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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."