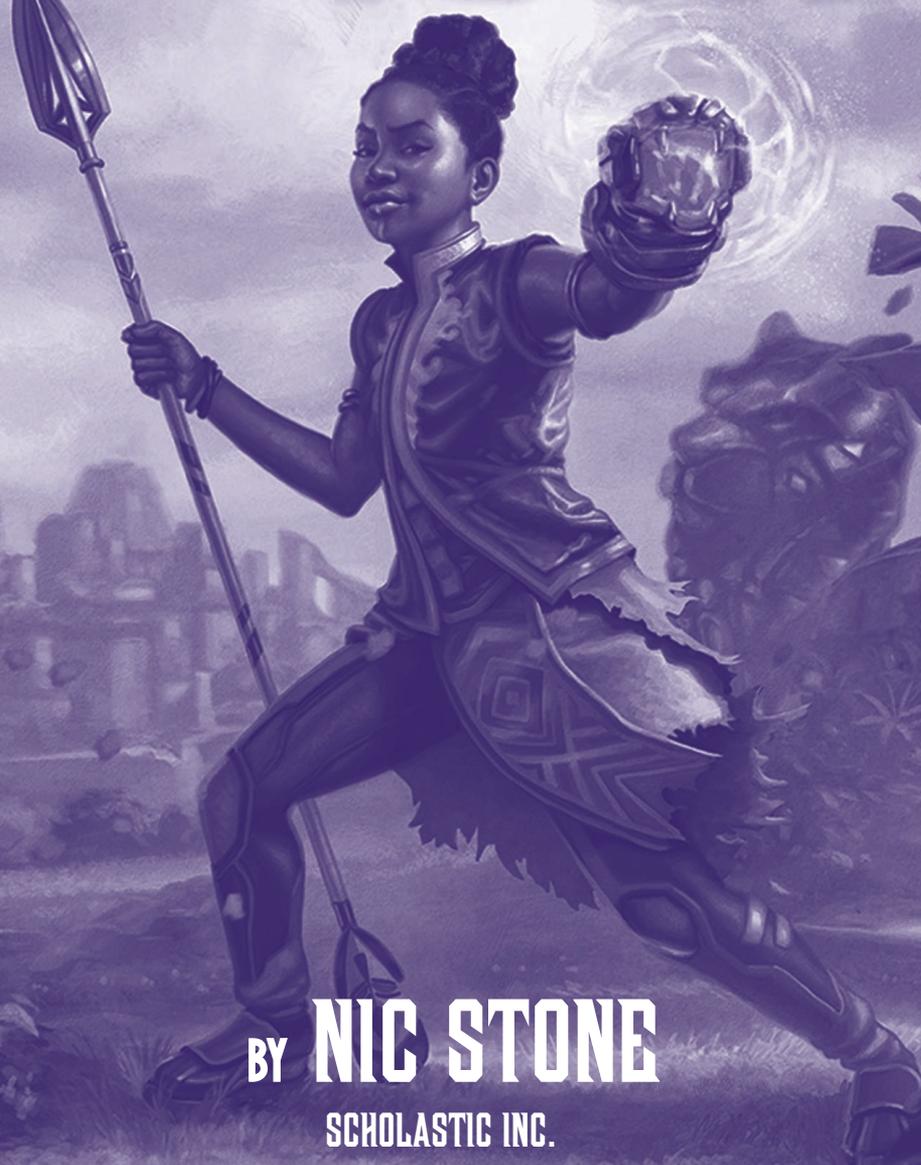


SHURI



BY **NIC STONE**

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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.