisps of cloud drift over the numberless stars. "Why did you want us to come out here alone?" T'Challa asked.

M'Baku resettled his blanket over his lap; a chill wind stirred the soft white fur. "There are things one man can ask another that a subject can't ask his king."

"If you have questions, ask them."

"Are we equals, then?" A huff of laughter. In the faint light of the cave, M'Baku's face looked like a thing carven of stone. His breath was slow and steady. Droplets of water glittered in his hair like stars.

In the charged stillness, T'Challa let himself admit that M'Baku was a beautiful man. "I would like us to be."

"Even for a king, liking doesn't make it so." M'Baku pushed himself to his feet, sweeping up the fur blanket and gathering it around himself like a robe. "Good night, T'Challa. We'll go on in the morning."

Long after M'Baku's tent fell closed, T'Challa sat beside the waterfall and watched satellites wheel across the starry sky. He wondered if there was anything he could have said that would have convinced M'Baku to ask his question.

He wondered if he would have been able to answer it.

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The day dawned cloudy, with winds that howled over the cave mouth like hungry spirits. The two of them packed up their tents and dressed themselves against the chill, trousers and boots and insulated gloves. Even M'Baku pulled on a skin-tight shirt in concession to the cold. The fabric strained mightily over his broad chest, but held.

Perhaps that shouldn't have been disappointing.

At the cave's entrance, M'Baku took out a palm-sized computer and thumbed through the display for a minute, then grinned. "How sure are you about that chemical signature you gave me? Because I'm reading it in a valley about a day to the northeast."

"I trust Shuri's research," said T'Challa. "Does this road ever go northeast?"

"Only if you fall," said M'Baku cheerfully. "We'll have to find a good place to descend and go
through the valleys.”

"Shuri said she saw something near one of the jamming towers—"

"Do you want to do this the easy, careful way, or do you want to have an adventure? Because I can call someone to pick us up if you're afraid of a climb."

The barb was so obvious that T'Challa barely felt it. He had glimpsed something last night beneath M'Baku's teasing and bluster—some part of him that strove for human connection. There are things one man can ask another that a subject can't ask his king. Even among the Jabari, is there anyone else with whom M'Baku can put his title aside?

Aloud, he said only, "Show me where you want to climb down, and we'll see if a gorilla can climb better than a cat."

M'Baku laughed and clapped a hand on T'Challa's shoulder, rocking him where he stood. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They spent the next hour edging along the mountain road, moving at a serpent's pace. The harsh wind tore at their coats and tried to whip them off of the mountainside; M'Baku only bent his head against the gale and pressed on, relentless as an engine. Sheltered in the lee of him, T'Challa blinked against whirling snow. If I fall, my suit will absorb the impact, he told himself. What happens if he falls?

After what felt like an eternity, M'Baku pointed down and said, "Here. That ridge will keep the wind off."

Glancing down, T'Challa watched the wind send snow skating over the top of the ridge to spiral lazily into the slight fissure that M'Baku had chosen. "Is this really our best option?"

"Have you seen anything better?"

T'Challa admitted that he hadn't.

Taking the strings of piton beads from their packs, they anchored themselves to the roadway and swung over the side. Each bead drove a spike of vibranium deep into the rock when it made contact, and the tightly-coiled cable that connected them raveled out slowly with their descent.

Even with the pitons, though, the going was rough. More than once, T'Challa scrabbled for purchase on a ridge of stone, but his cold-clumsy fingers refused to close. Feeling himself slipping, he activated the gloves of his suit to cling to the rock with panther claws.

Still they climbed. The wind buffetted them both like pendulums, shoulders striking shoulders, hips knocking against hips. The first few times, M'Baku grinned as though he thought it was funny. As the descent wore on, though, he stopped smiling. Even with his incredible strength, his apparent imperviousness to the cold, his face was strained and drawn.

They were halfway down the mountainside when T'Challa felt the rock crumble under him. His foothold snapped free, leaving him dangling over the abyss with all his weight on the cable. For a moment, the elation of survival flooded him; he laughed, astonished, and tried to swing himself back toward the rock face to reestablish his grip. He was just pushing up for a handhold when he heard the ominous clatter of falling rock from higher up the mountain.

The lowest piton snapped free first, and then the rest in one horrific chain—he heard the rock
breaking, watched the string tumbling down for one endless heartbeat—and then he fell.

M'Baku flung out a hand, but not fast enough to catch him. T'Challa spun as he fell, arms milling, vibranium claws striking sparks from the rock. For a moment, his claws caught, and the force of the fall nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket. His satchel tumbled to the ground far below. Then the rock shattered under his claws, and he was falling again.

He concentrated on the necklace, letting the black suit form around him. Shards of flexible vibranium enclosed him, armoring him from flailing foot to vulnerable cranium.

He struck the ground like a bullet, shattering rock where he landed.

Slowly, T'Challa climbed to his feet. He studied his hands, which crackled and pulsed with violet energy. The impact hadn't hurt, exactly, but it had left him winded in a way that had nothing to do with his lungs and everything to do with knowledge of his own mortality.

Far above, M'Baku was a mere speck on the side of the cliff. He waved at that speck. The speck waved back.

When he got back to the city, T'Challa would buy Shuri any handbag she wanted.

* * *

After that first, harrowing drop, the mountainside did not threaten them again. The temperature steadily climbed as they descended; streams of snowmelt branched and rejoined, and their banks were thick with wildflowers. When they reached the first tree-girdled valley, M'Baku stripped off coat and shirt and threw them over his arm.

"You don't have to impress me, you know," T'Challa said as they walked. His coat was still fastened, more because he'd come to like the weight of it than to ward off the chill. "I believe that the cold doesn't bother you."

"You think I'm doing this to impress you?" M'Baku canted his head. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I want you to admire my thick hide. That's probably why I built myself an open-air throne room, too, because I was waiting for the King of Wakanda to visit Jabariland and be impressed."

T'Challa laughed and raised both hands in surrender. "You have my admiration, whether or not you want it."

"I thought I caught you staring in the hot springs." M'Baku flashed a crooked smile.

T'Challa's pulse leapt. His face and ears went hot. "I admire you as a warrior and a statesman—"

"And what did my cock do better, throw spears or give speeches?"

"Enough," said T'Challa, lowering his hands. He tried to sound grave and kind, as a king should when he made an apology, but M'Baku's grin was infectious. "If I insulted you, please tell me how to set it right."

"I didn't say I minded." Still smiling, M'Baku strode ahead into the deep shadow of the trees. He sang a jaunty hymn to Hanuman as he walked, and from every tree, curious monkeys screamed a gleeful counterpoint.

* * *
In the valleys, dense trees curtained off the cloudy sky. When T'Challa looked up, he saw only a murky green darkness, broken here and there by jagged slashes of light where the trees' crowns shied away from each other. On the valley floor, broad-leafed undergrowth and tough ferns choked the gaps between the trees. Roots and fallen vines lay across the ground, forcing him to consider each step carefully; once, his boot nearly came down on a snake the color of fallen leaves, and he held very still until it slithered away.

Here, the snow of the high mountains faded to rain, which dripped from leaf to leaf to land inexorably on the back of T'Challa's neck.

He checked his kimoyo beads every now and then, watching the hour creep inexorably toward dusk. "Do you know a good campsite in these valleys?" he asked, when the light shed by his kimoyo beads was brighter than the light filtering down from the canopy.

"None close by," said M'Baku. He pushed an enormous fern out of the way with the end of his knobkerrie. "We have a few waystations on the roads, but this shit—" and he gestured grandly at the undergrowth "—is not a road."

"What is your plan, then?"

M'Baku laughed. "I like that you trust me to have one."

"You know Jabariland."

"Most of Jabariland. But we're out of the mountains now, and the forest doesn't like me any better than it likes you." M'Baku checked his palm-sized computer again, and a grin split his face. He passed it over to T'Challa. "Likes somebody, though. Take a look."

T'Challa gazed down at the screen, at the dull heat signatures of a thousand trees and the bright motes of monkeys and birds darting across a digital canopy. He and M'Baku stood at the center of the map, two human figures radiating a steady, vibrant light.

And a little way to the northeast, a gap in the trees that was unmistakably the corner of something massive.

"What is this?"

"Don't know," said M'Baku. "But if I'm right, we're about to find something interesting. If it's trouble, you've got claws, and I've got a big stick."

"That's not as reassuring as you think it is."

"Then let's hope it isn't trouble."

M'Baku slipped his device back into his satchel, and T'Challa let his kimoyo beads dim. The two of them crept carefully through the forest, letting the steady splash of water mask the sound of their footfalls. *I should have brought Shuri's "sneakers,"* thought T'Challa, but there was no sense in regretting it now. Overhead, a bird gave an eerie, laughing cry.

M'Baku threw out one arm, palm resting lightly on T'Challa's collarbone. *Wait.*

Ahead, a crumbling stone wall gleamed dully in the light of a cloud-veiled sickle moon.

Both of them stood for long moments, listening for human voices or the sound of cookware, straining their eyes for a faint glow that might mean a fire. T'Challa heard only the drip of rain, though, and
the delicate steps of forest creatures. After what felt like an eternity of waiting, M'Baku dropped his hand, and the two of them followed the wall.

Long ago, it must have been carved with some design or decoration, but centuries of steady rains and climbing vines had worn the stones smooth. "What is this place?" asked T'Challa. "How long has it been here?"

"Long enough to be forgotten," said M'Baku.

"Your sensors never picked this up before?"

M'Baku rolled his eyes, and the rest of his head rolled with them. "Unlike the rest of Wakanda, the Jabari don't just scan things for the fun of it. We weren't looking for—why are you smiling?"

"Because," said T'Challa, "you said 'the rest of Wakanda.'"

"Don't read too much into it."

They came to a place where the wall had crumbled, enormous stone blocks collapsing into a sinkhole so ancient that its sides had long since filled in and grown over. There, they climbed over the fallen blocks and into the ruin of a courtyard.

The plaza had once been tiled in stone, T'Challa thought, but now the gaps between stones were only visible as a pattern of indentations in the thick carpet of moss and fallen leaves covering the ground. The forest had conquered this ruin, seeding it with trees that had long ago grown tall and proud. Broken pillars stood in jagged ranks, or lay like felled giants with ferns rooting in their cracks. When T'Challa peeled away the soft moss from the fallen capstone of a pillar, he felt stylized fans of papyrus carved into the stone.

He knew in his gut where he was, even before he came face to face with Bast.

The statue stood sentinel at the back of the courtyard, a massive cat carved from a single piece of black stone. T'Challa twisted a kimoyo bead, and the light from it picked out rings of gold on her tail and in her elegant ears. What must it have taken for a place like this to be so completely forgotten that no one came to steal the gold from her ears? he wondered.

He caught a glint of gold between her front paws, and he bent to brush away the dead leaves. As he revealed the dust-dulled metal beneath, his breath caught. "M'Baku, come here," he called.

He heard footsteps behind him, then a long sigh. "Yes, I can see it's a big fucking black panther—"

"No, look."

M'Baku put a hand on T'Challa's shoulder as he bent down. Unthinking, T'Challa closed his hand over it; when M'Baku gripped him back, a warmth spilled through him that had nothing to do with body heat.

Between Bast's enormous paws knelt a tiny monkey carved of the same black stone. His smiling eyes were fixed on the world beyond their pedestal, and his hands were cupped before him to offer up a heart-shaped flower made of gold.

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They made a campfire a little apart from the temple courtyard, beyond the ruins of the thick wall that sheltered it. While their dried rice plumped up in M'Baku's collapsible stewpot, T'Challa gazed in the
fire, lost in his own thoughts.

"The stories say Bast showed your ancestors how to find this heart-shaped herb," said M'Baku. He knelt at T'Challa's side, then settled himself cross-legged on the ground. His expression was, T'Challa felt, entirely too smug to be allowed. "But who showed her where to find it? Looks like it was Hanuman!"

"This place has much to teach us about what our ancestors believed," T'Challa admitted. "We have historians and archaeologists who would love to see what secrets these ruins hold."

"So do we," said M'Baku. "What do you think? Joint venture?"

"Is that an invitation?"

For a moment, T'Challa thought M'Baku would answer with a joke; his eyes glittered, and one corner of his lips drew up in a half-smile. But then he looked back into the flames, and his face grew pensive. "My people deserve a voice in the story of Wakanda," he said. "We've spent too long as outsiders in our own country. Maybe it's time for the Jabari to come down from the mountains."

T'Challa laid his hand on M'Baku's wrist. Thick muscles tensed beneath his hand, but M'Baku didn't brush him away. Slowly, M'Baku looked up from the fire, and T'Challa met his gaze. "The Jabari have much to offer—fresh ideas and technology, and stories that the rest of us have forgotten. Wakanda needs your voices."

"I hope you remember saying that when you don't like what you hear." Shaking himself as though rousing from a daze, M'Baku leaned forward to pull his stewpot out of the fire. The rice inside was soft and sticky, studded with nuts and onions and shreds of waterleaf.

They ate their rice porridge from broad, tough leaves plucked from nearby bushes, following the repast with meltingly sweet fruits that M'Baku assured him were safe to eat. The satisfaction of warm food in his stomach was almost enough to calm T'Challa's racing thoughts, but all the same, he looked forward to the relaxation of a long sleep.

He reached into his satchel, feeling around in the seams for the little bead that contained his tent. Then frowned. Emptied the contents of the satchel onto his lap. Turned it inside out, then checked in every cranny of his gear by the light of his bracelet.

"Lost something?" asked M'Baku, who was already splayed out on his enormous bed.

"My tent. It must have fallen out when I fell off the mountain."

M'Baku snorted. "What, don't you have some kind of fold-up house in one of your kimoyo beads?"

"I must have left it in my other bracelet." T'Challa began scanning the area for somewhere relatively sheltered and comfortable. If he could make it to the crook of one of those trees in the courtyard, there might be enough moss to—

"Hey, where are you going?"

T'Challa turned back. "Looking for a place to sleep."

"Don't be an ass. Share my bed."

The offer hung between them, heavy with possibility. T'Challa's mouth went dry. When he looked
into the shifting shadows of M'Baku's tent, the piled furs seemed to beckon him with their softness. The dim moonlight glanced from every curve of muscle, M'Baku's heavy shoulders and barrel chest and thick, powerful thighs. He could almost imagine how M'Baku's skin would feel beneath his tongue. Nakia would laugh at me, if she saw me staring like a schoolboy with a crush, he thought.

And then she would lean over my shoulder and whisper in my ear, "Have courage. This chance may not come again."

He stripped to his underclothes and folded his garments, setting them just inside the tent. Next came his shoes, which faded down to tough treded soles and fell away. Then he closed up the embroidered flaps at the front of the tent and turned back to the bed.

As T'Challa undressed, M'Baku shifted to one side of the bed, his head pillowed on his hand. He regarded T'Challa with naked appraisal as he stooped to crawl into bed, speaking neither praise nor condemnation. For a moment, as T'Challa settled a heavy fur blanket over himself, he wondered if he had misread M'Baku's offer.

Then M'Baku pulled him in for a crushing kiss, and T'Challa cast all doubt aside.

The first kiss was rough, a frantic crash of lips and teeth. T'Challa tasted blood, and for an electric moment, he wasn't sure whose it was. His hand caught M'Baku's neck, urging him closer; he drank the kiss down and came up gasping.

The second kiss went down sweeter, and by the third, M'Baku was groaning curses into his mouth. "You kiss like you fight," T'Challa said, breathless.

"Why don't you get your thighs around my head, and we'll see who yields this time."

M'Baku slid one broad, callused palm down T'Challa's back, waking nerves from shoulder to hip as his fingertips dipped beneath T'Challa's underclothes. "Please," T'Challa whispered at the faintest hesitation. "Please, yes."

Then M'Baku was gripping his ass, skin to bare skin, stroking and kneading as though he meant to imprint himself on T'Challa's flesh. When T'Challa tipped his head back in pleasure, M'Baku bent to kiss his throat as though that had been an invitation. Lips and teeth traced over jaw, collar, neck, chin. T'Challa's pulse was a drumbeat against his skin, a steady rhythm resounding in his ears. He buried his face in M'Baku's neck and rocked into him, driving himself ever deeper into the embrace.

"Touch me," M'Baku laughed beneath his ear. "Or have you forgotten how to handle a spear?"

"It's been a while." There was barely space between them for T'Challa's hand; every time he drew back to make room, M'Baku's hips rocked up to meet him with delicious pressure. His palm dragged down over M'Baku's abs, beneath underclothes, until the next thrust slid M'Baku's cock into the waiting curve of his hand.

The sheer girth of it filled him with a deep, aching want. Even after many years, he remembered keenly how good it felt to be split open. He worked the heel of his hand from base to crown, answering each thrust with a pressure that made M'Baku cry out. "I want you inside me," T'Challa whispered against M'Baku's throat. "Please—"

"Don't tempt me. We have to walk back—"

"Ask me if I care."

"I care. I'm not carrying your sweet ass up that mountain."
"You could, though."

"I could." He caught T'Challa's lips in a long, lingering kiss; his lips were soft, his mouth sweet and hot. "But I won't."

The kiss left T'Challa dizzied and pliant. He lifted his hips to let M'Baku strip off his underclothes, then swelled again into his touch. It seemed M'Baku's heavy hands were everywhere, cupping the curve of his backside, sweeping up to pluck his nipples, diving down again to curl around his hardening cock. He poured himself into each kiss and touch with a mounting hunger, his skin raw and awake to every sensation.

Between them, their searching hands found a rhythm. The world condensed to the focused point of their pleasure, the sweep of M'Baku's thumb over the head of T'Challa's cock, the harsh melody of his breath against T'Challa's ear.

He came with a shudder, and mere heartbeats later, M'Baku followed him over the edge.

Afterward, T'Challa lay with his head pillowed on M'Baku's chest, his palm resting over his breastbone. "Last night," he said into the quiet. "You said there were things that a man could ask another man that a subject couldn't ask his king. Was this what you meant?"

"Are we equals?" M'Baku asked again, teasing and testing at once.

This time, T'Challa could not hesitate. "You will always be my equal."

M'Baku was quiet for a moment. T'Challa felt him swallow. "They make you face the challenge as a man," he said, voice pitched so low that he might have been talking to himself. "And when you win, they give you the heart-shaped herb and say that it makes you into a king. But that isn't what makes a king of you. It's having someone else's life in your hands and deciding to kill him or let him yield. You make that choice still staring your own death in the face."

His knuckles brushed T'Challa's cheek. "I didn't come down from my mountain a second time because you were my king. I came because when another man had my life in his hands, he let me yield. And if there must be a king in Wakanda, I thought, let him be that man."

T'Challa found his hand and laced their fingers together. "Thank you."

"Now, I'm not saying I wouldn't do it better—"

"Of course you aren't."

"And I'm not saying I won't keep an eye on you. You have some dangerous ideas, my friend. I'll be watching every choice you make."

T'Challa laughed, and leaned up to kiss M'Baku's throat. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

* * *

In a laboratory humming with vibranium, Shuri poked sadly at her amaranths. They had already begun to change in response to the resonance of their soil; the plants she'd cultivated from their seeds were already well past their expected growth threshold.

Her first amaranths, though, were wilting. "What is it you want?" she demanded. "More sunlight? More water? I will play you the happiest music I know, if you'll just stop dying—"
"Who's dying?"

She whirled at the sound of T'Challa's voice. "No one! Nothing. I wasn't talking to a plant. You can prove nothing. Let's not talk about me. Welcome home! How was your trip?"

He ducked down as he descended the stairs to catch her eye, then grinned. "Very educational," he said. "In more ways than I'd imagined." He unshouldered a satchel and pulled back the flap, revealing three perfect purple flowers that gleamed with health.

"You found them! This is wonderful! Let's get them in pots." Dynamic sand reshaped and hardened into three spacious planters, which she filled with vibranium-enriched soil. "And the Great Gorilla? He just let you take these out of Jabariland?"

"He kept a few for his own garden," T'Challa laughed. "But this isn't the only present I have for you. Turn your satellite to these coordinates."

Her kimoyo beads pinged, and Shuri flicked the coordinates to the main viewscreen. Then frowned. "This isn't going to work. Those coordinates are in the jamming zone. Or did you forget about that while you were out camping?"

T'Challa's eyes were bright with mirth. "Just look at them."

"I hope you like staring at a blank screen." Sighing, Shuri plugged in the commands. Far away, steadily circling the Earth, a cloaked satellite turned its powerful lens on the mountains of Jabariland.

A jungle appeared on screen, vivid green and lushly textured. And within it, a crumbling wall protecting a mossy courtyard.

And within that, the goddess Bast, her unblinking eyes full of secrets.

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