



ORORO

AND

T'CHALLA

A NOVELLA

BY

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**ORORO AND T'CHALLA:
A NOVELLA**

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Middletown, Ohio

2016

Chapter One

“Greetings, Beloved.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“How went the aerial inspections?”

“Things are looking good. Our agronomists are running at peak efficiency, with the exception of the Wild Boars.”

“You must give them time to work out their theories.”

“Their theories put our policies in retrograde. Talk to them.”

“Their house is very important to my administration.”

“Let me talk to them. They don’t like me anyway.”

The king considers this strategy.

“Yes. Talk to them. Let them know you have my full authority and that I expect them to conform to energy-reduction and environmental standards.”

“Thank you, dear love.”

“Are you wearing that to the state dinner?”

“What? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. it’s just that it’s a little . . . bit much.”

“Really? There’s not that much material.”

“That’s what I mean. I think I mean you’re a bit much. You have got a great deal to appreciate, Ororo.”

“Oh, T’Challa, don’t start now.”

“I don’t mean to start anything, you just keep trying on those clothes in front of me and—“

“Do you know what I want to do this weekend? I want to have a picnic. Just you and me.”

“This weekend is hard. Are you are sure you can’t stay until Wednesday?”

“You know I have that mission. Where is this coming from?”

“I just think they put a lot of demands on your time, that’s all.”

“I’m team leader. What do you expect?”

“You’re also First Lady. When are we going to talk about our Priority Plan?”

“T’Challa, listen. I’m fine with making your plan but you have to realize something. These people are my family, okay? Just like Shuri and T’Chaka and the rest of your biological family, these people took me in when I had nothing. They provided a space where I could be me—no, where I could grow into the woman I would become. I know how you feel about Charles and Logan and the others, but you need to thank them. Without them, I wouldn’t be me.”

“I—I get that. I suppose I am only threatened by . . . only threatened by the feeling sometimes that you are still choosing them to be your family now. That your heart is with them.”

“Oh my goodness, my sweet sensitive king. Yes, maybe a younger version of me, maybe the child’s heart is with those men, but I am a woman now. Can’t you see me? Would you have the heart of the child or the heart of the woman?”

“Fair point. Let’s stay in. I am not so sure I am in the mood for the dinner anymore.”

“Do you think about anything else?”

“I think about the welfare of my people above all.”

“Then what is your hand doing right now?”

“Looking out for the welfare of my people.”

“Speaking of time commitments, did you speak to *your* team about their duty-roster issues?”

“Ororo, there is a rotation. My turn comes up just as often as everybody else’s.”

“Not just as often as everybody else’s, more than any of the other senior members, and more than some of the junior members. I talked to Hank. He’s the one that brought this up with me. He thinks you’re being exploited and I agree with him.”

“Ororo . . . “

“That’s exactly the attitude they expect from you. They expect to just give you an extra load and for you to nobly take it because you are so honored to be in their company. Fuck that!”

“Ah, Queen Ororo!”

“I’m sorry, but this is not okay. I don’t like to see you taken advantage of. And you’re a head of state, for goodness sake. There’s already a provision for heads of state serving on the team.”

“You know I don’t like you talking like that—wait, there is?”

“Yes, for when Donald or Namor had state matters. I’m telling you, Hank told me about this. No one with as much seniority as you is put on the duty roster as often. Not even close.”

“I’ll take it up with Steve and Tony.”

“Take it up with Steve. Tony’s a little too comfortable having you at his beck and call.”

“You’re feisty today.”

“He’s maneuvering. He’s maneuvering for exclusive mineral rights and you know why. He’s got some weapon that needs the treasure from our little ‘gold mine.’”

“You don’t trust him very much.”

“I do in a firefight—he’s a nice big gun to have on your side. But not in business; he’s an unrepentant capitalist. Which means he’s justifiably amoral. Have you tried these dates? They’re from heaven.”

“No, I haven’t had any.”

“Wait there, I’m going to fix you one with a little bit of starfruit. Oooh here you go.”

“Mmmm.”

“Does Daddy like?”

“Mm.”

“Oooh, wait, this one has just a touch of yogurt and cassava paste.”

“Thank you, beloved.”

“I’m better than any serving girl, aren’t I?”

“You are.”

“Yessemeni!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Ororo?”

“Could you come here, please?”

“Right away, ma’am.”

A beautiful young creature suddenly springs into view.

“You serve on the king’s bathing staff, don’t you?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“Once you finish pouring his water, would there be any need for you to serve out your shift behind that wicker partition over there next to the pool, like I saw you do the past two weeks?”

“No, ma’am.”

“My husband is very handsome, is he not?”

“I mean no offense, Your Highness. I will vacate the palace this evening.”

“No need, silly girl. I’ve heard good things about you from your teachers—luckily for you. Because I asked.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.”

She flees like a fawn seeking shelter.

“Was there any need to torture that girl?”

“You encourage it.”

“What?”

“Taking those long, slow laps in the pool. Stretching for hours on the drying towels.”

“Minutes.”

“I just want to let you know, mama’s watching. From up there.”

“That’s terrifying.”

“Besides, I could turn a few eyes too if I wanted to.”

“No, please don’t.”

“Now open up. I put honey on this one.”

“Aww, that’s the best one. I’m postponing the state dinner.”

“Are you sure? What are you do—Oh! Okay . . . yes, I think you’re sure.”

Chapter Two

“Greetings, Beloved.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“What have you got there?”

“Surprise. Another invitation from the Organization of African States.”

“They are persistent.”

“Yes . . . “

“You sound as if you’re rethinking the Wakandan position.”

“When I was a child, the logic was that Wakanda would eventually participate in Africa’s political destiny once the colonized countries abandoned Western ways and went back to traditional African beliefs and customs.”

“That definitely hasn’t happened yet.”

“And I’m not sure if it ever will. I’m starting to think . . . I’m starting to think Wakanda abandoned its responsibilities to the peoples of Africa.”

“Okay, let me stop you right there because you’re not making sense. The very concept of ‘Africa’ was invented by the people of the outside world. Just because they decided to name this land mass ‘Africa’ doesn’t mean Wakanda has any more or less of a responsibility to the people of ‘Asia’ or the

people of 'Europe.' Don't get bamboozled by their preposterous racial classifications. There is one race—the human race. If Wakanda has a responsibility to the world it has a responsibility to the world."

"That's true."

"But the countries of Africa have made their choice. They're still . . . infatuated with becoming like their oppressors . . . praying to the gods of the World Bank and the IMF."

"It just seems like the cycle of violence is unrelenting. No one foretold the difficulties African peoples would have in adopting Western lifestyles and practices. Our best economists thought it would be a passing phase, at worst."

"Has Wakanda ever wavered in its position?"

"There was a pro-Nkrumah faction in the '60s. But policy consistencies and his inability to enlist Francophone states in the union always kept that faction to a minority."

"Senghor . . . that's right . . . he couldn't let go of French support."

"That reminds me, I told Steve I would find him a tutor for African history."

"How are his studies coming?"

"Very well. He should have his Bachelor's degree by next year."

"That was such a clever way for him to bring himself back into the world."

"He's got a real head for history. He's very good at seeing patterns and connections."

"I think you should invite him over for dinner."

“Why?”

“I think you two have a lot in common.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, you’re both super-soldiers for your countries.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for. You should invite him over. I think you two would make really good friends.”

“Men don’t just ‘invite’ other men over.”

“What is wrong with your sex? Why don’t you ever say what you feel?”

“Too busy running the world, I guess.”

“Mm.”

“It’s funny, you know what he told me once? He told me he wished I’d discovered him instead of Tony. He said he thought it would’ve been better if he would’ve gotten accustomed to this time period with me here in Wakanda.”

“I’ve always marveled that that man was born in 1923 but his cultural views are more progressive than anyone on your team.”

“All my teammates are progressive. I mean, socially, I mean.”

“Ha! I know you’re not talking about That Janet Woman.”

“Why do you call her That Janet Woman? Janet’s okay.”

“Janet’s okay?’ Why is it every time I go over she asks you to do something for her? ‘T’Challa can you reach that for me? T’Challa can you lift this for a minute?’ Please.”

“It’s just her way of getting attention.”

“You are a king, T’Challa! It’s her who should be reaching things for you.”

“I don’t even know what that means. Okay so maybe not Janet, but that’s all.”

“And what about Pietro?”

“He’s like that with everybody.”

“What is his problem?”

“He has never been . . . satisfied with the common circumstances surrounding his birth. I actually believe that he thinks I should demand more deference from the other team members. Just because I don’t preen like Namor—“

“No, that’s not it. He sees Namor acting the way he thinks a king should, and he sees you acting the way you do, and he thinks you’re a second-class king.”

“What does that mean, ‘acting the way that you do?’”

“Here is how I see it, beloved. At the very least, no one should talk to you disrespectfully. Like, that should be rule number one. Now, everyone should speak to everyone else respectfully anyway but I know with the team dynamics and the heat of battle, decorum sometimes gets lost but . . . I think sometimes you tolerate people talking to you like you are one of their gutter friends. And you are *not* one of their gutter friends.”

“Does that mean *anyone* . . . ?”

“Are you trying to start something right now?”

“No, my radiant flower.”

“Look at it this way: Don’t let anyone talk to you differently than if I were in the room. Yes, I love you and I want you and everything, but more than that, I admire you, T’Challa. I look up to you. So when someone treats you with harsh words it diminishes the man I admire.”

“Thank you, baby.”

“Did you understand me?”

“You make me feel like a man.”

“You *are* a man. You’re such a sexy lion. Where’s my kisses?”

“I will talk to Steve.”

“Make lips be kissing.”

“If you let me just . . . scoot down a little.”

“Mm. No, I have to run. Where is Royal Jet #3?”

“It’s in the east hangar.”

“Good. I’m taking a small squad of the Dora Milaje with me on a little hunting expedition.”

“Who is the unfortunate prey?”

“The tracker we implanted on Sergei Kravinoff activated an hour ago.”

“Is it possible that he still hasn’t detected it?”

“If he did I don’t know why he would come anywhere near here with it still activating.”

“And who would he possibly be setting a trap for?”

“The signal came to a stop a few miles outside the Northwestern minefields. I’m going to provide some cover and have my girls take a look.”

“Bring me back something nice!”

“Spirits of the wind, I greet you in supplication . . . ”

Chapter Three

“Greetings, Beloved.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“So when are you dropping the *black* from your name?”

“Ah, I was wondering when this one was going to come up again.”

“It’s just such an awful stereotype— “

“It’s more than that, Ororo, it’s our heritage. It’s our ancient legacy. I don’t want to abandon it to be politically correct.”

“I’m not saying abandon it, dear one. I’m just saying drop the *black*. And not here in Wakanda, just in the outside world. They have such ugly connotations with it. Do you remember the time Tony asked you why you didn’t arm yourself with a spear like the Dora Milaje?”

“I do.”

“He knows Wakandan forces employ more than spears in our arsenal. He was trying to read you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You better think so. That man is constantly trying to see what he can get away with where you’re concerned. He makes comments like that to keep you in your place.”

“I think you are too sensitive to foreign notions of race.”

“That’s impossible. No matter what you hear. It’s impossible to be too sensitive to them. These incomplete philosophies about skin color were sewn throughout the world by the British and their insidious empire of brown subjection. And it doesn’t help that the only people that use the word *black* in their name are of African descent.”

“Not Black Canary.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind. I am tired of talking about the narrow-mindedness of the outside world, Ororo. Is Wakanda such a paradise?”

“Wait, no, who is this canary woman? Does this have something to do with that blonde hair I found in our chambers?”

“What? No! You figured that out already, remember? The chambermaid who bleached her hair?”

“Oh, that’s right. Ayiesha. That was not a good look. So you’re saying if I find a blonde hair now—”

“She’s not even a real blonde.”

“What?”

“Look, the same melanistic variant that makes some panthers black is the same one that makes some humans black. I don’t see anything wrong with it. I’m proud of it.”

“You’re right. You should be.”

“I’ve really got bigger issues to deal with this season.”

“You sound worried.”

“The House of the Broken Arrow is threatening a council injunction.”

“Because of the wildebeest problem? Haven’t the hyena introductions had any impact?”

“The herds have been diverting again further into their lands. They don’t think this is environmental.”

“The House of Diamonds and the House of the Mongoose are going to abstain again if they call for an injunction.”

“That’s fine. The Broken Arrows don’t have enough political capital to make a serious threat. And if they do, I’m sure the council will concur with me.”

“King T’Chanzaa should have never given the Wild Boars their own district. Their narrow-minded dedication to maximum production is a drag on the whole economy.”

“My great-grandfather knew what everybody knows now. We would not have been able to resist the effects of the European Incursion without the families that now comprise the House of the Wild Boars. They saved us.”

“Your grandfather saved Wakanda at the Battle of Half Mound. I’ve read the histories. He killed every Portuguese soldier who showed up and it was his idea to forge the maps that were sent back to Lisbon.”

“And my grandfather, King Shurundi, was at the time engaged to the daughter of the Wild Boars’ most prominent family.”

“Oh.”

“You didn’t know that, did you? Our written records only maintain the patrilineal descent of our families. Matrilineal descent lines are strictly part of our oral history.”

“I am not sure I will be ever be able to understand the various platforms on which your people store their information.”

“*Our* people.”

“Our people.”

“But, to your point, yes I can see how it would be difficult to grasp at first.”

“Don’t you ever find it confusing? A written history, an oral history, *and* a native tongue that comprises its very own language family?”

“Seems like the most natural thing in the world to me.”

“So do you think any kingdom that had had peaceful transitions of power for 2,000 years would be as advanced as Wakanda?”

“Well, not any kingdom. I’d like to think our people possess a special resolve. But it makes a difference. Being able to maintain policies through several administrations to see if they’ll work, maintaining funding for scientific research no matter who’s in office. A polity can make strides when they’re consistent. I don’t know. Perhaps if the kings of ancient Axum or Ghana had been able to maintain political and cultural cohesion for the past 2000 years as well—“

“And there was never any trade or technology with the Romans?”

“Why won’t you let the Romans go?”

“Well, it’s just . . . both Wakanda and Rome are founded at roughly the same time, but the key to Roman expansion was this policy of conquest

and stealing technology and thinkers from every civilization in Europe . . . It just seems incomprehensible that the Wakandan people were able to develop without the aid of any other civilization.”

“Well perhaps if the Romans had been able to maintain their empire it might be Wakanda’s equal today as well. But it was their policy of conquest and imperial overreach that led to their demise.”

“Was that what made the difference? Because Wakanda was never expansionist?”

“It’s what got Namor’s people where they are, too. Their country was already 1,000 years old before they sank to the bottom of the sea. But they thrived because they had built up their technology over years of peaceful royal successions.”

“Namor tried to talk to me a few times, by the way. Before you and I were a thing. And once after.”

“Namor is a—wait, *after*?”

“Well it’s funny. I told him three times I was seeing somebody, but once I said it was you he backed off.”

“I know he did.”

“What? What do you mean you know he did?”

“I’m a nobleman. Once you told him you were seeing me he knew I’d have to challenge him to one-on-one combat if he persisted.”

“Where is that written?”

“It’s a matter of honor. Ridiculous, I know, but it’s what keeps houses from constant conflict. And when between two kingdoms, it keeps them out of war.”

“I feel like I live in a medieval novel.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

“It is. Because I’m the queen. And now I’m going to go get a massage.”

“Are you interrogating Kravinoff later today?”

“Shuri’s leading the interrogation.”

“Oh, then I must attend. Will you wait until after my council meeting?”

“That thing you two have is . . . peculiar.”

“What? I’m a fan of her work.”

“More than a fan. You two enjoy the Secret Inquisition Practices a little too much.”

“What are you going to do? It’s tradition.”

“So why do you make it a game at family gatherings?”

“What are you going to do? It’s family.”

Chapter Four

“Greetings, Your Highness.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“I have a matter of some import I was wondering if we could discuss.”

“Of course, Naiyema. What’s troubling you?”

“The queen, Your Highness. I would like to . . . I have concerns . . .”

“About my wife?”

“Your Highness, I am Dora Milaje, and I will not be intimidated.”

“Well said.”

“I am concerned that the queen’s foreign viewpoints might be affecting the Sisterhood Morale.”

“That is a serious matter.”

“Indeed.”

“What do you mean by her ‘foreign viewpoints?’”

“She often makes comments that point out certain . . . futile aspects of our operations.”

“How so?”

“Like with the Kravinoff extraction last week. She repeatedly made comments suggesting Kravinoff was only the small piece of a big puzzle, and how the op was a chase of a wild bird of some kind which was supposed to suggest that we were wasting our time. It wouldn’t have been so bad except she had field command and her mic was on.”

“I understand. That is not a proper message for a commander to transmit to their subordinates.”

“It is very hard on the recruits. Some of our early training rituals are . . . strenuous.”

“I’m well aware.”

“Morale is at its most tenuous in the first year.”

“Of course.”

“Saying things like this is not the Dora Milaje way. It is not the . . . Wakandan way. I am proud that our culture shows gratitude in our celebration of life. I have studied the outside world. I have always believed that it is what makes us . . . special.”

“Your words make my crown lie easier.”

“As you know, I have made Sisterhood Morale the ancillary mission of my command career.”

“Of course I remember. I was very impressed with your portfolio. I appreciate the grace with which you have accepted Ororo as co-general. I know it is an unprecedented appointment.”

“I completely understand. I was actually just glad you allowed me to retain my command once she joined the order. The queen is a legendary warrior. She had been amongst us even before you two had begun your

relationship. Many of our best warriors were excited about the opportunity to exchange knowledge with her.”

“Was there anything else?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Dismissed.”

Whoosh.

“Greetings, Beloved.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“Was that Naiyema?”

“It was.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Any word from Henry on the AIM surveillance?”

“I took Hank off that detail. He’s been having some perspective issues.”

“What, like he’s wondering if he’s on the right side?”

“No, like literal perspective. He’s been having trouble distinguishing between the realities he experiences while growing and shrinking in size.”

“He experiences different realities?”

“From his perspective. You have to imagine, when he shrinks by a factor of, say, ten, all of his size relativities shift to the degree that he’s for all

intents and purposes in another universe. What to us are drops of sweat are to him vast oceans. A dung beetle becomes Godzilla, that sort of thing.”

“Like that movie.”

“What movie?”

“*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids.*”

“Sorry, never heard of it.”

“What about *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid?*”

“What are these people doing to their children?”

“*Honey, We Shrunk Ourselves?*”

“They made three of them?”

“Nevermind. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that while we are constantly in this reality, he is constantly shifting back and forth . . . and starting to lose . . . perspective . . . on which is the ‘real’ reality.”

“So, like, he’s choosing his reality.”

“Well, I think it goes deeper than that. You know that ant colony he’s always flying around with? He’s a hero in that reality. He told me he wasn’t so sure if he wasn’t destined to be there.”

“What do *you* think?”

“I think he needs to spend some time in his reality of origin. Reconnect with us.”

“It’s been hard for him since . . . That Janet Woman.”

“Who could blame him?”

A minute pause.

“Dearest?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Why’d you ask if Hank had been questioning what side he was on?”

“No reason.”

“Have you been having some thoughts?”

“Maybe a few. Have we found conclusive evidence that AIM’s new projects are illegal?”

“They’re AIM, honey. A leopard doesn’t change its spots.”

“I’m just saying, their recent advances are right along the lines of what Henry’s been researching. And God knows he’d get more support over there.”

“We’ve got all the evidence I need. AIM is AIM. If there’s no money, they’re not interested.”

“Sounds like the rush of human progress.”

“I’ve been wondering . . . how have you been feeling?”

“How so?”

“I thank the gods there has been so much rain this season. But I also know that it is oftentimes a reflection of a foul mood on your part. Since you’ve relocated to Wakanda, I’ve noticed a shift in your outlook.”

“What kind of shift?”

“Less . . . positive.”

Somewhere in the distance, a crack of lightning sets loose a low rumble of thunder.

“I’m less . . . positive?”

“I have been noticing that many of the things in life you once found sweet, you are starting to see them as sour. Or at least you are looking on the sour side. Wasn’t it you who told me life was a constant choice, a commitment to happiness?”

“You remember me saying that?”

“I fell in love with you that night.”

She goes over to him and cuddles in his warm soft fur.

“I don’t want to be negative. Sometimes I can feel my very atoms gaining electrons. It literally makes my hair stand on end. I hate being like that.”

“But you can control it. I depend on your ability to control it.”

“Sometimes it’s not so easy. It’s like as soon as I’m happy I start looking at everything in my life and criticizing.”

“That’s going to make it really hard for you to find any real joy.”

“And it’s not just criticizing. It’s like I’m steeling myself; preparing myself in case I lose it all. Then I can say I never really liked it anyway.”

“That is not the way I want to approach marriage with you.”

“Don’t you ever get afraid about us?”

“No.”

“Don’t you ever get afraid we’re going to lose all this?”

“No.”

“Don’t you ever get afraid you may not be up to the task of running the ancient kingdom of Wakanda?”

“No. I was born to it.”

“*Fuck.*”

“Don’t talk like that, Your Highness.”

“Aren’t you afraid of anything?”

The king considers this riddle.

“I would not like to face my friend Matt in hand-to-hand combat.”

“Is *he* afraid of anything?”

“No.”

Chapter Five

“Greetings, Friend and Comrade.”

“Fertile Blessings.”

“ . . . Greetings . . . Blessings . . . ”

“Do you remember what happened? What led you here?”

“Are you hurt?”

“ . . . Stupid . . . Gen’ral . . . Shoot . . . BOOM! . . . ”

“Was it the nuclear test site, again? They’re not going to let you hide in those mountains, Bruce.”

“Should we mobilize?”

“ . . . tests . . . BAD tests . . . hurt . . . sick . . . ”

“Who got sick?”

“No, the tests are making people, sick. It’s General Ross’ weapons-testing site again. He’s been engineering biochem weapons that might slip past Geneva codes.”

“What is wrong with that man?”

“He’s got a sickness.”

“ . . . warn . . . Betty . . . stop . . . tests . . . ”

“Oh my god, that woman again.”

“We don’t what know happened.”

“ . . . warn . . . Betty . . . stupid gen’ral . . . BOOM!”

“He’s filthy. They must have unleashed their whole arsenal on him.
When is Ross going to learn he’s not going to win?”

“He’s not built that way. Can we get you anything?”

“ . . . no come smash . . . just wanted . . . talk . . . Betty . . . ”

“I know, old friend.”

“ . . . just wanted . . . time . . . alone.”

“It’s perfectly natural.”

“Why . . . no . . . leave . . . alone?”

“They’re afraid of you, Bruce. They’re terrified. Everything that you
are scares them. You scare them because they’re scared of themselves.
They’re scared of their own weakness.”

“No . . . come . . . smash.”

“It doesn’t matter what you intended. It’s what you represent. You
represent everything they’ll never have. Your strength, your decency.”

“They’re afraid to be decent, Bruce.”

“Hate . . . the . . . strong.”

“And you’re the strongest there is.”

The behemoth smiled.

“Cat man . . . comrade.”

“Always, old friend. You know whenever they won’t leave you alone, you’ve got a safe haven here. I don’t know why you don’t just stay.”

“Betty . . . in danger.”

“Oh, Betty’s always in danger.”

“Ororo, don’t be like that.”

“She’s been manipulating him for years and I’m sick of it.”

“ . . . not . . . nip you . . . ”

“I’m sorry, Bruce, but she has.”

“ . . . Betty . . . friend . . . ”

“Not yours, though.”

“BETTY FRIEND!”

“Will you let him calm down?”

“I’m sorry, dear one. I’m sure she does have a tender spot in her heart for you. But you’re among friends, now. Shall we throw some games for you?”

“ . . . like . . . watch . . . games . . . ”

“I know you do. The Jumping Pumas have some new tricks.”

“HA! Puma . . . jump . . . nice . . . like games.”

“We might also be able to arrange another rhinoceros race. The western herds are ready to migrate, the young males are feeling frisky.”

“ . . . ride the rhinos . . . like cat man’s friends . . . cat man Challa . . . ”

“Do you think they’ll try to send some aerial recon like last time? Ross knows he can circumvent international airspace because of our cloaking tech.”

“I think he’s learned his lesson. Steve told me their president gave him a stern talking to.”

“No chase . . . I jumped through . . . hostile air . . . place.”

“Good. You remembered.”

“Make . . . enemy . . . hesi - hesitate.”

“That’s it.”

“I thought . . . I thought this time . . . she’d listen.”

“Bruce, I’m afraid you might have to face up to the fact that Betty is not going to go against her father.”

“She always chooses him over you. She can’t seem to stand disappointing him. Even if it means disappointing you.”

“We . . . had something . . . once. She was . . . optimistic. But now, she . . . ”

“You want her to be brave, Bruce, but she’s not a hero. She doesn’t always do the right thing just because it’s right.”

“It’s . . . it’s easy for . . . you to say.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re the crown prince of . . . an ancient kingdom, T’Challa. You’ve got a beautiful wife who’s a legendary warrior. How hard has it . . . been for you?”

“Bruce, I think you’re being a little unfair.”

“It’s okay, Ororo. You know I’m just trying to help you, Bruce. I don’t say these things to hurt you. And you know there’s nothing I want more than your happiness.”

“I know, I just . . . I don’t mean to take it out on you.”

“I know.”

“It just seems like every time we get close . . . I don’t know, I blow it somehow, I guess.”

“These things are complicated, Bruce. There’s no way to know why women choose who we do. The heart makes no sense.”

“You can say that again. If we could choose who we fell for . . . well, wouldn’t that be some world?”

“Are you going to stay for a while?”

“I can’t. I have to get back to my research. If Betty won’t listen to my findings, I’ll have to find somebody who does.”

“You’re going up against a lot of powerful people, Bruce. You sure you don’t want some help?”

“The last thing you need is them calling you a crackpot, too. No, this is something I have to do myself. I started down this road on my own, so it’s only right I don’t drag anyone else down with me.”

“I only say it because . . . I am tired of them hurting you. I mean, I know they can’t hurt you on the outside, but . . . “

“What? You mean I’m not invincible on the inside, too?”

“Haven’t you ever considered that that’s the key to your anger? That unresolved triangle with Betty and her father?”

“I am not equipped to handle that conversation, Ororo. But thanks for talking me down again, as always. Sometimes I feel like I’m taking advantage of you, T’Challa.”

“Never. I told you that I am forever in your debt.”

“Yeah, it’s just that when most Westerners say that they only mean it till you forget.”

“Ouch.”

“Is it okay if I take a nap on our way back to the capital?”

“Of course.”

Out walks a mouse of a man.

“That was heavy.”

“Bruce knows I don’t mince words. Have you noticed that he got particularly snarly with you at the end?”

“Yes, it is seeming to be more and more the case that I get along better with Bruce’s angry side.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“He doesn’t intellectualize everything. And he’s more confident in his masculinity.”

“Do you think Bruce is threatened by yours?”

“I cannot speak to these things. A man can only be the man he is. If other men are threatened by it, then that is their journey.”

“Man, he’s got some journey.”

“A particularly dynamic one.”