

MARVEL

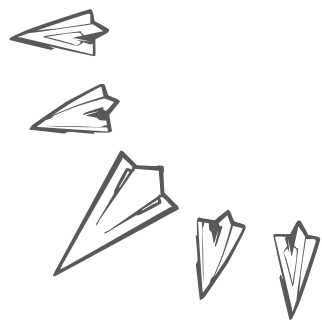
BLACK PANTHER

THE YOUNG PRINCE

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MARVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

The young prince fled through the forest, his pursuer hot on his heels.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He couldn't give up.
Not this time.

He ducked a low-hanging branch and splashed through a muddy creek. His attacker was gaining on him. He could almost hear his breath on his back.

There—

Up ahead, a fallen tree.

He jumped, and—

His legs were pulled out from under him.

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He crashed to the ground. Strong hands grabbed his ankles. He tried to break free, but his foe rolled him over and pinned him to the damp forest floor.

“I got you this time,” M’Baku hissed. “Nowhere to run now.”

The young prince gasped for air. “Okay, okay,” he said. “You won. *This time*. Wanna go again?”

M’Baku rose and extended a hand, pulling his friend up with a firm grip.

“If it hadn’t been for that log . . .” the prince started, brushing dirt from his linen trousers.

M’Baku smirked. “Excuses, excuses. I beat you fair and square, T’Challa.”

T’Challa looked up and cocked his head. “Don’t you know it’s not smart to mock your superiors?”

M’Baku bowed low in fake sincerity. “Oh, mighty prince, please forgive me for the error of my ways. I am but a lowly servant.”

T’Challa rolled his eyes.

M’Baku was T’Challa’s closest friend. They did everything together—sneaking out when they were supposed to be studying, playing practical jokes on unsuspecting victims, and sometimes venturing as far as the neighboring city, even though T’Challa was supposed to have a personal guard with him at all times. Like now, for instance.

One thing he would never forget was the look on his father’s face when he came home late once after being gone

for hours. *The whole tribe was out looking for you*, his father had said. *There are dangers in the forest, T'Challa. You must always be wary.*

It was a lesson he took to heart, but every now and then, M'Baku egged him on, daring him to break every rule the king laid out for him.

The forest around them was vast, teeming with lush vegetation and towering trees that seemed to brush the very heavens. In the distance, a mountain range rose high above the clouds, the midday sun glinting off its white peaks.

"C'mon," M'Baku said. "I'll race you to the river's edge."

T'Challa wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was tired, but he couldn't let M'Baku know that. He crouched low, ready to sprint.

"Go!" M'Baku shouted.

Both boys dashed through the forest, trampling broken branches and leaping over fallen tree stumps. This was when T'Challa felt most alive, in the woods with his best friend, finding adventure and escaping his royal duties. Out here, he wasn't a prince. He was just a kid.

M'Baku passed him, kicking up dirt in his path. T'Challa pushed himself as hard as he could. He was gaining on him.

But M'Baku had suddenly stopped on the path.

T'Challa swerved at the last minute, missing him by inches. He bent and rested his hands on his knees, winded. "Why'd you stop?"

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M'Baku slowly raised his hand and pointed. "Look."

A few feet ahead of them, a man lay slumped against a tree. He wore a military uniform, but it was one T'Challa had never seen before.

"Is he dead?" M'Baku whispered.

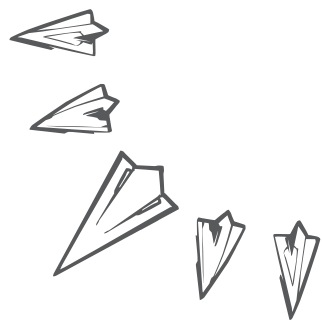
T'Challa didn't answer, but took a few steps forward. The man had a bandage around his leg, where his pants had been ripped. Blood soaked it red. "Help," he croaked out. "Please. Help me."

T'Challa took another wary step. He didn't know who the man was, but his father always said it was his duty to help those in trouble.

A rustling in the bushes made them both pause.

M'Baku started. "What was that?"

T'Challa didn't have time to answer, as four figures stepped through the trees.



CHAPTER TWO

They were tall. And they were all women. Tribal markings adorned their faces. They were the Dora Milaje, the king’s private bodyguards and the fiercest warriors in the country.

Hints of gold and silver glinted from the bracelets and cuffs around their necks and arms. Their spear points sparkled in the sun that filtered through the canopy of trees above them. T’Challa had seen those spears before, and knew that they also doubled as giant batons equipped with electrical charges.

T’Challa tensed.

“My prince,” one of them said, stepping forward with

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a slight bow and placing her right hand on her heart. “The king has demanded your presence.”

T’Challa was taken aback. “This man,” he started, coming back to the moment. “He needs help. He was mauled, or—”

“We will take care of him,” the woman said, without the slightest hint of sympathy.

The man tried to get up, but one of the Dora Milaje thrust her spear just inches from his neck. “Don’t leave me with them,” he pleaded, his eyes going wide. “Please!”

T’Challa didn’t want to leave, but he had to obey his father’s command—even if he did feel sorry for this strange man and whatever plight he had fallen into. He turned to M’Baku. “I’ll see you later. I have to—”

“He is also summoned,” the woman interrupted him. “Both of you.” She cast a sidelong glance at M’Baku. *Now.*”

The young prince hesitated with each step he took.

“What does he want with me?” M’Baku whispered, a hint of fear in his voice.

“I don’t know,” T’Challa replied. He was busy thinking of what could have happened to the injured man. He’d looked terrified. *Was it a wild animal? A lion? What was he doing in the forest?*

The dense thicket of trees ahead of them thinned to reveal a sight that only a few from the outside world had ever seen. Towering structures loomed up out of the forest.

They weren't just skyscrapers. They curved and swooped, twisted and turned, and seemed to defy the laws of physics. Sunlight shone off steel and metal surfaces, sending shards of light into the surrounding woods. It would be a strange picture for someone unfamiliar with the landscape—a futuristic city rising up out of a jungle—but this was no ordinary place. It was Wakanda, the most technologically advanced nation on the face of the earth, and it was ruled by T'Chaka, the Black Panther and King of Wakanda. This was the Golden City.

The Dora Milaje paused in front of the Royal Palace, their spear points lowered to the ground. The palace rose up out of the ground like a great orb, with a single door framed in gold and jade. Darkness beckoned from within. T'Challa turned to look at M'Baku, then both boys stepped through.

T'Challa's footsteps echoed in his ears. The floors were black jade and highly polished, casting a shadowy reflection back up at him. A massive slab of obsidian carved into the shape of a panther crouched at the far end of the room, ready to pounce. Its color was beyond black—a lustrous, inky hue that had no equal. The eyes were its most intimidating feature—two red gemstones that seemed to pierce T'Challa's very soul. When he was a child, he was afraid of those eyes, but now he saw them as a reminder of his nation—strong and always alert.

Up ahead, his father sat on the Panther Throne, its

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surface studded with gleaming stones and rare metals. The throne would someday be T'Challa's—*if* he could pass the grueling tests and gain the ceremonial title of Black Panther.

His father seemed to take up all the air in the room. Just his presence alone was enough to make grown men bow their heads in reverence. He wore the robes and heraldry of the Panther Tribe, and his garments shifted in color as T'Challa approached.

But his father wasn't alone.

M'Baku's father, N'Gamo, who sat on the king's war council, stood next to him.

M'Baku bowed his head as he stood before his king, then glanced at his father, who remained motionless, like a soldier carved from wood.

The King of Wakanda rose from his throne. He was a big man, broad-shouldered and strong, and the weight of the nation rested on his shoulders.

"Son," he began. "M'Baku. Where have you been?"

The torches in the wall flickered, as if his voice were strong enough to extinguish them.

T'Challa swallowed. His mouth was dry. "In the forest, Father. Playing games. I finished my studies and all of my lessons are complete."

The king nodded slowly. He eyed M'Baku, and then his gaze drifted back to T'Challa. "I have called you here because there is trouble brewing in the kingdom."

N'Gamo finally stirred. "My spymaster has received troubling reports of unknown invaders on our borders. We have intercepted some of their transmissions."

T'Challa's heart skipped. "We saw a strange man. He wasn't from Wakanda. He was injured by an animal. Is he . . . one of them?"

"He will be questioned," the Black Panther replied, "and we will certainly find out."

N'Gamo gave a grim smile.

"Who are they?" T'Challa asked. "Where are they from?"

The Black Panther glanced at M'Baku briefly before returning his gaze to T'Challa. "I will tell you, in time. But for now, you must stay safe. If war is on the horizon, I will not put your life at risk. So I am sending you away, for the time being."

T'Challa swallowed nervously. Surely he was hearing things.

"You will join him," N'Gamo said to M'Baku. "Perhaps the two of you can keep an eye on each other, and not get into too much trouble."

T'Challa pulled at his collar, but before he could ask another question, M'Baku asked it for him. "Where?" he said timidly, averting his gaze from the king. "Where will we be going?"

The king sat down. A ring shone on his finger, a simple

silver band, but T'Challa knew it was much more than that. "I have associates in America," he said. "I know a place where you will both be safe."

America, thought T'Challa. He had heard of the distant land, but Wakandans seldom traveled there, preferring never to leave their kingdom. Everything they needed was right here, including the source of their wealth and livelihood—Vibranium.

T'Challa cast a furtive glance at M'Baku, who seemed to have frozen where he stood. "*Where* in America?" he asked.

"You will be going to Chicago," his father replied.

T'Challa cocked an eyebrow. "Chicago?" He tried to recall anything he had heard about the city, but came up blank.

"Yes," the Black Panther answered.

"We have enrolled you both at a school," N'Gamo said. "South Side Middle School. You must assume new identities."

T'Challa's head spun.

"A regular school?" he ventured. "With regular *kids*?"

"I have many enemies," the king said. "And I will not have them know of your whereabouts. Therefore, you will be posing as exchange students from Kenya. My friends at the African Embassy of Nations will be your cover."

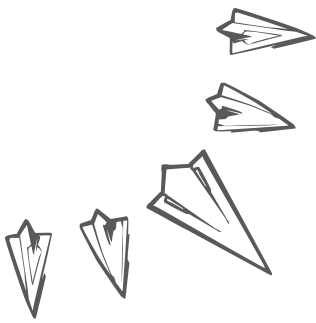
T'Challa frowned, but tried to not let his dismay show. What his father said was true. He was used to being wary

all his life. The kidnapping of a young prince could make a determined criminal very rich. If, he thought, his father didn't destroy them first.

"You will leave in a few days' time," the king said. "But first, we will have a feast in your honor."

Chicago, T'Challa thought, and finally remembered something he'd heard about the city.

It was said to be very cold there.



CHAPTER THREE

“America!” M’Baku whisper-shouted as they left the Royal Palace. “Can you believe it?”

“So you *want* to go?” T’Challa asked.

M’Baku paused midstep. “Of course I want to go! We’ll be able to do anything we want, whenever we want.”

M’Baku did have a point, T’Challa realized. But they’d have to hide their identities. That wouldn’t be too much fun.

“Ah, I get it,” M’Baku said, crossing his arms and smirking. “You won’t get the royal treatment over there because no one’ll know who you are. You’ll have to live like us commoners. No one waiting on you hand and foot.”

T’Challa was struck.

Was that it? Was he a spoiled brat who couldn't bear the thought of living without all his privilege?

"That's not it," he said. "I want to go—but if Wakanda is under threat, I should be here, with my father, to fight by his side if it comes to that."

"Don't worry," M'Baku said. "You'll have plenty of time for fighting when you become the next Black Panther."

T'Challa paused. Late-afternoon light glinted off the mountains in the distance, and he felt the sun on his face. "That'll be a long time yet," he replied wistfully.

M'Baku clapped his friend on the back. "Enough talking," he said. "Want to race to the city square?"

T'Challa smiled. M'Baku was too competitive for his own good. "Go!" shouted the young prince.

After saying good night to M'Baku—who won the race again, to T'Challa's dismay—he made his way to his room, which was set apart from his father's royal quarters. Like everything in Wakanda, his room was a blend of high-tech wizardry fused with nature. His bed was large, with sheets and pillows made from fine fabrics; high-definition moving images of the Wakandan countryside were embedded on flat screens in the walls, and tribal sculptures sat on pedestals and small columns. Under his feet was a soft carpet of woven grass.

He sat on his bed and let out a sigh.

This was the only home he knew, and he loved it more

than anything in the world. The forests, the people, the very culture itself were all a part of him. A part of him he did not want to lose.

“Chicago,” he said aloud, and then tapped a bead on his Kiyomo Bracelet. To an outsider, it would have looked like a simple string of black beads around his wrist. But to Wakandans, it was much more. At birth, every child was given a Kiyomo Bracelet to wear. Each bead had a purpose—from storing medical records to taking a picture or projecting a free-floating informational screen, much like a web page but suspended in midair.

T’Challa watched as thousands of tiny black dots swirled from the bead and knitted together to form an image of the Chicago skyline and lakefront. His black cat, Bast, appeared from the hallway and jumped onto the bed. She nudged him with her head, begging for a scratch behind the ears. T’Challa obliged. “I’m going to miss you, little one,” he said. Bast purred deeply, stretching her neck against his fingers. For a moment, T’Challa’s eyes watered, but he quickly coughed instead, and pretended it hadn’t happened.

T’Challa turned back to the screen. In just a few minutes he learned that Chicago was famous for its sports teams, music, and food. The city was situated right on Lake Michigan and was known for its cold winters and strong, bone-chilling winds. That was certainly something he’d have to get used to. It was always sunny and warm in Wakanda.

He waved his hand through the image and it winked

out. Bast leapt from the bed and meowed. “Want to go for a walk?” T’Challa asked.

Outside, T’Challa raised his head to the night sky. A crescent moon shone brightly in a field of black, surrounded by gleaming stars. It was hot, like always, and he was glad for his loose-fitting clothes, which allowed the slight breeze to cool him off a little. Perhaps he would take a quick swim in the nearby pond, he thought, although rumor had it that a great crocodile prowled through the reeds there late at night, looking for the foolish victim who decided on a midnight swim.

Perhaps not, he decided.

Instead, he went to his favorite place, away from the bustle of the city center. He called it the oasis—a salt marsh surrounded by fragrant trees and flowering plants. He loved being among the African juniper and leopard orchids, the water hyacinths and sweet jasmine. Small creatures stirred in the brush, night birds whistled, and every now and then a lion roared in the distance.

T’Challa looked heavenward. He thought back to the stories his father had told him when he was a child. Thousands of years ago, his father had said, a great meteor crashed into Wakanda. Amid the smoking and burning debris, something was found—something that would change the future of their country.

It was an energy-absorbing metal that vibrated upon

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closer inspection. The warriors of Wakanda crafted weapons from it and learned that it was stronger than any mineral, gemstone, or metal they had ever seen. They called it Vibranium.

But there was a downside.

The crash site was radioactive, and several Wakandans were supposedly turned into demon spirits. That was when the great warrior Bashenga prayed to the Panther God, Bast, for strength and defeated them. He became the first Black Panther, and his line led down through the ages to T'Challa's father and to him.

T'Challa let out a breath. There was another story his father told him, and it usually came to him when he was alone or feeling melancholy. It was of his mother, N'Yami, who died after bringing him into the world. She was a true Queen of Wakanda, his father had said, beautiful and strong. Sometimes T'Challa imagined her walking hand in hand with his father among their people, proud and loved by all.

I wish I had known you, Mother.

A rustling in the bushes made him turn. "Who's there?" he called.

All was quiet for a moment, until a figure appeared out of the woods surrounding the oasis.

"Thought I'd find you here . . . *brother.*"

T'Challa stiffened. "What are you doing here?"

Hunter approached him with a swagger. “I always know where to find you. You’re as loud as an elephant.”

T’Challa bristled. His older stepbrother was known as one of the best trackers in Wakanda, even at his young age.

“I know you’re going away,” Hunter continued. “Father told me.”

He already knows?

Hunter smiled, and it was not friendly. “Don’t worry. When the fighting starts, I’ll be here by Father’s side, not running off to hide in America.”

T’Challa clenched his fists. His pulse raced. It was always like this with Hunter—each one-upping the other, trying to gain the king’s favor.

“It’s not my decision to go,” T’Challa said. “If it were up to me, I’d stay. I’m not afraid to fight.”

Hunter laughed and drew close to T’Challa, so that the two boys were facing each other, with only a few inches between them. Hunter’s eyes were green, and they gleamed with a cold light. “Say whatever you like, little brother. But while you’re away, I’ll keep your royal seat warm for you.”

And with that, he turned and disappeared back into the woods.

T’Challa fumed. The sting of his words cut deep. But that was what Hunter did best—getting under his skin. *I am Father’s true son*, he told himself. *Not you.*

He thought back to the story his father had told him

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long ago. Hunter was an orphan, the only survivor of a plane crash in which his mother and father had died. Many Wakandans didn't accept him because of his white skin, but the king took him in and raised him as his own.

But you'll never be Black Panther, T'Challa thought. I have the birthright, and the blood.

T'Challa looked down. Bast was circling his legs, purring loudly. He reached down and picked her up, and returned to his room, Hunter's words still ringing in his ears.