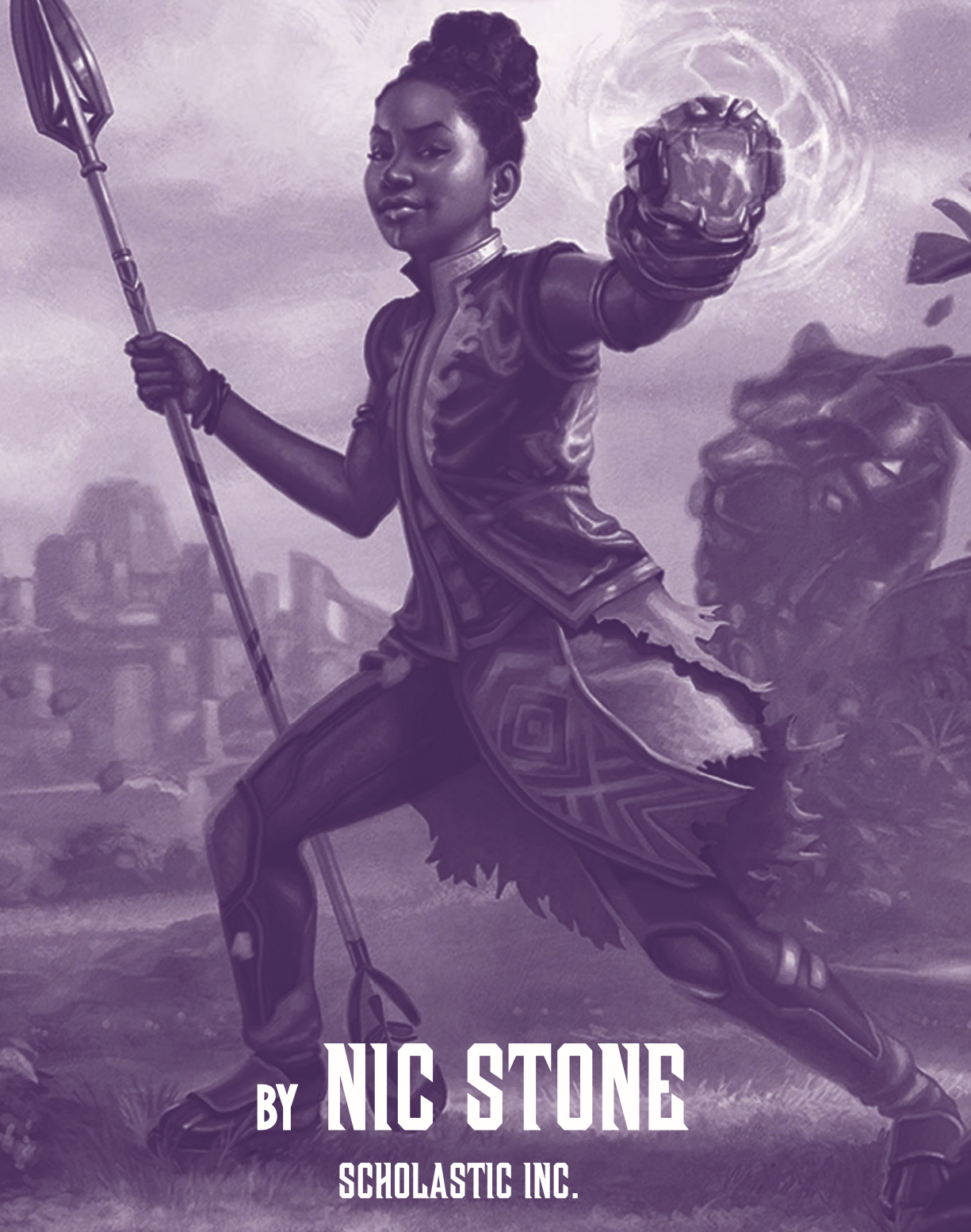


SHURI



BY **NIC STONE**

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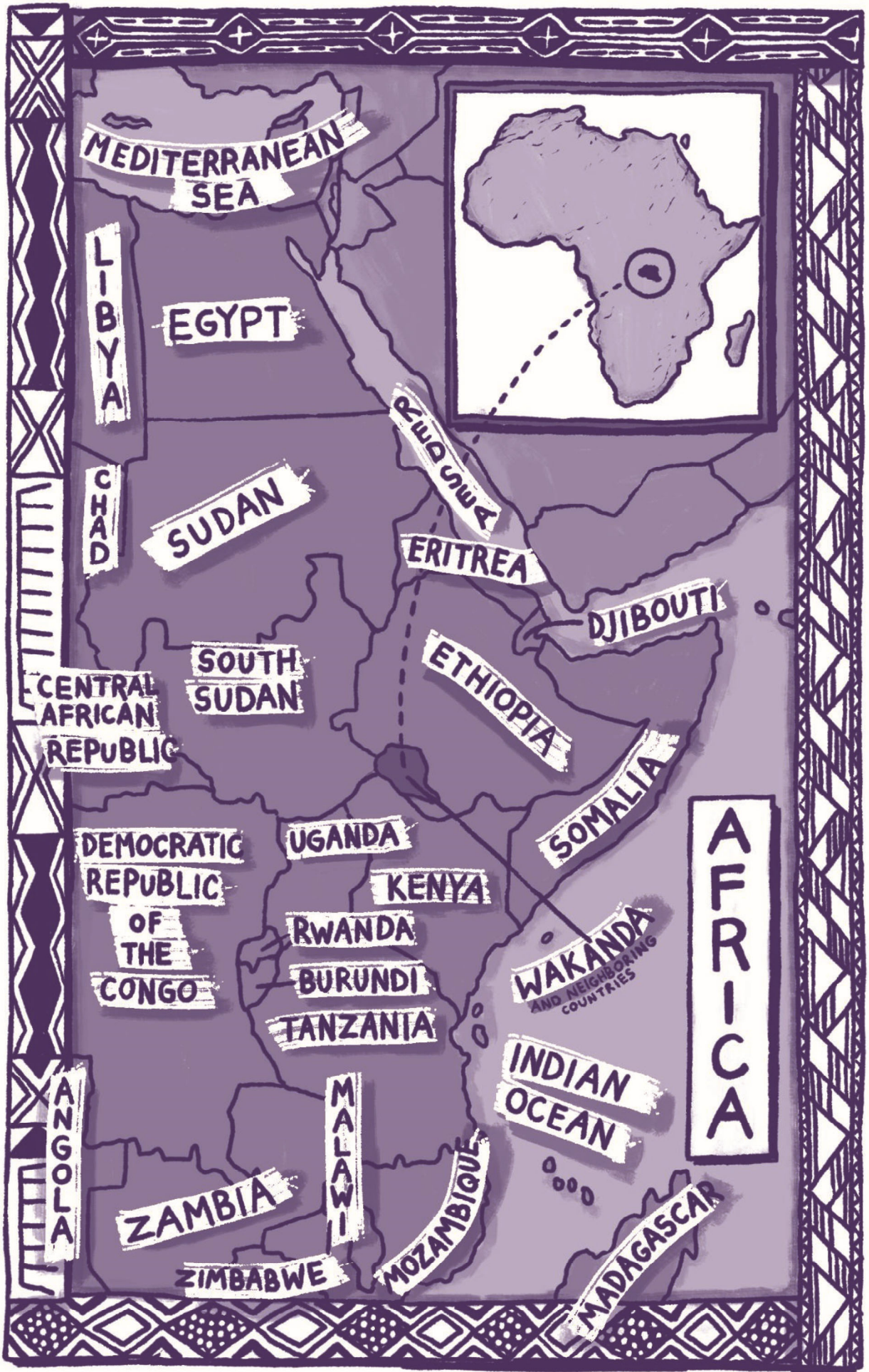
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**FOR KALANI JOY AND ALL THE LITTLE BROWN-SKINNED
SUPER-GENIUSES. STEAM ON, LOVES.**

—NIC



MEDITERRANEAN SEA

LIBYA

EGYPT



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SUDAN

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DJIBOUTI

SOUTH SUDAN

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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MOHANDA

BIRNIN T'CHAKA

BIRNIN DJATA

BIRNIN BASHENGA

BIRNIN ZANA
(THE GOLDEN CITY)

NECROPOLIS
(THE CITY OF THE DEAD)

MENA NGAI
(THE GREAT MOUND)

CANAAN

BIRNIN S'YAN

BIRNIN AZZARIA

ALKAMA FIELDS

NYANZA

AZANIA

NIGANDA



PROLOGUE

She didn't know she'd have to fight.

“Who are you?” she asks, a feeble effort to keep him talking, though she has no idea what that will accomplish. Perhaps her trio of former Dogs of War will happen to turn the corner at just the right moment to come to her rescue . . .



In fact, if you told her a *fight* would be waiting for her the first time she left Wakanda, she'd roll her dark eyes and wave you off like a conspiracy theory (which has no foundation in science).

“Who I am is of no consequence, Princess. The only thing that truly matters is what I plan to do . . .”

Not that she'd ever admit it aloud, but she's not even sure she *can* fight. Thanks to Mother, she hasn't truly trained in years. She was still a single digit in age the last time she made a fist.

"And what's that?" Shuri carefully, clandestinely shifts her feet into a fighting stance. Because she has a hunch about what his response will be.

Because fight she will.

"Well, to start, I intend to prevent your return to your beloved homeland."

For herself. Her life.

Her future.

For her people. For *their* future.

She will go out of her way. She will risk it all.

Her very existence.

The princess will *fight*.

For Wakanda.

And with that, his hand shoots out quick as a flash, reaching for Shuri's throat . . .

MISSION LOG

THERE IS SOMETHING FISHY GOING ON.

One week ago, my dear brother stormed my lab *begging* me to make him a new Panther Habit. "This one is too restrictive," he said, holding up the form-fitting catsuit he currently wears as our nation's ruler and protector, the Black Panther. "It hasn't been updated since Baba wore it. Can you *please* make me a new one? And fast?"

I could not have been more excited. I would never tell *him* because it would go right to his watermelon head, but I quite enjoy when T'Challa requests my assistance. Our father died when I was very young, but I think he'd be proud to see

his only daughter doing her part to keep our nation safe and secure.

And anyway: The current habit *does* make T'Challa's butt look funny.

I scoured the markets for a . . . *stretchier* fabric. Something with an easy-to-manipulate molecular structure that would bond well with my favorite substance and our nation's most valuable resource: Vibranium. In theory, the correct composition will allow T'Challa to kick high and flip fast, but also absorb kinetic energy from any hits he takes, gather it in the palms of his gloves, and shoot it out as sonic blasts (*FWOOM FWOOM*) that will knock opponents right out of their shoes.

Except nothing is working. *Stretchier* apparently means thinner, and none of the existing fabrics I've tried can handle the optimal amount of Vibranium. I've managed to merge two of the trial fabrics into something new—and sufficiently stretchy—but even this hybrid material can only withstand 73 percent of the total volume of the magic metal

in the previous habit. This is fine in terms of shock absorption and turning his hands into cannons, but the 17 percent decrease in bodily protection . . . well, I doubt big bro would be okay with punches and kicks hurting *more*.

My original idea was to distill the heart-shaped herb down to its strength-enhancing, speed-increasing, agility-augmenting essence, and infuse it into the fabric. That way, the longer the material is against T'Challa's skin and he's breathing through the mask, the more powerful and panther-like he would be.

However, the distillation process has proved more challenging than I anticipated.

In the first trial, I created a powder and then attempted to work it into the fabric by kneading. Seemed promising at first, but the moment I stretched it out, a puff of the powder filled the air. I inhaled it and . . . fainted. (Apparently those rumors about the herb taking out the unworthy are true. Bast forbid someone *not* of royal blood catches a whiff.

Also, the powder leaves a dusty film on the skin that makes one's skin appear in dire need of moisturization. And there's no way T'Challa would be okay with looking ashy once the suit retracts.)

In trial two, I tried a vapor. Which might've worked had I not put my head over the flask to check it and fainted again.

Trial three? A gel encased in patches as a suit lining. Thought I'd nailed it with this one . . . But then I tried to pull the piece of test fabric from my arm, and let me tell you: Band-Aid adhesive doesn't have a THING on Vibranium gel patches. *OUCH*.

Fourth and current trial *seemed* a step in the right direction: I lined the fabric with tiny liquid-filled bulbs that would break when hit, delivering small amounts of Heart-Shaped essence to the skin at the point of impact.

And it *does* work—I wrapped a piece around the midsection of a mannequin and gave it a good kick. The liquid *does* release at the point of impact, and *will*

coat the skin (maybe even enhancing cell regeneration and creating a speed-healing effect that would prevent pain and bruising? Must test this later . . . In fact, there's a good bit I could test later. Which has me wondering if anyone has ever *studied* the herb before).

But it makes my entire lab reek of rotten fish.

And I just used my last herb bulb.

Frosting on the cake? I have a deadline now. T'Challa just *appeared* in my lab in holographic form—perks of being able to override any and all security protocols, I suppose—to tell me that he needs the new habit by this Friday. That's five days hence.

Guessing he wants it for our ritual Challenge Day. Which would make sense. There's no telling who will come forward to face off against T'Challa for the throne and mantle of Black Panther, and though T'Challa is *virtually unbeatable*, as he likes to claim, an updated suit would certainly be to his advantage.

Come to think of it, our uncle S'Yan—who

stepped in to fill the role of Black Panther after Baba's death—was wearing the current habit when T'Challa challenged *him* four years ago.

And T'Challa obviously won.

No wonder he wants to be rid of the thing.

Back to the drawing board, I guess.

Wakanda forever.

1

PRINCESS

No sooner than Princess Shuri places her mission log Kimoyo bead into its nest for upload, her mother walks in.

And waves her nose.

“My goodness, Shuri, what have you been up to in here?”

“*Mother!*” Shuri exclaims, darting around the room, collecting flasks and vials and odds and ends in a futile attempt to clear some of the chaos. Despite the lab being a sacred space created just for *her* three years ago as a tenth-birthday present from her darling

brother, Shuri knows how her mother, in all her queenliness, feels about messy spaces. Especially work-related ones. “Did you not see the *Experimentation in Progress* sign on the door? You’re supposed to ring the bell!”

Queen Ramonda flicks the notion away as if it’s little more than a pesky insect buzzing around one of her elaborate head coverings. Shuri often wonders whether her mother’s myriad hats, wraps, and scarves put a strain on her neck.

“I’m serious, Mother! What if I’d been . . . testing the effects of gamma radiation on Vibranium or something? You could’ve been injured!”

“The only thing that could injure me in this place is the turmoil. Or perhaps the *stench*. Have I not told you, a cluttered space is the sign of a—”

“—cluttered mind. Yes, yes. You’ve been telling me that since the time I used to dismantle Baba’s gadgets in my pre-primary years.” Shuri grabs the unrolled bolt of shimmering gunmetal fabric that lies draped across two chairs, the shoulders of a mannequin, and a pile of books, and begins to roll it up. Knocking over an open box of circuits and loose wires with a deafening *CRASH* in the process.

Ramonda’s fingertips go to her temples. “Beloved ancestors, why do you vex me with this child?”

“You know you love me, Mother!” Shuri says as she trips on a panther boot prototype and goes sprawling. “Oops.”

Queen Ramonda sighs. “Yes. I do.” She reaches down to pull her daughter to her feet. “Which is precisely why I am here to escort you to the dress fitting I’ve no doubt you’ve forgotten about.”

Shuri’s smile tumbles to the floor, landing somewhere in the pile of fishy-smelling material. “Dress fitting?”

“My point, precisely. Come now.”

“Aww, Mother!”

But it’s no use, and Shuri knows it. The queen’s word is final. So with a huff and longing glance over her shoulder, she trails her mother out of her favorite place on Earth.



All the way to her *least* favorite place: the glorified oversize closet—with bathroom space—that comprises the queen’s dressing chambers.

Queen Ramonda was right in assuming that Shuri had forgotten not only about the dress fitting but the reason for it as well.

Now in addition to being grabbed and prodded and turned and poked like a pincushion (“She’s just so *wiggly*,” Lwazi, the royal clothier, mutters), Shuri is

also being treated to a verbal lashing by the queen mother.

“*How* does the princess of a nation—who is first in line to the throne, no less!—forget about the Taifa Ngao as if it means nothing?”

Mother is pacing. Shuri hates it when she paces. “*Relax*, Mother—*EEK!*” Shuri shrieks as she’s pinpricked again.

“I will not *relax*. At least one of us has to take things seriously, Shuri. It isn’t as if the tribal elders gather frequently. These meetings are vital for the continued unity and well-being of Wakanda! This particular one especially!”

As Shuri now knows—Mother has been walloping her over the head with it since the moment they’d exited Shuri’s lab—there’s a council meeting this afternoon. It’s the final one scheduled before Challenge Day. During *this* meeting, the tribal leaders will discuss security concerns and other Important Matters.

So fine: It’s one Shuri probably should have remembered.

That being said, Mother does seem more *vexed*, as she likes to put it, about things than Shuri feels is warranted.

“Mother, is something wrong?” Shuri asks as Lwazi finishes removing her from what feels like a

fabric cocoon and begins to pack his pins, needles, and the like.

“Of course not. Why would you ask that?” the queen replies. As the clothier exits the space, she drags Shuri to a velvet-topped stool at the center of the vast room and shoves her down onto it. “Perfect timing on the fitting. The braiders have arrived.”

“The braiders?!” Shuri’s arms cross over her head. “But why?”

“Tuh! You think I would permit your appearance in front of the elders with *that* mess on top of your head?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair!”

“Tell it to the gods,” Ramonda replies. “Perhaps they will hear you.”

At that moment, three women with luminescent brown skin stride into the room wearing identical bloodred silk robes with matching cylindrical caps. They look, to Shuri, like angels of scalp death. She wishes she had a small vial of heart-shaped herb essence to drop on the floor—there is no doubt the beautiful braiders would all flee from the fishy stench.

“Forgive my impropriety, Mother—”

“I won’t have to if you refrain from being improper, Shuri.”

The princess huffs. “I was just *thinking* . . . T’Challa has promised to make me the minister of Technology and Advancement in just a few years’ time. Wouldn’t *this* time be better spent in my lab, building and experimenting and discovering new uses for our beloved Vibranium instead of these—OW!—relatively . . . *impractical* aesthetic pursuits? OUCH!”

“If the princess would not mind holding *still* . . .” the braider on Shuri’s right side says. They have her surrounded: one on the left, one on the right, one at Shuri’s back, and Mother standing sentinel in front with what Shuri knows are wildly bejeweled hands clasped behind her.

“Even as minister of Computers and Progress—”

“*Technology and Advancement.*” (Oh, to have a mother who takes my passions so seriously, Shuri thinks.)

“Yes, that. Even with *that* role, you will still be the sole princess of this nation, Shuri. You are a *royal*. Bast chose to bestow upon *your* ancestor the mantles of ruler and Black Panther. Looking the part is an inescapable aspect of the position.”

“But Mother—”

“Don’t *but* Mother me, Shuri.”

“This *hurts!*”

The queen bends at the waist so she and Shuri are eye-to-eye. “The pain is temporary, my dear.” She takes Shuri’s arms at the wrist and crosses them over her chest to form an X. “But Wakanda is forever.”

As the braiders continue their torture, Shuri’s eyes roam the chamber. Above the wall of lighted mirrors in front of her are painted portraits of Wakanda’s queens, present and past. Ramonda’s is there. Shuri remembers bursting into the room where her mother was perched—with perfect posture—on a tufted, red velvet chair edged in gold. The princess was six years old at most and wanted to show her mother her latest creation: a drone with a Vibranium-centric flight mechanism that used sound waves to stay airborne. The louder the noise, the closer the thing would fly to it.

Which the painter found out the hard way. “OUT THIS INSTANT!” he boomed. And the drone flew right into the still-wet nose of Mother’s portrait.

Shuri smiles at the memory, but as her eyes dance over the other queens—everyone is there, from her father’s mother to that grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother—a little well of disquiet opens up inside her.

Her gaze sticks on N’Yami, T’Challa’s birth mother. The woman passed away long before Shuri was born,

but Shuri knows that before she married T'Chaka, Shuri and T'Challa's father, N'Yami was the chief scientist of Wakanda.

Did N'Yami step away from her scientific pursuits when she became queen? Did she shirk her lab gear for fancy dresses and glittering jewelry and elaborate headwear?

What about the other queens? Did they have endeavors beyond occupying the throne? It's not that Shuri believes her mother's job is frivolous—she's fully aware of the mental and emotional fortitude necessary to spearhead diplomacy for an entire nation, even one that remains hidden from the world at large.

But what else were queens permitted to actually *do*?

And what of the other princesses? There certainly was no tribute to them anywhere. At least not one Shuri's seen or heard of. How many of the queens looking out over this most *queenly* of rooms in the royal palace birthed daughters?

Had any of *those* princesses been scientists? Tinkerers? Builders of drones with Vibranium flight mechanisms? Clearly their brothers ascended to the throne and took wives, and those wives are the ones featured in these portraits . . . but what of the royal daughters?

Shuri is snatched back into the present as the braider on the left rips through a clump of tangled coils with a fine-toothed comb (“Weapons of mass destruction, those things,” she once complained to her mother). The women above her are chattering about Challenge Day. “Do you think anyone will come forward?” one is asking.

“To face T’Challa?” another replies. “They’d have to be mad.”

“Agreed. T’Challa is the fiercest Black Panther Wakanda has ever seen.”

But the same was said of Baba, and we see what happened to him.

The thought arises in Shuri’s head unbidden, surprising her with its sharpness. Its *truth*.

An image of T’Challa holding Baba’s Panther Habit in his hand floats before Shuri’s eyes.

She blinks it away and returns her focus to the portraits.

Whether or not those women—or their daughters—had active roles in keeping Wakanda safe, Shuri doesn’t know.

But she does know one thing: T’Challa requested *her* help.

She has to figure out that habit.