

SHURI



THE
VANISHED

BY **NIC STONE**
SCHOLASTIC INC.

**FOR MY BELOVED CHARLOTTE MACKENZIE.
AKA: QUEEN CHUCK. COCO LOVES YOU.
—NIC**

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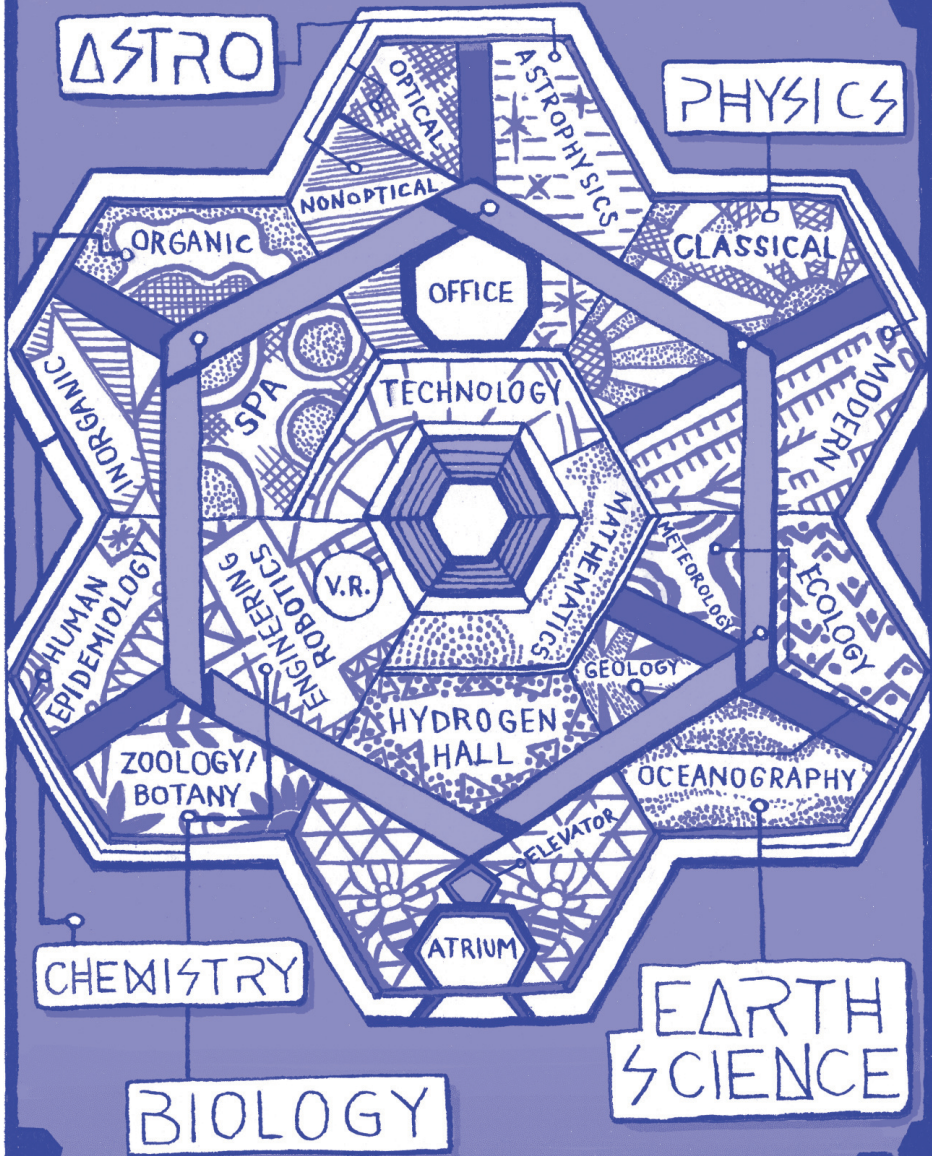
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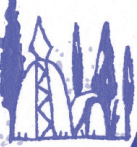
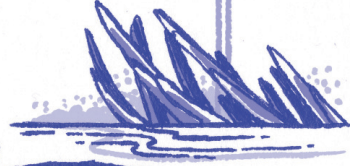
Birnin Zana The Golden City

NECROPOLIS
CITY OF THE DEAD

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MUTATA
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BIRNIN ZANA CITY CENTER



PROLOGUE

There is something seriously wrong with Shuri's best friend.

The princess and the Dora-Milaje-in-training have sparred before, sure . . .

But never like this.

As Shuri's eyes trace over K'Marah's stone-set face, her pulse quickens. Gone is the usual twinkle of mischief in the macadamia-shell brown of K'Marah's irises. Gone the dimple that appears with her slight smirk . . .

Gone even the vaguest hint that K'Marah *sees* Shuri standing before her.

It's like looking into the gaze of a complete stranger.

The girl who has stayed doggedly loyal to the princess for over three years is not the girl standing before her now. And Shuri knows it.

Knows it like she knows that the absence of her *friend* is Shuri's own fault.

The bell chimes.

Perhaps if Shuri had just listened, had shown some "concern," as her friend put it, K'Marah wouldn't be launching herself forward as though she's ready to tear the princess limb from limb.

Shuri isn't ready.

K'Marah strikes hard and fast with a chop to the tender space between neck and shoulder. And as if that wasn't enough to knock Shuri to her knees, the subsequent knee to the midsection certainly is.

Shuri stares up at the ceiling, too stunned to move.

"Fight *back*, Princess!" K'Marah's face appears above Shuri's, but the voice coming out her mouth isn't her own.

"Yeah. If you won't fight for *us*, at least fight for yourself . . ." Another voice Shuri doesn't recognize from a girl who has just, *poof*, appeared beside K'Marah.

"You're so big and bad, but you won't even look for us." A third girl.

Shuri shuts her eyes in the hope that when she opens

them, the additional girls will have disappeared. (Because who *are* they and where did they even come from?)

“Oh, is she sleeping now?” comes a *new* voice. (Shuri shudders.) “Typical.”

Shuri peeks out of one eye. There are now eight girls above her—of varying heights, complexions, and ethnic backgrounds—and as she watches, more appear.

They’re all beginning to shout now. And draw closer. Soon they’ll crush her beneath them.

Which is when Shuri locks eyes with K’Marah . . .

Who stands tall, draws her foot back as far as it will go, and then swings it forward into Shuri’s ribs.

MISSION LOG

THIS IS ACTUALLY FAR MORE DIFFICULT THAN I ANTICIPATED.

Everything hurts. I spend hours per day getting my butt kicked from multiple directions. And the minutiae of courses like Wakandan Diaspora and the World (because apparently there are people who have left this place over the millennia) are so boring at times, it feels as though my brain will ooze out of my ears.

I knocked an elbow out of socket in acrobatics last week—glory to Bast for our speed-healing technologies, because, *OUCH*. I also took a kick to the thigh that left a bruise the size of a mango (thanks, K'Marah!). And to top it all off, when I

began to doze in Scholar M'Walimu's Governing Fundamentals tutoring session, the old man made me "sit" against the wall with no chair until my legs felt like I'd dipped them in lava, and I cried out in agony. Mean as a poked rattlesnake, that one.

But it will all be worthwhile. When trouble comes a-knocking in our great nation, I will be well prepared to answer the door (with a double backflip and roundhouse kick to the throat while spouting off the origins and attributes of our tribes, no less).

And a-knocking it shall come. Especially if the intel I just received from my latest invention is any indication. It is a multi-point surveillance system I call P.R.O.W.L.: *Panther Reconnaissance Operative Watch Lattice*. Thanks to the ant-size "bugs" I may have planted during my visit to the throne for a training-progress meeting with T'Challa a few days ago, I just overheard a conversation he and Mother were having about some top-secret international summit he plans to attend.

The conclave, he said it's called. A gathering of hundreds of global heads of state.

Which would likely be the most boring thing on all of Earth if not for two reasons: (1) The main topic of discussion? Technology and its implications on national security—aka my area of expertise. And if that was not enough to pique my interest (it was): (2) T'Challa told Mother he intends to seek counsel from a few of the leaders he "trusts" about the wisest approach to revealing our existence to the rest of the world.

This latter piece did come as a bit of a surprise to *me* (though perhaps it shouldn't've—T'Challa has never been one to *not* carry out a plan of his own devising). It hasn't even been half a year since we were invaded and almost overrun by a handful of neighboring nations who *do* know we are here. I was tempted to give him a Kimoyo call and ask if he's forgotten that our beloved sacred field has only grown to 75 percent of its former glory (and all thanks to *me* . . . and K'Marah . . . and

"Ororo Storm," as K'Marah calls the queen of Kenya, but my point is clear).

I'd *thought* that entire ordeal would cause big bro to reconsider his plan to expose us to *more* (potentially) hostile entities with, like . . . armies and guns and warped ideas. I recently completed a study module about the history of colonization on the continent of Africa, and it was enough to give me nightmares. Ghostly pale, blank-eyed zombie creatures clawing and blasting their way through our land in pursuit of Vibranium while asserting that *our* culture and traditions are inferior to their people-eating ways.

Just the thought makes me want to move our entire civilization underground.

But T'Challa will do what T'Challa will do. I am trying to "maintain an open mind," as K'Marah says, and consider that his motivations are beyond my informational reach . . . But this *is* the same guy who shirked my concerns when the heart-shaped herb was being decimated by a mutated toxin.

If our king is bent on exposing Wakanda

to the ugliness and greed that permeate the wider world, the least *I* can do is make sure there are minimal holes in our cyber and border defenses. Which is why it is imperative that I attend this conclave. As I mentioned before: Tech—especially the national security-related type—is *my* realm of mastery. Case in point: Large-scale tests of my security dome prototype are set to begin in a few weeks' time.

I *must* be at T'Challa's side during this conclave. It is my duty.

Otherwise this overfilled brain and aching body are in vain.

1

STIPULATION

As it turns out, eavesdropping on highly confidential conversations can cause quite the distracted mind. Which Shuri is learning the hard way: The princess's lack of focus just landed her flat on her back. Hard enough to knock the air from her lungs.

“What is going *on* with you?” Shuri's best friend's brown face appears above hers—you know, after the swirling stars have cleared from her vision and she can actually see again. “You are maddeningly distracted today, Shuri,” K'Marah says. “At least block a blow every now and then? Kicking your butt over and over

is exhausting!” K’Marah reaches a hand down to pull Shuri to her feet.

“Sorry,” the princess mumbles.

“You certainly are!” Kocha M’Shindi rumbles. And despite the fact that the little woman only comes up to Shuri’s chin and has to be close to ninety years old, the princess shrinks into herself. M’Shindi has been training Black Panthers for as long as . . . well, no one really knows, but Shuri’s brother, father, and grandfather were among her pupils. One wouldn’t think it looking at her aged face and tiny frame, but her area of expertise is hand-to-hand combat.

What Shuri *does* know is that getting to train with THE Kocha is a huge privilege. One she’s currently squandering.

“Welp, you’re in trouble now,” K’Marah whispers as M’Shindi approaches with the graceful precision of a tightrope walker. Both girls have snapped to attention: backs straight, chins lifted, feet shoulder-width apart, and hands clasped behind their backs.

Not really breathing.

M’Shindi’s eyes narrow as she steps right up to Shuri. So close, it makes goose pimples erupt all over the princess’s arms. “Look at me, child,” the woman says.

Almost against her will, Shuri’s eyes drop and lock onto the Kocha’s. They’re so dark, it looks as if there’s

no barrier between iris and pupil. And with M'Shindi standing there, just *staring* at her, Shuri finds herself wondering just how much those eyes have seen.

What they're seeing right now.

"You are burdened, Princess," the woman says.

"Uhhhh—"

"Do not speak. Listen only."

K'Marah coughs beside Shuri, and the princess wishes she could get her elbow to shoot out in a quick jab to her best friend's ribs, but she's frozen under the Kocha's gaze.

"You have many gifts. Do not permit their investment in unworthy pursuits."

At this, Shuri's eyes drop, and the insectlike devices she created to give her access she's maybe not supposed to have crawl to the top of her mind unbidden.

Except her bugs are *necessary*. Without them, she'd have no idea what's really going on. *Despite* the fact that Shuri recently saved the nation—literally—Mother and T'Challa are still reluctant to share pertinent intel with the princess. Besides: It's not like Shuri intends to do anything bad with what she overhears. If anything, she's trying to make sure the "gifts" Kocha M'Shindi mentioned are actually being utilized for the *good* of Wakanda. For its *protection*.

Isn't she?

“Take heed, Panther Cub,” the Kocha continues. “Unworthy uses of your gifts won’t merely distract: They will serve to keep you small in your own sight. Understood?”

Shuri nods despite the fact that she has no clue what the old woman is talking about.

“Use your words,” M’Shindi admonishes.

Shuri clears her throat and forces the words to form on her tongue. “Understood, Kocha.”

“Lift your eyes and try again.”

After a *very* deep breath, Shuri does as she’s told. Looking right into M’Shindi’s black pools, she says again: “I understand, Kocha M’Shindi.”

The lines in the woman’s face deepen as she grins, and it’s then that the princess knows she has failed a test she had no idea she was taking. “You do not,” the Kocha says with certainty so absolute, her chin rises in triumph. “But you shall.”

And she turns on her leather slippers and silently pads away.



The whole exchange—and K’Marah’s cheeky “Dang, Princess, you got *told* . . .” response—puts Shuri in a sour mood. Which just strengthens her resolve to convince Mother and T’Challa that she should be permitted to attend this conclave thing.

In fact, as first in line to the throne, it's vital that Shuri be privy to matters of diplomacy. And honestly, it's not as though she's surprised Mother and T'Challa didn't think to make sure she's included. Among the other things she's overheard through the use of her bugs are discussions about whether allowing her to train was the right thing to do. Despite the "promise" she's shown (T'Challa's word) and the fact that her dear brother is insistent on tossing himself into the line of fire (Shuri's assessment, but a valid one), Mother still isn't convinced this is the proper path for her only daughter.

So Shuri will have to prove (again) that she's ready for a higher level of responsibility when it comes to matters of domestic importance. Especially the tech-related ones.

Besides, if there's one area where her "gifts" have proven useful, it's in the area of national defense. If there's one thing Shuri has learned from her various history courses, it's that people can be downright predatory when there are valuable resources to be had (and while Vibranium has no "market value," as they say, she's *sure* it's monetarily valuable considering even the limited things *she's* been able to do with it). Full fortification will be of utmost importance.

So committed to her mission is the princess, she

takes the time to write out and rehearse exactly what she'll say. Then she showers and puts on one of the unnecessarily ornate getups that appear in her closet every few weeks: a blue-green satin beaded tunic and slim-fit trousers with reinforced knees.

She even fixes her hair.

Ayo's eyebrows rise when Shuri steps out of her chambers.

(Another thing that hasn't changed: the presence of a Dora Milaje guard within thirty meters of the princess at all times.)

And as the young royal and her beautiful, bald bodyguard fall into step side by side, the Dora speaks. "Forgive my impropriety, Princess, but did I miss a memo?"

"Huh?" Shuri replies.

"You seem . . . overdressed for a mere weekly progress-reporting." Shuri catches the woman's smirk out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh. I, umm . . . Well . . ."

"No need to explain yourself to *me*. You look very nice, is all. Teal is definitely your color. Makes that melanin really *pop*."

"Oy, you sound like K'Marah."

Ayo laughs. "I will admit: Your young friend is rubbing off on all of us."

Which makes Shuri feel a bit . . . funny. Not that she doesn't love and admire her best friend, but it hasn't escaped Shuri's notice how many other people—adults especially—have come to admire K'Marah as well. Especially since the whole Princess-and-Dora-Milaje-in-Training-Save-Entire-Nation thing. It's like K'Marah is hailed as some conquering heroine returned home from a most treacherous battle, but Shuri is still . . . just some kid.

She attempts to swallow the bitter taste in her mouth as she and Ayo round the final corner and approach the throne room door.

Which is standing open. Shuri can see T'Challa all kicked back on his fancy throne like the king he is, with the queen mother daintily perched at the edge of her lavish purple-velvet-upholstered seat. Ramonda looks Shuri over from head to toe and smiles as her daughter crosses the threshold, and then gestures to the chair on the other side of T'Challa.

By the time the princess is seated, the massive double doors have been pulled shut. The three royals are alone now.

Shuri opens her mouth to speak . . . but doesn't get the chance to.

"So," the queen mother begins, clasping her hands in her lap. "I spoke with Kocha M'Shindi this afternoon."

And just like that, the entire spiel Shuri spent hours rehearsing has—*poof*—vanished from her mind. There is only panic now. “What . . . did she say?”

Shuri’s whole plan is over. Ended before it could begin. There’s no way she’ll be able to convince her mother and T’Challa to allow her attendance at the conclave if the Kocha told her mother she’d spent today’s training session getting pinned over and over again by a girl four inches shorter than she is.

Again, K’Marah is the mighty warrior, and Shuri is the bested (and distracted) weaker foe. She sighs as her vision blurs, then makes to wipe something out of her eye before any tears can fall.

“She says that she is deeply impressed with your progress,” the queen mother continues.

“Great,” Shuri grumbles. But then her chin lifts. “Wait. Come again?”

Now Ramonda is smiling. “She said that you are—and I quote—‘the quickest study’ she’s ever encountered.”

T’Challa *hmpfs*. He trained under M’Shindi, too, after all.

“I am very proud of you, Shuri,” the queen goes on. “As you know, I’ve had my qualms about you subjecting your body to physical violence and adding all those additional subjects to your course load. But perhaps I’ve been shortsighted.”

“I’d like to go to the conclave,” Shuri blurts.

The queen mother draws back as though the declaration hit her like a punch. She and T’Challa exchange a glance Shuri can’t read; then the king turns to his sister. “Conclave?” he says.

So that’s how they want to play it, eh?

“You are going to an international conclave on tech in two weeks’ time, yes? I would like to accompany you.”

“Hmmm.” T’Challa leans forward, placing his plum-colored-silk-clad elbows on his knees. The queen mother has gone stock-still. Not a good sign. “Now let’s say, hypothetically speaking, that I *am* going to an ‘international conclave,’ as you put it. Where exactly would you have acquired this knowledge?”

Oh boy. In her rush to devise a scheme for getting *to* the conclave, Shuri hadn’t considered that she’d need a viable (cover) source for the information. Seems quite obvious now but . . .

“K’Marah told me,” she says.

“Did she, now?” The queen turns to T’Challa.

And now Shuri has to backtrack: Getting K’Marah into trouble certainly isn’t what she was going for. “Not that she *wanted* to tell me,” Shuri goes on, spinning a larger web. “I could tell she was excited about something, so I poked and prodded until she told me. Don’t

be mad at her, though. I can be very persuasive.”

The queen mother’s eyes narrow, and her lips part—surely to shut the princess down with gale-winds-level force.

But T’Challa speaks first: “Fine.”

Mmmm . . . “Fine?” Shuri replies.

“You may accompany me with one stipulation.”

Now the queen mother looks shocked. But she doesn’t interject.

“Okay,” Shuri says, her excitement beginning to build. “What is it?”

“You must complete Phase One of your training and earn all ‘exceptional’ marks on assessments before we depart.”