Deep Breaths

by CocoBadShip

Summary

N’Jadaka has twisted T’Challa into something he cannot understand. Something he doesn’t want to understand.

Notes

I am not proud of myself for shipping this. Or writing this. Or writing what will come.

Hope y’all like it, though. Tags are subject to change.
Chapter 1

It hurts.

There’s a pain in Erik’s heart. It spreads upwards and downwards, branching out all across his body. Up his neck, down his stomach. There isn’t an inch of him that isn’t hurting.

Erik feels his body convulse, twitching and jerking every which way. He can hear a raspy, wheezing sound every time he tries to breathe. Erik coughs, and the blood that’s filling his lungs spills out of his mouth.

Erik’s dying.

His death should hurt, shouldn’t it? Erik was stabbed in the heart. Erik shouldn’t be surprised. How could he have a peaceful death if he lived such a chaotic, painful life?

Besides, it’s not the pain that’s horrifying Erik.

It’s not what he feels: it what he sees. Erik sees nothing. Miles and miles of darkness as far as he can see. It’s like he’s been dropped in the middle of a black ocean. There is no sky or bottom. There is nothing for him to hold on to, nothing he can touch or feel. It’s just an never-ending expanse of darkness. And that darkness is more fatal to him than any gaping wound in his chest could be.

Erik can’t feel his own body anymore. He can’t look down to see himself, and he can’t hear his own death rattle. Erik’s fading into the nothingness surrounding him.

So this is what it’s like to die a lost child. No ancestors on the other side, not even his father. Or his mother.

A light--Erik can see a light. Small and white. Faint, almost imperceptible, but it’s there in front of him, miles and miles away. Erik hears distorted, distant voices coming from all around him. He feels fear, a feeling so foreign that he can barely even recognize it.

Can you save him?

N’Jadaka . . .

He’s in there.

Unyana wam . . .

He hurts all over.

Something deep within his stomach moves like it’s being tortured: jerking and shaking like it’s trying to escape. Erik feels something tear inside of him and he thinks he might split in half.

Erik’s mouth opens and no sound escapes. He’s standing in the middle of darkness, silently screaming.

But that light. That strange, bright light--it’s growing. Expanding outward, growing faster and faster. And the darkness disintegrates underneath it, crumbling to pieces as the impossibly bright light touches it.

Erik hears a singular voice now, clearer and sharper.
Please . . . can you save him?

Why would anyone save me?

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The air is cool against Erik’s skin.

He feels that before he feels anything else. Slowly, Erik starts to return to his own body, and he can feel more. He can feel soft bed sheets against his bare skin. Erik can feel an IV in his arm.

And he can feel eyes staring down at his face.

“Well, you are definitely alive.”

Princess Shuri, peering down at him. She almost sounds fascinated.

“I must admit, this is not what I expected to happen. I thought you were gone for good,” Shuri mutters, her eyes narrowed.

Fuck you. The words are caught in Erik’s throat. Erik opens his mouth, ready to spit venom at her, but he finds he can’t speak.

“Give yourself a second,” Shuri advises, realizing that he’s trying to speak. “Your voice will come back to you. And if you want to be mad at somebody, I suggest you be mad at him.”

Shuri nods her head to the right. Erik sees her glare at somebody next to him. Erik turns his head to see the king of Wakanda staring dumbly at his little sister. When T’Challa realizes that Erik is looking at him, his eyes jump to Erik’s face.

T’Challa looks nervous. It’s not a good look for a king.

“Hello, N’Jadaka. I’m glad you are awake.” T’Challa’s voice is surprisingly steady for how nervous his eyes look.

Okay, but why am I awake? What the fuck is going on?

The questions play out angrily on Erik’s face. And maybe it’s the panther in him, but T’Challa seems to know exactly what Erik is trying to say.

“You’re awake because I brought you here, to Shuri, after you pulled the knife from your own chest,” T’Challa says the words carefully, casting a glance to Shuri while he speaks.

Erik glares at him. Aw, he doesn’t want his little sister to think he’s a killer. How fucking sweet.

“You were dead for a few minutes, though,” T’Challa continues.

“More than a few,” Shuri interrupts, sounding incredulous at her brother’s understatement. “You jerked and convulsed all over the place and then fell completely still. You were gone.”

“But,” T’Challa says firmly, giving Shuri a pointed look, “you came back.”

They fall silent. T’Challa’s eyes shift from nervous to pitiful, and Erik wants to lash out at him. Erik would rather T’Challa stab him until there is nothing left to stab than to look at him with pity in his eyes.
Slowly, Erik’s voice returns to him.

“So, this means I’m about to be y’all’s prisoner? I’m fucked, right?” he croaks. It hurts to talk.

T’Challa frowns, looking at Erik with soft eyes that Erik can’t stand. Erik can see that T’Challa wants to reassure him—he wants Erik to trust him.

Shuri, on the other hand, couldn’t care less about Erik’s feelings.

“I sincerely hope so,” Shuri says, her voice as flat as she can make it.

“Shuri,” T’Challa almost growls her name. It’s kind of funny to Erik.

“What?!” Shuri cries out indignantly. “Just because you’re soft on him for some reason doesn’t mean I can be. He murdered Zuri! And nearly destroyed our home!”

Shuri turns around and gives Erik an invasive stare. A less stubborn man would squirm underneath her gaze.

“Also, brother, I don’t know if you’ve thought this through. Have you considered the council?” Shuri says to T’Challa, never once taking her eyes off of Erik. “I imagine they’ll fight you tooth and nail over this.”

T’Challa sighs a long-suffering sigh, but he doesn’t offer Shuri any pushback. Erik thinks T’Challa gives up too easily. T’Challa clearly doesn’t like arguing, and he especially doesn’t want to argue with someone who is right.

Erik smirks at Shuri.

“I don’t know, Princess, your council was pretty nice to me before,” Erik puts as much derision in his voice as he can, but he sounds weak, even to his own ears.

Shuri smiles at Erik in a way that tells him that she wants to sink her teeth into his jugular.

“I hope this experience teaches them to not make the same mistake twice,” she says.

Erik snarls at Shuri, but it has no effect: Shuri is nonplussed. She does, however, frown at him, her eyes landing on his chest.

“I’m not sure how long it’ll take for you to heal, considering the extent of the damage to your heart and lungs,” she says. “Most men would be dead, but you are being aided by the heart-shaped herb.”

Shuri talks about Erik likes he’s some sort of experiment to her. Her stare turns invasive again, and Erik wants to snap at her, but he doesn’t have the energy. It’s at this moment that Erik realizes that his life is in Shuri’s technological hands. The thought pisses him off.

Shuri finally pulls her curious, medical eyes up from Erik’s chest, and looks over to T’Challa.

“He’s going to be well soon enough, brother,” Shuri states. “You’re going to have to figure something out very quickly.”

And with that, Shuri turns and leaves the lab. T’Challa and Erik are alone together.

Her absence creates an uncomfortable silence in which Erik can feel T’Challa staring at him. Erik tries to ignore the brooding king for as long as he can before T’Challa’s unyielding gaze starts to
make his skin itch.

“If you have something to say, say it, cousin,” Erik snarls over at T’Challa, hoping to stare a hole into his soul.

T’Challa just looks at him, his expression unreadable now. Erik doesn’t understand how T’Challa can be so damn quiet, especially when he must have a thousand thoughts racing through his mind. Erik is about to demand T’Challa speak when T’Challa finally does.

“I did not think you deserved to die,” T’Challa says quietly.

Erik’s stomach drops, and his face flushes. For a moment, Erik is too weak to maintain his facade; he can feel himself softening. But he reminds himself of who he’s talking to: despite how guilty he looks now, T’Challa will throw Erik away like he’s garbage, and won’t think twice about it.

“Whatever. You ain’t as virtuous as you trying to come off. You want a prisoner. That’s all,” Erik says everything with a growl, and he dares T’Challa to deny it.

Erik thinks T’Challa will offer him some bullshit about not being like his father and wanting to save Erik somehow.

But, once again, T’Challa is quiet.

Erik remembers the brief feeling of death. The pain. And, for the briefest of moments, Erik wants to ask T’Challa why it had hurt so much. The question is an expression of weakness that Erik cannot afford. But still, it’s there, at the edge of Erik’s tongue.

T’Challa sees it anyway.

T’Challa’s lips part and his eyes widen. Erik braces himself, but he doesn’t know what for.

An eternity passes. And then T’Challa’s face, once wide-open and bright, dims. He closes his mouth, and narrows his eyes. He leaves the room before Erik can call him out on the change in his demeanor.

The automatic door slides shut behind T’Challa. And Erik is alone.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I want to clarify something real quick.

During Erik's sections, he'll be referred to as "Erik."

During T'Challa's sections, Erik is referred to as "N'Jadaka."

And Erik is referred to as "N'Jadaka" during any flashbacks.

That's why you'll be seeing both names :)

"Sit still, boy!"

But N’Jadaka can’t stand still. He’s too jittery.

His baba has firmly put his hand on N’Jadaka’s shoulder, trying to press down so he can’t move so much. But N’Jadaka is still bouncing from foot to foot, trying to knock the knot in his stomach aloose.

“Unyana,” his baba says, his voice warm but stern, “relax my child. You have been here many times before.”

Yeah, he has. They’ve come to see his mama a bunch of times before, ever since N’Jadaka was really little. But he’s nervous today. He’s graduated from 5th grade, and he’s brought his last report card. He wants her to see how good he’s doing.

Baba looks down at N’Jadaka and chuckles.

“You have all A’s, child,” Baba says. “She will be so proud.”

N’Jadaka looks up at his father and nods, giving him a small smile. The line for the metal detectors slowly moves forward. N’Jadaka looks at the tense security guard standing in front of Baba and him, and is now nervous for a whole different reason. He sees the menacing figure tightly clutching a hand-held metal detecting wand and tries not to stare.

Baba’s grip on his shoulders tightens. N’Jadaka peers up and sees that his father’s jaw is hard set, like he is gritting his teeth. The knot in N’Jadaka’s stomach tightens. The pain almost makes him double over.

When it’s his turn, the guard glares at his backpack.

“Put it in the tray,” he says gruffly.

N’Jadaka, eyes wide, obeys immediately, dropping his backpack in the tray on the table next to him.

Baba grunts, sounding less like his father and more like an animal.
“I can assure you my 10-year-old son has no weapons,” Baba growls.

The security guard stares at Baba like he wants to punch him. The look makes N’Jadaka freeze to the spot, wondering what he would do if Baba gets taken by police, too.

The security guard tears his eyes away from Baba to stare down at N’Jadaka again.

“Step through,” he commands.

N’Jadaka walks through the detectors--it makes no noise. He stands at the end of the table, waiting for his backpack to be returned to him. A lady takes his backpack from the tray and gently puts it in his hand, smiling at him.

“You have a good one, sweetie,” she says gently.

She’s nice, so N’Jadaka smiles her.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Baba appears next to him, having peacefully gone through the detector. The security guard is still giving them a mean look, so Baba gently pushes N’Jadaka forward.

“Let’s go see your mother,” he urges.

This way is familiar--two guards lead N’Jadaka and Baba to the visiting area. They sit by the window--that’s where Mama likes to sit, so that she can see outside. While they sit, N’Jadaka takes his report card and his diploma out of his backpack, laying them on the table in front of them.

N’Jadaka catches his own reflection in the window: buck teeth, ears he hasn’t quite grown into, perfectly straight hairline. Brown skin, like Mama’s. As he checks himself out in the mirror, his mother’s reflection appears above his.

Her brown skin is not as brown--it looks pale, like N’Jadaka sometimes gets in the winter. Her face isn’t as round as it was before, and her eyes look smaller and tired. She’s smaller all over, actually, like she’s getting really skinny. Her hair is shorter than N’Jadaka’s ever seen it: her curls don’t even touch her ears.

N’Jadaka frowns at this lady that looks like a ghost of his mother.

But then she looks at him and her eyes light up. N’Jadaka can see the old her in her eyes. She looks like the Mama that used to tug on his ears while holding him in her lap. He can see the small gap in her teeth as her lips slightly part.

Then she smiles really big.

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Nakia once called the council “regressive.”

At the time, T’Challa thought she was being too hard on them. But now, listening to them all yell over each other in Xhosa, T’Challa sees exactly what she meant.

Shuri was right: the idea of keeping N’Jadaka alive and in Wakanda has shaken them to their core.

T’Challa scans the room, carefully looking at the overwhelmed or indignant faces of the tribal elders. He and Okoye meet eyes: she keeps her face blank, but he can see a mischievous twinkle in
her eyes. T’Challa remembers that Okoye suggested a ritualistic execution of N’Jadaka. She’d said it with far too much eagerness in her voice, and T’Challa tries to suppress the shudder that wants to go down his spine.

T’Challa’s eyes fall on his mother. Ramonda watches him curiously, an eyebrow quirked at her son. He can feel her judgement seeping into his skin.

All right. This has gone on long enough.

“If I may have the attention of the room again,” T’Challa says firmly, raising his voice above the din.

The elders all peer at him, looking very much like antelope caught in headlights. Great Bast, give me strength, T’Challa prays.

“I am having a hard time understanding this panic,” T’Challa states. “Wakanda has always kept our enemies within our own walls, have we not? The only one we could not contain was Ulysses Klaue. Everyone else has been dealt with on our soil. What makes this so different for you all?”

The elders, so chatty mere moments ago, are all silent for an awkward amount of time. Finally, the Mining Tribe Elder speaks up.

“My King, my hesitancy comes from how dangerous Killmonger is,” she say, struggling to keep her tone neutral. “He murdered Zuri! And made an attempt on the lives of the royal family! Keeping him in Wakanda might only inspire him to try to rise to power and try to harm you all again.”

The Border Tribe Elder nods. “I agree. I understand that I have little credibility on this subject, as it was my strongest warrior who first followed Killmonger,” the Border Tribe Elder glances at the ground before continuing, “but I also feel that Killmonger is less of threat outside of our walls. Sadly, we cannot be sure that he has no sympathizers here.”

The room falls quiet again. It’s a thought that keeps passing through T’Challa’s mind, to a point of distraction: how many others feel the same way as N’Jadaka? How many others in this world has Wakanda hurt so gravely?

It’s about 2 billion people that look like us. And their lives are a lot harder.

The River Tribe Elder speaks up, looking directly at T’Challa.

“I understand your position on keeping N’Jadaka within Wakanda, my King,” he says, “but I fear that N’Jadaka not only brings out the worst in this country as a whole, but he also seems to bring out the worst in us as individuals. N’Jadaka could potentially cause you more stress than necessary.”

Stress. Yes, that is a very real possibility. The River Tribe Elder has a good point. N’Jadaka’s already drastically changed them. But T’Challa still cannot imagine letting him go, especially not now. The thought makes T’Challa so uncomfortable. What exactly would happen to N’Jadaka if he was exiled? Would he just come back for vengeance? Would he wander the world alone for the rest of his life? Would he hurt himself, or worse? If anything ever happened to N’Jadaka because T’Challa ordered his exile. . . .

T’Challa feels himself getting pulled into his worries. The more he thinks of N’Jadaka, the less he can focus on anything else.
“Besides,” The Mining Tribe Elder says, her voice just barely getting through to T’Challa, “and I mean no disrespect, my King, but it is hard to say whether or not you have an interest in actually punishing him--”

“Thank you, Elder.”

The Elders all stare at him. Okoye gives T’Challa a look of concern. T’Challa knows his voice sounded harsh, but he finds that he doesn’t care.

“I am cognizant of your concerns surrounding my decision to keep N’Jadaka here,” T’Challa says, “and you all have very valid concerns. But I still feel that N’Jadaka should be kept here. I do not believe we should release all of his anger and hatefulness back into the world. Please remember that he gained most of his strength in the world outside of Wakanda.”

He sees the elders consider his words, a couple of them nodding as they think.

T’Challa continues, “N’Jadaka is a deeply traumatized individual, and he is that way because of the actions of my father as well as the policies that we have upheld for our entire existence. I believe that we can help N’Jadaka, and prevent others like him from developing such a strong resentment for their ancestral homes.”

They all look at him doubtfully. T’Challa feels irritated; he wants to end this as quickly as possible.

“And also,” T’Challa says, his voice hardening, “if I am not mistaken, each and every one of you was present for Zuri’s death as well as my own. And you were present the next morning, when N’Jadaka gave out his genocidal orders. I have not heard about much resistance from you all at that point.”

The Border Tribe Elder frowns deeply, staring at the ground. T’Challa remembers W’Kabi, standing with him in front of his rhinos, telling T’Challa that he wanted to go out and “clean up” the world. T’Challa should’ve known then.

If any of the other elders have anything more to say, they keep it to themselves. Most of them don’t even look up at T’Challa.

T’Challa forces himself to smile. “I’m glad we could all come to an understanding. We are dismissed.”

The elders get up to leave, a couple of them casting curious looks T’Challa’s way. Okoye and Ramonda walk over to T’Challa. Ramonda places her hand on her son’s shoulder.

“I can’t say I’m very thrilled with your decision, but I must say that I’m proud of how you handled that council,” Ramonda says warmly.

T’Challa looks up at his mother with a wane smile.

“Thank you, Mother,” he says softly. “I know this decision probably does not make much sense to you.”

Ramonda nods, a small frown on her face.

“In a way, it does. It seems like something you’d do; it’s in your nature. I just worry that my nephew will try to take advantage of your nature.” Ramonda squeezes her son’s shoulder, and T’Challa can feel her concern and simmering animosity just from the touch.
“Oh, he will try,” Okoye says harshly. “That’s a given, considering who we’re dealing with. All that matters is that he doesn’t succeed.”

T’Challa flinches, feeling the hostility in Okoye’s voice. Typically, this type of response from Okoye would feel like teasing. But after all that’s happened over the past few days, her words sting.

“Have I managed to lose all your trust so soon, General?” T’Challa asks. He tries to keep his voice steady, but the hurt creeps in anyway.

And Okoye can hear it, because her shoulders slump, and she gives T’Challa a soft look.

“Of course not, wam kumkani,” Okoye answers. “I’m just . . . I don’t believe he deserves your mercy. You know what I want to do to him.”

“Yes, you’ve described it in very graphic detail,” T’Challa deadpans.

It gets a small chuckle out of them both. Ramonda moves her hand from her son’s shoulder to his cheek. T’Challa leans into the tender touch.

“Just promise me--promise us—that you’ll be as careful as possible. Alright?”

T’Challa looks at his mother and opens his mouth to speak when he stops. A sharp pain suddenly rises in his chest. It takes his breath away. T’Challa’s stomach starts to twist into knots, and he can hear his heart starting to pound wildly in his chest.

It’s harder to breathe. His senses are heightened: he’s looking for the danger, preparing himself to be attacked. But there’s also a strange numbness. It’s as if he’s shutting down and trying to separate himself from his surroundings. T’Challa can hear every movement within his body, but his vision has blurred. He is tense and frozen, yet trembling and agitated. T’Challa feels like he might fall apart at any second.

And underneath all of this? Fear. A paralyzing fear that is unlike anything T’Challa’s felt before.

“. . . T’Challa?” Queen Mother is calling his name. “T’Challa, are you alright?”

“My King?” Okoye’s concerned voice sounds muffled in T’Challa’s ears.

T’Challa’s face burns. He stands up, and it feels like he might fall through the floor.

Ramonda and Okoye grab both of his arms. His body is heavy, and his legs refuse to cooperate.

“T’Challa!”

“My King! What’s wrong? Can you hear me?”

“Okoye, we need to get to the medical wing now!”

“No!” T’Challa’s voice comes out rough, like he hadn’t used it in days. “No! I just--need a moment.”

T’Challa tries to pull his arms from their arms, but they both only hold tighter.

“T’Challa, you clearly need more than a ‘moment,’” Okoye says, anxiety strong in her own voice. “At least stand still, alright?”
“*T’Challa*,” Ramonda’s voice is impossibly soft, “breathe. You hear me, son? Breathe.” Ramonda places her hand firmly in the center of T’Challa’s chest. “Deep breaths. Hold them for a few seconds, then let them go. Okay, T’Challa?”

Okay. T’Challa follows his mother’s instructions: deep breath, hold it in . . . deep breath, hold it in . . . deep breath, hold it in . . .

Slowly, T’Challa’s heart starts to beat normally. He still feels a pain in his chest, but it’s no longer overwhelming. T’Challa focuses on the feeling of Queen Mother’s hand on his chest, and Okoye’s hands on his arm. The firm touches ground him. T’Challa puts his hand over his mother’s, allowing her warmth to calm him.

“I am alright,” T’Challa says softly. He sounds--and feels--exhausted. “I’m alright. Thank you.”

Neither women take their hands off of him, and T’Challa is very grateful for that. Neither women believe T’Challa when he says he’s alright, and he is also very grateful for that.

But before Okoye and Ramonda can call him on his lie, all three of their kimoyo beads light up bright red. A loud, irritating sound emits from the beads, ringing in a way that strikes fear in T’Challa’s heart.

It’s a distress signal. And T’Challa knows where it’s coming from.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the nice comments so far! I have to be honest; something about writing these ship is super anxiety-inducing for me. So the comments have really helped out!

Erik doesn’t remember falling asleep. He should be worried by the way he just knocks out like this.

Erik opens his eyes, inadvertently staring directly into the lights of Shuri’s lab. They’re blinding, making his already tired eyes sting and his head pound.

He hears a soft beeping sound to the left of him. When he turns over to investigate it, Erik feels the IV in his right arm tug. He winces; he forgot that he’s still hooked up to wires and machines, like some kind of Wakandan experiment.

Shit, maybe they are experimenting on Erik. It’s probably the real reason they’re keeping him alive. As much as they like to talk about vibranium fueling their medical and technological advancements, Erik doesn’t put it past them to do some foul shit to human subjects. Maybe Wakanda really is just like every place else in this world, snatching up Black and Brown bodies to do whatever they want with them.

That’s something his mother used to be afraid of: the idea that Wakanda really was just like everywhere else in the world. She always worried that N’Jobu was making up stories whenever he talked about his “home.” Afro-futuristic fairytales to make Erik’s childhood a little bit easier.

Erik sees his mother’s pale, smiling face again.

Erik doesn’t think about his mother very much. His memories are fading--all the good ones keep being replaced with ones of her behind bars. Whenever Erik lets himself think of her, he remembers that she wore wraps around her hair, taught him about who Stokely Carmichael and Huey P. Newton were, and that she ended up in prison for some shit she didn’t even do.

His mother died right after that visit, the one where Erik showed her his 5th grade diploma. Heart attack brought on by starvation, they said. She wouldn’t eat, they said. Nothing they could do about that.

They killed her. Erik knows they did.

Erik looks down at the IV in his arm. It’s not made like any IV Erik’s seen before. Instead of being attached to standing bags of fluid, the thin tube snakes across the floor, leading to a very small machine perched on a table to the right of Erik’s bed. There are two capsules, one full of clear fluid and one full of a faint blue liquid.

The machine to the left of Erik suddenly starts to beep faster. Erik belatedly realizes that the machine is monitoring his heart rate; he peers down at his own chest and sees an impossibly tiny, metal “x” right over his heart. Erik starts to pick at it, trying to peel it off, but it won’t budge.

Fuck, man. He really is stuck here, isn’t he?
Erik sinks into the bed and stares up at the ceiling in irritation. He needs to get out of Wakanda somehow, the sooner the better. Erik ain’t trying to stick around for whatever else his cousins plan on doing to him next. That’s probably what T’Challa is doing right now, making plans with that useless ass council.

It’ll be a good way for T’Challa to show his dominance, to remind everyone that he is the rightful king of Wakanda. He’ll let Erik rot in a cell and then they can pretend that nobody in Erik’s family ever existed.

And Erik knows the council can be convinced to do whatever T’Challa wants. They’re so fucking spineless it makes Erik’s face heat up just thinking about it. They weren’t ever ready for what Erik had planned, they weren’t ready to step into the sun. They just want to do whatever they’re told, no matter who tells them.

The machine that’s monitoring Erik’s heart starts beeping wildly, but Erik doesn’t need to hear the sound to know that his heart is trying to climb out of his chest.

His heart’s manic pounding makes his chest hurt, and he can’t breathe, and he’s going rigid and he wonders if this was what it was like when his mother died, when her own heart attacked her while she was alone in a filthy cell.

She died alone, her heart bruising the inside of her skeletal chest, in a dark room in a place where no one cared about her, all because she saw how badly the government was treating Black people. All because she was going to do something about it.

And that’s what’s happening to Erik now, right? He’s going to rot and die. T’Challa’s going to want to lock Erik in the darkest cell he can find in the dirtiest, most forsaken part of Wakanda. They’re going to watch Erik whittle away into nothing because Erik saw a country that let a world of Black people suffer and die, that let Erik suffer after killing their own blood. Because Erik wanted to do something about it.

He’s got to get out of here.

Erik’s got to get out of here. He can’t stay, he can’t be their prisoner, he can’t crumble up and die the way they want him to. T’Challa should’ve just let him go when he wanted to, should’ve stopped trying to save him because Erik didn’t want to be saved.

Erik’s got to go, so before he can think anymore about it, he grits his teeth, braces himself, and rips the IV out of his arm.

A loud, piercing sound alarm immediately goes off. The noise grates Erik’s nerves, but he’s too overwhelmed to care. Erik uses his blunt fingernails to scratch at the small “x” on his chest. He scratches, and scratches and scratches until finally it’s off, too.

And it hurts, everything fucking hurts so bad. His arm and chest feel like they’re on fire. The noise gets louder and louder and his head starts to pound.

Erik tries to stand, and ends up falling flat on his face.

Erik feels every bit of the concrete; pain spreads all across his face. His heart is beating too fast, and he finally understands that his heart can’t take this much commotion.

Erik props himself up on his hands and knees. His damaged heart and lungs are working too hard. Erik starts cough, and blood splatters all over the floor. The coughs rack his entire body and more blood splatters from his mouth.
He’s actually going to die here. On this damn floor. And it’ll be his own fault.

Erik’s arms shake; he’s about to collapse again. Erik closes his eyes.

Well shit. At least he won’t die in a cell.

Erik hears himself wheezing, and he can hear the blood in his lungs again. He can feel his body giving up on him.

But then . . . Erik feels something else, something moving underneath all the inner-carnage. Something shifts inside of him, and that hurts too, but it’s an entirely different pain. Erik hears himself let out mangled cries of pain, anger, desperation.

He doesn’t even sound human. He sounds like an animal.

*N'Jadaka*

The shifting thing--the thing inside of him--calls out to him. Erik hears his own name, and it sounds even louder than his failing heart.

*N'Jadaka . . . N'Jadaka . . .

And then another voice, high-pitched, piercing and terrified.

“N’JADAKA!”
Chapter 4

T’Challa’s never run to Shuri’s lab so fast. He activates his suit and runs off without even looking at Okoye and Ramonda.

Okoye catches up to him, and soon Ayo and Aneka are trailing him as well. He barely notices their presence as he rushed to the lab. All T’Challa can think about is getting to Shuri now.

When he finally arrives, T’Challa’s so focused on the commotion from he hears from inside the lab that it takes him a moment to realize that Nakia is already there, her chest heaving and her face covered in sweat. She’s trying to pry open the doors with a large, curved blade.

“I can’t get it open!” Nakia cries in frustration. She grits her teeth as she attempts to drive the blade in between the doors. “The lab locked itself up when the signal went out!”

Nakia stops trying to pry, and starts banging on the door. “Shuri! Shuri! Can you hear me?!”

Through the door, they can hear Shuri’s muffled yelling.

“N’Jadaka! N’Jad– wait! Stop it! Just-- hold still! I’m not trying to hurt--GAH!”

“SHURI!” T’Challa bellows. Nakia jumps out of his way, and without a moment of hesitation, T’Challa uses his hands to force the doors open.

They see N’Jadaka knocking Shuri backwards with one arm, her body crashing into a workstation. Shuri lands on her back, her legs tangled up with the chair she knocked over on her way down.

“Shuri!” Nakia cries, rushing to Shuri’s side.

T’Challa lays his eyes on N’Jadaka and extends his claws. N’Jadaka looks back at them, his eyes wild. He looks petrified.

Okoye rushes into the room, spear raised.

“Uya kufa!”

“No!” Shuri scrambles off of the ground and puts her hands up to Okoye and T’Challa.

Everyone freezes, looking at Shuri with confusion.

“Don’t hurt him! I just need T’Challa to hold him down!” Shuri yells.

T’Challa looks at N’Jadaka again, and he pounces, wrapping his arms around N’Jadaka’s chest and arms, and his legs around N’Jadaka’s.

N’Jadaka tries to speak, but he can only make garbled noises.

Shuri takes the opportunity to snatch a huge syringe off of the ground; it’s filled with a blue liquid. Shuri crosses the room and stabs the needle in his side, injecting him with the liquid.

N’Jadaka bucks and squirms, trying to wiggle his way out of his T’Challa’s arms, but T’Challa tightens his grip. N’Jadaka growls as the liquid Shuri’s injected him with sinks into his body.

N’Jadaka’s breathing begins to slow down. T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka’s muscles loosening
against his body.

After a couple of minutes, N’Jadaka’s body slumps against T’Challa’s. N’Jadaka is unconscious.

T’Challa loosens his grip on N’Jadaka’s body, but he does not move from his spot on the ground. He watches N’Jadaka’s chest as his breathing steadies. Brown, muscular, scarred skin slowly rising and falling. If T’Challa were to tilt his head, his lips would be brushing against the side of N’Jadaka’s face.

N’Jadaka suddenly feels too solid and heavy in T’Challa’s arms. T’Challa can feel his eyes lingering on N’Jadaka’s skin for too long.

“Princess, are you hurt?” Okoye demands.

The sound of her voice pulls T’Challa from his brief reverie.

Shuri twists her nose up and rubs at the back of her neck.

“I am fine,” she answers, “but I know that I am going to be sore in the morning.”

“In the morning? You are going to be sore in an hour,” Nakia corrects, standing up from her crouching position. “Especially with him tossing you around like that!”

T’Challa carefully releases N’Jadaka’s body, letting it lay on the ground. T’Challa stands up, but he keeps staring down at his cousin.

“Was he attacking you?” T’Challa asks. “How did this happen?”

“I wouldn’t say he was attacking me,” Shuri answers. She also frowns at N’Jadaka’s prone figure. “I was monitoring his vitals from my tablet in the other room. All of a sudden, his heart rate went through the roof, and then totally flatlined. I came back here to see him crawling on the ground, coughing up blood. He had ripped out his IV and everything.”

They all grimace. T’Challa imagines the feeling of a needle being violently ripped from his arm and flinches.

Shuri continues, “I was trying to get him back on the bed to put him to sleep, but he started freaking out and swinging at me. He acted like I was trying to attack him.”

“What did you give him?” Okoye asks, peering at N’Jadaka curiously.

“The strongest sedative I could find.”

“So, when will he wake up?” Nakia questions.

“Not soon.”

T’Challa looks at the body on the ground, and it’s hard to accept that it’s N’Jadaka of all people. He never imagined that he’d see him so still and peaceful-looking. He didn’t look this still when he collapsed after pulling the knife from his chest.

Shuri bites her lip, and when T’Challa looks at her, he can see that she’s thinking of about hundred different solutions right now. Shuri nods to herself; she’s settled on something.

“He’s going to have to be put into a coma,” Shuri states. “We can wake him up when we’ve finished working on him. Otherwise, he might try something like this again.”
“Are you sure about this?” T’Challa thinks of his cousin, strapped to a bed, not in his own body. For some reason, the thought bothers him. T’Challa doesn’t understand why it would.

Shuri looks at her brother with a deep frown on her face. She looks exhausted.

“Do you have any better ideas?”

T’Challa looks at Shuri, then at Okoye and then Nakia. They all watch him like they’re not sure who he is.

“No,” he admits with a sigh. “I don’t.”

**

N’Jadaka’s bed is too small.

It’s not even a real bed—it’s a damn cot. All the boys in the room—all six of them—are sleeping on cots. N’Jadaka’s legs are too long for his: his feet are hanging over the edge. And every time he moves, he bumps his legs up against the bed’s metal railing.

The bed’s cold metal railing, since it feels like ice to his skin. It’s the middle of winter, and his foster folks have turned the heat as low as they can stand it so the bill won’t be high. Everyone’s curled up in a ball, shivering so hard that their cots are moving.

N’Jadaka tries not to shiver, just so he doesn’t have to feel his ankles banging against the metal. He lies as still as possible, occasionally letting a shudder go down his spine. He wraps his raggedy, threadbare blanket as tightly around him as he can, and he glares at the high ceiling above him.

Their room is almost totally dark. There’s only two small night lights that keep it from being pitch black in here. N’Jadaka has to stare super hard to see the other boys. And even then, he wouldn’t be able to make out their faces.

He hates this place. He hates it so much.

N’Jadaka slams his eyes shut, trying to force himself asleep.

The boy beside him suddenly starts tossing and turning and whining; he’s making his rickety bed creak. N’Jadaka opens his eyes and glares at the figure with disdain. It’s a hot feeling that makes N’Jadaka’s face burn.

But just as quickly, the feeling is replaced with sadness and pity. N’Jadaka goes from blazing hot to cold all over again, feeling like ice is lodged in his chest. The boy beside him is Jordan, the youngest of them. He’s about 6 years old, and he has nightmares. He’s afraid of the dark.

N’Jadaka watches the little boy and sighs: he hates that he’s ended up here. Why couldn’t he be placed in a better home than this?

N’Jadaka reaches over and gently touches the boy on his back.

“Jordan,” he whispers, “Jordan! Wake up, man.”

Jordan whimpers, then jolts awake, his tiny body producing way more strength than N’Jadaka expected. Jordan turns his head towards N’Jadaka’s voice, and N’Jadaka knows that Jordan is straining his eyes to see who woke him up.
“Daka?” Jordan asks in a small voice.

“Yeah, it’s me. You okay?”

Jordan nods, and N’Jadaka can just barely see the movement.

“Yeah, I’m okay now,” Jordan says. “I had a bad dream.”

“What about?”

“Scary men were coming after me. And I couldn’t get away. They were gonna hurt me.”

“That was just a dream. No scary men are gonna come after you. Plus, if they did, we can knock them upside their heads.”

Jordan giggles, and his voice is too loud for their bare room. Across the room, one of the other boys huffs and moves roughly in his bed.

“Shhh,” N’Jadaka whispers.

“Shh,” Jordan returns, his voice still light.

N’Jadaka can see Jordan lay his head back down on his pillow. After a while, both boys fall silent. N’Jadaka’s almost asleep when Jordan speaks again.

“Daka?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have bad dreams sometimes?”

“No.”

He’s lying. He has a nightmare every night.

“Are you scared of anything?”

“Not really.”

That’s a lie, too. N’Jadaka’s always scared. He goes to sleep scared, wakes up scared. Every day feels like it’ll be his last; it’s like the fear is killing him.

“I wanna be like that. Not scared. The people at my other house I was at said I cried too much. So I had to come here. They said that’s why my real parents didn’t want me. Because I cried too much and made them mad at me.”

He sounds small and pitiful, and it pisses N’Jadaka off in a way he can’t put his finger on.

“Those other people were bad people. Don’t worry about them, okay? You ain’t gotta deal with no more.”

Jordan nods, and N’Jadaka wishes he could see what his face looks like.

“Okay. Thanks, Daka.”

They’re quiet again. N’Jadaka’s tired, but he knows he’s not going to sleep tonight. It’s not like the sleep does him any good anyway.
So he just lies there, slowly breathing, watching Jordan’s still shadow for what feels like hours.

Ever since he got here, N’Jadaka’s always thought about getting the hell out. But tonight’s the first night that he’s wanted to take someone with him.

“Um . . . Daka?” Jordan’s voice, tiny and nearly inaudible, makes N’Jadaka jump.

“Yeah?”

“How . . . how’d you end up here? What happened to your real family?”

If anyone else in the world had asked him that, N’Jadaka would cuss them out. He’s told a hundred different people that he doesn’t want to talk about it ever. But . . . it’s different tonight.

“Bad men took them away,” N’Jadaka answers quietly.

“Really?” Jordan sounds scared.

“Yeah,” N’Jadaka’s voice sounds dark and rough. He feels all that anger all over again. “They took them both away. And I got sent to a lot of other places. And now I’m here.”

“. . . I’m sorry.” He means it. N’Jadaka can tell.

“It’s okay,” N’Jadaka answers too quickly, his voice too hard. “It doesn’t matter. Because sooner or later, I’m getting outta here. And I’m going to find those bad people.”

“Hey, yeah!” Jordan’s voice brightens, like that’s the best idea he’s ever heard. “Yeah! Then you can find your family, too!”

N’Jadaka nods. He remembers claw marks in his father’s chest and blood on the carpet beneath them.

“Yeah. I can find my family, too.”

**

“How did you know Shuri was in trouble?”

Nakia looks up at T’Challa as if he were dim-witted.

“I got the distress signal,” Nakia answers, raising her wrist at him. “I wasn’t about to just sit at home while my kimoyo beads were blaring. I had to do something.”

“Thank you,” T’Challa says gratefully, “for saving me. And for being there for my family. And this country.”

“It is my duty to protect what I love,” Nakia says with a shrug. “I love Wakanda. And you. And Shuri, of course.”

T’Challa pulls Nakia in for a tight hug, and he rests his face in the crook of her neck. They stay wrapped around each for what feels like an eternity, with Nakia rubbing T’Challa’s broad back.

Eventually, they pull apart, and he studies her face. T’Challa’s always thought Nakia was the most capable and beautiful woman in the world. In this moment, he realizes that he’s extremely fortunate to have her as a friend.
“You know,” T’Challa says slowly, “I’ve been thinking about what you said a few weeks ago. About Wakanda sharing what we have.”

Nakia raises an eyebrow at him.

“You have?”

“Yes. And you were right. We have a responsibility to share what we have with those who need it most. We’ve ignored the world for far too long.”

Nakia gives a small smile.

“Of course I was right,” she says playfully.

They both laugh, but then Nakia suddenly frowns, casting her eyes to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” T’Challa asks, his voice full of concern.

“Why are you doing this, T’Challa?” Nakia asks after a few moments. “Is this really about my ideas . . . or is it about N’Jadaka? And your father?”

The question makes T’Challa flinch. Nakia’s always been able to see right through him.

“I suppose . . . it’s about all three,” T’Challa answers quietly. “I . . . when I was in the ancestral plane, after N’Jadaka defeated me . . . I told the ancestors that they were wrong for turning their back on the world.”

Nakia looks at him in surprise. She knows how much the ancestral plane means to T’Challa and how much T’Chaka means to him, even after what they’ve discovered about him.

T’Challa sighs. “I’ll tell you the same as I told the council. We’ve allowed so much suffering. Suffering that we could’ve stopped. There are probably thousands of N’Jadakas out there.”

T’Challa looks Nakia in her eyes. “You are the only person I’ve ever met who truly understands what it means to help people without fear or self-interest. That’s what I want us to do. And I think I’ve got an idea and how to do it.”

“What’s that?” Nakia’s voice is full of cautious excitement.

“Outreach centers. Places of refuge in the most disenfranchised communities. Places to exchange resources and technology, and training and how to use them.”

T’Challa watches Nakia’s face as she thinks it over. It’s only half an idea, one that started forming as he was rushing N’Jadaka’s body to Shuri’s lab. And T’Challa knows that Nakia would know a lot more about balancing the global playing field than he. Mostly, he’s hoping she doesn’t make fun of him.

Nakia’s eyes shut as she considers it. T’Challa steels himself.

“It’s good,” Nakia says, her eyes still closed. “It’s very good--for a start.”

Nakia opens her eyes and looks at T’Challa carefully. T’Challa, relieved and wide open, nods for her to continue.

“Resources are only part of the problem for many Black people in the world,” Nakia says. “The most pervasive problems are the systems they live under. Legally, economically, socially . . .”

Nakia’s words trail off, and she frowns.
Nakia’s always had a habit of taking the toughest wardog assignments. Her missions have allowed her to see some of the most heinous examples of inequality.

“This will be hard, T’Challa, harder than you might imagine,” Nakia says.

T’Challa nods.

“I imagine that you’re right,” T’Challa admits. Then he gives her a small smile. “And that’s why I can’t do it alone. I need everyone’s help. I need your help.”

Nakia bites the inside of her cheek, and stares off into space. Her eyes light up: T’Challa can see her forming plans, can see the ideas dancing behind her eyes. T’Challa’s stomach twists: he feels the oddest combination of excitement, hopefulness and anxiety.

Nakia looks at him again, her eyes glowing brighter than T’Challa’s ever seen.

**

“THIS IS TREASONOUS!” The Merchant Tribe Elder shouts at some point during Tribal Council meeting a few days later.

Her voice, formerly soft and gentle, has gone harsh and shrill with rage and fear. “Hayi, hayi! You will destroy us!”

Yes, T’Challa expected that reaction. Especially from her.

The rest of the Elders sigh and rub their temples and shake their heads. M’Baku watches them in all with bemusement. T’Challa had thought M’Baku decided to attend out of concern for the state of the country, but now T’Challa is realizing that M’Baku is enjoying watching the others explode.

“With all due respect, Elder,” T’Challa says, keeping his voice as even and soft as possible, “I fail to see how our current state of affairs isn’t an indication of the necessity of us branching into the world.”

The Merchant Tribe Elder glares. “First you want to leave the murderer here, now you want to leave us exposed! Have you forgotten who we are?”

The Border Tribe Elder speaks up. “I imagine he’s doing this because of who we are,” he says. “This is similar to what we discussed before, regarding N’Jadaka.” The Elder looks T’Challa in the eye as he continues. “We could prevent more things like this if we are not so isolated.”

“You just want to be back in his good graces, you kiss up!” The Merchant Tribe Elder says with hostility.

“Oh Bast,” The Mining Tribe Elder mutters, rolling her eyes.

“No,” The Border Tribe Elder growls, “what I want to is get us all on one accord.”

“We haven’t been on one accord since King T’Chaka passed!” The Merchant Tribe Elder shouts.

“That was not even two months ago!” The River Tribe Elder cries out in exasperation, startling the others. He rubs his eyes angrily. “Look, I actually think it is a good idea if it means we never have to repeat the last few weeks of this country’s history!”

“If I may,” M’Baku deep, booming voice draws everyone’s attention. M’Baku looks over at T’Challa, and T’Challa nods at him to continue.
“I would like to say that I agree with the River Tribe Elder,” M’Baku announces. “While I am not overly fond of the world outside of Wakandan borders, I personally feel that change is necessary. It would be bizarre to try to carry on like nothing had ever happened. Besides, maybe if Wakanda branches out into the world and see our enemies firsthand, we won’t be blindsided like we were with N’Jadaka.”

Everyone falls silent. T’Challa watches each of the Elders think it over. T’Challa wonders how many more of these meetings he can handle. T’Challa fleetingly thinks that things were different for his father, but of course they were.

Finally, the Merchant Tribe Elder sighs.

“Do we even know if these outreach centers will work?” she asks skeptically.

“No,” T’Challa answers bluntly. “But when has that ever stopped anything we’ve ever tried? When has uncertainty ever stopped our desire to continually better Wakanda?”

She thinks on it for a moment, staring at the something past T’Challa’s head. Then, she gives a small shrug, causing her large hoop earrings to quiver.

“I don’t like it,” The Merchant Tribe Elders announces, “but I suppose I’m not entirely opposed to it.”

T’Challa smiles gratefully. That’s as good as it’s ever going to get.

**

N’Jadaka graduates high school just before he turns 15. He’s # 3 in his class of 400 and has a black eye from where fought three kids and won the night before.

His classmates cheer for him as he accepts his diploma. The principal looks at him like he’s always looked at N’Jadaka: with a weird mixture of pride, fear and worry on his face. N’Jadaka Stevens, one of his brightest students, and the one who probably got suspended the most out of anyone else in the honors program.

N’Jadaka smirks back and takes his diploma. He tunes out the noise around him. Most of them were nice enough, sure, but it doesn’t matter. He won’t ever see any of them again anyway.

N’Jadaka has a plan. And sticking around reminiscing about any of this isn’t a part of it.

**

Erik’s entire body hurts.

There’s a deep aching all over him, from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. The pain in his back, neck, and pelvis makes the very thought of movement seem torturous. Erik used to hate the whole “I feel like I got hit by a truck” cliche, but he legitimately feels like he got hit by a truck. Even his fucking locs hurt.

And he’s exhausted. God, he feels like every bit of energy has been sucked out of him. Erik’s never felt this weak and spent before. Erik’s too tired to stop the tears that are sliding out of his eyes. Erik can’t help but wonder if T’Challa and Shuri are keeping him alive just to keep torturing him every so often.

Erik takes a breath and focuses: he’s trying to parse out the noises he hears. He hears people
walking around, and he hears voices he doesn’t recognize. They’re all female voices, chattering away about Erik’s condition in Xhosa.

Blood pressure very good. Temperature a little higher than they thought it would be. Heart rate is . . . a little too fast, actually.

Erik can feel people hovering over him, and he can feel himself twitching. He wants to tell whoever they are to get the hell away, but he can’t.

“He looks stressed,” a soft voice says, “even while he’s sleeping.”

Before Erik can get even more anxious, he finally hears a voice he knows.

“That’s because he’s not actually sleeping,” Shuri says, and Erik can feel her lean closer to him. “N’Jadaka?”

Erik opens his eyes. He’s almost relieved to see the princess staring him with that intent look she had when they first woke him up.

Shuri stands up and twists her lips at him.

“You look much better, now,” Shuri says.

Erik glares at her.

“Then why don’t I feel better?” Erik says, and he’s surprised at how clear his voice sounds. He expected his throat to hurt since every other part of him hurts.

“You’ve been asleep for a while. I imagine you know what that does to your muscles,” Shuri answers. “What hurts? Your back and neck?”

“And everything else.”

Shuri nods and looks him over. “We’ll give you a muscle relaxer to help out. Can you sit up?”

Erik sits up, wincing as he does so. Two other nurses approach him with small tablets in their hands, scanning him with their eyes as they type something in.

Erik’s mouth feels like cotton.

“You said I was asleep,” Erik says, eyeing the women as they work.

Shuri, who had turned her attention to a large, holographic that seems to have appeared out of nowhere, nods.

“Yeah, we had to put you in a coma after what happened the last time you woke up,” Shuri says, her back to him. “We had to work on you without you trying to escape or doing something else dangerous or stupid.”

Erik isn’t even offended. If he’s being honest with himself, he knows that stunt he pulled was ridiculous. Erik can’t even pretend that there was any real logic to it. He just kind of . . . panicked.

“How long was I out?”

“13 days, 8 hours and 20 minutes.”
“Shit.”

Shuri snorts, tapping on the holographic screen. “No kidding. We needed time to repair your heart and lungs. And, lucky for you, we did.”

Shuri enlarges the holographic screen and steps aside so that Erik can see a diagrams of his heart and lungs, along with his vital signs. There’s a very detailed map of all the repairs Shuri and her team made to Erik’s heart and lungs.

“You are in nearly perfect condition now,” Shuri says. “You will still be weak for a while. All that surgery is not easy on anyone’s body. But your heart and lungs are no longer in any danger.”

Erik stares at the screen. He doesn’t want to admit to be fascinated, but . . . it’s incredible what vibranium is allowing them to do. A 16-year-old princess can lead a team of nurses and doctors in repairing Erik’s destroyed heart and lungs in about two weeks. If vibranium could’ve gone to Erik’s old neighborhood, a whole bunch of people wouldn’t have died.

Hell, if vibranium could’ve gone to Erik’s mother . . .

Erik can see his blood pressure rising. The holographic screen starts to update, showing a miniscule rise in Erik’s body temperature. His face burns, and he can feel tears welling up in his eyes again.

Shuri frowns at him.

“N’Jadaka?”

Erik swallows hard and blinks at her. His name still sounds so weird coming from her.

“So I’m good to go then?” Erik asks in a thick voice.

Shuri’s shoulders slump when she looks at him. “Yeah, you’re good to go.”

Shuri has that same pitying look in her eye that Erik fucking hates. But, thankfully, it’s not there for long. It’s a replacement by one of derision.

“Well, you’ll be good to go as soon as my brother figures out what he wants to do with you,” Shuri comments.

What he wants to do with . . . Erik’s stomach sinks as her words sink in. He’s still at the mercy of T’Challa. T’Challa, and that council, not to mention whoever else decides to throw their two cents in.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Erik growls. The screen shows another rise in his blood pressure.

Shuri shrugs and smirks.

“It is like I’ve said. He has to figure out what he wants to do with you. Surely you haven’t forgotten that?”

Erik groans and lets himself fall back onto the bed. He closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to see the enjoyment Shuri is getting from his dissatisfaction.

Erik can still hear it in her voice, though.

“It could always be worse,” Shuri tells him. “Try to remember that, cousin.”
Chapter Notes

You ever been really excited to do something, and then life comes in and kicks the shit outta you for days on end? Yeah, that's what happened here -___-

“You know you don’t need his approval for anything, right?”

Nakia always manages to catch T’Challa off guard. He’s asked her to come with him to explain their idea to N’Jadaka. T’Challa had anticipated that Nakia wouldn’t want to see N’Jadaka, but he hadn’t expected her to give T’Challa such an interrogating look.

“I’m not asking for his approval,” T’Challa says. “I simply realize that our plans are something he will be interested in.”

Nakia watches T’Challa’s face as they walk.

“I don’t believe you,” she says bluntly. “And I am not quite sure why you feel the need to be dishonest.”

“I’m not being dishonest, Nakia.”

Nakia puts her hand on T’Challa’s wrist and pulls him to a stop.

“T’Challa, I’m worried about you,” Nakia says. “I feel as though you are not being honest with yourself when it comes to N’Jadaka. I think he affects you much more than you are willing to admit.”

T’Challa can’t meet Nakia’s eyes. There’s no point in arguing with her. Especially not when they both know that she is right.

“I do not know what you want me to say,” T’Challa says quietly.

“I want you to say that you’ll try to guard your heart, T’Challa,” Nakia responds softly. “You feel so deeply. And that’s not a bad thing, but I just don’t want you to get hurt. Alright?”

“Alright,” T’Challa agrees with a sigh.

Nakia smiles and they continue walking to the medical wing.

“You know,” T’Challa says with a shy smile after a few moments of silence, “I’m starting to wonder if you all think I’m competent, what with all this worrying after me.”

Nakia snorts and rolls her eyes at him.

“Oh, we know that you’re competent. The problem is that you don’t like to take care of yourself,” Nakia says. “You have a bad habit of flinging yourself into situations.”

T’Challa looks at Nakia in surprise. “You make me sound impulsive.”
“You are impulsive!” Nakia retorts with a laugh. “You may have everyone else fooled into thinking you’re refined and measured, but I know you. You have a tendency to just go!”

“This is coming from the woman who gets into bar fights when she’s on wardog assignments.”

Nakia’s mouth falls open, and T’Challa laughs loudly at the sight.

“Aye, that’s not fair!” Nakia says. “Sometimes, in those circumstances, a few punches must be thrown. That’s different!”

“Nakia, it is not different.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Are you really about to go back-and-forth with me? Like we’re children again?”

“Only if you feel like it.”

Nakia playfully shoves T’Challa. “You are foolish.”

T’Challa chuckles, feeling very light inside. “Oh, that, I already know about myself.”

They both laugh again and, for a few moments, T’Challa feels easier than he’s felt in more than a month. T’Challa could almost close his eyes and imagine himself in the life he had before that trip to Vienna.

But that’s only for a few moments. Because the light feeling disintegrates as soon as they walk into the medical wing and see N’Jadaka sitting on the edge of a bed, meticulously twisting his still-damp locs into cornrows.

N’Jadaka goes still as stone as T’Challa and Nakia enter. He looks as if every single one of his muscles has gone tense and rigid. N’Jadaka watches them as if he suspects they’re going to attack him.


T’Challa slowly and deliberately puts both of his hands behind his back. He lowers his shoulders, trying to make himself appear more relaxed to N’Jadaka. It just makes N’Jadaka all the more agitated.

“What do y’all want?” N’Jadaka demands, his ever-present anger making his voice hard.

“You look well,” T’Challa says calmly. “I see Shuri has guided you to a full recovery.”

N’Jadaka glares at him and grits his teeth. He looks as like he’s trying to decide whether or not to speak.

“Yeah, I better look well,” N’Jadaka eventually growls. “The princess has been doing experiments on me all damn week. But I know you ain’t here to comment on my good looks, so what do you actually want?”

T’Challa is actually grateful for N’Jadaka’s impatient nature right now. It’ll help him force what
he has to say out.

“In a few weeks, I will be addressing the United Nations to inform them that Wakanda will be opening its borders to the rest of the world for the first time in our history,” T’Challa explains as carefully as possible.

N’Jadaka’s eyes go wide at T’Challa’s words. For a moment, he looks very young, and there’s something akin to hope in his face. It’s startling. But, in the next second, N’Jadaka shuts down again and he scoffs.

“So you letting a bunch of colonizers into the country?” N’Jadaka challenges. “Of course you are. Why am I not surprised at all?”

“We’re not planning on letting colonizers in,” T’Challa argues. “We’re planning on sending resources out.”

N’Jadaka looks at him skeptically.

“Out to who?”

“We plan to build outreach centers in certain parts of the world. They’ll be spaces where the most marginalized communities can receive the resources they need and be exposed to our technology. And America is going to be the first place.”

N’Jadaka looks... confused, as if he’s not quite processing T’Challa’s words. And then he looks irritated.

“So, what? You think a few community centers in the hood is gonna fix anything?” N’Jadaka demands. The simmering rage starts to paint his words. “It’s gonna change the fact that they got locked up or shot up by cops for no damn reason? Or how about the the way they purposefully fuck up public schools so they send Black kids straight to jail? Your community centers got a fix for that?”

“If we do this correctly,” Nakia says, her voice strong and clear, “we actually might be able to.”

N’Jadaka turns his blistering gaze onto her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the outreach centers are only one part of what we’re doing. They are to provide tangible assistance to the citizens in these communities. The other part involves placing our wardogs in a few politically strategic American cities.”

N’Jadaka raises an eyebrow at her. Nakia smiles. T’Challa wishes he had her confidence.

“We are planning to monitor--and intervene, if necessary--elections, criminal justice departments, educational systems and the economies of certain cities. Those seem to be the areas colonizers attack first when they want to denigrate a community. We want to do whatever we can to ‘level the playing field,’ as you would say.”

N’Jadaka looks at Nakia as if he’s never seen anyone like her before. He blinks rapidly, and his jaw twitches as he glowers at the two of them. T’Challa realizes that N’Jadaka doesn’t know what to say, and neither he or T’Challa are used to this speechlessness from him.

“I don’t believe you,” N’Jadaka finally says, his voice uncharacteristically quiet.
And now it’s T’Challa’s turn to not know what to say. Nakia is also silent: she frowns in confusion and shoots T’Challa a look.

T’Challa watches his cousin. N’Jadaka has gone from glaring at them to looking at anything but them. He’s grinding his teeth, and he’s got his nose scrunched up as if something smells. T’Challa can see him trembling.

And, in that moment, T’Challa feels a wave of fear come over him. Frustration, distrust, skepticism, and fear. N’Jadaka is sitting, trying his best to portray stony silence and hostility, but T’Challa knows better. He can feel better. His own anxiety has tangled up with N’Jadaka’s fear.

“It is not that you don’t believe us,” T’Challa says. “It’s that you don’t want to believe us.”

N’Jadaka looks at him in alarm. T’Challa moves closer to him, stopping when he’s only a couple of feet away. N’Jadaka tenses; T’Challa can see N’Jadaka’s eyes roaming over his face, neck, chest. He can feel Nakia watching him, and he suddenly remembers that she keeps at least one thin blade on her at all times.

“You do not want to believe us,” T’Challa continues, keeping his gaze steady, “because you are afraid that we will fail. And everyone who would be depending on us would suffer.”

“I know you’ll fail. And you’re right, when you fail, everybody who’s depending on you will be fucked,” N’Jadaka hisses. He sounds more hurt than anything.

The anger and distrust in N’Jadaka’s words sting, but, somehow, T’Challa is certain that N’Jadaka is not trying to hurt him. At least, not this time he’s not.

“Why are you so certain?” T’Challa asks.

N’Jadaka laughs bitterly.

“Because you don’t know shit about helping people,” N’Jadaka says. He nods towards Nakia. “Now, her? She maybe does. Because she’s actually left this damn country and done work. But you? There’s no way you do. You’ve spent your entire life being spoiled and pampered and raised as a prince of some fairytale ass country. Everything you ‘know’ about oppression, you learned from a long ass distance.”

T’Challa sighs, but he doesn’t argue. If he’s being honest, he’s not sure that N’Jadaka’s wrong.

N’Jadaka continues, sounding more and more annoyed as he speaks.

“Those people you think you’ll help? The poor Black people? The kids? They don’t have time for you to stumble around trying to get your shit together. They need help now! And they need someone who isn’t doing it just to make themselves feel good!”

“And do you think your plan would’ve helped?” Nakia challenges, crossing the room to stand right next to T’Challa. “Honestly. Do you really think sending weapons out into a world that was unequipped to handle them would’ve helped anyone?”

“At least it would’ve been immediate action. It would’ve gotten something done in a hurry,” N’Jadaka snarls at her.

Nakia rolls her eyes. “Oh, please, ‘immediate action.’ You of all people know what violent revolution looks like. You know who gets hurt the most. None of the people you claim to care about would’ve benefited. This was about your rage. And your rage isn’t much of a plan.”
N’Jadaka’s ego is wounded: T’Challa can feel it. But N’Jadaka’s not about to let Nakia see it. He smirks at her.

“You know you ain’t helping your boyfriend sweet talk me into this little idea of his, right?”

“She is not trying to, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa says calmly.

He can feel the energy pouring off of the both of them. The air around T’Challa is thick with agitation, frustration, envy. It’s so overwhelming, but T’Challa has no choice but to regain control of the room.

So, he straightens his back, and he gives his cousin an emotionless look.

“We are not seeking your blessing, N’Jadaka, as it seems as though that would be a fruitless venture,” T’Challa explains. “I merely wanted you to know about our plans because I am aware that you have a . . . vested interest in the redistribution of our resources.”

N’Jadaka stares at T’Challa as if T’Challa has just cursed him. N’Jadaka sets his jaw, but says nothing, seemingly content to watch him. T’Challa can see the wall N’Jadaka’s hastily building between them.

“N’Jadaka, I can assure you that these efforts are not about how I feel about myself,” T’Challa says. “They are about finally doing the right thing. I hope that, in time, you come to realize that.”

N’Jadaka says nothing. T’Challa turns to Nakia; she takes his hand, and they turn to leave.

Just before they exit, N’Jadaka speaks up.

“You know once you start this, you’re starting this, right?” N’Jadaka demands. “You can’t just decide to stop. And your CIA and Avenger buddies ain’t gonna approve.”

T’Challa looks over at Nakia. The look on her face tells him that she has, at some point, wondered the same thing.

“I know,” T’Challa calls over his shoulder, hoping they both truly hear him.

Then he takes Nakia’s hand again, and they walk out of the room. And T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka’s gaze burning into his back as they go.

**

It’s disturbingly easy to buy foreign real estate.

It’s particularly baffling how easy it is to buy land in capitalist countries. They stifle and oppress their own citizens, but a foreign ruler with a big enough paycheck can do whatever he wants. T’Challa simply contacts the right dignitaries, and, in a few hours’ time, he owns abandoned buildings in the United States and several countries in Africa. Places that are good for a “pilot run” of the Wakandan Outreach. Places that potentially need it the most.

**

T’Challa takes Shuri to Oakland. He shows her the buildings, tells her the plans, watches her talk to some kids about the spaceship and what it means to be Wakandan.

He feels a pride swell in his chest as he watches Shuri move around the court, gesticulating as young boys watch her with amazement in their eyes. Shuri will be fantastic as the head of the
technological outreach. T’Challa’s grateful to have her as a partner.

But as T’Challa studies the boys on the makeshift basketball, he feels a sense of dread. He thinks of N’Jadaka. How many days did his cousin spend on this court? How many nights? Was he here the night T’Chaka . . .

The feeling of pride in T’Challa’s chest twists itself into one of anxiety. He feels breathless, and he feels a pain in his stomach.

T’Challa closes his eyes and silently prays.

**

Erik watches the livestream of T’Challa’s speech at the United Nations. He rewinds it no less than five times.

Erik doesn’t even understand why he watches it in the first place. He doesn’t even know why he accepts the tablet of the nurses offered him. But Erik takes it, and then he curls up, and he watches T’Challa bullshit the United Nations for about 25 minutes straight.

The entire speech is bullshit, especially considering what T’Challa and Nakia told Erik. T’Challa’s making it seem like Wakanda’s extending an olive branch to the colonizers, not secretly infiltrating them and working to stop oppression. The colonizers all look pretty satisfied. There’s even a quick shot of that agent Ross smiling in the background.

And then T’Challa fields mildly racist questions from several European and the American representatives, and it takes everything within Erik to not fling the tablet against the wall. White people get on his fucking nerves. The knowledge that they’re being led on would be funny to Erik if watching T’Challa smile pleasantly while answering their questions didn’t also get on Erik’s nerves.

Each time Erik watches the speech, he carefully watches T’Challa’s face. Even from thousands of miles away--through a damn screen, no less--looking at T’Challa’s face makes Erik feel like his throat is going to close up. Thinking of his cousin for too long makes Erik feel like he’s unraveling on the inside. Erik always starts to shake, and he usually can attribute it to the fury he feels whenever he thinks about T’Challa and T’Chaka, and the throne and Wakanda, and everything that’s led up to Erik’s current situation. Most times, Erik thinks of T’Challa’s face and begins to think of all the ways he can mangle it.

But right now . . . Erik doesn’t know what this is. He feels that something—the same something that seemed to try to claw its way out of Erik the first time he woke up. It shifts within him, moving and twisting as if it were impatient and desperate. He feels a surge of energy in his body, and it sets every inch of Erik on fire. But, just as quickly as it comes, the energy dissipates, and Erik is left hollow and shaky. It’s like he’s crashing.

This is almost like torture. The worst, most asinine form of torture.

But Erik keeps doing it; he watches the speech again, and again, and then once more. No less than five times, committing T’Challa’s deceptive, torturous face to memory. And Erik will probably never be able to say why.

**

“So, how much are you telling them?”
Okoye asks the question with a look of skepticism in her eyes. T’Challa’s just finished his speech at the United Nations, and Ayo is flying them back to Wakanda. T’Challa can hear Nakia chatting with one of her foreign sources in another room on the ship.

“As little as possible,” T’Challa responds. “I don’t expect they’ll be happy to know we are essentially undermining them, even if their modes of operation are heinous and immoral. We’re treading on very dangerous territory.”

Okoye rolls her eyes. “It’s not as if any of the targets have room to talk. They’re not called ‘colonizers’ for no reason.”

“I know,” T’Challa says with a frown, “which is why I fear becoming them.”

It’s a fear that nags at T’Challa. As much as these ideas excite him and make him hopeful, he can’t help but remember the crazed way N’Jadaka sounded when he told T’Challa that he knew how to beat colonizers at their own game.

“I think we’ll avoid that. You don’t want anything from people. Just to give to them,” Okoye reassures.

T’Challa nods at her with a tentative smile.

“Besides,” Okoye continues in a flattened tone, “it’s not as if we are assassinating their leaders or encouraging people to murder one another. That would be monstrous.”

“Okoye.”

Okoye gives him a look, flaring her nostrils and pursing her lips together.

“Am I wrong?”

T’Challa looks at her, and he remembers the feeling of a blade cutting across his stomach. He deflates.

“There’s good in him. I am certain of it. I know that you aren’t, but I am,” T’Challa says quietly.

Okoye sighs and looks at T’Challa through narrowed eyes.

“At least someone is,” Ayo says gruffly. “That may be the only thing that saves that man. If there is anything left to save.”

They all fall quiet, sitting in the thick truth of Ayo’s cynical words. The plane glides through Wakanda’s borders. For a moment, it looks like they’re flying directly into the setting sun.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing N’Jadaka does when he gets to MIT is changes his name.

He goes to the registrar’s office and fills out forms that’ll let his professors know that he prefers to be called “Erik.” In a few months, he’ll legally change it.

Erik Stevens. Simple, nondescript. Hell of a lot easier to say than ‘N’Jadaka.’ None of these white people deserve to hear ‘N’Jadaka’ anyway. It’s a name too ancient, too fucking African for them. And none of them have the familiarity to call him ‘Daka.’ He doesn’t have the patience to listen to a bunch of white people butcher his name every single day.

So Erik. Erik is easy. There are a lot of “Eriks.”

Stevens was his father’s last name. That’s what he thought anyway. N’Jobu never told N’Jadaka that it was a fake name. His father told him all types of stories about Wakanda. He told him about Bast and Sekhmet, about mystical lands with an unusually-colored sky. He told him about clothes sewn with metal. N’Jobu told N’Jadaka about the tribes, and how a Wakandan’s tribe--their home-is their life. His father told him so much about himself. But never once did N’Jobu tell N’Jadaka that their last name was fake.

That makes absolutely no sense to N’Jadaka. But that’s how it happened.

Not that it matters.

It’s not like N’Jadaka and N’Jobu really have a tribe. They never did. A real tribe wouldn’t have sent someone to spy on them and lie to them for years. A tribe wouldn’t have sent someone to kill his daddy. A tribe wouldn’t have left his daddy’s dead body in an apartment for a little kid to find.

Fuck whatever tribe they hailed from. N’Jadaka will find it and destroy it, burn every inch of it to the fucking ground. It’ll be more than they deserve.

But that’s all in due time. MIT’s just one step forward. A few years that Erik Stevens will get through. He can do this.

**

It’s time for N’Jadaka to leave the medical wing.

T’Challa knows that he’s run out of time. W’Kabi and several members of the Border are being sentenced two days from now, and T’Challa had told himself that, by now, he would have made a decision on N’Jadaka as well. The only reason N’Jadaka has been there for the weeks that he has been is because T’Challa’s been stalling.

All tangible reasons aside, T’Challa knows that it’s time for him to move N’Jadaka because of
Shuri.

Shuri, who is perpetually irritated and has a frightening look in her eyes. T’Challa’s come to her lab to discuss his options with her, and the entire space feels tense and agitated.

Shuri doesn’t even have to say it for T’Challa to realize that she’s ready for him to go: he can tell by the way she’s huffing and grumbling as she works.

“All he does is whines,” Shuri mutters as she glares at the device she’s calibrating. “Whines, and grumbles a bunch of conspiracy theories about us. He thinks he’s being philosophical or intimidating or something, but he is just paranoid and annoying.”

T’Challa chuckles, trying to cut through the thick air surrounding them. “It is nice to know that you are not afraid of him.”

Shuri snorts. “I was never afraid of him.”

T’Challa’s not sure he believes her, but he’s not about to call her out on it. He’s fully aware of how lucky he and N’Jadaka are that Shuri is a person of strength and integrity.

Shuri picks up the ankle monitor she’s working on, squints at it, and then places it to the side, apparently satisfied.

“Besides,” Shuri says as she drags another ankle monitor to her and starts tweaking it, “it’s hard to be afraid of a man once you find out that he’s afraid of needles.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yes! Can you imagine that, brother? The man can gleefully perform scarification on himself, and he ripped an IV out of his arm some weeks ago, but his heart skipped a beat whenever I told him that I needed to draw his blood. And let me not get started on how he reacts to being in a totally dark room. His blood pressure skyrockets.”

T’Challa frowns, staring at the ankle monitor that Shuri’s placed on the table.

“I don’t think it is the needles he’s afraid of, Shuri,” T’Challa says quietly.

Shuri frowns in confusion. Then, recognition softens her face.

“I told you he is paranoid,” Shuri says softly. She returns to her work, trying her hardest to re-focus on the ankle monitors she’s outfitting.

Shuri allows a moment of tense silence to pass before she speaks again.

“I’m not trying to kill him, and it is aggravating that he suspects me so often,” Shuri says. “As much as I grumble about granting his request to ‘bury him in the ocean’, I have no intention of killing him. I like to think of myself as better than that. Even though he isn’t.”

T’Challa looks up at Shuri curiously, struck by what she’s just mentioned. He hadn’t told her about what N’Jadaka said that day, while they were watching the sunset.

“How did you know he said that?”

“He’s said it before. In his sleep, actually,” Shuri shrugs, not meeting T’Challa’s eye.

“He . . . talks in his sleep?”
“Yes.” The answer is curt.

“Does he do that often?”

“Yes, T’Challa!” Shuri suddenly snaps, dropping the monitor and tools. “Yes, he says a great deal of things in his sleep!”

Shuri looks pissed. There’s no other word for it.

“He talks, and yells!” Shuri shouts and her voice shakes. “And he tosses and turns all the time! And though he’ll deny it, I’m pretty certain that I have heard him cry in his sleep! All the more reason for you to finally move him out of my space!”

T’Challa’s heart drops, and his jaw follows suit. He’s known Shuri to have a little bit of a temper; she is his sister, after all. But he’s never seen her fly into anger so quickly. Shuri’s face is reddening, and she blinks back tears of frustration.

“Shuri,” T’Challa says, keeping his voice as calm as possible, “what is going on?”

Shuri rolls eyes. “Oh, don’t use your politician voice with me, brother! And do not ask me that question. It is not as if you actually care about anything other than him.”

If T’Challa didn’t know any better, he would say that the anger in Shuri’s voice is starting to change into envy.

“Shuri, you have to know that that is untrue.”

Shuri crosses her arms and stares at her brother.

“T’Challa, you are going so far out of your way for him that it is scary,” Shuri says. “And I sometimes feel as though you are using my love for you to force me into going out of my way for him.”

“Shuri! I would never mean to--”

“Do you know how it’s been to be around him so much?” Shuri interrupts, her voice hardening.

Shuri looks at him as if she’s expecting his answer. T’Challa shakes his head.

“It’s confusing, actually,” Shuri answers, much to T’Challa’s surprise. “I feel confused because I look at him and think, ‘This is the man that tried to kill my brother. He is the man that killed Zuri. He is the man that nearly killed a member of the Dora Milaje, and then stood over me with a knife.’ I think of all that, and I hate him. I remember all he’s done, and I can’t help but wonder what has gotten into my brother that would make him want to be so lenient on someone like this.”

T’Challa cringes.

“I understand,” he admits faintly.

“I am not finished,” Shuri says, her voice also quiet, but firm.

She takes a deep breath, and continues.

“I also remember the day he woke up, when he tried to ‘escape.’ I remember seeing him crawling on the ground and bleeding all over the place. He looked terrified. I’ve seen him look that terrified since then, and hear it in his voice when he’s having a nightmare, and I . . . ”
Shuri’s voice trails off. She sighs, and rubs her eyes as if she’s developing a headache.

“It is just hard to reconcile those two images,” Shuri says after a moment. “It is hard for me to remember they are the same man that I hate so much.”

T’Challa thinks back to when Nakia and he told N’Jadaka about opening Wakanda up to the world. He remembers that one small moment, the one where N’Jadaka looked so young before shutting down again. It’s hard to remember that face as being one of the villain who so thoroughly turned their lives upside down.

But he is.

“I believe . . . that is possible for him to be both,” T’Challa says carefully. “Our cousin is both the man who has committed horrendous acts and that terrified one. And though I may not seem to, I am acknowledging both sides of his dual nature.”

“Are you sure that you do? You don’t think you’re not a little bit bias towards the part of him you can take care of? Because, T’Challa, you definitely want to take care of him. And I’m starting to understand, but it is still very weird.”

Take care of him. T’Challa’s stomach twists, and his face flushes. Something about Shuri’s words makes T’Challa feels exposed and uncomfortable.

“I want to do right by him. And that want makes it easier for me to deal with him,” T’Challa admits. “I just want you all to—”

“Trust you. I know, I know,” Shuri sighs, and puts her tools down, giving up on using the ankle monitors as a distraction. “I am trying to trust you in this. I want to be here for you. Just know that I am also a ways prepared for him to turn on you.”

“That’s actually good to know,” T’Challa responds with a smile.

Shuri gives him a small smile. But then her smile falters.

“What do you plan on doing with him, T’Challa?” Shuri asks.

“I . . . am not sure,” T’Challa confesses slowly. He sighs heavily. “I do not want to put him away in Fort Hahn. But I can’t just allow him to wander around as he pleases. W’Kabi will be going to Birnin Nanli—”

“He is?” Shuri asks. “That’s where they’ll be spending their house arrest? Birnin Nanali?”

“Only W’Kabi. Half of the other men are going to serve their sentence in a settlement south of Birnin Bashenga, and the other half are going to one near Birnin Azzaria.”

Shuri frowns. “So those of them that have families . . . will they not see them at all?”

“They’ll see them occasionally. I’ll make sure they get visitations. And they will have kimoyo beads with very limited settings to communicate with their families.”

“And how do you think the council will feel about this sentencing?”

“It does not matter. It is my decision.”

Shuri looks at her brother in surprise.
“Well, alright then,” she says. Shuri picks up one of the ankle monitors. “You could just slap one of these on N’Jadaka’s ankle and send him to one of those places.”

T’Challa frowns. Logically, that makes sense. It would probably be the most sensible option. But when T’Challa considers sending N’Jadaka away to one of the other cities, he hears an increasingly loud voice shouting in his mind.

*Too far, closer, closer. Need him closer.*

It’s . . . disturbing. And unsettling. But T’Challa *needs* N’Jadaka to be closer to him.

It could be an instinctual need to be able to watch him. Something along the lines of “friends close, enemy closer.” T’Challa always hated that phrase and thought it ridiculous and counterproductive. But it could be an explanation for what T’Challa is feeling.

It *could* be. But, if T’Challa is honest with himself, he gets the feeling that it’s not.

“I would rather he and W’Kabi not be near one another,” T’Challa answers. “Besides, I don’t exactly love the idea of him being that far away.”

“*Oh?*” Shuri asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Because I cannot *watch* him,” T’Challa finishes, cutting his eyes at her. “I’d rather keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah, I bet you would,” Shuri mumbles under her breath.

“*Shuri.*”

“Like I said, you *are* the one making this very weird,” Shuri says, pointing at him. “And why is Fort Hahn not an option? It’s in Birnin Zana, eh? You could poke your head in and check on him everyday if necessary.”

“It’s just--” T’Challa cuts himself off. He can already hear Shuri’s reaction to what he’s about to say.

“It’s just *what?*”

“Fort Hahn is an actual *prison,*” T’Challa explains. “And if I put him there, I’ll be proving him right.”

“Oh my *goodness*!” Shuri says exasperatedly. “You both are *ridiculous.* You’ve let him too far into your head with his ‘prisoner’ nonsense!”

“Somehow, I anticipated this response,” T’Challa mutters.

Shuri rolls her eyes. “You should have, because it’s true. *This* is the kind of thing I am talking about! He’s really guilt-tripped you into not making any sense.”

“That isn’t the *only* reason I’m against Fort Hahn. I also don’t think confining him in a cell is going to help his mental health,” T’Challa continues. “I’d rather try to rehabilitate him.”

“You need to be worried about *your* mental health after all of this calamity,” Shuri shoots back. “And plus--does it really even *matter* where you put him? He’s going to think everywhere is a prison because he thinks *Wakanda* is a prison!”
Shuri does have a point, T’Challa realizes. He knows that N’Jadaka would love nothing more than to get out of the country. And he’s so damn stubborn that he’s going to mistrustful and irate no matter what T’Challa decides.

“I mean,” Shuri continues, “You could make him his own little corner of the palace, and he’ll consider that a prison.”

. . . Wait.

“. . . What did you just say?”

Shuri blinks at T’Challa. Then she narrows her eyes at him.

“T’Challa,” she says in a warning tone, “do not think what I suspect you are thinking.”

It’s too late for the warning, of course: T’Challa’s mind is already working. A small room within the palace walls, guards stationed nearby. An ankle monitor to constantly track N’Jadaka’s location, kimoyo beads so that they can contact him . . .

“Brother--”

N’Jadaka would be within arm’s reach at all times--

“Brother,” Shuri’s suddenly standing very close to T’Challa, glaring at him with incredulity. “I feel like you’re getting a very terrible idea.”

“What do you mean ‘my idea’?” T’Challa asks, feigning innocence. “As far as I can tell, it was yours. Or at least, that’s what I’ll tell Mother.”

Shuri makes an amusing squawking noise.

“I absolutely refuse to be responsible for whatever is going on in that head of yours!”

T’Challa looks at sister and smiles. “You already are, Shuri.”

“T’Challa!” Shuri whines.

“I will see you later!” he says. Then he rushes out of her lab, laughing to himself as he overhears Shuri’s cursing him under her breath.

**

The sentencing goes very quickly. For that, T’Challa is eternally grateful.

All of the Elders agree with sending W’Kabi and the others out of Birnin Zana for no less than 3 years. They’re all stripped of rank, and will be considered “tribeless” during this time. T’Challa has arranged for them to move into single-bedroom homes in the cities.

The Border Tribe Elder stays composed, but T’Challa can feel his regret and sadness every time he looks at W’Kabi.

He can feel Okoye’s, too. Her sadness, frustration, hurt. W’Kabi is trying his hardest to not meet her gaze--his eyes dart around the room, avoiding Okoye, T’Challa and his new ankle monitor at all costs. But Okoye’s hard stare never leaves her ex-husband.

And then there is T’Challa’s own feelings, the ones he’s forcing out of his voice. His own sorrow
and bewilderment. The memories of W’Kabi and he that threatened to make his voice shake. T’Challa has to focus very hard when he’s administering the sentence: he is trying to keep his tone as neutral and emotionally-flat as possible.

As much as T’Challa likes to intellectualize W’Kabi’s actions against him—as much as T’Challa genuinely understand craving revenge the way W’Kabi did—W’Kabi’s betrayal will never stop hurting.

But it’ll be alright. Because, soon enough, it’s done, and W’Kabi and the others are being led out of the room. The air in the room is too thick to breathe, and everyone is looking at T’Challa as though they’re afraid he’ll lose his temper at any moment.

But it’ll be alright. Eventually.

“My King,” the Mining Tribe Elder says cautiously, “if I may—what of N’Jadaka?”

T’Challa looks at her, and her face tells him that she regrets asking him that question. One day, T’Challa will have to learn to monitor his facial expressions. Baba always told him he was bad at keeping his feelings off of his face.

“I plan to keep N’Jadaka in a location in Birnin Zana, where he’ll be monitored by myself, the Royal Guards and the Dora Milaje. And, if you all don’t mind, I would rather not disclose the location at this time.”

The Mining Tribe Elder nods. Surprisingly, none of them offer any pushback.

“If there is no more business, we are dismissed.”

And the Elders rise and file out of the room, murmuring their goodbyes.

M’Baku is the last to leave, slowly following the other members of the council.

“I’ll see you soon, your Majesty,” M’Baku calls back to T’Challa as he leaves. He suddenly stops, and looks back at Okoye. “I’ll see you, too, General.”

Okoye, astonished, nods and shoots a glance over to T’Challa. T’Challa watches M’Baku’s retreating form skeptically.

Finally, it’s just he, Okoye and Ramonda left. Okoye finally relaxes, and T’Challa can see the tension leave her body.

“Are you alright, Okoye?” T’Challa asks gently.

Okoye shrugs.

“Not at this moment, but I will be,” she answers, “I honestly feel drained.”

“That’s to be expected, given the circumstances,” Ramonda tells her. “But I am confident that you will emerge from this even stronger than before.”

Okoye smiles. “Thank you, Queen Mother,” she says gratefully. “I am going to try my hardest to believe that myself.”

“Well I mean, it seems like you might have help,” T’Challa interjects, “what with Lord M’Baku wanting to ‘see you.’”
Okoye bites the inside of her cheek and blushes, and it’s such a rare sight that T’Challa and Ramonda can’t help but laugh.

“I don’t know why Lord M’Baku said that,” Okoye retorts.

“This must be something I missed,” Ramonda says, looking at Okoye curiously.

T’Challa nods in Okoye’s direction. “She rescued Lord M’Baku from W’Kabi during the battle.”

“Oh?”

Okoye rolls her eyes. “I just stopped that rhino of his. There was no need for Lord M’Baku to end up impaled.”

“Well, then, I’m sure he’s just very eager to repay you for your kindness,” Ramonda says cheekily.

Okoye blushes even harder, and T’Challa groans.

“Oh Bast, Mother,” he mutters.

“You’re the one who brought him up!” Ramonda says with a laugh.

“And now I regret it. I should’ve kept my observation to myself,” T’Challa grumbles.

“Oh, speaking of keeping things to oneself,” Ramonda says slowly, raising an eyebrow at her son.

T’Challa’s stomach drops. He knew Queen Mother and Okoye would not accept him not telling them about his plans for N’Jadaka.

T’Challa looks over at Okoye contemplatively. He’d rather not deal with both of their reactions at the same time.

“Okoye, would you mind if I spoke to Queen Mother alone?”

Okoye cuts her eyes at him and opens her mouth as if she’s going to protest, but she simply nods.

“Alright, Okoye says finally. “I’ll find out about sooner or later.”

Okoye walks out of the Throne Room, tossing one last invasive look over her shoulder before she leaves.

As soon as they’re alone, T’Challa looks over to his mother reluctantly.

“About N’Jadaka . . .”

“Ah, yes, I was wondering about that,” Ramonda says expectantly. “I imagine none of the Elders wanted to risk another argument with you, but I am afraid my curiosity about N’Jadaka’s future is nagging at me.”

Ramonda watches him, and T’Challa suddenly feels very, very trapped. He was so certain of this idea a couple of days ago, but now T’Challa thinks he might actually be losing his mind.

“I plan to move him to a wing of the palace.”

Ramonda blinks at him.

“Okhokho. You are serious,” Ramonda responds. “Hm. I see why you didn’t say anything.”
“Are you angry with me?”

“Would my anger sway you, son?”

“Yes, it would, Mother.”

Ramonda stares at him for an uncomfortable amount of time. Then she sighs.

“I am not angry,” Ramonda answers. “I am confused. Tell me, what good does it do to have this . . . to have him so close to you?”

T’Challa takes a steadying breath. Whatever bravery he has vanishes whenever Ramonda speaks to him in a certain tone.

“We can watch him, monitor him,” T’Challa says. “As I said earlier, there will be guards and Dora Milaje around him at all times.”

“He can’t have guards with him in a place past the river?”

“It’s much easier to monitor his movements from the palace than it would be if we were to simply send him elsewhere in Wakanda.”

“Much easier for you to monitor his movements,” Ramonda states sharply. “And I suspect you are the only thing you are thinking about at the moment.”

“I do not mean to behave selfishly,” T’Challa counters. “I am merely trying to do what I think is right.”

“Right for whom, T’Challa? Right for you, right for him or right for Wakanda? That is what I am concerned about.”

“Is it not possible to do all three?” T’Challa’s voice is starting to sound small and meek to his own ears. He hates it.

Ramonda hears the change, and watches her son for a moment before speaking again.

“No,” she says in a gentler tone. “And I say ‘no’ because I am worried that what is right for you and what is ‘right’ for N’Jadaka may be at odds with one another.”

T’Challa reaches out and holds his mother’s hand.

“I know none of this makes much sense to you, but I want you to know that I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t think it was the best thing to do.”

Ramonda tilts her head a little and looks at him like she’s x-raying him.

“Alright, T’Challa,” she finally says. “I am going to support your decision as King. And as my son.”

“Thank you.”

T’Challa smiles at her, but Ramonda gives him a sad look.

“Is there something wrong?” T’Challa asks.

“There is . . . something else I’ve meant to talk you about,” Ramonda begins gently.
“Yes?”

“Yes?”

“Your anxiety. The attack you had a couple of weeks ago? I’ve been meaning to speak to you about it.”

Oh. T’Challa can his face flushing.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of, T’Challa,” Ramonda says. “Unfortunately, anxiety is very common. And considering the extremely stressful few months you’ve had . . . . you’re allowed to have issues, too.”

T’Challa’s startled by his mother’s serious tone. Ironically, he feels guilty for causing her concern.

“It’s not been so bad, I’ve not had any attacks since then,” T’Challa answers. “I’ve felt anxiety, but nothing debilitating.”

Ramonda nods, and gives him a small smile. “I’m glad. Do you remember the breathing technique I showed you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I want you to use it whenever you feel an attack coming on, alright?” Ramonda instructs. “Also, I think it’d be a good idea to see a counselor every now and then.”

T’Challa frowns; the idea makes him squirm a little.

“Do you think that is appropriate?” T’Challa questions. “Don’t you think I’d been putting quite a lot on them?”

“Believe or not, I don’t think you’re as burdensome as you imagine,” Ramonda says. “They can handle it. It’s about helping you handle these things.”

T’Challa sighs, mulling over the idea. He knows that his mother is probably correct. But the idea will take a lot of getting used to it.

“You’re right,” T’Challa says. “Thank you.”

Ramonda seems satisfied. She stands up, leans over and kisses T’Challa on his forehead.

“I want you to be well,” she says solemnly. “Do you understand?”

T’Challa nods; the actual words won’t come out of his mouth. Ramonda can see that hesitancy, too.

**

Shuri likes to pick with Erik.

It’s because she hates him. Or maybe, it’s because she’s trying to hate him. Erik can feel her cooling off towards him; whatever heat she felt towards him is starting to dull into a lacklustre loathing. Maybe she’s starting to get used to him. In a weird way, Erik’s starting to get used to her.

But Shuri clearly doesn’t want to admit any of that, so she does petty shit that she knows will irritate Erik.

Shit like positioning the alarm on her kimoyo beads directly next to his fucking ear to wake him up. The piercing noise is so loud and nerve-grating that Erik thinks he’s going to go deaf.
Erik jolts, wide awake and furious. He hops out of the bed, teeth bared and fists clenched. But before he can get a proper threat out, he’s met with Okoye pointing her spear directly into his face.

“Please, get out of line,” Okoye says, “because I will relish the opportunity to split your face in half.”

Erik looks directly into Okoye’s calm face. It’s kind of funny: he’d think her beautiful if he weren’t a little afraid of her. But there’s no reason for anyone to ever know any of that.

“What? You suddenly need a guard dog when you’re around me? I thought you were some kind of badass, princess?” Erik asks Shuri, continuing to stare at Okoye.

“You should be more respectful of Princess Shuri, considering she’s saved your life twice now,” Okoye says.

“I don’t give a fuck! I didn’t ask any of y’all for any of this shit! Y’all can all go to--”

Okoye pokes the tip of her spear directly into Erik’s chest. Erik expects it to hurt, but he doesn’t expect it to sting so much. He wants to look down to see if she’s drawing blood, but he doesn’t want to give her the satisfaction of breaking eye contact with her.

“You’re like a child,” Okoye says coldly. “An ungrateful, pathetic, violent child who throws temper tantrums. I don’t see what the King sees in you. I don’t understand what’s the point of him keeping you alive.”

“You can do us all a favor and try to kill me if you really want to,” Erik challenges. He’s feeling real froggy, which is stupid, but oh well. “I promise not to make it hard or anything. Go ahead. I’m asking nicely.”

Okoye clenches her jaw. Erik can see that she might actually be considering it. But Shuri puts her hand on Okoye’s arm.

“There’s no use in hurting him now. Not after all the work we’ve done,” Shuri says. “Besides, I don’t want to hear T’Challa complain.”

“You don’t want to hear me complain about what?”

T’Challa’s voice makes Erik’s stomach twist into a knot. Erik can’t even name what he feels as he watches his cousin stride into his room, dressed in black from head to toe. It’s like he feels flustered.

T’Challa sees Okoye threatening Erik with her spear and gives her an exasperated look. Like this is something they’ve had to go over several times already.

“Okoye,” T’Challa says. “Ndiyacela?”

Erik can’t see the look Okoye throws at T’Challa, but he imagines that it wasn’t pretty. Not that T’Challa’s face betrays anything: he looks stoic. His face is completely blank. After a few seconds, Okoye sighs and lowers her spear. Erik expects her to give him a dirty look, but she doesn’t. Instead, Okoye gives him a smile. Erik is thoroughly unnerved.

“Is there a reason y’all doing this shit?” Erik demands.

“Well, yes, actually,” T’Challa answers. “I’ve come to take you to where you’ll be serving your sentence.”
Erik shoots a look at Shuri. She has a resigned look on her face, which is confusing. She’s been talking about kicking his ass out of here. Erik thought she would be happy.

“Where you putting me?” Erik asks. “In a hut near the river? Or how about one of the jail cells you swear you don’t have?”

T’Challa smiles serenely. It makes Erik agitated.

“Actually no,” T’Challa responds. “You’ll be staying in a wing of the palace, with guards and members of the Dora Milaje keeping watch over you.”

Erik squints at his cousin and tilts his head. He barks out a loud, rough laugh.

“I didn’t know you had a sense of humor, cuz,” Erik says. “Ain’t no way you’re serious about that.”

“Hey, that’s what I said,” Okoye mutters.

“I shouldn’t have been surprised,” Shuri says to Okoye.

T’Challa turns to his sister. “Of course you shouldn’t have been. It was your idea, remember?”

“Brother,” Shuri cuts her eyes at T’Challa, and Erik can tell that she’s mentally cussing him out.

T’Challa turns back to Erik as if he can’t feel Shuri giving him a homicidal stare.

“I’m completely serious,” he tells Erik.

Erik looks at all three of them in turn. Erik feels off-balanced; he’s not usually at a loss for words. But he has no idea how to respond.

“You up to something?” Erik finally asks. He immediately feels ridiculous for asking: Shuri groans, and Okoye mutters something under her breath. Plus, it’s not like T’Challa will tell him the truth.

“One day, you will accept the fact that I am not plotting against you,” T’Challa answers.

Erik glances at Okoye, who blinks at him.

Not plotting against me, my ass, Erik thinks.

“So do I have a choice in this? Or do I go wherever you say, whenever you say?” Erik challenges.

T’Challa, seemingly determined to give Erik no emotional response at all, simply smiles.

“I think you will find it easier to cooperate,” T’Challa says.

There’s a pleasantness in his voice. It sounds fake as fuck.

**

Okoye’s walking way too close to Erik.

She’s damn near stepping on the back of his ankles. Every time he shoots her a look, she only smiles. Ayo and Aneka, who were apparently waiting outside while T’Challa, Shuri and Okoye collected Erik, both glare at Erik like they can’t wait for him to die.
Worse yet, Erik can hear Shuri muttering to herself. He can’t make out what she’s saying, but he can guess that it’s not particularly kind. Erik sneaks glances at his little cousin to see her looking at him and T’Challa in turn, a suspicious look on her face.

All the hostility makes the relatively short journey from the medical wing to Erik’s designated room feel long as fuck.

They arrive at a massive door with intricate detailing. When Erik looks closer, he realizes that there are small images of panthers carved in the wood.

The door also has some sort of touch keypad where a lock should be. T’Challa steps in front of Erik and inputs a series of numbers.

“Is that to keep me locked in there?” Erik asks. It comes out sarcastically, but Erik is extremely serious.

T’Challa finishes inputting the numbers, and then turns around to face Erik.

“I told you, you will not be locked away anywhere. You’ll just have designated places you can go,” he responds.

“Okay, sure,” Erik says. “And how will you know when I’ve overstepped my boundaries? Are ya guards gonna be watching me while I sleep or something?”

“No, I’ll do that,” T’Challa deadpans. “And I look forward to it.”

Erik smirks. He didn’t realize his cousin was capable of being anything other than painfully earnest.

“Well, if that’s the case, I guess I should go back to sleeping naked,” Erik winks at T’Challa, hoping to make him as uncomfortable as possible.

Behind him, Shuri makes a loud noise of disgust, and Aneka mumbles something about him being loutish. But T’Challa doesn’t react to him.

T’Challa reaches into his pocket and pulls out a string of kimoyo beads.

“These are to keep us in communication with you. Shuri made the settings so that you can’t disable them,” T’Challa says politely.

T’Challa’s right hand grabs Erik’s left wrist, and the touch feels so odd and foreign that Erik instinctively tries to pull his hand away. T’Challa simply tightens his grip and uses his free hand to slide the kimoyo beads on.

“And the ankle monitor will be constantly tracking your location.”

“What ankle mon-- ow!”

A pain shoots up Erik’s right leg as Aneka snaps the ankle monitor in place. Erik looks over at her furiously. Aneka just shrugs.

“Oops,” she says.

“You little--”

“Aw!” Okoye interrupts, looking Erik in the eyes. “Ukuba uthetha oko, ndiza nqunyulwa yakho
“Did you--are you threatening to cut something off of me?” Erik demands. His Xhosa may not be the best, but he knows enough to figure that part out.

“I did,” Okoye says with faux-happiness. “Use your imagination to figure out what that ‘something’ is.”

“Just don’t ask me to reattach it,” Shuri says flatly.

“Enough, everyone,” T’Challa commands. “No one is cutting off anyone’s body part.”

Erik can’t help but notice that Ayo looks disappointed at T’Challa’s words. Erik already knows that they’re gonna try to kill him the second T’Challa’s not watching.

T’Challa reaches behind him and opens the door to Erik’s new room.

“N’Jadaka,” T’Challa says, stepping aside and nodding in direction of the room.

Erik steps inside, and almost immediately stops to look around. If Erik were a lesser man, he’d allow himself to be impressed with his new room. It’s bigger than any bedroom he’s ever had.

The walls are bathed in deep purple paint, a color that is surely meant to dull Erik’s sharper senses. His bathroom is almost comically spacious and ornate, the golden trimming standing out against the purple paint on the walls. Wakandan artifacts decorate the walls; masks, knife handles and paintings they definitely did not have to steal back from certain museums.

There’s a large, mahogany desk right next to a matching bookcase. Books about Wakandan history, technology and medical discoveries line the shelves.

He has a king-sized bed with obscenely lush black sheets and comforter. While Erik’s looking at it, a glint of light on the pillow catches his eye.

His grandfather’s ring is lying on the pillow. Erik hasn’t seen it in weeks.

The sight of the ring makes Erik’s heart sink. He couldn’t wear that necklace and the necklace that held the Black Panther suit, so he’d taken his grandfather’s ring off and didn’t think about it. But then T’Challa stabbed him in the chest, and he’d ended up in the lab, and . . . Erik just didn’t think he’d ever see it again.

Erik wants to put it on right now, but he can’t, not with all of them watching him.

“So, um,” Erik clears his throat and turns back around to face T’Challa, “how long I gotta wear this?” He gestures to the ankle monitor.

T’Challa’s watching Erik’s face in a while that makes Erik anxious.

“At least three years,” T’Challa answers.

“Oh,” Erik responds. “I thought you were gonna say ‘forever.’”

“No, no, I wouldn’t do anything like that,” T’Challa says. His voice goes soft, and Erik can tell that he’s being honest now.

Erik makes the mistake of looking T’Challa in the eye. T’Challa’s eyes look tired and worried, and, God, Erik feels flustered again. Erik suddenly feels very awkward, and, somehow, he knows that
T’Challa does, too.

“Mostly because it’d be a waste of resources,” Shuri butts in.

“Yes, thank you for that reminder, sister,” T’Challa says, giving Shuri a look from over his shoulder.

Shuri grins in response. Once again, Erik can’t help but be thankful for Shuri’s utter lack of concern for his feelings.

“Anyway,” T’Challa turns back to Erik, “if you need me, you call using the kimoyo beads, or walk to my office. I’m not that far away.”

“I won’t need you from anything,” Erik quickly states. “So don’t even worry about it.”

Ayo and Aneka glance at each other, and both Shuri and Okoye roll their eyes again. Erik is definitely being an ungrateful child right now. But he’ll be that if it means putting some distance between himself and all of them.

T’Challa just nods at Erik.

“That’s fine, as well. Just don’t forget I’m around, yes?”

Erik sets his jaw, stubbornly refusing to answer.

T’Challa gives Erik a small smile, and then he, the princess and the three Dora leave.

As soon as they’re out of the door, Erik snatches his necklace off of the pillow, and puts it on. A wave of exhaustion suddenly crashes over Erik, and he lets himself fall onto the entirely-too-soft bed.

Erik can’t help but think of his father. He wonders what kind of punishment he would’ve received had he had been able to return to Wakanda. Would he have ended up wearing an ankle bracelet in a wing of the palace like Erik, or kicked out of the Golden City like W’Kabi? Or maybe he would’ve been kicked out of the country all together.

For the millionth time in his life, Erik wonders about how differently his life could’ve turned out if one or two people had made better decisions.

Erik runs his fingers over his grandfather’s ring. Then he lets his eyes fall shut.

Chapter End Notes

- "Birnin Nanali" is actually Birnin T’Chaka. I changed the name because I felt it odd that it's even called Birnin T’Chaka in the first place. Nanali is a past queen of Wakanda and T'Chaka's mother.

- The movie kind of made it seem like Wakanda was made up of the capital city and the big ass field where the big fight took place, so I thought that sending W’Kabi and the Border tribesmen out of the capital city would be a suitable punishment. Plus, I looked at the map Ta-nehisi Coates used for his "Black Panther" comics and everything looks far away as fuck.
- Okoye is referring to Erik's tongue.

- The "sleeping naked" thing came from an interview where MBJ revealed that he sleeps naked lol.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

A chapter in which both of these traumatized idiots are bad with emotions.

This is weird.

T’Challa can pretend like it’s not weird all he wants, but it doesn’t matter. This is fucking weird, man.

Erik squirms, turning so that he’s lying on his right side. It’s been damn near two weeks, and he still can’t sleep for more than a couple of hours in this room.

This bed is too soft. Erik never really got used to sleeping in a bed after all those years of sleeping on dirt, concrete, or the most raggedy cots to have ever existed. And this bed is ridiculously soft: the mattress contours to Erik’s body, and the blankets feel like he’s being rubbed up on by a bunch of puppies. Erik’s considered sleeping on the floor, but the floor is covered in the softest carpet Erik’s ever walked on.

This is weird. It’s weird as fuck. There is no reason Erik should be in a bed this soft in the fucking palace, especially not when actual Wakandan citizens have been shipped off to cities they’ve never lived in before.

Erik can’t figure out T’Challa’s game. Every time Erik thinks he knows his cousin, T’Challa throws him a curve ball. He knows that T’Challa is trying his hardest to hide his actual intentions from Erik. All of this is just a way to distract him.

Erik needs to figure out what the fuck is actually going on. Because he’ll be damned if T’Challa gets the best of him again.

**

T’Challa can’t sleep. He knows N’Jadaka can’t either. Neither of them have properly slept in nearly two weeks.

T’Challa doesn’t need to rely on . . . whatever it is that bonds them to know this. He doesn’t need to siphon N’Jadaka’s confusion to know that he feels it. Why wouldn’t N’Jadaka be confused? T’Challa knows that N’Jadaka doesn’t trust him in the slightest.

Not that T’Challa blames him. If the roles were reversed, T’Challa wouldn’t trust a word N’Jadaka says.

It’s actually quite reasonable, if T’Challa is deciding to use reason. They both know that T’Challa could really hurt N’Jadaka if he wanted to. He could kill N’Jadaka if he really wanted to. Problem is, N’Jadaka refuses to see that T’Challa doesn’t want to.

T’Challa doesn’t know why he’s so anxious to make N’Jadaka trust him. This is beyond any need to absolve himself of guilt, or any paternalistic desire to guide N’Jadaka away from the darkness within himself.
N’Jadaka has made T’Challa unrecognizable to himself; it’s like he can’t depend on his thoughts, emotions and wants to be his own. T’Challa is starting to feel like he won’t be okay until he makes everything around N’Jadaka okay. Until N’Jadaka himself is okay.

And if his well-being depends on N’Jadaka’s . . . well, they’re both in trouble, aren’t they?

**

T’Challa was not kidding about guards being around all the time.

Erik’s room is at the end of a hall on the first floor. Since he’s on the first floor, he’d expected to hear a lot of noise, but it’s like his room is secluded from the rest of the busy area. The hallway leading to the common areas reminds Erik of that horror movie “The Shining,” except instead of bloody twin ghost girls, there are two big ass guards waiting at the end.

One smiles serenely at Erik as he tries to walk past them.

“Good morning, my prince,” the guard says, and the phrase nearly stops Erik in his tracks.

Erik doesn’t say anything; he just nods and walks away as quickly as possible, hoping to put some distance between himself and them.

But he doesn’t get much farther into the palace before he sees even more guards. Worse yet, now he’s seeing Dora Milaje walking around too, not even trying to pretend like they’re not watching Erik’s every step. Erik gets the feeling that the palace isn’t this crowded with security most of the time.

But Erik *is* a very high security risk, isn’t he?

He looks down at his ankle monitor. There’s a soft blue light on the top of it; it’s supposed to turn bright red if he goes too far. Erik wonders what else would happen if he stepped out of bounds. Shit, it’ll probably poison him or something, especially considering that Shuri made it. Just looking at it creeps Erik out.

Erik walks the halls of the palace, trying to look as innocuous as he possibly can. Erik’s partially trying to get his bearings, but he’s mostly trying to see what his boundaries. He never got to see all of it before, and, if he’s being honest, he’s already forgotten his way around. This place is fucking huge, by the way, and there’s no way Erik’s going to be able to walk through it by himself in one day with everyone *staring* at him as he goes.

But he keeps walking anyway, determined to be defiant in the scandalized and paranoid faces of the Wakandans. Erik makes note of the throne room which is next to a series of smaller conference rooms. He also notes all the dining and lounging areas which are near the almost unnecessarily high-tech ass kitchen in the palace.

Erik already knows that if he were to walk further past the kitchen, he’ll start getting into more lounge/rest areas which eventually give way to the medical wing. And the medical wing is practically next door to the long corridor that leads to an elevator and a long, winding staircase that descends into Shuri’s lab. And Erik will be grateful if he never has to go back down *there*.

Eventually, traffic starts to thin out in the palace: it’s nearing noon, and everyone who doesn’t live or work here is heading out. Pretty soon, T’Challa will meet with the Elders and Ramonda, and the Dora who aren’t glaring at Erik’s back will be in there with them. Erik ain’t trying to be in the hall with any of them.
So he turns around and starts heading back to his room. But Erik’s luck is shitty, and as he’s heading back past the conference rooms, he sees Okoye and Ayo heading directly for him.

*Ignore them. Ignore both of them.*

“Where are you scurrying to, N’Jadaka?” Ayo asks.

“I ain’t scurrying nowhere, fuck you mean?” Erik spits out.

Ayo snorts and Okoye smirks. *Damn it.*

“I’m going back to my very fancy prison cell,” Erik growls, and he brushes past them before either of them can have anything else to say.

Seriously. What kind of king lets his guards be so damn smart-mouthed?

Erik can feel their eyes pricking his skin and it makes him itch. He can hear people whispering about him, and he wants to cuss them clean out, but he already knows that he’ll just end up with a hole in his chest if he makes the slightest move.

He’s walking among people who either stare at him like he has some extremely contagious, incurable illness or look at him like they take joy in the fact that they can talk to him any kind of way. He feels very harshly reminded of his status as an unwanted house guest—a despised foreigner. Erik starts to feel agitated and antsy and uncomfortable and embarrassed.

Erik understands now.

He gets it. T’Challa knew exactly what the fuck he was doing when he stuck Erik in the palace. He wanted Erik to feel small and discombobulated. To remind Erik that he didn’t—and won’t ever—belong.

That petty motherfucker.

**

“Wam kumkani,” the Merchant Tribe Elder’s tone is icy. She’s barely waited until T’Challa sat down on the throne to address him.

“Yes, Elder?”

“I’ve been informed that you’ve moved N’Jadaka into this palace,” she says, with a raised eyebrow. “Is that true?”

T’Challa blinks at her. He doesn’t feel like arguing right now, but he was going to have to reveal N’Jadaka’s location eventually, wasn’t he?

“Yes,” T’Challa answers, his tone neutral. “And that is a decision I will not be reconsidering.”

The Merchant Tribe Elder looks a little thrown, but not confrontational.

T’Challa looks around at the rest of the council.

“Anyone have any questions?”

Silence. They all opt for looking at each other instead of looking at T’Challa. That’s fine by him.
It’s incredible how normal and easy the rest of today’s meeting is.

T’Challa listens to proposals from the Elders. M’Baku makes thinly-veiled insults towards the Border Tribe Elder, who makes less thinly-veiled insults back. Neither he or Ramonda have to argue with the Merchant Tribe Elder about anything. And no one looks miserable or as if they would rather be dead.

If T’Challa did not know better, he would start to believe that every meeting could be like this.

Eventually, T’Challa adjourns the Elders, pleasantly biding them a good day and trying to watch Okoye and M’Baku out of the corner of his eye. Ayo approaches him from his right as he’s saying goodbye to the River Tribe Elder.

“You missed your charge this morning,” Ayo mutters.

“Did I?”

Ayo nods. “He was wandering around like a lost, feral dog. Some found him a bit disturbing.”

“I’m sure they did. I’ll check in on him some time today.”

“May Bast grant you strength.” Ayo’s tone is serious, but her eyes are devious as they can get.

T’Challa rolls his eyes.

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“Thank you, Ayo,” he answers. He knows he’ll need it.

**

“So some time today” unfortunately turns into much later in the day.

T’Challa gets dragged into more meetings, and then into an ever-growing mountain of paperwork, and then into a test of the laptops Shuri wants to send to the outreach center in Oakland, and then into another conversation with Ramonda where she sneakily asks him to go the counselors, and then into refereeing an argument between Shuri and M’Baku that M’Baku swears Shuri started.

(T’Challa has Okoye’s help for that one, and he’s pretty amused by how evasive Okoye is being about whatever is going on with Lord M’Baku.)

Even as busy as he is, N’Jadaka lingers in the back of his mind. T’Challa has been waiting to talk to him again. He’d been thinking about N’Jadaka all week anyway. T’Challa just didn’t think he’d be so avoidant. Or that he’d feel so totally unprepared.

By the time he’s nearing his cousin’s door, the sun is low in the sky, and the overnight guards are in position.

They both salute T’Challa as he approaches. One of them, Daluxolo, nods his head towards the door with smirk on his face.

“The prince is in a bit of a mood, my King,” he says.

“So, I’ve heard.” T’Challa can hear N’Jadaka moving around in there, and it dawns on him that this might not be the best of ideas.
But T’Challa opens N’Jadaka’s door anyway. Sure enough, there’s his cousin, pacing back and forth like he’s dying to escape, anxiety radiating off of him.

T’Challa tries to make his voice as gentle as possible.

“N’Jadaka--”

And . . . well . . .

The next movements are a blur for both of them.

All T’Challa can discern is that N’Jadaka swings at him. It’s a wild swing that N’Jadaka clearly did not plan, otherwise it would’ve been much more strategic and graceful. T’Challa is conscious of ducking under N’Jadaka’s swing, and he’s conscious of launching himself at N’Jadaka and wrapping his arms around him.

What T’Challa is not fully conscious of is the two of them crashing onto the floor. Or of both of T’Challa’s hands ending up on N’Jadaka’s neck.

It’s only when he feels N’Jadaka’s hands on his chest that he realizes, yes he is actually choking N’Jadaka. The palms of T’Challa’s hands are tight on either side of N’Jadaka’s neck, and he can practically feel his cousin’s skin starting to bruise. But he’s somehow managed to keep his thumbs from closing N’Jadaka’s airway.

N’Jadaka’s still not breathing, though. And he lies statute still beneath T’Challa. His hands are on T’Challa’s chest, but he’s not trying to push T’Challa. He’s barely pressing his fingers in. N’Jadaka looks up at T’Challa with such big, wide eyes, and T’Challa can’t tell if N’Jadaka is scared, shocked, curious or some tangled mess of the three.

“My king, are you alright!?” Daluoxo’s voice brings T’Challa back to reality.

T’Challa slowly releases N’Jadaka’s neck. N’Jadaka blinks. He’s shaking. T’Challa grabs both N’Jadaka’s wrist.

“I am fine,” T’Challa answers, still watching N’Jadaka.

N’Jadaka looks down, and when T’Challa follows his line of sight, he realizes that he’s straddling N’Jadaka. T’Challa’s face starts to burn.

T’Challa can feel Daluoxo and Dubula still standing over them.

“Stand down,” T’Challa tells them, not moving from his spot on N’Jadaka. “We are okay.”

Both guards linger a moment more, but then exit the room.

T’Challa stands up, takes a few steps back from N’Jadaka, and sits down on the bed. N’Jadaka instantly sits up and crawls away from the spot where they fell. N’Jadaka moves until his back is pressed against the wall. He sits there, tense all over, watching T’Challa as if T’Challa were a venomous snake.

T’Challa sighs. Alright, then.

T’Challa gets off of the bed, and sits down on the floor across from N’Jadaka, sitting with his legs criss cross. N’Jadaka frowns in confusion.

“Are you alright?” T’Challa asks gently. He’s fully aware that this is probably a stupid question
given what just transpired.

Sure enough, N’Jadaka laughs bitterly.

“You just fucking choked me, and now you’re asking if I’m aight?” N’Jadaka asks derisively. “Is something actually wrong with you?”

“Apparently, yes,” T’Challa answers honestly. “But I would like you to answer my question. I would also like you to remember that you swung at me.”

“You snuck up on me!” N’Jadaka yells childishly. He seems to realize how juvenile he just sounded, because he growls. “Yeah, I’m aight. I guess I should be grateful that you didn’t crush my throat, huh?”

“I’d say ‘yes,’ but I don’t actually know if I ever intended to crush your throat,” T’Challa retorts. “And it’s not my fault you didn’t hear me calling your name when I walked in here. Maybe your senses are starting to dull.”

“I love how you got an excuse for everything.”

T’Challa cuts his eyes at his cousin. “You’re one to talk. Almost everything out of your mouth is either an excuse, a threat or some long soliloquy.”

N’Jadaka smirks. “Well, shit, that makes me sound like you. We’re related, after all.”

“Please do not remind me.”

N’Jadaka laughs, and the genuinely happy noise seems to startle both of them. N’Jadaka instantly frowns again.

“What are you even doing here?” N’Jadaka demands. “What do you want?”

“To check on you,” T’Challa answers. “We haven’t seen each other in several days. And I heard that you were roaming about the palace earlier.”

“Let me guess, Ayo told you.”

T’Challa nods and N’Jadaka groans.

“Look, I was just trying to get to know the place, alright? Especially since I’m under your little house arrest for at least 3 years. You should’ve told them I’d be around.”

Well, he’s not wrong about that.

“You are right, I should have,” T’Challa responds. “What exactly happened earlier that left you so tense to begin with?”

N’Jadaka shifts. He suddenly looks smaller and more self-conscious.

“Nothing, really,” N’Jadaka admits. “I could just hear people talking about me. And they were all staring.” N’Jadaka looks down at the floor, as if he’s embarrassed by the confession.

T’Challa nearly points out that N’Jadaka can’t really blame everyone for being flummoxed at N’Jadaka’s presence, but thinks better of it.

T’Challa can still see the tension in N’Jadaka’s body. N’Jadaka has holed himself up in this room
since T’Challa brought him here. He’d been so paranoid about being locked away, but at the end of the day, N’Jadaka’s been the one to keep himself locked in. T’Challa knows N’Jadaka must been going stir crazy.

T’Challa has an idea. He stands up off of the floor, and reaches down for his cousin.

“Come with me,” T’Challa says.

N’Jadaka watches him warily. “Where?”

“Outside, to one of the gardens,” T’Challa answers. “I think you’ll find it peaceful.”

“I can’t go outside,” N’Jadaka argues suspiciously. “Where are you actually trying to get me to go?”

T’Challa rolls his eyes.

“You can go certain places outside of the palace walls, and I’m trying to take you to one of those places,” T’Challa says exasperatedly. “I swear I’m not lying to you, N’Jadaka.”

N’Jadaka blinks rapidly, like T’Challa’s not making sense to him. But before T’Challa can ask again, N’Jadaka slowly takes T’Challa’s hand.

**

T’Challa didn’t realize that night had fallen.

The stars look impossibly close as he and N’Jadaka walk through the doors leading to one of the gardens. The stars are so bright that they almost don’t need the garden’s dim light to guide them.

T’Challa and N’Jadaka are still holding hands. Out of the corner of his eye, T’Challa can see N’Jadaka gazing at the massive amounts of pale orange roses around them.

T’Challa leads N’Jadaka to the large fountain in the center of the garden. The lights installed at the bottom of the fountain cast a blue tint to their faces.

It’s only now that N’Jadaka realizes that he’s still holding hands with T’Challa. He snatches his hand away as if T’Challa’s hand burns and crosses his arms. N’Jadaka stares at the water like he refuses to look anywhere else.

T’Challa feels a hurt that he knows he shouldn’t feel.

T’Challa also watches the water, hoping that it’s steady flow calms him. He and N’Jadaka are silent for what feels like an eternity, but T’Challa is surprised to find that he finds no discomfort in the quiet, even with N’Jadaka bristling next to him.

“I used to come here with Zuri sometimes,” T’Challa eventually says. “Quite a few times, actually.”

N’Jadaka shoots T’Challa a quick look but says nothing.

“I think he knew it was soothing to me,” T’Challa continues. “I used to have a very bad temper when I was younger, and my father and I didn’t always see eye-to-eye. And when that would happen, Zuri was step in and lead me out here.”

T’Challa remembers the last time he and Zuri stood out here. It was years ago, sometime around
T’Challa’s 18th birthday. T’Challa had had a brief row with T’Chaka. Something about being a teenager who thought he was ready to be a grown man. Zuri had put his hand on T’Challa’s back while T’Challa vented to him. Afterwards, Zuri had smiled.

“You are much more like that man than either of you see,” Zuri had said.

T’Challa had denied that statement then. He thinks he would deny it now, too.

N’Jadaka speaks, jolting T’Challa out of his memory.

“So that was just his MO, huh?” N’Jadaka says softly. “Figures.”

T’Challa turns to look at N’Jadaka and finds that N’Jadaka looks very despondent.

“What do you mean?”

“He . . . he used to be like that with me and my dad,” N’Jadaka answers with a frown. “If I was ever being bratty or talking back or whatever. Uncle James-- Zuri would kinda pull me to the side and let me cool down before telling me to watch my mouth and respect my daddy.”

T’Challa frowns. He hates to admit this, but T’Challa sometimes forgets that Zuri would’ve had a hand in raising N’Jadaka while spying on N’Jobu. If T’Challa thinks about it too long, it makes N’Jobu’s eventual death all the more disturbing.

N’Jadaka must realize that T’Challa’s thinking about that, because finally looks at T’Challa with a hard stare.

“Yeah, it’s real fucked up, huh?” N’Jadaka demands harshly. “He sat there and spent all that time with me and then left my ass. He could’ve at least killed me before he went.”

T’Challa grimaces. He remembers the look on Zuri’s face when he finally told T’Challa the truth. But then T’Challa remembers the horror he felt as he watched Zuri die.

“Well, you killed him, so you are even now, yes?” T’Challa asks, harshness creeping into his own voice.

N’Jadaka glares at him.

“Look, he might’ve been a good guy to you, but he didn’t mean shit to me, okay?”

“Oh, he meant something to you,” T’Challa challenges. “Otherwise, you would not have felt that much rage when you realized who he was.”

“I didn’t mean shit to him, so he didn’t mean shit to me,” N’Jadaka says through gritted teeth. “He cared so much about you that he left me with my daddy’s dead body.”

T’Challa wants to argue, but he bites his tongue. T’Challa closes his eyes and rubs his right temple.

“Yes, I know,” T’Challa says. “I’m sorry.”

N’Jadaka falls silent. T’Challa opens his eyes to see N’Jadaka staring at the water with fire in his eyes.

“Well, I’m not,” N’Jadaka states.

T’Challa looks at his cousin carefully, and he can see N’Jadaka trying not to move underneath his
gaze. He watches as N’Jadaka’s fingers twitch at his side. T’Challa can see the uncertainty in N’Jadaka’s body.

T’Challa watches N’Jadaka closely. And then he realizes something.

“Yes, you are.”

N’Jadaka looks at T’Challa as if he wants to punch him in the face.

“You are sorry,” T’Challa says. “You feel remorse. Or, at least, you are starting to.”

N’Jadaka scoffs. “I ain’t starting to feel a damn thing, King. You tripping if you think I am.”

“You feel something,” T’Challa presses. He can hear a weird sense of excitement in his own voice. “I can tell that you are, N’Jadaka.”

“You can’t tell shit,” N’Jadaka says hostilely. “I don’t give a fuck about you or anyone here. Got it?”

N’Jadaka breathing kicks up, and T’Challa can feel him becoming anxious and jittery.

“Then what is happening, N’Jadaka?” T’Challa questions. “Because I am not imagining things like you want me to believe that I am.”

“Nothing is happening!” N’Jadaka sounds frustrated and trapped.

“N’Jadaka--”

“But that’s what you, right?” N’Jadaka suddenly growls. “You want me to feel bad or sorry or whatever. You want me to grovel and beg for your forgiveness and to beg you to let me be a part of this fucking country--”

“That’s not what I want!”

“Then what do you want?!?” N’Jadaka shouts at T’Challa as if T’Challa has gotten on his last good nerve. “Because I’m trying to figure out what your fucking deal is! What games are you trying to play with me?!”

“I want you to know that I’m not like everyone else that’s come into your life!” The words fly out of T’Challa’s mouth before he can consider them, but they sound as close to the truth as he’s ever going to get.

N’Jadaka blinks and shakes his head. Something in T’Challa’s statement is just not computing.

“What? No. What are you talking about?”

“I do not have a game I’m playing or a lie I’m trying to tell,” T’Challa says in a quieter voice. “I care about you.”

N’Jadaka furrows his brow and looks at T’Challa strangely.

“No--no you don’t. I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”
“Because you can’t. Care about me. It’s not possible.” N’Jadaka sounds like he’s trying to convince himself more than he’s trying to convince T’Challa.

And now T’Challa is the one feeling befuddled and exhausted.

“N’Jadaka-- why is it not possible for me to care about you?”

“Because that makes no sense!” N’Jadaka shouts, and he has that same wild, distressed look in his eye that he had that day on the train tracks.

“Because why would you? Why would you care about me?” N’Jadaka pushes. “Nobody else does!”

“Everyone else thinks I’m just the crazy, stupid, shameful American bastard!” N’Jadaka’s voice starts to shake. “Everybody else wants me dead! I’m barely human to most people here! And you know what? That makes sense to me!”

“That makes sense to you? Why? Because of what you’ve done?”

“Yes! Fuck, man, yes! And here you are talking about you ‘care’ about me. It’s bullshit!”

N’Jadaka’s breathing becomes quicker, more shallow. His eyes start darting around, and he’s trembling. N’Jadaka’s chest jumps, and he grabs his necklace as if it were the only thing keeping him alive.

“My chest hurts,” N’Jadaka gasps.

“N’Jadaka!” T’Challa says his name quietly, but urgently. “N’Jadaka, look up at me, okay?”

N’Jadaka looks T’Challa in the eye. T’Challa steps closer to him, and puts his hand on N’Jadaka’s chest.

“Take a deep breath for me, alright?” T’Challa instructs. “As deep a breath as you can take.”

N’Jadaka does what he’s told. He doesn’t break eye contact with T’Challa as he inhales deeply.

“Hold it for a few seconds . . . good. Now, exhale as slowly as you can.”

N’Jadaka’s breath comes out shaky, and his eyes fill with tears. But he keeps breathing.

“That’s right. Just like that.” T’Challa presses his hand against N’Jadaka’s chest just a bit more firmly. “Keep doing that.”

N’Jadaka takes another shuddery breath. Holds it. Then breaths out. He does it again and again, T’Challa murmuring soft words of encouragement the whole time.

Eventually, N’Jadaka’s breathing is steady again, and he goes still. N’Jadaka reaches up and puts his hand over T’Challa’s. N’Jadaka looks down at their hands, and T’Challa thinks N’Jadaka’s going to remove his hand. But he doesn’t. He just lets them be.

“Let’s go back inside and get you to bed. Alright?” T’Challa suggests softly.

N’Jadaka, his eyes still cast downward, nods.

**
Kabul, Afghanistan. A quick assassination. That's all this is.

Erik lies on his stomach on the roof, his rifle partially sitting on his shoulder. All guards have been disposed of, and all security cameras have been disabled.

He looks through the lens: he can see his target below, slowly walking out of the Arg. There’s a car waiting for the target: the poor bastard thinks it’ll be taking him back to his hotel.

Erik only has a few minutes. He’ll shoot the target and move him into that car before anyone else exits that building. Quick and easy.

The target walks down the long path. Erik steadies his rifle.

But then--a presence. Erik can feel a dark, heavy presence floating above him. Erik’s stomach drops, and he tenses all over. He sees shadows appearing below him: it’s suddenly getting dark. Erik flips himself onto his back and sits up, ready to shoot. And then he freezes.

Erik’s not hidden on the roof of the Arg anymore. He’s lying on a grassy field.

The feeling of concrete is replaced by the feeling of grass blades prickling his back. He stares at out ahead of him to see dark trees with long, crooked branches.

And the sky. The sky is purple, and there are blue clouds--storm clouds--looming. The colors are hypnotic.

Erik knows this place. Or, he feels like he does.

Erik stands up. The rifle is gone, and his hands are empty. He’s trembling. Erik walks forward even though he knows that he has no idea where he’s going. He looks ahead of him and sees nothing but grassy hills and trees.

Erik feels another presence, just as heavy as he felt before. He scans the terrain and braces himself. Finally, he sees her. A tall, frail-looking Black woman, wearing a long, dark blue dress, walking slowly. She’s got her back to Erik, but Erik doesn’t need to see her face.

“Mama? Mama!”

She keeps walking.

“MAMA!”

Erik starts to follow her. He walks, then jogs, then runs after her.

It feels like he’s been chasing her for hours. Erik’s heart pounds, and his throat starts to burn. He runs as fast as he can, but she stays far ahead of him, even though she keeps moving so slowly.

Finally, Erik stops, exhausted and struggling to catch his breath. He didn’t know he could feel so tired.

“Mama,” the word comes out as a ragged sigh. “Where are you going?”

She stops, finally she stops. But she does not turn around to face him. She merely tilts her head downwards, in the direction of Erik’s voice.

“Home.”
“What do you mean?” Erik’s voice sounds strained and desperate. “Where’s home, mama?”

The ground beneath Erik’s feet shifts. The sky darkens. The tree branches become gnarled.

“I don’t know where your home is,” she says. “I don’t believe that I know you at all, sir.”

What?

“What do you mean?” Erik’s throat is closing up. His chest hurts. Below him, the ground starts to crack open.

She starts walking again.

“What do you mean?!” Erik shouts. His voice sounds distant. “I’m your son!”

She whips around, a furious look on her face. Erik can feel his skin burn under her gaze.

“You are no son of mine.”

The ground beneath Erik’s feet shatters as if it were made of glass.

And Erik falls, dropping into the darkness below. He screams and screams and screams. But no one will ever hear him.

**

“N’Jadaka!”

N’Jadaka thrashes, kicking and hitting T’Challa in his legs, shoulders and face. N’Jadaka wildly tosses his head from side to side. He’s sobbing in his sleep, and the sounds is like a punch in the chest to T’Challa.

T’Challa straddles N’Jadaka, and manages to take hold of his wrists and pin his arms to the bed. N’Jadaka keeps twisting, turning and crying, his eyes tightly shut. Whatever this nightmare is, it has completely overtaken N’Jadaka.

“N’Jadaka,” T’Challa says urgently, his soft voice even as he tightens his grip on his cousin. “Wake up! Wake up for me!”

N’Jadaka suddenly opens his eyes, blinking rapidly, looking frightened and shocked. He finally stops moving, going still underneath T’Challa. Then his body slumps as if he were drained of all of his energy.

T’Challa climbs off of N’Jadaka, and lies down next to him, lying on his side so that he’s facing him. It’s in this moment that T’Challa feels just how tired they both are.

N’Jadaka lies flat on his back, staring blankly up at the ceiling. He’s still crying.

“She’s gone,” he says his voice barely audible.


“My mama .” N’Jadaka moans the word as if he were in pain.

His mother? As far as T’Challa knew, N’Jadaka’s mother died long ago.
N’Jadaka flips himself onto his side, and then he curls up into the fetal position. He looks like a small, lost child. T’Challa thinks back the day Shuri yelled at him in her lab, when she told him about how horribly confusing it is to watch N’Jadaka have a nightmare.

T’Challa looks at N’Jadaka as he sniffs and holds himself. T’Challa doesn’t feel any confusion. Just an intense sense of heartbreak.

T’Challa pushes him further down into the bed, so that his face will be more leveled with N’Jadaka’s. T’Challa delicately places his hand on N’Jadaka’s cheek. N’Jadaka stiffens beneath the touch, but he doesn’t pull away.

“She wouldn’t even look at me,” N’Jadaka whispers, more to himself than T’Challa.

“That was a dream, okay?” T’Challa says. “It was just a nightmare. You are all right. You are safe here. Do you understand me?”

N’Jadaka nods. He still looks startlingly sad and hurt.

So, T’Challa, without thinking about it first: “Do you want me to stay here with you?”

N’Jadaka shuts his eyes. He blushes, his brown cheeks turning a bright red. T’Challa prepares himself for the fuck no, get away from me that he expects to hear.

“. . . Yeah.” N’Jadaka opens his eyes again and looks up at T’Challa with embarrassment before looking down again.

T’Challa prays that his own uneasiness isn’t showing on his face.

“Okay,” T’Challa responds, and he motions for N’Jadaka to get under the covers.

Amazingly, N’Jadaka does so without any hesitation or comment. T’Challa pulls the covers over them both. N’Jadaka immediately shuts his eyes and starts taking deep, steady breaths. It takes T’Challa a minute or two to realize that N’Jadaka’s fallen asleep again.

T’Challa watches his cousin’s sleeping face until he can feel himself start to drift off. He knows that sleeping N’Jadaka’s room—in N’Jadaka’s bed, no less—is an absolutely terrible idea. But lying here makes T’Challa feel grounded in a way that he hasn’t felt in a long time.

Besides, he’s tired. T’Challa just wants to sleep now. He will confront the baffling nature of these moments—and the draining argument in the garden—in the morning.

T’Challa tries to ignore the thousands of thoughts that are racing through his mind and wills himself to fall asleep.

**

T’Challa doesn’t know if he feels N’Jadaka press his lips against T’Challa’s mere minutes or many hours later. He doesn’t even know that the kiss isn’t a strange, short dream T’Challa’s had.

All T’Challa knows is that he feels a brief, chaste kiss on his lips. And, when his eyes fly open, N’Jadaka’s face looks much more peaceful than it had before.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

An awkward morning conversation and spirit world shit :)

Fuck, Erik’s neck hurts.

The pain wakes him out of a dead sleep; it’s radiating from his head down his neck and back. Erik’s jaw hurts; he’s been clenching his teeth. He feels like someone is beating his brain with a mallet.

Erik turns over onto his side and groans. What the hell happened to him last night?

“N’Jadaka.”

T’Challa’s voice is soft, but it might as well be a siren.

Erik sits upright, and instantly regrets it, because damn it that hurt, too. It’s like gravity is working against him. T’Challa’s standing in the corner of the room, near the foot of Erik’s bed, and he’s staring at Erik with a worried frown on his face.

“Are you okay?”

To be honest, Erik is too disorientated and sore to come up with a smart remark.

“No,” Erik growls. “What the fuck are you doing in here?!”

T’Challa opens his mouth, then frowns. His eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“You . . . do you not remember last night?” T’Challa crosses his arms and tilts his head as if Erik has grown another head.

Last night? Shit, thinking makes his head hurt. But Erik reaches back into his mind anyway, trying to retrace his steps.

Erik finds his memories and grimaces. He remembers T’Challa choking him--wow, that actually happened. Great.

And Erik remembers . . . them talking. Yeah, they were sitting on the floor talking.

And then T’Challa took him outside to a garden. And then they had an argument? And then . . .

Oh. Oh, shit. Oh, shit.

Erik squeezes his eyes shut. He can feel his face burning.

“We are never going to talk about that again,” Erik grumbles.

T’Challa laughs uneasily.
“I figured you would say that,” T’Challa says. “But I am afraid that we have to.”

Erik opens his eyes just to glower at T’Challa.

“No. We don’t. We never do,” Erik says. “We can just forget anything ever happened and carry on avoiding each other like we were doing before.”

“I can’t do that, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa argues, sounding way too serious for Erik’s liking.

“Well, then, you about to be talking to yourself. Because I ain’t having this conversation,” Erik says stubbornly.

Erik plops back on the bead with a wince and throws an arm over his eyes.

T’Challa doesn’t say anything, and Erik foolishly thinks that T’Challa’s actually going to respect his wishes and leave him the hell alone. But nope. Soon enough, Erik can feel the bed dip underneath him as T’Challa sits down next to him.

T’Challa moves Erik’s own arm from his eyes, and Erik’s forced to look up into T’Challa’s stupid, soft-looking eyes. Erik absolutely refuses to do this this morning. Erik snatches his arm back from T’Challa and pushes himself off of the other side of the bed.

T’Challa frowns at his sudden movements.

“Hey--”

Erik is in the bathroom and running the water before T’Challa can get another word out. Erik can still hear his cousin over the sound of rushing water.

“You cannot stay in the bathroom for forever, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa says, and Erik swears that T’Challa’s teasing him.

“Get the hell outta my room, King!” Erik shouts.

T’Challa actually chuckles, and Erik almost opens the door to fight him. He opts for aggressively brushing his teeth then washing his face instead.

Not nearly enough time passes before Erik hears T’Challa’s voice again.

“I know you don’t appreciate having said it, but I was very grateful for the things told me last night,” T’Challa says. “I think . . . they helped me understand you better. And understand our relationship better.”

Erik feels a fluttering in his stomach. He recalls himself curled up in the bed, whining to T’Challa about his mother of all people, and he starts to feel that same overwhelming sense of doom he felt last night by the fountain.

Erik rubs his still-sore neck and tries to ignore the rising, dreadful feeling in his chest.

“There’s nothing to understand,” Erik says.

T’Challa doesn’t respond. Erik hears nothing but silence on the other side of the door, and he starts to believe that T’Challa’s left. But just as the thought enters his head, the bathroom door swings open, startling Erik.

“There is much more that we need to come to understand,” T’Challa says, staring N’Jadaka in the
eye. “You cannot be so stubborn as to deny that.”

“I could’ve been naked, you know,” Erik protests weakly. “But maybe that’s what you wanted, you damn pervert.”

Erik stomps past an amused and bemused T’Challa and into his deep ass closet to get dressed.

“I find it interesting that you call me a ‘pervert,’” T’Challa says as Erik’s pulling on a pair of pants, “when you are the one who kissed me last night.”

“Hey, I was clearly not in my right mind!” Erik yells, keeping his back to T’Challa.

Erik’s heart starts beating the hell out of the inside of his chest. He shrugs on a long duster and begs himself to relax. “That shit don’t even count! And plus, it’s not like you all that bothered!”

“I’ll admit that I was very flustered,” T’Challa responds. “But I’m not about to be angry or anything, if that is what you mean.”

Erik finally walks out of the closet to see T’Challa sitting on his bed again. He looks entirely too relaxed for the situation they’re in.

Erik shifts his weight from foot to foot. Oh God, he’s got butterflies in his stomach.

“Y’all not homophobic or anything?” Erik immediately wants to kick himself for asking that.

“Oh course not,” T’Challa says earnestly.

Well, that’s nice. Erik’s bisexuality has been a point of contention in pretty much every other space he’s ever been in.

“And the whole kissing cousins thing isn’t taboo?”

T’Challa shrugs with a soft smile.

“It’s not exactly uncommon.”

Erik knows that T’Challa is level-headed and all that, but come on, bruh. Erik kissed T’Challa. On the mouth. After being super weird because of a nightmare. T’Challa has to react a little bit, right?

T’Challa continues, “I am really just shocked that you kissed me. I know I’m not exactly your favorite person in the world.”

“. . . Like I said, I wasn’t in my right mind,” Erik mumbles. “That dream was . . . I don’t know, it kinda just took me out.”

T’Challa’s soft smile disappears.

“Yes, that is what I wanted to talk about.”

Damn it. Why did Erik mention it again? This isn’t a conversation he wants to have. But then again, 99 percent of the conversations Erik has with T’Challa are conversations he doesn’t want to have.

“I have never heard you talk about your mother,” T’Challa says gently.

“Yeah, that’s intentional,” Erik says hastily. “She’s not your business.”
T’Challa looks at Erik through narrowed eyes. “She was my business last night . . .”

“Fuck you,” Erik says with a snarl.

T’Challa looks at him with a deep frown and flared nostrils, offense and worry apparent on his face. Erik feels dizzy with humiliation and a guilt he refuses to acknowledge.

“Look, man,” Erik says in a softer tone, “it’s like I said. I just wanna forget last night happened, aight? It was a weird night, and I wanna just let it go.”

Erik expects T’Challa to launch into some monologue about why they can’t forget about it and how important it is for both of them to explore Erik’s feelings and blah blah touchy-feely shit.

But T’Challa doesn’t say anything. He gives Erik a long look before looking at the floor thoughtfully. T’Challa stares at the carpet, seemingly getting lost in his own thoughts. Eventually, T’Challa sighs resignedly and looks Erik in the eye.

“You and I have to take a trip,” T’Challa states.

“A trip?” Erik asks with confusion and skepticism. “Where . . . you know what? It doesn’t even matter. Because I’m not going anywhere with you ever again.”

T’Challa chortles. “Must you be so dramatic all the time, N’Jadaka?”

T’Challa stands up off of the bed and takes a step towards Erik. Erik immediately takes one step back.

“Damn nigga, back up,” Erik mumbles, glaring at T’Challa.

“Bast ndindece,” T’Challa mumbles, looking at T’Challa with annoyance.

Before Erik can take offense, T’Challa leans down and puts his kimoyo beads directly next to Erik’s ankle monitor. The ankle monitor’s blue light suddenly turns green and it makes a soft beeping noise.

“Um, what the hell did you just do?” Erik glances down at the monitor before glaring at T’Challa again.

T’Challa simply walks past Erik towards Erik’s bedroom door.

“I’ll explain later,” he says. “Now let’s leave before Okoye wakes up.”

**

The shamans’ place scares Erik.

It scared him the first time he came down here, after he’d defeated T’Challa. Erik wasn’t ever going to say that, of course: there was no way he was about to admit that to the women down there after he’d just declared himself their king. But even as he watched the heart-shaped herbs burn, Erik found this place fucking terrifying.

T’Challa isn’t exactly comfortable here, either, and he’s not even pretending to be: even in the low light, Erik can see tension in T’Challa’s back as they walk.

The stone pathway feels cold beneath Erik’s feet, as if the flames of the lit torches in the room are giving no warmth. He looks around at the space; the brown vines that sprawl down from the
ceiling seem withered. Erik looks down at the green fields around them to see they are completely barren. There are no buds, no flowers. Just grass. And the room is empty except for themselves, and one woman standing at the very back, near the entrance to the pit.

Of course, it’s the woman that Erik had strangled. Who else would it be?

“Kuhle,” T’Challa salutes her, saying her name very softly.

The woman--Kuhle--smiles very warmly at T’Challa.

“Wam kumkani,” she says. “What can I do for you?”

“We are in need of some . . . guidance,” T’Challa answers slowly.

Kuhle peers around T’Challa and looks directly at Erik. Erik tenses up all over underneath her stare, his jaw tight, his eyes downcast.

“Lift up your chin, prince,” Kuhle says, her tone more than a little derisive. “I almost didn’t see you.”

Erik blinks, and flushes. He lowers his shoulders, sticks his chest out, and lifts his jaw so that he has to look down at her. Erik refuses to let this woman believe that she’s intimidating him in anyway.

Kuhle just quirks an eyebrow at him and sighs.

“Just a boy,” she remarks. “An unwell boy.”

The quiet phrase takes all of the air of Erik’s lungs, and he feels embarrassed.

Kuhle looks at T’Challa again, giving him an evaluative stare.

“You are both unwell, yes?”

T’Challa nods. “N’Jadaka and I . . .”

T’Challa’s voice trails off, and he looks back at Erik. And God knows the way T’Challa is just staring him dead in his face should make him uncomfortable, but it feels like it’s the only thing keeping Erik from running away.

“We seem to be . . . feeding off of each other. As if we’re connected somehow,” T’Challa finishes, never taking his eyes off of Erik. “And I don’t understand it.”

Erik expects Kuhle to laugh or dismiss them. Instead, she nods, a contemplative look on her face.

“Come with me,” Kuhle says, and she gestures towards the pit.

T’Challa and Erik follow her into the room, stopping when they reached the red-sand-filled pit. Erik looks around for Kuhle, but she seems to have disappeared.

“I thought we could not go into the ancestral plane without the heart-shaped herb?” T’Challa asks.

Kuhle suddenly reappears, holding a basin of bright red clay.

“Eh, yes, that is true,” Kuhle says. “But you two are not exactly going to the ancestral plane.”
T'Challa and Erik look at each in alarm.

“Where we going, then?” Erik demands.

“Some place . . . similar,” Kuhle says vaguely. Then, more clearly: “Remove your shirts and lie down, please.”

Reluctantly, T’Challa and Erik do what they’re told. The sand makes Erik’s skin crawl, and he forces himself to lie as still as possible. T’Challa’s arm presses against Erik’s as they lie next to each other. T’Challa’s skin feels like he’s on fire.

Kuhle dips three fingers into the red clay. She then leans over and spreads the clay over T’Challa’s chest, making an “X.”

“Close your eyes, and slow your breathing,” she instructs.

Erik watches as T’Challa’s fall shut. Kuhle moves over to Erik and repeats the action, drawing a big X over his heart.

“You do the same,” Kuhle says quietly. “Close your eyes, slow your breathing.”

Erik’s eyes flutter shut. The clay is freezing cold and it feels slimy on Erik’s chest. Erik tries to focus on his breathing and not on the rising fear he feels.

Suddenly, the clay burns, and Erik hears himself gasp. He wants to open his eyes, but he can’t.

“Relax.” Kuhle’s voice sounds distant as Erik starts to drift further away. “It’s alright. Let it take you, N’Jadaka.”

Take you. Another ragged breath escapes Erik’s mouth, and he feels himself start to sink. He can’t even feel T’Challa pressed against him as he fades.

**

*T’Challa cannot feel his own body.*

It’s like he’s floating. Or, no, not floating--it is like he’s being suspended. Held up by an invisible string attached to an impossibly high ceiling. A broken marionette.

*T’Challa cannot tell if his eyes are still closed or if he’s gone totally blind: there’s nothing but darkness all around him, an infinite sea of black. No sky or fall. No north or south, east or west. No light. Just an all-encompassing dark.*

Suddenly, T’Challa can feel his body again: he can feel his heart begin to pound in his chest, and his arms begin to tremble. He can feel his stomach twist, and he can feel his throat tighten, and he can feel himself being killed by his own panic. T’Challa’s breathing is too shallow, and he knows that he’ll being joining the ancestors permanently.

But--no. Not now. T’Challa knows what to do. He knows how to steady himself. His mother taught him how.

*T’Challa inhales as deeply as he can and exhales as slowly as he can. He does this until the air that fills his body stills his erratic heart and quaking limbs. T’Challa does this until his body is his own again.*

And then, out of nowhere--the sky forms before his eyes. No, this cannot not be the ancestral plane,
because this sky has turned a dazzling pink, orange and golden, and the clouds are enormous and blindingly white against it.

And as T’Challa puzzles over this sky, he can feel blades of grass tickling the back of his arms. The blades are gold. T’Challa feels the ground against his back, and somehow, he knows that he has not fallen, but the ground has materialized beneath his body.

T’Challa sits up and squints; this place is bright, brighter than any other place he’s ever been. T’Challa looks down at his arms, then his legs. He is whole, and he feels real again.

But something is missing.

N’Jadaka.

The panic returns all at once as T’Challa stands up and starts to hastily look around for N’Jadaka.

“N’Jadaka? N’Jadaka?!”

“T’Challa?”

T’Challa whips his head in the direction of N’Jadaka’s voice. And there he is, sitting on the ground only feet away, seemingly have appeared out of thin air.

N’Jadaka, absolutely terrified. His knees pulled close to his chest, and his eyes are darting around wildly.

“Where are we?” N’Jadaka hisses.

A growl. A loud growl rips through the air around them, as if it were a response to N’Jadaka’s call. It’s come from nowhere, yet everywhere.

T’Challa and N’Jadaka freeze, anxious, afraid, and curious. T’Challa thaws just enough so that he can reach down for N’Jadaka.

“Come with me,” the word sounds heavier in this place.

N’Jadaka’s hand feels heavier, too, as he grasps T’Challa’s. T’Challa pulls him from the ground.

Again: a growl, growing louder and softer in turn, sounding closer and farther away in turn. T’Challa and N’Jadaka--holding on tight to one another--walk towards the sound.

This place turns feet into miles, and the ground beneath T’Challa and N’Jadaka almost feels too soft to walk on now. But the growling continues, and they must find it. So they press forward.

And then, they see it: a panther. Purple-eyed, with pitch-black fur, moving towards them. Baring its teeth at N’Jadaka.

The sight of the animal brings T’Challa and N’Jadaka to a stop. T’Challa instinctively steps in front of N’Jadaka. He feels N’Jadaka squeeze his hand even more tightly.

The panther steps closer, its eyes trained on N’Jadaka.

“Do not hurt him,” T’Challa commands.

Without warning, N’Jadaka snatches his hand from T’Challa’s. Before T’Challa can get a word out, he feels N’Jadaka’s back pressed against his.
“Get away!” N’Jadaka shouts.

T’Challa turns his head towards his cousin’s voice. From over N’Jadaka’s shoulder, he sees a jaguar, its fur golden with black spots. Its eyes are golden. The jaguar paces back and forward, its head low, and it growls.

T’Challa turns around and gapes. He has never seen anything like it before. And as T’Challa watches the odd cat move, he realizes why N’Jadaka is so alarmed. The jaguar is staring directly at T’Challa.

The jaguar pounces. But it doesn’t attack T’Challa. Instead, it jumps over the both of them and crashes into the panther.

At first, they seem to be fighting. There are teeth, and claws, and growls and roars as the panther and jaguar roll around on the ground. But, a closer look tells the truth: they aren’t fighting. They are playing.

T’Challa and N’Jadaka watch in awe. The panther seems to be the more dominant cat, but its not trying to harm the jaguar. The jaguar moves around the panther swiftly, taunting its playmate. The animals have forgotten their human audience: the panther and jaguar are in their own world now.

Suddenly, the panther and jaguar stop, standing side-by-side. They quickly lift their heads and stare out ahead of them, as if something has called out to them. They slowly walk forward together, with the panther a couple of steps ahead of the jaguar.

But then, the jaguar stops. It turns its head to the side, away from the panther. The panther turns around gazes at its companion. The jaguar takes two steps forward, heading towards whatever has called its attention away from the panther. Before it can go any farther, the jaguar vanishes.

The panther runs backwards, startled. T’Challa’s heart drops into his stomach. T’Challa turns toward N’Jadaka to see if they’ve just witnessed the same thing.

But N’Jadaka is gone.

**

T’Challa wakes with a jolt, and he hops out of the pit. Red sand flies everywhere as he stumbles forward, disoriented and shocked.

“My king! My king, it is alright!” Kuhle calls out to him.

T’Challa looks at her, his eyes wild. Kuhle reaches for his hand, but he snatches back from her. Without a word, T’Challa turns around and kneels back into the pit. Then he reaches down and roughly pulls N’Jadaka’s body out.

“Wait!” Kuhle shouts.

N’Jadaka is limp and heavy in T’Challa’s arms.

“N’Jadaka!” T’Challa cries desperately. “N’Jadaka!”

But N’Jadaka does not answer.
Chapter 9

If you still care about this fic, you a real one.

The sun is brighter than Erik’s ever seen.

People with common sense know not to stare directly into the sun--it’s bad for the eyes, right? But this sunlight doesn’t burn Erik’s eyes at all. Erik stares directly at the sun and feels nothing but its warmth.

When Erik searches the sky around the sun, he sees that it’s a brilliant blue, not a single cloud in the sky. An absolutely perfect day.

“You always did like to stare up at the sky.”

Erik startles and whips around. His mama is standing right behind him, wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans. Her brown skin glows, and her curly fro is big like it used to be when Erik was little. Mama grins at him.

But Erik takes a step back from her. Her smile falters.

“The last time I saw you, you said you didn’t know me,” Erik mumbles.

Mama frowns. “That couldn’t have been me, honey.”

Erik looks down at Mama’s white Air Force Ones.

“You were wearing a dress,” he answers.

Mama laughs boisterously.

“Then you should know that wasn’t me!” she says. “You know I don’t like dresses!”

Erik chuckles, and the anxiety he didn’t know he felt melts away.

Mama reaches out her hand. “Let’s go sit down.”

Sit down? Erik looks up and realizes that they are on the basketball court near their apartment. There are kids out playing basketball; their laughter and joyous shouts suddenly fill the air. Mama nods her head towards the metal bleachers on the sidelines.

Erik smiles and takes his mama’s hand.

“So, what am I doing here?” Erik asks as they dawdle to the bleachers. “I ain’t dead, am I?”

Mama chuckles. “Nah, you’re living. I just needed to borrow you real quick.”

They sit down on the first row of bleachers and watch the kids play ball. When Erik looks closer, he realizes that he recognizes some of the kids--childhood friends who left the Earth way too soon.
“You sure I’m not gone?” Erik asks, his voice more solemn now.

Mama scrunches her face up in thought.

“I mean, you technically are. But I’m not gonna keep you, I promise.”

Erik nods to himself. Mama nudges him with her elbow.

“But look at you, actually wanting to live now!” she says, and Erik can’t help but burst into laughter.

“Really, Mama?” he asks through a fit of laughter.

“Yes! You know how you were before. You actually want to embrace life, now.” Mama rubs Erik’s dreads soothingly.

Erik shrugs. “Might as well. Death didn’t quite work the first time, you know?”

“Yeah, I noticed,” she answers softly. She scratches his scalp, and the gentle feeling almost makes Erik cry.

They fall silent and watch the children as they play. A reel of Erik’s memories plays out in front of his eyes as he watches these run up and down the court, shooting a basketball into a net-less goal.

This was him, once upon a time; this was him before he learned what a funeral was, before he was bitten by bed bugs and ants, before he ever pulled the trigger of a gun. Before he learned that the entire world wanted to destroy him.

“You know, I used to love to watch you play the other kids,” Mama says.

Erik looks over at her. Her eyes are shiny and wet.

“You always acted a little older than your peers,” Mama says. “You were a leader. The other kids trusted you. And you were very protective of your friends. Loyal. I could tell that you liked looking out for ‘em.”

Erik’s heart flutters. It’s a part of himself that he’d forgotten. Now it’s returning with startling clarity.

“It was nice,” Mama continues, her voice sound thick. “I never felt like I had to worry about you falling in with the wrong people, because you would be the one leading the way.”

Erik frowns, and looks down at the ground. His mama’s nostalgia hurts.

“But that’s not me anymore, right? I killed that part a long time ago, didn’t I?” It’s not really a question. To Erik, it’s just how it is.

But Mama shakes her head and puts her hand on Erik’s back.

“I still see it,” Mama says. Erik looks up at her in surprise, and she nods. “I do. I still see you.”

Erik watches her face for a moment. Then he sighs.

“Lemme guess: you see it underneath all the rage and violence and hurt and all that?” Erik asks dejectedly. “That it?”
Mama furrows her brows and flares her nostrils at him.

“Well, yes,” she answers as if it should be obvious. “And if you know that, why don’t you act right?!”

Erik rolls his eyes at her. Mama glares at him, and then uses the hand that was on his back to mash him upside the head.

“Don’t be rolling ya eyes at me,” she says. “I’m just asking!”

“It’s not that easy!” Erik’s voice cracks. “It’s not!”

“Why not, N’Jadaka?” Mama asks in exasperation. “Has it been easier for you to destroy the people around you?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

“You like holding on to all that pain?”

“No, ma’am!”

“Then why not unburden yourself? Let it go!”

“I don’t want to get hurt!” Tears spill from Erik’s eyes, and his voice shakes. “I--I can’t let him hurt me.”

Mama sighs. She reaches over and gently wipes his tears away.

“You don’t think he knows that already?” she asks. “Or that he’s not as afraid as you are?”

Erik releases a breath that he didn’t realize he was holding.

“. . . I don’t know.”

“Don’t you think you should try to find out?”

Erik stammers, then slams his eyes shut and hangs his head. He can feel Mama’s eyes on him as he tries to gather himself.

“I . . . I’ve done some evil stuff, Mama,” Erik finally says, lifting his head again. “Some truly evil stuff. And I can’t take any of it back. And he--what? He just sees something else?”

“He sees what I see. And he loves you.” Mama says it like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “You’re the one that has to see it, now.”

Erik looks her in the eye and opens his mouth to protest, but the words get caught in his throat. Mama rubs his face as he cries silently.

The ground beneath their feet starts to shake, and the bright sun starts to shine even brighter. Erik tenses all over, and Mama looks around with a frown on her face.

The children are all gone. Their gleeful shouts have been replaced with an eerie silence.

The ground quakes again, and Erik jumps up from the bleachers.

“What’s happening?!” he demands. “We gotta get outta here!”
Erik reaches down for Mama, but she doesn’t take his hand. Instead, she gives him a serene smile.

“My time’s up, sweetheart,” she says quietly. “And it’s time for you to go. It’s gonna be okay.”

Erik’s body suddenly feels heavy. The basketball court starts to disintegrate around him, and the sky darkens. He can hear a distant voice calling his name.

“But—I’m not ready!” he says to both his mother and that voice.

His mother’s smiling face starts to fade from his sight as she sinks to the encroaching darkness.

“Yes you are.”

**

N’Jadaka sits up so fast that he almost jumps out of T’Challa’s arms.

“N’Jadaka!” T’Challa cries, tightening his grip.

T’Challa puts his hand on N’Jadaka’s heaving chest. N’Jadaka looks around frantically.

“Look at me!” T’Challa urges. “N’Jadaka, look at me!”

N’Jadaka turns sharply to face to T’Challa, and his hands fly to T’Challa’s arms. He blinks at T’Challa, a bewildered look on his face.

“It’s okay,” T’Challa says reassuringly, trying to calm himself as much as he’s trying to calm his cousin. “It’s okay. I’m right here.”

N’Jadaka watches T’Challa for a moment. Then his breathing finally starts to slow.

“Got damn,” N’Jadaka says shakily.

T’Challa chuckles nervously. N’Jadaka cursing in a sacred place is the most reassuring sound in the world right now.

T’Challa stands up, and helps N’Jadaka out of the pit. N’Jadaka is a little wobbly on his feet, and he squeezes T’Challa’s arms as they stand.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this spirit shit,” N’Jadaka mumbles.

They let go of one another, and T’Challa looks N’Jadaka in his face. He looks . . . different, but T’Challa cannot put his finger on how.

“How do you feel?” T’Challa asks.

“. . . Okay, I think?” N’Jadaka frowns. The uncertainty in his voice isn’t helping T’Challa’s nerves.

“I already told that he was going to be fine, my king,” Kuhle’s voice startles both men. “You did not listen. You were being very stubborn, you know.”

T’Challa blushes. He feels like he’s a child being scolded by his tutors again. He doesn’t appreciate the feeling. N’Jadaka snorts, and that just makes T’Challa feel more embarrassed.

“You were worried about me, cuz?” N’Jadaka asks softly, a small smirk on his face.
“You did not wake up!” T’Challa says. “Was I not supposed to be concerned?” He turns to Kuhle. “What exactly happened just now?”

“N’Jadaka was . . . sidetracked,” Kuhle answers, looking at N’Jadaka. “It seems that one of his ancestors briefly interrupted your connection. You must have had a separate vision then, N’Jadaka?”

“Well, I mean, it wasn’t really a ‘vision?’” N’Jadaka suddenly sounds very shy, and he starts to fiddle with his necklace. “It was more a like a conversation.”

N’Jadaka glances at T’Challa, and then at the ground. T’Challa realizes that N’Jadaka’s avoiding his eye.

“A conversation with who?” T’Challa asks.

N’Jadaka’s eyes widen, and he gives T’Challa a cautious look. Before N’Jadaka can say anything, Kuhle puts her hand up.

“Ah! He does not have to tell you,” she says definitively. “Not right now, anyway.”

“I don’t?” N’Jadaka mumbles.

“No, you don’t,” Kuhle responds. “Your vision is yours to contend with for now.” She gives T’Challa a stern look as she continues. “Right now, we only need to address the fact that you two confirmed my suspicions.”

T’Challa and N’Jadaka both look at her with trepidation.

“. . . Which were?” T’Challa asks.

Kuhle chuckles at their unease.

“That your souls are mated,” Kuhle says warmly. “Bonded by Bast herself. And that bond is exacerbated because you have both, in a sense, been the Black Panther.”

Mated . . . mated?

“So . . .” N’Jadaka sounds so hesitant and flustered that T’Challa can barely stand it. “. . . he and I . . . we’re . . .?”

Kuhle watches N’Jadaka struggle with an amused look on her face.

“You are sort of like two sides of the same coin,” Kuhle supplies. “Your spirits may differ, but you ultimately are one.”

They are one. The words sink deep into T’Challa. The phrase may be one of the most terrifying things T’Challa has ever heard, and yet . . .

T’Challa slowly turns to N’Jadaka, and sees N’Jadaka watching him with a look of awe on his face.

“You two were always meant to find each other,” Kuhle comments. “This relationship was always meant to be. How it manifests--what it looks like--is entirely up to you.”

**
N’Jadaka is staring at T’Challa.

He was staring when they walked out of the shaman’s temple, and he’s still staring as they approach the palace. Even with his back turned, T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka watching him: N’Jadaka’s eyes roam over T’Challa’s back, his arm, his hands.

And T’Challa understands why--it’s only natural, considering what they’ve just learned. But T’Challa is also now understanding why T’Challa’s own examination of N’Jadaka makes N’Jadaka twitch. N’Jadaka’s gazing is penetrating and distracting.

T’Challa is so focused on the set of eyes piercing his skin that he almost doesn’t notice Okoye and Aneka waiting for him at the palace entrance.

Aneka sees T’Challa, and strides towards him with urgency.

“*There* you are, my king!” Aneka says as she walks towards him. “The day guards alerted us that N’Jadaka was not in his room. We cannot locate him in the palace, and--”

“Aneka, it’s okay,” T’Challa softly interrupts. He steps aside so that Aneka and Okoye can see that N’Jadaka is right behind him.

Aneka frowns, and peers at N’Jadaka in confusion. T’Challa looks over to Okoye to see that her express is neutral. Okoye’s neutrality is usually more concerning than her anger.

“N’Jadaka and I had some business to take care of this morning, and it involved me briefly escorting him away from the palace,” T’Challa explains. “I relieved the night guards, but I unfortunately neglected to notify the morning guards. I am sorry for that, and I will not do it again.”

Aneka wants to ask what is going on so badly. T’Challa can see that in her eyes. But she simply nods. Okoye walks up to Aneka and places her hand on her shoulder.

“At ease,” Okoye says. Okoye looks at T’Challa, then at N’Jadaka. “We are not needed,” she continues, her gaze lingering on N’Jadaka.

Aneka relaxes, but N’Jadaka goes tense. T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka’s intense desire to say something to Okoye, but N’Jadaka says nothing. T’Challa can’t tell if he should be worried or proud.

“Thank you for your concern, Okoye,” T’Challa says, drawing Okoye’s attention away from N’Jadaka.

Okoye looks at T’Challa and gives him a small smile.

“Kunjalo,” Okoye responds. Then she and Aneka salute them and walk away before T’Challa can say anything else.

“What kind of reaction was that? I can’t tell,” N’Jadaka says.

“Not a promising one,” T’Challa says as he watches their retreating form. “I’ll have a lot of explaining to do later.”

“You ain’t lying about that,” N’Jadaka mutters, his voice gone soft.

T’Challa turns around to look at him. N’Jadaka is still staring at T’Challa with that same look in
his eye, the one that’s somewhere between awe and hesitancy. There are million questions in N’Jadaka’s eyes.

“We . . . should talk,” T’Challa says quietly.

N’Jadaka blinks, and his breath hitches. One of those questions is at the tip of his tongue. But before N’Jadaka can get it out, T’Challa’s kimoyo beads are glowing bright green, and they start emitting an incessant chirping noise. It’s his daily alarm, the one that was supposed to wake him up this morning. T’Challa had almost forgotten just how early it is.

A groan escapes T’Challa’s mouth as he twists one of the beads to shut the alarm off.

“Busy day?” N’Jadaka asks, raising both of his eyebrows.

T’Challa looks to see that N’Jadaka looks more than a little relieved. T’Challa certainly can’t blame his cousin, but he has to admit to feeling the slightest bit offended.

“All days are busy,” T’Challa murmurs, and he smiles sheepishly at N’Jadaka. “But, yes, I should probably . . .”

“Right, you gotta go,” N’Jadaka blurts. He stumbles over the words, and T’Challa can see him cringe at his delivery. “So, I’ll see you later, right?” the question comes out a little shaky, and T’Challa would be amused if his own heart weren’t starting to beat wildly.

Before T’Challa can respond, N’Jadaka turns around and starts to walk away with surprising speed.

“Wait!” T’Challa calls out, bringing N’Jadaka to a stop.

“Hm?” N’Jadaka looks back at T’Challa with wide eyes, and he’s bouncing from foot-to-foot. T’Challa better make this quick or N’Jadaka might actually make a run for it.

“Let me walk with you.”

“Um, why?” N’Jadaka asks, and T’Challa swears that N’Jadaka’s blushing.

T’Challa shrugs, trying to be as casual as possible. “Why not?”

N’Jadaka narrows his eyes at T’Challa suspiciously, but walks with him away. They slowly dawdle to N’Jadaka’s room. T’Challa can feel more eyes against his skin—the curious eyes of workers and guards wondering what in the world the king and convicted prince are up to this early in the morning. T’Challa elects to ignore those curious glances in favor of focusing on the feeling of N’Jadaka’s arm against his as they walk.

They reach N’Jadaka’s room, and T’Challa lets them in, carefully closing the door behind them. N’Jadaka steps inside as if he’s desperate to hide himself away from everyone else. He immediately flops down onto his bed, letting out a long, shaky breath as he sits.

T’Challa coughs, and N’Jadaka jumps as if he’d already forgotten that he wasn’t alone.

T’Challa watches N’Jadaka and, for the briefest moment, feels his throat tighten.

“I forgot something,” T’Challa says softly, nodding at N’Jadaka’s ankle. “Your monitor.”

N’Jadaka blinks in confusion, then looks down at his ankle in recognition.

“Oh, shit, I forgot, too,” he says awkwardly.
T’Challa walks over and crouches down in front of N’Jadaka to reactivate N’Jadaka’s ankle monitor. N’Jadaka’s leg starts to bounce again, so T’Challa places his hand on N’Jadaka’s calf. He looks up at N’Jadaka to see him staring down at him.

“Hold still, will you?” T’Challa asks with a faint smile.


T’Challa puts his kimoyo beads next to N’Jadaka’s monitor, and a green light appears on the top of the device as it is reactivated.

T’Challa stands up. The sudden height difference between T’Challa’s standing form and N’Jadaka’s sitting one is a little disorienting. N’Jadaka is still watching his monitor with fascination in his eyes.

“I, um, modified your ankle monitor,” T’Challa admits.

“Soooo, you’re the only one who can turn it off like that?”

“Well, yes,” the words come out in a stammer.

“... Does Shuri know you changed her design?” There’s a twinkle in N’Jadaka’s eyes.

No, because T’Challa impulsively reconfigured the monitor last night, while N’Jadaka fitfully slept. If he had given himself anymore time to think, he would’ve realized that the gesture is simply another piece of evidence that confirms Kuhle’s suspicions.

T’Challa blushes. “I suppose she will now.”

N’Jadaka snorts, and looks down at the monitor again. He twists his ankle around like it’s the first time he’s really noticing it.

“I feel real weird right now, man,” N’Jadaka whispers.

T’Challa stares at N’Jadaka’s face, watching the way his dreads fall in front of his eyes.

“I know,” T’Challa says, his own voice quiet and distant. “I do, too.”

N’Jadaka bites his lip, and his leg starts to jump again.

“What if . . . how do we know she wasn’t just fucking with us?” N’Jadaka demands, staring at something far away from T’Challa.

T’Challa chuckles. They’re really going to have to work on N’Jadaka’s trust issues.

“I don’t think that she was.”

“She could’ve been though,” N’Jadaka pushes, and he’s starting to sound agitated. “I mean, we don’t even know what that stuff she smeared on us was! It could’ve been some kind of poison to fuck with our heads or something.”

“N’Jadaka . . .”

“And maybe that’s why we had those ‘visions’ or whatever they were. We coulda just been hallucinating because some chemicals that she--”
“N’Jadaka,” T’Challa puts both of his hands on N’Jadaka’s shoulders. “You are spiraling.”

When he feels N’Jadaka relax again, T’Challa moves his hands to the sides of N’Jadaka’s neck, letting his thumbs rest on the bottom of his jaw.

N’Jadaka silently stares up at T’Challa for a moment. Then he scoffs.

“Wild ass morning,” N’Jadaka mutters to himself, not breaking eye contact.

“Very wild, indeed,” T’Challa murmurs.

T’Challa considers the feeling of N’Jadaka’s jaw underneath T’Challa’s thumbs; his skin and beard is much softer than N’Jadaka would probably care to admit. For a moment, that softness makes T’Challa freeze. And that small moment of stillness, T’Challa’s own doubts begin to rush forward—loudly whispering just how impossible this moment is, how fast it’s all happening, how their ancestors—their fathers—would despise them.

But—that’s only a moment. Because in the next moment, N’Jadaka grabs hold of the front of T’Challa’s robe and tugs until T’Challa is standing in between N’Jadaka’s legs, and then he tugs again until T’Challa’s lips are against N’Jadaka’s.

T’Challa can never mistake this kiss for a dream, not when he can feel just how wet and full N’Jadaka’s lips are. Not when N’Jadaka’s lips part and T’Challa takes the moment to deepen the kiss. Not when T’Challa is able to take N’Jadaka’s bottom lip between his teeth and listen to N’Jadaka’s soft moan when T’Challa releases it just so that he can starting kissing N’Jadaka’s neck.

T’Challa’s not sure why, but he’s been obsessing over N’Jadaka’s neck for a while now. He focuses on a spot on the right side, just above the chain of N’Jadaka’s necklace. T’Challa’s so fixated on it that it takes him a few seconds to realize that N’Jadaka’s trying reach underneath T’Challa’s robe and undo T’Challa’s pants.

T’Challa finds the inner strength to pull away from N’Jadaka’s neck and grab N’Jadaka’s hands.


“Um . . .” shit, why are they stopping?

T’Challa glances down at his kimoyo beads and remembers the alarm that went off earlier. Oh, yes, that’s right, he’s supposed to be working right now.

“I have job I’m supposed to be doing,” T’Challa answers apologetically.

N’Jadaka rolls his eyes. “The country will be alright if you outta commission for a minute.”

T’Challa bites his own lip, trying to stop himself from agreeing with N’Jadaka. He lets go of N’Jadaka’s hands, but also takes two big steps backwards so that N’Jadaka can’t immediately go back to trying to undress him.

“Besides,” T’Challa says, smoothing the front of his robes, “I don’t know if we should do this right now, considering that it was only a few hours ago that you seemed to not want me to touch you at all.”

N’Jadaka scoffs. “Yeah, okay, well, that was before, when I was mostly tired and kinda fucked up,” he says dismissively. “But now we’re apparently soulmates and the way you bit my lip made
me horny as hell. So come here!"

“I don’t think that’s the best idea right now,” T’Challa says with a soft chuckle.

“Nigga, are you serious?!” N’Jadaka exclaims with frustration.

“Yes. We went through a lot this morning, and I don’t think either of us are totally clear-headed. I need to be completely sure this is what you want.”

N’Jadaka cuts his eyes at T’Challa.

“Nah, I think you want me to beg or something,” he says.

Oh. Well, the thought hadn’t occurred to T’Challa before, but now it’s all he can imagine. T’Challa imagines gripping N’Jadaka’s hair while N’Jadaka stares up at him with wide, watery eyes, and he almost forgets to be the responsible one.

But, just because T’Challa is being responsible now doesn’t mean he can’t entertain himself a little bit.

“If I want you to beg, I’ll make you beg, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa responds with a smile.

N’Jadaka looks at T’Challa as if he’s never seen him before.

“Oh for real?” N’Jadaka asks with a smirk. N’Jadaka leans back on his bed and spreads his legs wide open. “Come make me beg, then.”

Bast, help me. T’Challa puts his hands behind his back, and thanks the gods for his restraint.

“Later,” T’Challa answers, smirking at the way N’Jadaka groans in response.

“I think I hate you, again,” N’Jadaka grumbles as T’Challa leaves.

“Good to hear,” T’Challa says over his shoulder, feeling very proud of himself.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Erik and Shuri have A Moment. It's almost sweet.

Erik’s gonna kill T’Challa. He swears he is.

See, this is why Erik should’ve just stuck to his original idea of escaping Wakanda. Everything would be okay if he’d just stayed long enough to get well and then get the hell out of dodge. Mama was wrong--Erik should’ve clung to his anger as tightly as he could.

But no, Erik just couldn’t do it. He lost his grip on himself and ended up blubbering out his deepest, darkest pain, and now he’s lying here alone, and hard and thinking that he might actually be in--

No. Do not say it.

Erik flings himself back onto the bed, and stares up at the ceiling.

It’s just--this feels like it’s all happening fast as hell. Realistically, it’s been a few months since Erik first woke up, and Erik knows that they’ve both been on a wild ass emotional rollercoaster since then. But it stills like it was just yesterday that Erik killed Klaue and arrived in Wakanda. It feels like Erik and T’Challa’s fight on the waterfall is only hours old. Erik knows that their argument about Zuri was only some hours ago.

But now here he is, feeling so completely different that Erik can hardly recognize himself. Erik trained for years and years only to end up feeling like this.

Erik screws his eyes shut. He thinks about the Erik Stevens that spent years learning how to kill and destroy whole worlds. He tries to imagine telling that Erik about this moment, about a moment where they’re lying in a bed provided by the King of Wakanda--hard and wanting and falling headfirst into a feeling they’d forgotten existed.

That Erik would literally kill him; he’d take a big ass knife to Erik’s throat and slit it wide open, cussing and screaming the whole time. Then he’d use the bloody knife to carve another scar into his skin, digging in deep as he performs some twisted, misinterpreted version of a centuries-old tradition from a continent that he didn’t respect nearly as much as he claimed to. It’s actually a really sad thing to think about.

Erik opens his eyes and stares up at his ceiling. That Erik isn’t all that far away from who Erik is now, he thinks. He can still feel his former self hovering over him, whispering that T’Challa will eventually betray him and that wasn’t really his parents he’s spoken to and that he’ll never really have a home. Erik knows all of that rage is still in there. But at least now he knows that rage isn’t the only thing Erik’s soul is capable of feeling.

Erik sighs and squirms on his bed. He looks down at himself and groans. This nigga really did just leave Erik here, hard dick and all. He could’ve at least jacked Erik off before he left to do his kingly duties or whatever.
T’Challa doesn’t play fair. But Erik guesses he should’ve known that. He should’ve figured that the refined king was secretly an asshole. Erik thinks about T’Challa telling him that he’ll make Erik beg, and his dick jumps. T’Challa’s probably a secret sadist. He definitely seems to have some kind of neck fetish. Erik remembers the way T’Challa sucked on his neck, and his dick jumps again.

Okay, fine, shit. Erik’s gotta take care of himself. He gets up, gets the thick body oil they so graciously provide, and lies back down. Erik lifts his hips and pushes his pants and underwear down just far enough to take his dick out. Erik pours oil into his hand and grips his dick.

Erik strokes himself lazily at first, letting his eyes flutter close. He starts to imagine what will happen when they actually have sex. Erik’s always been pretty versatile in bed, but he already knows that he’s about to be the bottom this time around. T’Challa’s a big boy, too, so he’ll be heavy on top of Erik. Erik imagines T’Challa pinning him down and sliding fingers into Erik’s ass, and Erik starts to stroke himself much faster now.

Erik wonders how big T’Challa’s dick really is. Erik’s caught glimpses of a dick print or two, and it looks promising. How much of T’Challa will Erik be able to take down his throat? How long can Erik suck T’Challa’s dick before he starts choking and gagging? Shit, T’Challa probably wants Erik to gag. He probably won’t even wait for Erik to suck him off. Erik pictures T’Challa grabbing his head and just fucking Erik’s face. Erik imagines his eyes watering up as T’Challa’s dick fills his mouth, and Erik strokes faster and faster and faster until--

Fuck.

Erik cums all over his hand and stomach. He groans as his body deflates, sinking into the bed. Erik’s spent, and he briefly considers just lying here. But then he remembers that he still has cum on his hand and gets up off of the bed with a huff. Erik goes into the bathroom and washes his sins off of his hand and stomach.

Erik catches a glimpse of his own reflection and freezes: he even looks different. Younger. And blushing.

Erik shakes his head at himself, and runs a hand through his dreads.

This place might still be the death of him.

**

The banality of massive amounts of paperwork will never not amaze T’Challa.

T’Challa really shouldn’t be surprised. He grew up watching his father spend hours at his desk, his neck perpetually bent downwards, his hands curled around pens that glided across seemingly endless stacks of documents. When T’Challa was very young, he often worried that his father would be permanently gnarled because these repetitive actions.

As a grown man, T’Challa wonders how his father managed to stay focused on these tasks, especially with other matters weighing so heavily on his mind. T’Challa certainly can’t do it--his mind is running away from this desk. It’s hard for T’Challa to respond to correspondence from the president of Zambia when he keeps glancing at his grandfather’s ring.

T’Challa is staring at it now, and he’s thinking of the one hanging from N’Jadaka’s neck. T’Challa put his pen down and allows himself to gently twist his grandfather’s ring. T’Challa twists the ring and thinks of his own arms wrapped around N’Jadaka’s body, the panic T’Challa
felt when N’Jadaka did not wake up, the faint taste of mental on T’Challa’s lips as he latched onto N’Jadaka’s. T’Challa twists the ring and thinks of the strange mixture of confusion and relief he felt when Kuhle told them that they were meant to find one another, and the overwhelming desire and exhilaration at the idea that N’Jadaka wants him.

T’Challa wonders if—somewhere, in another dimension or galaxy or lifetime—there is a version of the two of them that gets to take the easy route.

Maybe there’s a T’Challa and N’Jadaka whose fathers didn’t betray one another. Maybe there is a T’Challa and N’Jadaka who had the opportunity to grow together, to learn each other in a safer space.

T’Challa hopes there’s a version of them that aren’t even related or of royal blood or have any other complications in their relationship. He genuinely hopes there’s a version of them that met in a coffee shop or a library or some other mundane place and realized that they should spend the rest of their lives together.

A knock at the door brings T’Challa out of his thoughts.

“Come in,” T’Challa calls, still sounding somewhat distracted.

Queen Mother glides into the room and gives T’Challa an inquisitive look.

“Good morning, son,” she says with a smile.

T’Challa sits up straighter and returns the smile.

“Good morning, Mother. How are you?”

Ramonda shrugs, and T’Challa knows that he’s in for an interrogation.

“I am fine,” she answers. “I tried to sleep in this morning.”

“Is that so? That’s unusual for you.”

“It is,” Ramonda responds. “Just as it’s unusual for you to have been up so early this morning.”

T’Challa looks at Ramonda. She watches him as if she’s already fully aware of what he was up to this morning.

“The Dora gossip,” T’Challa says.

Ramonda smiles. “So do the guards.”

T’Challa rolls his eyes, a small smile on his face.

“Of course they do.”

A silence descends over T’Challa’s office, and if neither of them speak soon, the silence will become awkward. Ramonda continues watching T’Challa as if she’s having a staring contest with him. One that he didn’t consent to.

“N’Jadaka and I went to see a spiritual counselor,” T’Challa finally says.

“Ah, okay,” Ramonda says with a nod. “What led you there?”
“We had . . . an argument late last night. I realized that he and I have a lot to work through.”

“I see,” Ramonda’s eyes turn downward. T’Challa realizes that she’s looking at the way he twists his ring.

When Ramonda looks him in the eye again, he can see the concern in her eyes.

“And what did the counselor tell you?” Ramonda asks.

You ultimately are one. A million butterflies have been released in T’Challa’s stomach.

“She told me— us— that we have much to figure out in our relationship,” T’Challa with a sigh.

Ramonda scoffs, and the sound catches T’Challa off guard.

“Well, I could’ve told you that,” Ramonda says. “And you wouldn’t have had to sneak around so early in the morning to hear me say it!”

T’Challa’s face falls. “Thank you, Mother. I will be sure to bear that in mind,” he says flatly.

Ramonda laughs loudly. She walks over to T’Challa, and gently puts her hand on his cheek.

“Do you think you are up to it? This relationship?”

“I am not sure,” T’Challa answers honestly. “To be honest, I think we are both afraid. But . . . I want us to try.”

Ramonda nods, then she leans over and kisses T’Challa on the cheek.

“I will never trust him around you,” Ramonda says warmly. “But I will always be here if you need me.”

T’Challa grins at Ramonda, and puts his hand over hers.

“I know.”

**

There’s a training gym in the palace, on one of the lower floors, near Shuri’s lab. It’s one of the rooms in the building that is needlessly high tech. Erik remembers that he was gobsmacked the first time he saw the interactive punching bags and the ellipticals that gives invasively detailed information on your vital signs. Erik would’ve admitted to being impressed if he wasn’t still trying to keep it cool.

Right now, he’s too busy working out to be in awe of anything. Erik should’ve probably stayed in his room, ate breakfast and gone to sleep or something. But he couldn’t. He had too many thoughts running through his mind and under his skin. He was too damn antsy. All Erik kept thinking is that he wanted T’Challa around, and then he would feel faintly freaked out by the fact that he wanted T’Challa around so badly. Too much noise in his head. And punishing his own body has always been the only way that Erik can quiet the noise in his head.

So yes, he’s drenched in sweat, and yes, his muscles are starting to feel like melting jelly and his knuckles feel like they’re about to crack, and yes his stomach is doing that weird thing where it’s growling loud as fuck even though he just ate a couple of hours ago.

But Erik keeps going, because he’s never been one to stop while he’s ahead. So Erik punches and
punches and punches, but eventually the noise comes back, and he remembers the feeling of T’Challa’s body on top of his and T’Challa’s hands wrapped tightly around Erik’s neck and T’Challa’s lips against his neck and the warmth and the smell of T’Challa’s hair and skin and--

Erik’s left knuckle splits open and pain shoots up his hand. Growing dots of blood appear on the cotton wraps Erik’s wrapped around his knuckles.

“Shit!” Erik hisses, unraveling his hand wrap. Only he can make his hand bleed after punching a soft bag for so long. Drawing blood always has been Erik’s specialty.

Erik stares at his knuckle, grimly fascinated by the way the skin around the bloody cuts has bruised. And as he stares at his newest self-inflicted injury, he finally begins to feel all that his body has been through for the past 24 hours. His knees shake, his muscles burn and Erik realizes that he could pass out right now and probably sleep for the rest of the day.

“I need to take my ass back to my room,” he mumbles to himself.

Erik turns around, staggering a little, and walks through the door. Erik’s so preoccupied by his messed up hand that he doesn’t even notice Shuri standing there until he’s standing right in front of her.

“The guards said you’ve been hiding here all day,” Shuri says with a raised eyebrow.

Erik startles and stumbles away from her.

“Got damn, Princess. You don’t know what personal space is?” Erik retorts with a glare.

Shuri gives Erik an once-over and crosses her arms.

“Where did you go with my brother this morning?” Shuri demands. “I heard you two left the palace completely, but you couldn’t have gone too far.”

“I don’t think that’s your business, sis.” Erik says with a glare, enjoying the look of offense on her face. “Now, excuse me. I’m going back to bed.”

Erik steps around Shuri and tries to walk away. But before he can really go away, Shuri grabs his wrist and pulls him back around to face her.

“You Wakandans love violating my space, huh?” Erik says with snark in his voice.

Shuri ignores his comment, and stares at his bloody knuckles.

“Aye, what happened to your hand?” she questions.

Aw, damn. Of course she’s noticed.

“. . . That ain’t ya business, either,” Erik grumbles.

Shuri smirks at him. “I’ll fix your hand if you tell me where you went this morning,” she offers in a sly tone.

“My hand doesn’t need ‘fixing,’” Erik lies. “It'll heal on its own.”

“Tuh. You are overestimating your body’s abilities, cousin,” Shuri says. “And I know it must hurt, right?”
Erik almost tells her that it hurts like a bitch, but he opts for biting his tongue instead. He doesn’t want to be that honest with her just yet.

But Shuri sees it anyway.

“The look on your face is answering my question,” she tells him in a teasing tone.

Erik opens his mouth to protest, but then he feels the pain of his split knuckles and the weakness in his legs. Shuri looks up at him as if she knows he’s about to cave.

“. . . Fine,” Erik grumbles, and Shuri grins.

**

T’Challa is mid-stretch and contemplating sneaking away from his office when his tablet starts to ring.

T’Challa unlocks it with a sigh, but then smiles when he sees that it’s Nakia calling.

“Hello, T’Challa,” she says, her smiling face filling up the screen.

“Nakia! Unjani?”

“Ndiphilile. How is home? Has our very way of life been lost yet?”

T’Challa rolls his eyes, and Nakia snickers.

“Thank you for your concern, but no, not yet,” T’Challa answers. “Although, I think a couple of the elders are still waiting for me to sell us to the EU or something.”

“The Merchant Elder still looking at you a little funny?”

“Of course.”

Nakia grins widely. “Then all is well, indeed.”

T’Challa glares at her image as Nakia laughs again.

“Have you called me just to poke fun at me?” he asks.

“That is partially my reason, yes,” Nakia answers genially. “I also thought you’d like to know that our outreach centers are running a lot more smoothly than we’d thought they would. Especially the one here in Oakland.”

“Are they?” The news makes T’Challa’s heart feel full.

“Yes! Literacy rates are way up in a short amount of time. And there’s been improvement in healthcare thanks some of the more systemic changes we’ve been able to make.”

“So, we’re not failing!” T’Challa says cheerfully. There’s a very faint desire to say “I told you so” to the council at the next meeting, but T’Challa will be more mature than that.

“We are not!” Nakia responds with a chuckle. But then her chuckles dies down, and she sombers a bit. “However, we are hitting a little bit of a snag with community engagement.”

T’Challa frowns, and sits back down on the couch in his office. “What do you mean?”
“I mean that we’re starting to get the same families to come in. It’s getting harder to convince new families to come,” Nakia answers. “I think some people are a lot more skeptical of us than others.”

“That is . . . understandable,” T’Challa says after a moment. “We are foreigners who’ve come to their city. And our culture is very different than theirs. It’s natural for them to be wary of us.”

Nakia nods. “That is true. I suppose I’m just having a little difficulty navigating the space our operation is in,” she says thoughtfully. “I don’t want us to come off as preachy or as if we’re their ‘saviours,’ but I know that we have resources that they need.”

T’Challa is mulling over Nakia’s words when an idea hits him.

“It sounds to me as if we need someone to bridge the gap between us and them,” T’Challa says carefully.

T’Challa watches as Nakia nods, but then narrows her eyes at him.

“Someone like who?” Nakia says with skepticism in her own voice.

T’Challa can’t stop the smile the plays at his lips.

“I think he’ll want to help us,” T’Challa says, preemptively retorting Nakia’s protest.

Nakia rolls her eyes, and T’Challa suppresses a chuckle.

“I could’ve sworn the three of us had a similar conversation some time before I came to Oakland,” Nakia says. “A lot must have changed between then and now.”

“. . . Yes. Quite a bit has changed, actually.”

Nakia bites her lip and stares at T’Challa with an evaluative look.

“I suppose it can’t hurt for you to ask him,” Nakia says slowly.

T’Challa grins boyishly.

“He’ll say ‘yes.’ I’m sure of it.”

Nakia wrinkles her nose and tilts her head in confusion. But then she smiles at T’Challa.

“If you say so.”

**

“Stop squirming so much!”

Erik just barely stops himself from snatching his hand away from Shuri.

“This shit stings!” Erik grits out, only slightly embarrassed by his own behavior.

Shuri rolls her eyes. “You were such a big bad ass when you got here, and now you can barely tolerate some antiseptic. What’s happened to you?”

Got damn. Erik must really be getting soft if the princess can spot it so easily.

“Maybe you just be rough as hell,” Erik retorts. “Ever considered that?”
“Whatever,” Shuri says. But Erik can see the corner of her mouth quirk upward.

Shuri falls silent as she continues to work. She disinfects Erik’s wound, then tightly wraps bandages around his knuckles. The bandages look like the ones Erik had haphazardly wrapped around his hands when he was boxing, but they don’t allow for nearly as much movement.

Oh, hell, Erik’s gonna have to explain this to T’Challa. And that motherfucker will probably laugh at him.

“Oh, hell, Erik’s gonna have to explain this to T’Challa. And that motherfucker will probably laugh at him.

“Okay,” Shuri says, pulling Erik out of his own thoughts. “I fixed your hand. Now talk. Where were you?”

Erik sighs and studies Shuri for a moment. How much can he actually tell Shuri? Erik thinks that she won’t believe most of it. Shuri doesn’t strike him as particularly religious or anything like that. And the whole ‘soulmate’ thing might just scramble her brain.

. . . Which sounds pretty fun, now that Erik thinks about it.

“We went to the shaman’s place,” Erik says with a smile. “She sent us to a spiritual plane and then we had a talk about our relationship.”

Shuri glares at him skeptically.

“You cannot go to the ancestral plane. Because you burned the heart-shaped herb,” Shuri says with a hard edge to her voice.

“I didn’t say the ancestral plane. I said a spiritual plane,” Erik smugly corrects her. “And she didn’t use any heart-shaped herb. She smeared red stuff across our chests.”

“Stop lying.”

“Why I gotta be lying?”

“Because you are lying,” Shuri leans back in her chair and crosses her arms. “You have to be. I know for certain that you couldn’t have gone to the shaman’s place.”

Erik leans back and crosses his arms, too, being very careful of his bandaged hand.

“How you know that?”

“Because it is beyond the boundaries of your ankle monitor. And I’m the one who created and programmed your monitor, remember?”

Erik literally bites his tongue, and watches Shuri without saying a word.

Shuri’s eyes widen, and she slowly leans forward until she’s halfway across the table.

“What did you do to that monitor?” she demands.

“I didn’t do anything!”

“N’Jadaka!”

“I didn’t! Your brother told me to follow him, and I was able to follow him,” Erik shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe the monitor just doesn’t work as well as you thought it did.”
Shuri glares at him quietly, her eyes searching his face. Suddenly, she gasps, and she covers her mouth with hand.

“T’Challa! He did something to it, didn’t he?”

Erik says nothing and gives Shuri the most innocent look he can muster. But it fails. And a string of Xhosa words that Erik assumes are cuss words falls out of her mouth. There’s really no reason for Erik to even be slightly offended, but he can’t help the pang in his chest as he watches Shuri fume.

“What is wrong with him?!” Shuri finally says in English. “Actually, nevermind that question. You are what is wrong with him.” Her eyes slam shut, and she begins to rub her temples. Shuri leans all the way back in her chair, as if she’s trying to get away from Erik.

“Yep, I sure am,” Erik says. “But it’s cool, because apparently that’s how it’s supposed to be.” The words don’t come out nearly as sarcastically as he’d wanted them to.

Shuri opens her eyes and peers at Erik with dissatisfaction.

“Don’t try to make me feel bad,” Shuri grumbles. “Don’t ever try to make me feel bad.”

“Why not?” Erik challenges. His jaw twitches. “You scared it might work?”

Shuri lets her hands fall from her temples and onto the table. She grits her teeth as she watches Erik. Any joviality in the air is dissipating as the two of them regard one another.

“. . . I haven’t decided how to feel about you, yet,” Shuri finally admits. “And T’Challa knows that. I suppose the answer should be obvious, but . . .”

Erik sighs heavily.

“Yeah. I get that.”

Erik looks down at the table. Bandages, ointment, metal bits and knick knacks are strewn about. Erik can see sheets of scratch paper with notes and drawings hastily written on them. Evidence of the thousand and one thoughts running through Shuri’s mind. Thoughts that probably shouldn’t include Erik at all.

“Look,” Erik says softly, his eyes resting on the mess in front of him, “I’m . . . I’m not used to feeling sorry for something I’ve done. And the way your brother’s been treating me confused the hell out of me, too. But . . . I can tell that . . . you don’t have anything to worry about. Not when it comes to me, anyway.”

Erik hesitantly looks up to see Shuri looking at him with much softer eyes. Shuri nods at him. And Erik knows that this is the closest he’ll get to acceptance from her. For now, anyway.

They fall silent again, the air around them much lighter than before.

“. . . N’Jadaka?” Shuri asks after a while.

“Yeah?”

“When you say that you and my brother talked about your ‘relationship’ . . . what exactly does that mean?”

Erik’s face starts to burn.
“You, uh . . . you probably don’t want to know about that, actually,” Erik mumbles.

Shuri looks confused for a moment. Then it clicks.

“Oh my goodness.” Shuri closes her eyes again, putting a hand over them this time. “Oh my goodness. You know what? You are right: I don’t want to know anything. In fact, I am going to pretend that we never even had this conversation. Alright?”

Erik chuckles lightly.

“Yeah, alright.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

THERE'S SEX STUFF IN THIS ONE.

T'Challa’s kimoyo beads must be malfunctioning.

He raises them closer to his eyes, tilting his head as he looks at the hologram the beads are displaying.

While T’Challa curiously inspects his kimoyo beads, Okoye appears at his office door. T’Challa feels nods for her to enter. Okoye frowns when she sees the look on his face.

“Something wrong, my king?” Okoye asks.

T’Challa turns to face her. A small voice in the back of his mind advises him that lying or avoiding the question would be the better options here, but T’Challa’s never been good at being dishonest with his general.

“I think my kimoyo beads aren’t working,” T’Challa admits against his better judgement.

Okoye gives him a confused look. “Why? What are they showing you?”

T’Challa inputs the tracking sequence and pulls up the hologram he had just been looking at.

“T’Challa turns to face her. A small voice in the back of his mind advises him that lying or avoiding the question would be the better options here, but T’Challa’s never been good at being dishonest with his general.

“I am trying to lock on to N’Jadaka’s location,” T’Challa explains. “But it must be mistaken because it keeps showing N’Jadaka’s location as ‘Shuri’s lab.’”

Okoye blinks at T’Challa, and then she shifts her eyes so that she’s staring at the hologram. T’Challa begins to feel more and more insecure as she stares. Okoye looks at T’Challa as he (awkwardly) turns the hologram off.

“Are you feeling well, T’Challa?” Okoye asks.

If T’Challa didn’t know her so well, he would’ve almost believed she were genuinely asking him and not just mocking him.

T’Challa’s face falls into an expression of embarrassment and irritation, and Okoye barely stifles her laugh.

“I only ask because the location is very clear,” Okoye continues, mirth creeping into her words.

“I can see what the location says, General,” T’Challa says flatly. “That’s why I think something is wrong. Shuri’s lab is the last place N’Jadaka would voluntarily go.”

“I understand, my king,” Okoye says, still sounding way too amused at T’Challa’s expense. “But I feel we would know if something had happened to him. And surely Shuri would’ve set off an alarm if she were in danger.”

That is true, T’Challa thinks. If nothing else, Shuri and N’Jadaka are both so dramatic that anyone
passing by would hear any confrontation they have.

They start to leisurely walk out of T'Challa’s office towards the lab, slowly moving through the palace corridors. They walk in silence for a while, nodding at and saluting workers as they pass.

T’Challa feels a flutter in his stomach; it is a strange sort of excitement and nerves that he can’t place.

Okoye looks up at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t look so tense,” she says.

“I do not think I can help it,” T’Challa admits with a sigh. “The odd circumstances won’t allow it.”

“The worry will age you quicker.”

“Then I suppose I will finally look as old as I feel.”

Okoye laughs softly. “If I am not concerned, you probably shouldn’t be, either,” she says. “Things have changed quite a bit around here. Perhaps those two have finally made it past plotting to kill one another.”

“I hope they have. I don’t think I could take another ‘incident’ with those two. My nerves are starting to fray.”

“The whole country’s nerves are frayed, T’Challa.”

“Thank you for that comforting thought.”

“What I mean is that you are not alone,” Okoye says warmly. “We are all going through this strange season with you. Surely you know that by now.”


Okoye smirks at him. “Eh. Don’t get too used to it.”

**

Someone else got him. Someone else got the fucking King of Wakanda.

Erik just barely restrains himself from kicking his t.v. off the stand.

He’s done all this damn planning--all this training--just for some brainwashed Russian puppet to blow King T’Chaka up in the middle of fucking Austria. This is some absolute bullshit.

The news drones on and on, and it’s getting on Erik’s nerves. A bunch of other people were killed in the terrorist attack. Several members of the Avengers were already there because they were being forced to sign some dumbass Accords.

Erik couldn’t give a fuck about any of this shit. He’s worked all this time to kill his bitch ass uncle and now this shit happens. If Erik ever finds this Winter Soldier fucker, he’ll strangle the life out of him.

Just as Erik’s about to explode, he finally hears something useful.

“The King had been accompanied by his son, Prince T’Challa.”
. . . Wait.

“Prince T’Challa will now more than likely have to take over as King of Wakanda.”

**T’Challa. T’Challa, prince of Wakanda. T’Chaka’s oldest. Next in line. Heartbroken and disoriented and unprepared as fuck.**

Okay. Okay. That could work. That could work very well.

**

It’s a little strange, seeing them together.

T’Challa quietly walks into Shuri’s lab, peering in at Shuri and N’Jadaka. Neither of them have noticed him yet. They actually look a little too wrapped up in whatever conversation they’re having.

Shuri looks . . . exasperated. And mildly horrified? She rubs her temples, and her eyes are wide. Shuri scrunches her face up as if she’s grossed out.

But N’Jadaka . . . he looks soft . He laughs, and T’Challa can tell that it’s real. N’Jadaka looks relaxed, loose. Like he belongs.

And the sight of N’Jadaka’s grin makes T’Challa’s heart melt. T’Challa sees the gentleness in N’Jadaka, and he wants to hold onto it forever. T’Challa wants to hold onto N’Jadaka for forever.

Oh, goodness. He really is in love, isn’t he?

**

“Um, what’s going on here?”

T’Challa’s soft interruption draws Erik and Shuri’s attention. Erik sees T’Challa, and he suddenly feels hot all over.

“Hey! I have a bone to pick with you!” Shuri says to T’Challa as he walks into the lab.

“It is nice to see you, too, Shuri,” T’Challa answers cheerfully. “How are you today?”

Erik snorts, and Shuri makes a face at him. Yeah, these are definitely Erik’s people.

Shuri cuts her eyes at him. “I am annoyed. Because I have discovered that my brother has been tinkering with my designs without telling me.”

T’Challa looks at Erik in surprise, but Erik just shrugs.

“I ain’t tell her nothing! She figured it out!”

T’Challa looks at Shuri again sheepishly while Shuri directs all her irritation at his face. Erik bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at his theatrical cousins.

“We had somewhere to be this morning,” T’Challa tries.

“Oh, I know ,” Shuri retorts, pulling a face. “You two had couples’ therapy.”

This time, Erik can’t stop himself laughing at T’Challa’s shocked expression.
“Aight, I told her that,” Erik admits. “But I had to! She was extorting me!”

“Extorting--?” T’Challa looks at Erik, bewildered, before finally noticing the bandages on Erik’s hand.

“Um, what happened to you?” he asks in a concerned tone.

Erik blushes. “I, uh, kinda had a training accident? With a punching bag.”

Damn it, Erik knew T’Challa would like at him like this. T’Challa eyes widen and fights back a laugh.

“I leave you alone for the morning, and you go and accidentally damaged yourself?”

“I mean, it probably wouldn’t have happened if we’d just went ahead and did what I wanted to do.” Erik shrugs, but he watches T’Challa intensely. As far as Erik is concerned, T’Challa owes him for leaving him like that this morning.

T’Challa’s ever-so-slightly raises his eyebrow. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

Shuri closes her eyes and puts both of her hands over her ears.

“LALALA I DON’T WANNA HEAR ANY OF THIS FLIRTING NONSENSE. LALALALA, PLEASE LEAVE MY LAB NOW!”

Erik and T’Challa laugh so loudly that they’re voices echo through the lab. T’Challa takes Erik’s unbandaged hand and pulls Erik to his feet.

“I’ll be happy to take him off of your hands,” T’Challa says with a smirk. “He and I have much to discuss, anyway.”

“Discuss” better be an euphemism for something, damn it.

Shuri seems to think it is; she scrunches her face up again.

“I don’t want hear this,” she says. “Please go.”

T’Challa salutes Shuri with a smug grin, and starts to leave. And Erik eagerly follows.

“See you later, cuz!” he calls back.

Shuri makes a loud noise of disgust in response.

**

N’Jadaka’s on T’Challa as soon as T’Challa closes the door.

T’Challa’s barely turned around when he feels N’Jadaka reaching hastily undoing his rope. T’Challa laughs breathlessly as N’Jadaka’s hot hands find T’Challa’s skin.

N’Jadaka kisses T’Challa so hard that it nearly takes T’Challa’s breath away. T’Challa kisses back just fervently, but he thinks N’Jadaka’s got this confused.

For some odd reason, N’Jadaka seems to think that he’s in charge here.
N’Jadaka breaks the kiss and grins wickedly.

“You ain’t gonna run out on me this time?” he challenges. “You ain’t got ‘work’ you need to do?”

T’Challa takes a deep breath, letting all his nerves out. Then he smiles serenely and puts both of his hands on N’Jadaka’s neck, squeezing the sides.

N’Jadaka’s eyes go wide, and his breath hitches.

“That smart mouth of yours,” T’Challa murmurs. “It’ll get you in trouble one day.”

T’Challa lets go of N’Jadaka’s neck just so he can snatch N’Jadaka’s duster off and shove him onto his bed.

“Be good for me, will you?” T’Challa says. “And do you think you can hold still for a few moments?”

“That, uh, depends on what you about to do,” N’Jadaka quips breathlessly.

T’Challa starts to pulling N’Jadaka’s pants off.

“I don’t know if I like that answer,” he says as N’Jadaka’s pants come down. T’Challa runs his hands up and down N’Jadaka’s thighs, letting his fingertips graze N’Jadaka’s underwear.

N’Jadaka’s eyes follow his pants, and land on T’Challa’s roaming hands.

“Well, shit, yes. Yes, I can stay still.”

T’Challa chuckles. He firmly presses hand down on N’Jadaka’s still-clothed dick, and N’Jadaka twitches in response.

“Why’d you wear underwear this morning?” T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka harden underneath his hand.

“I mean . . . it’s not like I knew I was gonna get fucked today.”

N’Jadaka bites his lip and looks up at T’Challa’s face. He’s getting impatient, which is good for T’Challa. Impatience makes it easier to make N’Jadaka feel desperate.

T’Challa does away with N’Jadaka’s underwear in one quick movement. N’Jadaka’s lying there--naked, half hard, watching T’Challa with something like awe in his eyes. The vulnerability of the moment his T’Challa in his chest.

T’Challa strips off his robes, shucks off of his pants. He is not wearing underwear, and he laughs at the way N’Jadaka’s eyes fall directly to T’Challa’s dick.

The look on N’Jadaka’s face makes T’Challa realize that he’s forgotten something.

“One second,” T’Challa says, and he goes into N’Jadaka’s bathroom.

“Where you going??” Petulance is creeping into N’Jadaka’s voice.

T’Challa opens the cabinet door underneath N’Jadaka’s sink. He looks at the small bottles he had placed there, and immediately finds the one he’s looking for. T’Challa opens the bottle as he walks back into the bedroom.
“N’Jadaka, have you ever noticed these oils down here under your sink?”

“Huh? Nah, why would I-- oh.” N’Jadaka’s eyes light up with recognition. “Well, shit, I could’ve used that this morning.”

“Oh, really?” T’Challa takes the top of the bottle and puts the bottle on the bedside table so that N’Jadaka doesn’t end up kicking across the room.

T’Challa elects to wet three of his fingers.

“Lift your hips,” he commands, and N’Jadaka immediately obeys. T’Challa reaches under and slides his in between N’Jadaka’s cheeks so that he can wet his hole. T’Challa’s thinking that he’ll want to do this part with his tongue next time.

T’Challa pulls his hand back so that N’Jadaka can lay his hips back down. Then T’Challa presses a finger inside of N’Jadaka.

N’Jadaka groans softly.

“You don’t want me to hurt you, do you?”

T’Challa adds a second finger, making sure to twist his wrist as he works.

“Shit.”

T’Challa chuckles at just how breathless N’Jadaka is. He can tell that N’Jadaka’s regretting that quick outburst; he’s trying so hard to appear composed.

T’Challa presses a third finger and very deliberately presses against N’Jadaka’s prostate just to a reaction out of him.

And boy, does he get one. N’Jadaka’s whole body jerks, and it’s like he’s trying to simultaneously move away from and closer to T’Challa’s fingers. T’Challa reaches up and gripes N’Jadaka’s with his free hand.

“You said you’d stay still,” T’Challa says. “You remember that, N’Jadaka? Stay still, okay?”

N’Jadaka swallows hard and nods. T’Challa presses against N’Jadaka’s prostate again, and T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka forcing himself still as T’Challa moves his slick fingers in and out.

T’Challa releases N’Jadaka’s dreads and opts for putting those fingers into N’Jadaka’s mouth. N’Jadaka sucks on T’Challa’s fingers greedily. T’Challa pulls his fingers out of N’Jadaka’s asshole, and N’Jadaka involuntarily whines around the fingers in his mouth.

T’Challa laughs, and takes his fingers out of N’Jadaka’s mouth. N’Jadaka looks up at T’Challa with agitation and desire in his eyes. T’Challa moves so that he’s settled in between N’Jadaka’s legs. He takes his own dick in one hand and rubs the other run up and down N’Jadaka’s thigh.

“I told you that you had to beg for me, umthandi,” T’Challa says lowly.
“I . . . but I . . .” N’Jadaka looks stressed. His eyes search T’Challa’s face and then travel all the way down to T’Challa’s dick. N’Jadaka groans, and T’Challa smirks: he can see N’Jadaka’s stubbornness finally starting to slip away.

“T’Challa,” N’Jadaka grumbles, his eyes still on T’Challa’s dick.

“Yes, baby?”

T’Challa rubs his dick against N’Jadaka’s hole, teasing him. N’Jadaka’s eyes go wide again.

“I-I hate you,” N’Jadaka stammers out.

T’Challa bursts into laughter.

“I’m sure that you do,” he says, rubbing himself against N’Jadaka again, “but that’s not going to get you what you want.”

N’Jadaka bites his lip. He looks up at T’Challa’s face again and glares at him. T’Challa grins at him; T’Challa can see him weighing his options. N’Jadaka shuts his eyes and growls like T’Challa is getting on his last nerve.

“Please, T’Challa,” N’Jadaka says through gritted teeth.

“Please what?”

“You motherfu--”

T’Challa pushes himself into N’Jadaka, stopping when he is halfway in. N’Jadaka gasps at the sudden intrusion. T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka stretching. N’Jadaka groans and lets his head flop back.

T’Challa leans forward with a wicked grin.

“Please what, N’Jadaka?”

T’Challa pushes himself just a little bit further in, and N’Jadaka’s breath catches.

“PleasefuckmerightbeforeIkillyou,” N’Jadaka growls.

T’Challa smirks. Close enough.

In one fluid motion, T’Challa grabs N’Jadaka’s hips and slams into him, his thrust hard and abrupt. N’Jadaka squeals, and the sound is way more amusing to T’Challa than it should be.

“I’m sorry--was that too rough?”

“You sonofabitch .”

T’Challa rolls his hips, fucking N’Jadaka with slow, deliberate strokes.

N’Jadaka’s eyes flutter shut, and he grips the sheets as T’Challa goes deeper. T’Challa releases N’Jadaka’s hips and braces his arms on either side of N’Jadaka. He knows that he’s left bruises that would look very ugly on anyone else.

“You--I fucking--shit, baby.”
N’Jadaka’s full lips fall open, and T’Challa can’t resist: he moves his arms and pushes himself so that he’s lying on top of N’Jadaka, chest to chest. T’Challa gives N’Jadaka a long, absolutely filthy kiss, and N’Jadaka makes a surprised noise into T’Challa’s mouth. The deep, raunchy kiss feels like N’Jadaka’s letting T’Challa claim him, even more than fucking him does. It’s feels like N’Jadaka officially belongs to T’Challa.

N’Jadaka whines when the kiss ends, but the whine quickly morphs into a moan when he feels T’Challa’s dick hit his spot. N’Jadaka opens his eyes; he looks more than a little dazed.

T’Challa hoovers over N’Jadaka, their faces only a few inches apart.

“N’Jadaka, you have to tell me if you want me to fuck you harder,” T’Challa says.

N’Jadaka rolls his eyes. “You didn’t need permission a second ago when you rammed my shit,” he retorts breathlessly. “Fuck, man, just--do that again.”

“That wasn’t nice of me to do without asking you, so now I’m asking,”

“Oh my god.”

T’Challa knows he’s annoying the shit out of N’Jadaka, what with his slow thrusts and long sentences. He’ll examine why that’s so funny to him later.

“Now--do you want me to fuck you harder?”

“Yes, nigga, shit! Fuck me!”

T’Challa smiles and does what he’s told. He picks up the pace and fucks into N’Jadaka with all the lust and aggression he’d been withholding.

“Shit! Oh, fuck, just like that--got damn it!”

A string of profanities mingled in with moans start falling from N’Jadaka’s mouth. He wraps his legs around T’Challa’s lower back, and T’Challa can feel him dig his fingernails into his back. T’Challa buries his face in the crook of N’Jadaka’s neck, nuzzling him.


“And you feel so good on it, baby,” T’Challa purrs directly into N’Jadaka’s ear. “So tight, and wet and warm. You opened right up for me.”

N’Jadaka whimpers, and presses his fingers harder into T’Challa’s slick back. T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka’s legs shaking on his lower back, and the feeling drives T’Challa to fuck N’Jadaka even harder. T’Challa lets himself moan loudly.

T’Challa feels N’Jadaka’s body tense all over, and he feels a burst of heat in his chest. His big, scary, monster of a cousin has been reduced to a wet, panting, begging mess because of T’Challa. T’Challa’s inside of N’Jadaka, and N’Jadaka’s clinging to him for dear life. And T’Challa’s never felt more satisfied.

“T’Challa, I’m about to cum,” N’Jadaka rushes the words out. “I’m--shit--can’t hold out much longer.”

“Just a little bit longer? For me?” T’Challa murmurs. “I want us to cum together.” He takes N’Jadaka’s earlobe in-between his teeth.
“You are--so fucking corny,” N’Jadaka manages to sound exhausted, annoyed and plainative all at the same time.

T’Challa laughs. He slows his strokes, and leans up so that he can look into N’Jadaka’s face. N’Jadaka looks much more clear-eyed now that T’Challa is fucking him a little bit slower.

“You look so good like this,” T’Challa mutters.

T’Challa kisses N’Jadaka again, a softer kiss this one is. He breaks the kiss and leans his forehead against N’Jadaka’s.

I wanna take care of you, N’Jadaka.”

“Fucking ‘take care of me,’” N’Jadaka mumbles.

And then, louder: “T’Challa. You about to catch a nut. I’m so serious.”

“Just a little bit longer,” T’Challa mutters. T’Challa can feel himself getting closer and closer; his orgasm is building in the pit of his stomach.

“Aww, you bitch!”

“N’Jadaka, sithandwa sam,” T’Challa’s abs tighten. He picks up his speed one last time, and N’Jadaka starts cursing underneath him. “N’Jadaka, I’m so close, ndiphantse apho!”

“Fuck, man, does that mean I can cum?? Please?? Shit!"

N’Jadaka’s hole tightens around T’Challa’s dick, and T’Challa’s pounding into him, and neither can hold off anymore, and--

“Yes! Cum on me! Cum-- oh, fuck.” T’Challa’s own orgasm cuts him off mid-sentence. T’Challa’s body goes rigid as he cums in N’Jadaka. T’Challa’s eyes fall shut, and he sees stars, and he is only slightly aware that cum is spilling out of N’Jadaka’s ass.

T’Challa can feel N’Jadaka’s body shake as he succumbs to an orgasm, and he feels N’Jadaka’s cum on his stomach.

“Holy shit!” N’Jadaka groans. He drags his nails down T’Challa’s back.

And after what feels like an eternity, they both fall limp, completely spent.

“Got damn,” N’Jadaka mutters, his lips pressed against T’Challa’s jaw. T’Challa chuckles in agreement.

For a while, T’Challa just lies on top of N’Jadaka. And he would probably stay like this, if weren’t for the fact that his dick was still inside of N’Jadaka. He suddenly realizes how uncomfortable this is.

Slowly, T’Challa puts out of N’Jadaka. He then promptly realizes that he doesn’t have any more energy to do anything else. T’Challa lets himself flop down next to N’Jadaka on the bed. As soon as T’Challa is flat on his back, N’Jadaka flips onto his side, and wraps his arm around T’Challa, laying his head on T’Challa’s chest.

T’Challa, surprised and touched, rubs the back of N’Jadaka’s neck.

“I never took you for the cuddling type,” T’Challa says. “Not consciously, anyway.”

“And you actually obeyed me, for once. First time for everything, yes?”

“Fuck you.”

T’Challa hums contentedly. And they lie there, wrapped around each other, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Eventually, T’Challa speaks up again.

“We should shower,” T’Challa says thoughtfully. “We’re disgusting.”

“Yeah, we probably should,” N’Jadaka says, “but um, I’m kinda tired as fuck? So I ain’t moving. That cool with you?”

T’Challa chuckles and pulls N’Jadaka closer.

“Yes, that is ‘cool’ with me.”
Chapter 12

I'm going to be (FINALLY) finishing this up within the next couple of chapters. So, expect a lot of fluffy awkwardness in the future!

“N’Jadaka,” T’Challa murmurs softly, “there was something I meant to ask of you today.”

N’Jadaka groans as he lifts his head off of T’Challa’s chest and peers up at T’Challa skeptically.

“I don’t like your tone,” N’Jadaka mumbles. “You sound like you up to something.”

T’Challa laughs and gently rubs N’Jadaka’s back. “I am not up to anything, I promise.”

Whatever level of productivity T’Challa hoped to achieve today vanished after he and N’Jadaka fell into bed this morning. T’Challa and N’Jadaka eventually migrated from N’Jadaka’s room to T’Challa’s suite, lounging around together for hours. T’Challa will regret this laziness later, when he’s confronted with stacks and stacks of paper.

But for now, he’s content. He’s more content than he has been in years.

“Oh, then. What’s up, King? What you want?” N’Jadaka asks lazily.

“I was speaking with Nakia earlier today about the outreach centers—”

“Noooo, this sounds like policy talk,” N’Jadaka interrupts, dropping his head back onto T’Challa’s chest. “I don’t wanna talk about policy stuff. My brain ain’t functioning enough yet.”

T’Challa rolls his eyes at N’Jadaka with a smile. “Iwam uthando, all I was going to say is that we would like you to help us with the outreach centers.”

N’Jadaka goes still against T’Challa, his back tensing underneath T’Challa’s hand. Then he lifts his head again, and looks at T’Challa.

“Really?” he asks cautiously. “She actually wants my input?”

“If you are willing to offer it,” T’Challa responds warmly.

“. . . Why?” N’Jadaka narrows his eyes at T’Challa. “The last time I saw her, she seemed to consider me barbaric and unhelpful.”

“The circumstances are different now. And so are we,” T’Challa says. “Personally, I think you’d be invaluable to this project.”

N’Jadaka casts his eyes downward and bites his lip, uncertainty written all over his face. The look on his face tugs at T’Challa’s heart.

“After all,” T’Challa continues softly, “this project is partially for you.”

N’Jadaka suddenly looks at T’Challa with a sly grin.
“Ah, so you finally admit it, huh? I oughta make you say that in front of the council.”

“I will do no such thing,” T’Challa says happily. “So--what do you say?”

T’Challa watches as the hesitation in N’Jadaka’s eye gives way to excitement.

“Yeah, okay,” N’Jadaka answers, trying to bite back a smile. “Yeah, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you,” T’Challa says. He leans down and kisses N’Jadaka on the forehead.

Suddenly, N’Jadaka rolls off of T’Challa, lies flat on his back, and slams his eyes shut.

“Bruh, you did not just kiss me on the forehead,” N’Jadaka wails. “Nah, man, this shit is too fucking soft for me!”

T’Challa chuckles loudly at N’Jadaka’s apparent distress. T’Challa over to his side, and casually tosses his arm across N’Jadaka’s stomach.

“You’ll get used to it, eventually.”

**

Erik was very wrong about the outreach centers, and about Nakia. And, for once in his life, he’s glad to have been so wrong.

This shit was super awkward at first; Nakia still didn’t trust him, because of course she didn’t. And Erik’s never really been able to completely shove his pride to the side. So, they started off with snide comments, and eye-rolling and a shit ton of circular arguments that left Erik with pounding headaches.

(“We can’t fix this racist ass healthcare system just by putting Black people in these corporate spots, Nakia!

“But we also can’t kill all the insurance company CEOs, N’Jadaka!”)

(“You talk about me being trouble, but you got the wardogs out here breaking into governor’s houses?

“And we got what we needed. I thought you would respect that!”)

(“Nakia, if you tell me that one more kid comes in talking about a cop harassing them, I’m sending over the damn spears!”)

To be very honest, it’s kind of a miracle that they found a middle. But, they did.

Erik and Nakia have about a thousand ideas between them. Erik’s got so many questions about policy change, about exchange of power, about what Oakland--what his home--can look like without the old systems of power. A whole world of change that he never really considered.

Nakia doesn’t gloat. Well, not aloud. She likes to smirk at him on occasion. Usually when she’s in the middle of explaining some wardog mission to him or pretending to ask his opinion on a proposal.

“Do you think that would work, Erik?” Nakia sometimes asks, and the corner of her mouth quirks upwards, and there’s a twinkle in her eyes.
And every once in a while, Erik is petty and tries to start an argument. But most of the time, he’s got to admit she’s right.

Sometimes, Erik’s got so many notes scattered around him that he has to sit on the floor of T’Challa’s office so that Erik can look at all the pages at once. He tries not to do that, though; T’Challa likes to watch him work, and the feeling of T’Challa’s eyes on his back is more than distracting. Erik starts tripping over his words and looking dumb in front of Nakia.

Last week, Nakia actually saw T’Challa staring at Erik in the background. She was asking him what he knew about the BART system and its issues when her eyes suddenly focused on something over Erik’s shoulder. Then Nakia grinned, and Erik didn’t have to turn around to know what she was looking at.

“How cute,” she purred, and Erik’s face turned scarlet.

“I can’t stand either one of y’all,” Erik grumbled.

Nakia just laughed at him.

“Yeah, sure you can’t,” she said. Then she kept talking strategy as if Erik wasn’t still embarrassed.

Erik quite literally bumps into Ramonda on his way to T’Challa’s office one day, because he’s dumb and too busy trying to walk and read stack of papers at the same time. He only looks up because he hears a soft “oh!” and feels soft hands on his arms.

“N’Jadaka!” Ramonda greets him. “I did not expect to run into you today!”

Erik’s throat goes dry. It’s at this exact moment that he realizes that the only time he’s directly spoken to her was in the throne room all those months ago. “Hey, auntie” rings in his ears, and he tries not to cringe.

“Queen Mother,” he says, and he completely trips over the phrase he’s unused to. “Um . . . how are you?”

Ramonda’s eyes scan Erik’s face, and he tries his hardest to hide any trace of fear or agitation.

“I am good,” she answers after what feels like an eternity. “I did not expect to see you today.”

Ramonda looks down at the giant pile of papers in Erik’s arms. “You seem a little busy,” she adds.

“Yeah, I am,” Erik says. “I, um, am helping T’Challa with a project.”

Erik tries to slowly walk past Ramonda only to have her walk with him, her gait matching his.

“What is this ‘project’?”

“Basically just budget adjustment. For the outreach center in Chad.”

Ramonda squints at him, then suddenly bursts into loud laughter.

“Ah, so he has tricked you into helping him with the boring stuff,” she says.

Ramonda catches Erik off guard so badly that he can’t help but laugh, too. Both the Lord and
T’Challa know that staring at a bunch of numbers all day makes Erik’s eyes glaze over.

“Yeah, yeah, I guess he has. I don’t mind it, though.”

“Ah, then you are better than I was, then,” Ramonda says contentedly. “Because T’Chaka often tried to trick me into the mind-numbing stuff.”

Hearing T’Chaka’s name sets off a million alarms in Erik’s head. “Did he?”

Ramonda nods, a serene look on her face, and smirks at whatever memory just floated through her mind.

“Yes,,” Ramonda says softly. “Diplomacy, politics, the minutiae of it all--those were his strong suits. I was more into the science of medicine, and he knew that. But he somehow always found a way to get me to ‘help’ him.”

“He trusted you,” Erik supplies. “He valued what you had to do.”

Ramonda smiles warmly. “He did. And my son clearly trusts you, and values what you have to say.”

Erik nods, awkward and anxious.

“He does,” Erik says, trying not to flinch at the sound of his own nervous voice. “I’m glad he does.”

The hall leading to T’Challa’s office comes into Erik’s view, and he sees four Dora standing guard outside. Erik’s ready to sprint through T’Challa’s office, just to get away from the feeling he gets when Ramonda gives him a sly look out of the side of her eye.

“You know,” she says as they both slow to a stop, “you are not the partner I ever imagined for him. But I’m actually glad he has you.”

“Um . . . thank you.”

“You are welcome, N’Jadaka,” Ramonda says. She puts her hand on Erik’s wrist again, and smiles. “My son’s peculiar taste in lovers finally started to pay off.”

Erik’s mouth falls open, and it feels like his whole body is on fire.

“Love--?” he squeaks out.

Ramonda smirks at him.

“What? You two thought I didn’t notice?” Ramonda asks. “I’m neither blind nor naive, nephew.”

For the first time in a while, Erik wants to die.

“I’ll see you later, Queen Mother,” Erik rushes out.

Then he scurries into T’Challa’s office, trying to ignore the alarmed look on T’Challa’s face and the sound of Ramonda’s laughter.
They go to Kuhle at least once a week.

Erik was afraid to go for the first few weeks. He sat close to T’Challa during the sessions (much to Kuhle’s amusement), and only occasionally spoke. Erik would listen to T’Challa talk about T’Chaka and Zuri, and Erik could feel both of their blood pressures rise. Erik would curtly mention Uncle James, or his mother, or the other foster care kids Erik sometimes still thinks about, and he’d feel sadness pouring off of T’Challa.

There’s a lot of pain hidden in both of them, more than Erik had realized. Some of it is deep-seeded, dug into their cores. And some of it is barely hidden beneath their skin. But it’s there, and it must be treated. And if it must be treated, then Erik has no choice than to do it with his arm pressed up against T’Challa’s, their hands finding one another in the dim light of the shaman’s place.

Eventually, the fear and anxiety finally starts to subside. Erik can feel it dissipating, slowly leaking out as he opens his mouth more and more. Erik feels lighter, more awake in these sessions now. T’Challa does, too; the sadness and heaviness that weighed him down--weighed them both down--feels more distant now.

Every once in a while, the heaviness still lingers; Erik can sometimes feel it right before he goes to bed, or it might him right as he’s passing Okoye in the hall, or hanging up after a call with Nakia. The sorrow, the anxiety, the guilt--they will probably always hang around both of them in some way.

But they have breathing room now. And they have each other. And that’s more than Erik’s had in a long time.

**

Erik almost chickens out of formally apologizing to Okoye.

Erik’s nerves almost kill him as he waits outside of a gym from her. Okoye’s going to walk out of their tired and with a spear in hand. This might be one of the worst ideas Erik’s had in awhile.

But he’s gotta do it. Erik’s likened this to a 12-step program, and he’s the on the step where he has to at least attempt to make amends. He might get killed in the process, but he should at least try.

So, Erik takes a deep breath and stands up straight. And when Okoye emerges from the gym with a spear slung across her back and a suspicious look on her face, Erik stands firmly in the place.

“I’ve never said ‘I’m sorry’ to you,” Erik says quietly. “And I’d like to do that now. I’m sorry for what I’ve done. For hurting Nonqaba.”

Okoye squints at him and tilts her head. She looks at him so look that Erik’s stomach starts to twist into knots.

Then the corner of her mouth curve upwards.

“Thank you,” Okoye responds quietly.

Relief courses through Erik. All of the air leaves his body, and he could collapse on the floor right
now.

Okoye snorts as she walks past Erik.

“Have a good nice,” she calls back teasingly.

Erik laughs shakily, his heart still beating like it wants to climb out of his chest.

**

N’Jadaka and T’Challa are about three months into their collaboration on the outreach centers when Shuri decides to be more hands-on in her role as head of scientific and technological outreach.

Of course, this means that one day, out of nowhere, Shuri marches into T’Challa’s office with an arm full of schematics and a look of determination in her eyes.

“You two are excluding me,” she announces with no preamble.

T’Challa and N’Jadaka both look up from their work to stare blankly at one another and then at her.

Shuri rolls her eyes. “You two have been holed up in this office working on the outreach centers without me,” she flatly amends. “I feel like I’m barely doing anything at all.”

“You’ve been very busy,” T’Challa says confusedly. “You just approved plans for laptops to be sent to Accra. Not to mention the work you’ve been doing to help fortify broadband connectivity in the Congo.”

“But I’ve been doing that alone, in my lab, and I’m feeling very segregated from the rest of the work,” Shuri presses.

T’Challa blinks at her, still confounded by Shuri’s sudden interest in close-quarters collaboration.

N’Jadaka raises an eyebrow at Shuri. Suddenly, he kisses his teeth and narrows his eyes.

“You just wanna be in here to see what we doing,” N’Jadaka says. “You being nosy.”

“I am not being nosy,” Shuri protests, but the smile that she’s barely suppressing gives her away.

T’Challa’s face falls, and Shuri chortles.

“Really?” T’Challa asks. “Didn’t you say that you’d like to stay away from us and our ‘coupleness?’”

“Usually I would. However, a colleague of ours expressed concern about you guys’ productivity level when you’re in this office together. So I told them that I would check in on you two every now and again.”

N’Jadaka frowns, concerned by what Shuri’s just told them. But T’Challa flares his nostrils at her little sister.

“ ‘Colleague’ as in Nakia?” T’Challa demands.

“ . . . And Okoye. But yes, also Nakia,” Shuri confirms with a grin.
Shuri bursts into a new round of laughter as T’Challa groans and runs a hand down his face. “How do any of you have the time to gossip about N’Jadaka and me?” T’Challa grumbles.

“We make time!” Shuri says proudly between fits of giggles. “Y’all so damn messy,” N’Jadaka mumbles with a glare.

“We are only ‘messy’ in service of the world,” Shuri says with faux solemnity. She plops down on the couch and crosses her legs. “So I’m working here today,” she adds cheerfully. “Uh, no you not! Go back to your lab,” N’Jadaka retorts. “I’ll go back to my lab if you go back to your room!”

“Aye, I’ve been working in T’Challa’s office for months. So you just mind your own business!” T’Challa watches them squabble for a moment. Their words lack hostility or even the annoyance they’re both trying to check. They sound like family. It makes T’Challa’s heart feel full.

“You know,” he interjects, getting both of their attentions, “I could just kick you both out. Bast knows I need the quiet.”

N’Jadaka and Shuri both look at T’Challa and roll their eyes. “You wouldn’t know what to do with the quiet,” Shuri says. T’Challa simply smiles at her. “You’re probably right.”

**

“You nervous?”

T’Challa opens his eyes to see N’Jadaka watching him anxiously. They’ve crammed themselves in a tight hallway near the throne room, slipping away from the curious eyes of the Dora and guards. They have to go inside soon. But neither of them seems willing to walk in just yet.

T’Challa exhales heavily. “Yes,” T’Challa admits, “but I do not know why.”

N’Jadaka scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Probably because this is the first time you’re bringing me in there with you,” N’Jadaka says shakily. “And you know everybody’s gonna wonder if you’ve lost your damn mind again.”

He knows his cousin is not wrong; he knows they’ll be stared at, questioned and silently picked apart.

But T’Challa’s gotten used to that scrutiny. After all, it’s been nearly a year since N’Jadaka first woke up, and every decision T’Challa has made regarding N’Jadaka has confused the council in some way. T’Challa knows that they inspire thousands of questions and judgement. And he’s grown to be okay with that.
T’Challa gives N’Jadaka a small smile, and he puts both of his hands on N’Jadaka’s shoulders.

“You know I don’t really care about any of that,” T’Challa says softly, warmly. “I just want you to be okay.”

“Oh, how sweet of you,” N’Jadaka grumbles, but he smiles back at T’Challa. “You’re such a saint, always looking out for me.”

T’Challa chuckles at N’Jadaka’s attitude. His hands run all the way down N’Jadaka’s arms. T’Challa’s hands fall into N’Jadaka’s, and they tangle their fingers together.

“You don’t have to go in there, you know,” T’Challa offers. “You don’t have to deal with the council if you don’t want to.”

“Nah, I gotta go in,” N’Jadaka argues. “I gotta look them in their faces and let them know what’s up. Can’t hide in your office forever.”

“I don’t mind you hiding in there,” T’Challa says warmly with a wide grin on his face.

N’Jadaka rolls his eyes. “Yeah, of course you don’t. I could make your office my permanent home and you wouldn’t give a fuck.”

“I am glad you know that, my love.”

N’Jadaka snorts, but T’Challa can see him blush. T’Challa gently pulls N’Jadaka towards him. Before N’Jadaka can say anything, T’Challa kisses him, deep and slow. When the kiss finally breaks, T’Challa leans his forehead against N’Jadaka.

“I’m glad we’re here,” T’Challa says softly, his voice full of love. “I’m glad we’ve made it here. And I know you are, too.”

T’Challa can tell that N’Jadaka is fighting back a huge grin. But that’s fine; T’Challa can see the affection in N’Jadaka’s eyes, and it makes T’Challa’s heart skip a beat.

“Yeah, whatever,” N’Jadaka mumbles, his cheeks reddening.

They both stand up straight, looking each other in the eye. N’Jadaka smirks at T’Challa.

“Let’s walk in there before they think we’ve run away,” N’Jadaka says.

T’Challa chuckles and nods. T’Challa and N’Jadkaa walk into the throne room, their fingers still laced together.

**

Okay. Deep breaths. Slow, deep breaths. One, two . . .

Erik hates being stared at.

When he was younger--and dumber--he didn’t mind it. He loved it, in fact; he always used to revel in the way people’s eyes fell on him, whether it be in admiration, lust or fear. The undivided attention used to fuel his ego. Now, it just makes Erik feel exposed, and alone. He hates that feeling of eyes against his skin.

Unless those eyes belong to T’Challa.
Three, four. Inhale, exhale . . .

The Elders all stare at Erik as T’Challa explains the progress of the outreach centers. There’s a wide range of expression on their faces. Ramonda wears a look of surprise. The Merchant Tribe looks suspicious; the River Tribe Elder, intrigued; The Mining Tribe Elder, a bit scandalized; The Border Tribe Elder, a wistful smile on his face. There’s M’Baku, who isn’t even trying to hide the mischievous smile on his face. And when Erik is brave enough to look at Okoye, he can see her trying to look as stone-faced as possible. But, if Erik didn't know any better, he’d say that she almost looked a little impressed with him.

Five . . . six . . . seven . . . eight. Breathe slowly, calmly.

Erik’s nerves are shot. He’s not even gonna pretend otherwise. But he focuses on the sound of T’Challa’s voice--on the way it lifts and falls, the way pride creeps into his words--and Erik can feel himself calming. T’Challa tethers Erik to the ground in a way nothing else ever has. And Erik knows that he does the same for T’Challa.

So, they’ll be okay. Yeah, they’ll be okay.

Nine . . . ten.

“I have a question for Prince N’Jadaka.” The Merchant Tribe Elder’s voice pulls Erik from his thoughts.

Erik glances at T’Challa. T’Challa looks . . . annoyed. Annoyed in a way that only these meetings can make him. Erik smiles at T’Challa, and T’Challa’s face softens ever so slightly.

Erik’s still smiling when he faces The Merchant Tribe Elder’s skeptical gaze. “Yes ma’am?"

“You spent the better of your time here raging against us and our way of life,” the Merchant Tribe Elder says. “And now King T’Challa tells us you are very actively involved in changing our way of life . . .”

The Border Tribe Elder groans, and all the other elders begin to shift uncomfortably. Erik bites the inside of his cheek. Erik can’t even get mad at the hostility in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am, I admit that’s true,” Erik concedes. “Thankfully, my disposition has changed over the course of the year.”

The Merchant Tribe Elder cuts her eyes at Erik. “That is what I’m wondering about. This year’s not been so long. Are we really to believe that your intentions towards this country have changed? Or are you simply trying to fool us?”

Erik can hear the unspoken as well at the end of her question. Erik ventures another look at T’Challa; he actually looks offended now.

“I believe the work N’Jadaka has done--both on the outreach project and in his counseling sessions--is sufficient evidence of the changes he’s made,” T’Challa says, his voice quiet, but hard.

“I am sorry, my king, but that does not soothe my suspicions,” the Merchant Tribe Elder says. “I simply find it hard to believe that the prince has made such a shift. Especially after having struggled for power for so long.”

T’Challa opens his mouth to speak, but Erik raises his hand.
“It’s okay,” Erik says to T’Challa.

T’Challa nods for Erik to continue, and Erik shifts to face the Merchant Tribe Elder.

“Yes, power was the most important thing to me when I first to Wakanda. But living here and working here has pretty much forced me to examine myself very closely.”

Erik can feel T’Challa smirk at him. Erik can feel himself blushing, but he continues.

“Look, I’ve learned that I had good ideas with a really, really terrible execution plan. I . . . learned that I can’t lead the world with hate in my mind. Or in my heart. So now . . . I’m learning to let all of that go, and actually do what’s best for all of us.”

Erik can see the River Tribe Elder and Mining Tribe Elder nod along to his words. The Merchant Tribe Elder’s icy gaze defrosts a little bit.

The Elders are all staring at Erik again; he can feel their eyes roaming all over his face. But even though Erik is tense as fuck, he’s not so afraid anymore.

“I . . . I want to do right. By Wakanda, by the continent, by the rest of the world. And . . . by my King.”

The Merchant Tribe Elder squints at him. There’s a little bit of awkwardness in the air; Erik knows exactly what his words sound like. But hey, it’s not like no one knows about them. The specific nature of their relationship has started to become the worst kept “secret” in Wakanda, partially thanks to the gossipy ass guards and Dora.

The Merchant Tribe Elder studies Erik for a little bit longer. Then she sighs slowly.

“You don’t sound like you’re lying . . .” The Merchant Tribe Elder mutters.

Erik bites back a laugh. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see T’Challa rub his eyes like he’s getting a headache.

M’Baku scoffs loudly, drawing everyone’s attention.

“I think that’s her way of saying she has no more objections to the prince.”

The Merchant Tribe Elder turns around sharply.

“If that’s what I meant to say, I would say it, Lord M’Baku!”

M’Baku throws his hands up in surrender.

“My apologies, Elder,” he says, a hint of slyness in his voice. “I should not have attempted to speak on your behalf.”

“Honestly, though,” the Border Tribe Elder speaks up, “I don’t see a reason for any of us to drag this out any further.”

“Neither do I,” the River Tribe Elder grumbles. “I’m satisfied that the prince isn’t trying to murder any of us. At least not at this present moment.”

Erik nods, barely keeping himself from grinning.

“That’s all I’m trying to get across at this point,” Erik responds.
From across the room, Okoye snorts, and the noise almost makes Erik lose his composure. T’Challa clears his throat pointedly.

“So while I thank you all for your insight and concern, I would like to reiterate that N’Jadaka has *my* total confidence. And all of my trust. And I look forward to making more progress with him.”

Erik looks up at T’Challa. T’Challa smiles, and it sends Erik’s heart into overdrive.

“Thank you,” Erik says, his voice tight, his face starting to burn a bright scarlet. “I do, too.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOSH, I FINALLY FINISHED IT.

Thank you all so, so, so much for all the kind comments and encouragement along the way! I hope this last chapter is as enjoyable and typo-free as possible!

T’Challa has a million worries on his shoulders at all times.

He has to worry about his country, and his people. He has to worry about the rest of the world, since he knows how much they can shift it. He has to worry about his family--both blood and not. He has to worry about governments and councils and the agendas of nations far and near.

T’Challa has a million worries on his shoulders.

But he also has Shuri, and Ramonda, and Nakia and Okoye. He has N’Jadaka. T’Challa has the love of the most amazing people to ever walk this earth.

It’s hard for a good man to be a king. But T’Challa can do this.

**

Erik’s always wanted to go home, even when he didn’t know what that meant.

The thought has crossed his mind ever since he was a kid. I want to go home. In foster care, in college, in the military.

I want to go home. Always on his mind. Even when he knew he didn’t have a home to go to.

Erik recalls that thought now, as he, T’Challa and Shuri listen to Nakia’s proposal. She wants them to come to Oakland in a few months for a meeting with several American politicians. It seems they’ve grown “curious” about the outreach center.

“As much as I enjoy lying to them myself, I feel that you come and lie as well,” Nakia says, her grin bright even through a holographic image.

And T’Challa and Shuri both laugh, but the thought captures Erik. Oakland, the only place he knew as home for most of his life. His mother’s land.

Erik absentmindedly rubs his necklace, his grandfather’s ring. How undeservedly blessed Erik’s been to go from having no home at all to two. Two places where he belongs, where his family his history. He wouldn’t have any of this at all had he’d been left up to his own devices.

“N’Jadaka . . . ?”

Erik looks over to T’Challa. “My bad. Got lost in my own head.”

“How do you like my proposal?” Nakia asks. “I know American politicians aren’t your favorite people.”
“You ain’t lying,” Erik says with a wry smile.

Then he looks over to T’Challa. “I mean, could I even go?” he asks demurely. “With . . .” Erik glances down at this ankle.

T’Challa’s about to answer when Shuri’s scoffs loudly.

“I’m pretty sure you can go whenever you and he want you to go,” Shuri says.

T’Challa good-naturedly rolls his eyes at his sister.

“He can, actually,” T’Challa quips at her. T’Challa turns back to Erik. “Of course you can go, if you want. It’s your home, after all.”

Erik watches T’Challa, still trying to wrap his head around that big word “home.” Then he nods.

“Yeah, okay. Yes.”

**

T’Challa holds N’Jadaka tightly--as tightly as he can--and he still doesn’t feel close enough.

_Closer, closer._ T’Challa always wants N’Jadaka _closer_.

Even now, with their bodies pressed together, with N’Jadaka whining T’Challa’s name, T’Challa wants him even closer. T’Challa sinks into N’Jadaka, and N’Jadaka hisses and digs his nails into T’Challa’s back, and still T’Challa hears _closer_. I need you even closer.

“ _Fuck,_” N’Jadaka breathes out and T’Challa moves his hips faster just so that he can watch N’Jadaka come apart.

N’Jadaka’s mouth falls open, an obscene moan escaping. T’Challa takes advantage of the moment and kisses N’Jadaka deeply. They kiss and kiss and fuck and kiss until they’re both breathless and limp and tangled up in one another.

And T’Challa must be greedy or desperate or too in love for his own good because _this_ is what he needs, this is the _closer_ he craves. He and N’Jadaka, wrapped around each other. Connected in mind and body and in spirit. One.

And when they’re done--when they’ve both come and aren’t able to prop themselves up anymore--they lie next to each other, and there’s only that feeling between. The feeling of wholeness.

N’Jadaka smirks at T’Challa, then says something crass that T’Challa pretends to admonish. T’Challa says something too nice that makes N’Jadaka squirm.

And they hold each other close, closer than either are really used to. An intimacy they’re both still learning to accept. Two wild spirits adjusting to serenity.

This is strange. Yes. It’ll never _not_ be strange, really. But it is real.

**

Even in the middle of the night, Wakanda is beautiful.

The city glows; vibranium-powered lights are soft and colorful, not at all like the harsh streetlights Erik’s always known. Green, blue, purple lights decorate skyscrapers and small homes alike.
Birnin Zana feels lively, even when everyone is sleeping.

Erik lounges on the balcony attached to T’Challa’s suite, looking out at the city below him. He breathes the night air in deeply then sighs. Maybe it’s the stillness of the night or the strangely soothing city lights, but Erik feels so peaceful. He feels free.

When was the last time he free felt like this? Erik thinks it must’ve been years and years ago, on a basketball court in Oakland. Dribbling basketballs with his mother, while his father sat on the bleachers and laughed.

“Are you going to stand out there for the rest of the night?”

T’Challa’s teasing voice makes Erik’s stomach flutter. He looks over his shoulder to see T’Challa standing in the doorway grinning at him.

“I might,” Erik smirks. “Why? You miss me?”

“A little bit.”

Erik beckons T’Challa over. “Then come out here, King.”

T’Challa makes a show out of rolling eyes.

“You are always so difficult, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa huffs with faux exasperation.

Erik scoffs. “Yeah, and you love that, don’t you?”

T’Challa closes the space between them, and wraps his arms around Erik’s waist. He softly presses his lips against the back of Erik’s neck. T’Challa’s skin is hot against Erik’s back, and the heat makes Erik shiver.

“Of course I do,” T’Challa says.

Erik laughs shakily. He wonders if there will ever be a time when T’Challa doesn’t make him nervous, where T’Challa could touch him and he won’t feel butterflies in his stomach.

Erik hopes not. He really, really hopes not.

T’Challa kisses N’Jadaka on the neck again, and his hands start to roam. T’Challa’s hands find Erik’s sides, his stomach, the top of his thighs, the front of his pants.

Erik’s breath hitches as T’Challa’s fingers trace over him.

“You being inappropriate,” Erik says with a breathless laugh.

“I don’t mean to be, sithandwa sam,” T’Challa mumbles. “Forgive me.”

“Whatever,” Erik says faintly. “You made me lose my train of thought.”

“Oh? What were you out here thinking about?”

Erik stares up at the city sky. He imagines a deep purple spreading across it. Without warning, Erik twists around in T’Challa’s arms, turning until T’Challa’s let him go and he’s able to look T’Challa in the face.

T’Challa frowns. “What’s wrong? Have I said something to upset you?”
Erik searches T’Challa’s face. T’Challa looks at him the same way he always has, and the softness in T’Challa’s eyes makes Erik want to cry.

“You know something? I never told you about that vision. The one I had when we first went to Kuhle.”

T’Challa blinks at Erik, looking as though he’s been caught off-guard.

“If I recall correctly, Kuhle essentially told me it was none of my business.”

Erik remembers the offended look on T’Challa’s face and smiles.

“It wasn’t your business until I decided it was. That’s what she said,” Erik corrects.

“And you’d decided that it wasn’t? But . . . you’ve changed your mind now?”

Erik doesn’t answer. Instead, he lets his eyes travel from T’Challa’s face down to his stomach. The scar is still there; it’s faded, but it still stretches across T’Challa’s stomach. It glares up at Erik as a constant reminder of the absolute impossibility of them.

“I . . . I was talking to my mama,” Erik says softly, his eyes lingering on the scar, on the evidence that he shouldn’t be here right now.

“Oh,” T’Challa says breathlessly. “You saw her?”

Erik nods. The memory of seeing his mother brings tears to his eyes.

“Yeah, she was there,” Eriks says. “And we talked about you.”

T’Challa blinks at Erik. “ . . . Really?”

Erik bites back a laugh. He loves it whenever he’s able to leave T’Challa speechless.

“Yes. I . . . told I couldn’t let you hurt me. That I was kinda scared of you. And I didn’t think you could care about because of what I’d done. All I could see was the evil I’ve done.”

T’Challa frowns, but Erik smiles as he laces his fingers with T’Challa’s. Erik focuses on their hands clasped together as he speaks.

“She told me . . . that you saw something else. What I could be. And that you loved me.”

T’Challa squeezes Erik’s hand. Erik looks up at him; the intensity in his eyes makes Erik’s knees feel weak.

“She was right about that,” T’Challa says fiercely. “I do love you. I love with everything in me, N’Jadaka.”

T’Challa’s words snatch all of the air out of Erik’s lungs. Erik lets himself lean into T’Challa as T’Challa wraps his arm around Erik’s waist.

“I know,” Erik says, a huge grin spreading across face. “Fuck, man. I think I love you, too.”

T’Challa cracks up, his whole body shaking against Erik’s as he laughs.

“That’s all I need to hear.”
Erik giggles, feeling like a silly kid. Then he takes a deep, shaky breath and kisses T’Challa. They kiss and kiss and kiss until the world around them falls away.

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