



OKOYE
TO THE PEOPLE





CHAPTER 1



The orange-yellow sun rises over Wakanda and casts a light so bright that Okoye's eyes instantly open. She sits up on her bed eager to sprint through sun rays, morning dew, and tall grass to get to the Upanga Training Facility. But her mandatory morning routine forces her to slow down for quiet reflection, and for gratitude to the ancestors that she is now part of a respected group of some of the bravest women in the world: the Dora Milaje.

Just a few years ago, Okoye was a village girl who would race other children through the bushes, over the hills, and down to the market, where the aunties would sell their harvest and trinkets beneath thatched-roof

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stalls. From time to time, King T'Chaka would bless the villagers and market people with his presence. The Dora Milaje would walk by his side as they looked sternly out into the distance, where the green mountain ranges touched the long stretch of ocean-blue sky. They would secretly wink or smile at a girl who might soon join their ranks.

This was how it started for Okoye. The day her youthful, impressionable eyes met one of those beautiful, strong, and powerful women, she knew this would be her life. Months of training during which she was broken down to only a relic of her girlish self and built back up to a mighty, wise, and loyal woman, warrior, and protector of Wakanda and its throne have led to this moment when she proudly slips into her Dora Milaje uniform.

Her red tunic and fitted pants are made from a material so tough and light that they feel like a second skin. So she wears the duties of the Dora Milaje on her body and carries them in her heart. The matching armband and boots are an added touch that make her feel that much more powerful. Her spear is not just a weapon—it's become part of her body, like another limb. It folds into the sleeve of her tunic, hidden from plain sight. Okoye slicks some oil over her bald scalp,

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where the new tattoo has marked her for life, and perhaps, the afterlife.

Ayo is waiting outside her compound, just as eager as Okoye is, even if she isn't smiling. Her clean-shaven head glistens in the morning sunlight and her deep brown skin seems to be covered in starlight. Okoye knows that Ayo is her reflection in every way. She is proud to be a warrior woman alongside her best friend.

There are several compounds at the edge of the forest where the Dora Milaje have made their homes. Each compound is a rounded-edged square structure with white stucco walls, red steel doors, and one-way reflective windows. Hausa symbols are painted around the edges of the doors—secret affirmations each Dora Milaje has to memorize. Many of the Dora have already left their compounds while another group rests after having completed their nightly shifts in the palace. Okoye and Ayo are summoned to the Upanga Training Facility for today, away from their usual duties of guarding the Wakandan throne.

Ayo stops just as the dirt road leading out of the forest opens up to a paved footpath. She holds her spear as a deceptive smile spreads across her face. “How about a little morning exercise before we walk to Upanga?” she asks.

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“Shouldn’t we wait to see what the captain has in store for us?” asks Okoye.

“A little friendly combat will not hurt,” Ayo says, pounding her spear on the ground. “Besides, we will be that much more prepared. It’ll be a warm-up. I promise.”

Okoye has already unfolded her spear from out of her tunic’s sleeve and is in her combat position—her knees bent with one leg forward and one leg back, her right arm extended over her head, ready to knock Ayo’s spear out of her hand. Within seconds, the warrior women are dodging each other’s weapons as they spin on their heels, kick, swing, and leap. Okoye’s movements are swift and fiery while Ayo is steady and patient before she attacks. Okoye quickly twists to deliver a strong jab, but Ayo aims for her legs, and in an instant, Okoye is on the ground, on her back, defeated. But it’s only a few seconds before she swings her arm around Ayo’s arm at the elbow, weakening her grip on the spear. With all the strength she can muster, Okoye pushes herself up with her legs, taking Ayo’s whole body with her. Ayo leaps out of Okoye’s grip, and the two women are a few feet away from each other once again, in their combat positions.

A small crowd of children has gathered around them, cheering for their favorite. Half of them are

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singing Okoye's name, while the others root for Ayo.

Okoye is the first to smile. Ayo relaxes her body. The children applaud, and most of them return to their chores or long walks to school. About five girls stay back, looking up at Okoye and Ayo in awe.

"When we are older, we want to be just like you!" a girl says.

Another girl motions with her arm as if to release a folded spear. She swings her imaginary weapon at the other girl, and they are in battle while speaking an unintelligible gibberish that is supposed to be Hausa.

Okoye and Ayo laugh. "Soon, my young sisters," Okoye says. "Soon."

"Make sure Mistress Zola takes notice of you when you demonstrate your skills," Ayo adds.

The girls disperse, running, laughing, and swapping dreams of how they will one day protect Wakanda as Okoye and Ayo head to the Upanga Training Facility. Ayo is moving slower than before.

"What is the matter?" Okoye asks. "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt? Me? Never," Ayo says. "You, on the other hand, must be tired. You were breathing hard, my sister."

"Tired? Me? Never," Okoye says, standing straight and folding her spear back into her sleeve. "We can fight all day, if you want. But Captain Aneka would

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reprimand us for practicing when we have more important matters to tend to.”

“You are correct. After all, you need your rest.”

“And you need to tend to your sore muscles.”

This small moment of joy and playfulness between the two warrior women slowly wears off as the morning sun inches toward the middle of the sky.

“You know,” Okoye says, “we mustn’t be so careless around the villagers. They must see us as noble and disciplined at all times.”

“I disagree. They must see us as humans and not as warrior robots created in one of Wakanda’s many technological labs.”

“You are correct,” Okoye concedes. “After all, those village girls were looking up to us. I suppose they want to see the possibility of what they can achieve in Wakanda. They can be artisans if they want. They can be healers or have their own businesses.”

“They can be poets or spies; seamstresses or carpenters,” says Ayo.

“Physicists or singers; botanists or chemists,” Okoye adds. “Don’t you see how prodigious little Shuri has become? The princess is sure to create an entirely new universe in that play lab of hers.”

“Yes, that one is just a ball of raw talent and potential.

And of course, any girl in Wakanda can become a Dora Milaje.”

“If they succeed at passing all the trials. Don’t you think Captain Aneka will become much stricter as time goes on?” Okoye asks.

“Wakanda may change during our time as Dora Milaje,” Ayo says. “I’ve been out there in the world and I’ve seen how nations have fallen and risen. We may need to shift our skills as times change.”

“Do you think this is what the meeting with Captain Aneka is all about?”

“I do not know. But in any case, we have both gotten a little workout from our battle this morning. I am ready for whatever assignment will come our way.”

“I am not sure, Ayo,” Okoye says, lowering her voice. “I am just getting used to guarding the king and getting to know the royal family. I don’t think I want to be sent off to a new assignment just like you were a couple of months ago.”

“I understand, my sister. I, too, was barely a new Dora Milaje when I accompanied Captain Aneka on my first trip outside Wakanda. But being whisked away to new adventures at a moment’s notice is all part of our calling. Accept it with grace, Okoye. Village girls are looking up to you. You are a role model now.”

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“A role model? Me? A whole me?” Okoye jokes with a smile.

“Yes, my sister. A whole you. Okoye of Wakanda and the mighty and brave Dora Milaje,” Ayo says.

The two women laugh as they make their way to the Upanga Training Facility. But as soon as passersby come close, they shift into their serious Dora Milaje stances—face forward, shoulders back, alert, tall, and regal.



CHAPTER 2



The warm morning breeze grazes the tops of Okoye's and Ayo's heads, and their tattoos shimmer in the sunlight. Just a few seasons ago, they had dreams of protecting King T'Chaka and Wakanda as warrior women of the Dora Milaje. Those girlhood wishes are now their reality. Okoye's chest puffs out with pride as they make their way to Upanga. But they must stay grounded and centered, exuding a commanding presence, even if they are still like buoyant, giggling village girls on the inside.

"Ayo, I have certainly gotten much stronger since becoming a Dora Milaje," Okoye says. "I am swifter and lighter on my feet. I almost feel invincible."

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“Ah, Okoye. Captain Aneka taught us that strength is not only physical. It is mental and—”

“Spiritual,” Okoye adds. “I know, I know. But when we fight, it is with our bodies and strong muscles, yes? Our strength as the people of Wakanda is not from magic but muscles and brain power, am I correct?”

“Our ancestors guide us, too,” Ayo says.

“In the middle of battle when we call on the Black Panther, he doesn’t descend from the clouds hanging over Wakanda. It is the science of the Kimoyo beads that brings him to us.”

“Do you not remember what Captain Aneka has told us? As Dora Milaje women and warriors, we can be all things at once: spirit, science, and pure strength.”

“Ah, yes. Like the sun, moon, and stars. They all exist in the sky,” Okoye says. “Then we are like the sky.”

“And like the earth with its mountains, valleys, oceans, and rivers,” Ayo adds. “We are like Wakanda.”

“Ha! I like that. We are Wakanda!” Okoye says.

Then they turn to each other and say, “Forever!”

Upanga’s arched roof and tinted windows become visible in the distance, past the trees and flower bushes lining the paved road leading to its elaborate red double doors where two spears cross each other. As soon as Okoye and Ayo step onto the mat where the words *Dora*

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Milaje are inscribed in gold, the doors open up to the wide and majestic rotunda of the training facility.

In the center of the brightly lit rotunda, standing over a Black Panther insignia, is Captain Aneka, wearing her white-and-gold tunic and matching pants. Her hands are clasped in front of her and her short, cropped hair glistens under the lights. “Good morning, warriors!” she says in Hausa, one of the languages of Wakanda, with only a hint of a smile. “I am so elated to see you.”

“Good to see you again, Captain,” Ayo says. “We will only be elated once we know what this is all about.”

“Well, I am elated to see you, Captain,” Okoye says, bowing her head out of respect.

“Ha! Ayo is right. Hold your enthusiasm, Okoye. Tell me, how have you been?”

“We are doing well,” Okoye says.

“We are better than well,” says Ayo. “Did you expect otherwise, Captain?”

“Of course not. This is why one of you has been chosen for this special assignment.”

Okoye and Ayo quickly exchange glances. Captain Aneka had sent a message via a Kimoyo bead for Okoye and Ayo to meet her first thing in the morning in Upanga. Excitement had stirred in Okoye’s belly, but

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she's learned to keep her emotions at bay. When duty calls, she mustn't revert to her girlish fantasies of action and adventure. On the day she received her noble and very important assignment to be a guard for King T'Chaka alongside Aneka, she wanted to leap toward the sky with joy. But she's learned to maintain a stern and controlled presence, even when her emotions are like a turbulent river.

On most days, Okoye and Ayo stand beside the king as he meets with the Tribal Council, during his briefings with intertribal representatives, and when he's addressing his son, Prince T'Challa. This is when it's harder for Okoye to keep a stern face. She can still recall T'Challa playing along the grassy edges of the palace wall as a little boy. Now he is busy with his own combat trainings and trying to impress his father. Little Shuri makes her presence known from time to time, poking fun at Okoye's bald head and stoic facade. Okoye has mastered the art of suppressing her laughter, thank goodness.

Captain Aneka paces up and down around them, her boots clicking against the marble floor of the rotunda. The captain stops just a few feet in front of Okoye. Her face is stern, but her eyes are smiling, letting Okoye and Ayo know that while she is strict, she cares deeply about the Dora Milaje.

“You may be wondering why I called you here this morning,” the captain says. “Firstly, I apologize for pulling you away from your duties. I’ve sent two other Dora Milaje as substitutes. The king understands. However, one of you, the noble women of the Dora Milaje, has been presented with a tremendous opportunity. Ayo, since you have already been on this special mission, I have invited you here to support your warrior sister Okoye.”

Okoye feels her insides leap, but she is as still as a baobab tree. She glances over at Ayo, checking for any sign of excitement on her face. Ayo quickly winks at her, so Okoye smiles back only a little—a secret exchange between the two young women expressing anxiety or excitement. Only a few times during their training would they read genuine fear in each other’s eyes. But they are long past those days of having to perform strenuous feats and competitive games to demonstrate skill, speed, and strength to be worthy of the Dora Milaje title.

Okoye hangs on to Captain Aneka’s every word as she looks at the women with her piercing eyes, scanning each of their faces. Okoye looks at Captain Aneka in admiration. She’s always believed her to be a pillar of grace and strength—a stealthy warrior and a master at combat techniques from all around the world.

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Aneka is closer to their age, so her achievements seem attainable. Surely, there is more to learn from her, but Okoye has passed all her tests, performed exceedingly well in all the games, and she is now a pillar of grace and strength as well. Okoye's mind races, wondering what this opportunity could be.

"As you already know, the world is much, much larger than Wakanda," Captain Aneka continues. "There are nations and cultures, people and places that have their own histories and keep their own secrets."

Okoye raises her hand, and Aneka nods for her to speak up. "Do these other places have anything like Vibranium?"

"Of course not," Captain Aneka snaps. "Vibranium belongs only to Wakanda, just like the Dora Milaje. You are one of a kind: diamonds in a sea of coal, a constellation in the night sky, a rainbow after a storm—"

"We get it, Captain," Ayo interrupts. "We are special."

Okoye tries to hold back a chuckle, but within seconds she is an avalanche of laughter. Soon after, Ayo bursts open with joy.

"Attention!" Captain Aneka shouts in Hausa, and the women immediately stop and stand straight with their arms at their sides, their faces like stone again. "I will not fault you for finding a bit of respite from your

new duties. In fact, some laughter here and there—some light conversation and small talk, as they say—will prepare you for this sort of assignment.”

Okoye’s ears perk up. Ayo smiles a little. It’s true. The Dora Milaje are not about warfare and stone faces all the time. Joy slips in like beams of sunlight every now and then, lifting their spirits and lighting their hearts, very much like this morning. Their jobs are not easy, and they are humans, not machines. So laughter is rest. Moments of levity heal wounds from wars not yet fought. Okoye turns to Ayo again, and they exchange genuine smiles this time.

“However, I will need to prepare you for this task, Okoye,” the captain says. “And *you* will need to demonstrate to me what you can bring to this assignment. You will be accompanying me to America, where King T’Chaka will be an invited guest. You and I will be his guards. However, we have to tone it down. No Dora Milaje uniform. We can bring our spears, but they must remain discreet and be used only when absolutely necessary.”

“I am ready, Captain,” Okoye says, trying to contain her excitement.

“She was born ready,” Ayo adds, smiling at her friend.

“Very well, then. Follow me.”

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Okoye and Ayo walk into a small room where a series of strange outfits float in midair, hanging from invisible wires. There are ball gowns and exercise clothes, T-shirts and jeans, sneakers in all colors, and even swimsuits that are a far cry from their Dora Milaje uniforms, which cover every inch of their bodies. A blazer, a fitted skirt, and a pair of heels hover before them as if being worn by a model, but there is no one there. “What is this?” Okoye asks.

“It’s business attire,” Ayo says.

“I mean, I know what it is. But why is it here?”

“Why don’t you try them on for size?” the captain asks. “We already know they fit, but you should learn to be comfortable in this clothing.”

Soon Okoye is out of her uniform and into a black blazer, pencil skirt, and black heels. “Who am I supposed to be?” she says.

“A college student. A supermodel. An intern at the Wakandan palace,” Aneka says.

“Which one?” Okoye asks.

“All of them. At once! We are going to America, Okoye!” the captain exclaims. “Where you can be all you can be!”

“America!” Okoye squeals, forgetting all her Dora Milaje training to keep her emotions at bay. She can’t help it. Joining the ranks of the Dora Milaje is already

a dream come true several times over. But traveling to America exceeds everything she could've ever imagined. She quickly composes herself because she will certainly be on duty even outside Wakanda's borders. "This will be very exciting. But we can't be part of an army? Any and everything else but Dora Milaje? I think this will be the hardest part of this assignment, especially wearing those clothes."

"You can wear sneakers with anything in America. You can run, fight, kick in them, and not have to blow your cover," Ayo says as she watches Okoye trying to walk around in the heels. "But I like the heels. Why couldn't we wear something like that when we traveled with the king?"

"Because you were a student then, wide-eyed and oblivious. Now, Okoye, you will be a diplomatic guest. You don't want to blend in too much with the commoners."

Okoye and Ayo exchange smiles. "A guest to whom?" Okoye asks.

Captain Aneka smiles deceptively. "There is more for me to teach you, warrior woman. Let us go," she says.

Okoye soon becomes accustomed to her new outfit, still without knowing the details of this assignment. As her heels click-clack on the marble floors of the facility,

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Captain Aneka motions for her and Ayo to follow her into another room.

A small group of other Dora Milaje is seated around a table that is covered with fancy plates, wineglasses, silver cutlery, and elaborate place settings.

“A dinner party? At this time of the morning?” Okoye asks.

Captain Aneka simply pulls out two seats for Okoye and Ayo as the other Dora Milaje politely greet them with slight nods and gentle smiles—odd gestures from their fellow warrior women, who usually exchange a few jovial Hausa words with one another.

Okoye is awkward around the table. Sure, she’s been to dinners in the palace where she would stand guard by the door as the king hosts his guests. But the Dora Milaje take turns eating meals out of sight, sometimes while standing outside the servants’ quarters where the meals are prepared, and other times late at night after they’ve fulfilled their duties. Sitting around a table like this is a luxury.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” the captain says. “Your sister warriors are here to help.”

“Do you care to tell us what this is all about?” Ayo asks.

“Formalities,” Captain Aneka says as she paces around the table with her hands clasped behind her.

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“Niceties and pleasantries. You’ve all seen in one way or another how our beloved king has entertained his guests—other members of the royal court, tribespeople, and even humble villagers with a special invitation. Except our king is not as shallow as the people you will meet on the other side of Wakanda’s borders. Way on the other side, in America.”

Okoye’s heart leaps as she thinks of all the adventures that await in that foreign country, but she remains calm to receive more details.

“Okoye, observe your sister warriors as they serve themselves while engaging in light conversation. Please remember this: napkin on the lap, salad fork, dinner fork, knife, spoon. Water glass, wineglass. However, in other parts of the world, you are too young to drink. You have a couple more years.”

“Ayo tells me that at twenty-one it will be legal for us to drink in America, while at eighteen you can go to war and are expected to kill your enemies,” Okoye says as she glances at Ayo, who only gives her a knowing nod. Soon she is mimicking the Dora Milaje’s gestures as they serve their meals and ask strange questions about the weather and compliment the unusually bland food that is certainly not part of the traditional Wakandan fare—a far cry from their customary ways of eating out of calabash bowls, sometimes with their bare fingers

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because mashed yams with a spicy sauce demand it. “I don’t understand, Captain,” Okoye says. “We are not unfamiliar with American customs. We know how to eat at such tables. Why must we engage in such frivolous activity?”

“This is not about civility. This is about diplomacy,” Captain Aneka says as she gracefully cuts her vegetables into tiny bite-sized pieces. “Okoye, we are going to New York City!”

Okoye nearly chokes on a piece of lettuce. “New York City?”

“Yes, the richest city in America. Almost like Wakanda, but it doesn’t hide its wealth from the world.” Captain Aneka holds out her right hand, where a single Kimoyo bead rests in her palm. The bead projects a light beam that becomes a hologram. Within its iridescent walls, a silhouette of a tree appears with the initialism>NNLB. “The king has to make several rounds of diplomatic meetings, and he has been invited by an internationally renowned organization called No Nation Left Behind Industries. They’ve been pestering our king for some time now and King T’Chaka has finally obliged. A woman by the name of Stella Adams has personally invited the king. He’s been told that his help is needed to do some good around the world, and you know our king. If it’s a humanitarian mission, then

he doesn't need much convincing to leave Wakanda to, at the very least, spread his message of hope and peace."

The hologram shifts into an image of a blond woman with her arms folded across her chest. She smiles a little, but there is something discomfoting about her eyes—cold and piercing. Or it may just be how Americans photograph themselves to show the world that they have power and control, even over their own facial expressions. No matter. Okoye only takes in the details of her face for future reference.

"Will he be in any danger?" Okoye asks, glancing at Ayo, who has barely shared anything about her brief time in New York City. "We will protect him at all costs."

"Ayo, have you not instructed your sister warrior on what the world is like outside Wakanda?"

"What's to tell? The first and last time I was in New York City, I simply followed you and the king around like a palace pet," Ayo says in a tone unfamiliar to Okoye.

"Our Royal Highness King T'Chaka likes to make an appearance in the world when he feels it's necessary," Captain Aneka continues. "It's important that we represent Wakanda exactly how the world believes us to be: a humble African nation that is willing to extend its grace to other nations. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Well, that is true, isn't it?" Okoye asks. She picks

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up a piece of bread to sop up some gravy—the way she would eat mashed yams and a spicy sauce with her hands—but another Dora Milaje slaps away her hand and motions for her to use a spoon.

“Yes, but there shall be no word of Vibranium or your training as Dora Milaje. We don’t want to arouse suspicion as to why a small and humble nation like Wakanda would need powerful female warriors such as ourselves.”

“When I went to New York City,” Ayo says, “the king introduced me as a student.”

“It was not entirely untrue,” Captain Aneka says. “You were a Dora Milaje in training. You were certainly a student.”

“Then what will be our roles?” Okoye asks.

A deceptive smile spreads across Captain Aneka’s face. “You can be whatever you want to be in America. If you can make it in New York City, you can make it anywhere, as they say. But, as for your duties, you are to stay alert at all times, making sure our king is safe. I believe that he will be in good hands as an invited guest. However, I worry that New York City has plenty of petty thieves, or anyone who will want to take advantage of newcomers.”

Okoye looks at Ayo with inquisitive eyes and a string of questions swirling around in her head. Petty thieves

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in a place as wealthy as New York City? Whatever the case, if this is part of her Dora Milaje duties, then she is more than ready and willing. There is no room for questions and doubts. She must answer the call and fulfill her king's wishes with every ounce of her Dora Milaje soul.