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INTRUSION

Despite knowing that what she’s feeling isn’t actually happening, Princess Shuri is so *shook* by the sense of being covered in spiders, she wonders if it’s possible to faint when you’re asleep.

It’s not real, Shuri, she says to her snoozing self (so bizarre). *This is merely one of those lucid dream things Kocha M’Shindi warned you about.*

And the Kocha had warned Shuri that lucid dreams—the type where she’s fully aware that she’s dreaming—were a common side effect of “immersion phobia-therapy.” It’s the Kocha’s latest form of torture

the princess has to undergo as part of her Panther training. “We must eliminate all potential hindrances to quick action,” she said as she shoved Shuri into a small, dimly lit room that had a dozen tarantulas scurrying around within it.

The princess could have sworn she would cease to exist right then and there.

Interestingly enough, the furry, many-legged creatures seemed even keener on staying away from the princess than she was on staying away from them. Which, when she thought about it, made quite a bit of sense: She was fully capable of crushing the things with a single stomp. How would *she* feel if a creature hundreds of times her size was looming over her?

Better yet, how would she feel if said creature seemed to *fear* her?

How silly she suddenly felt about being afraid.

And yet . . .

“Great Bast, great *Bast*,” she pants. “Okay, okay, okay. Not *real*, Shuri. They aren’t *real*.”

But they *feel* real. Far, far too real.

In this lucid dream, there are far more than twelve of the hairy little creatures. So many more, the princess couldn’t begin to count them if she tried.

And unfortunately, in this dream-space, they aren’t

running away. Quite the opposite. Shuri is standing with her feet planted shoulder-width apart and her arms stretched out to her sides, and the tarantulas are *all over* her. Crawling up and down her arms and legs, scuttling around her midsection.

She's breathing, but just barely.

"Not real, not real, not *real*. Hey, actual Shuri, wouldn't be a bad idea to wake up now! I think we're good on the whole phobia immersion concept!"

How do I get out of this thing? the princess wonders, trying to lift her arms or wiggle her toes. Movement is impossible. Her limbs feel as heavy as the condensed core of a collapsed star. Even *within* the dream, she's frozen in place, despite the fact that her shoulders are beginning to ache from holding her arms aloft.

She wants to scream but is afraid that if she opens her mouth, the eight-legged furballs will crawl right in. Down her throat, into her belly, and . . .

Her body shudders in her sleep.

"Mmmmmmm!" She hums within the dream, feeling her heart rate rise. (At least she thinks it's rising . . . can one really tell when not actually conscious?)

There's the sudden, faint *WHOOOP* of a siren from somewhere behind the princess. She twists around on instinct and a bunch of the creeper-crawlies go flying.

“Huh,” she says, surprised. But now she has an idea: With her arms outstretched, the princess begins to spin. Slowly at first, then faster and faster until she’s basically a human centrifuge with tarantulas flying off her in every direction—

The siren sounds again. Louder this time. Startles Shuri so bad, she trips over her feet and goes sprawling. The spiders swarm.

“Ahhh!” she yells, attempting to scramble back to her feet.

“Shuri!”

“Great Bast, are they *talking* to me now?” Her voice cracks like a pubescent boy’s, and she claps a hand over her mouth.

“Shuri! You must wake!”

Wait a second . . . The princess looks around, but her pause has given the creatures enough time to almost completely overtake her.

The siren howls louder.

“SHURI!” The whole room begins to shake, and dream Shuri *does* open her mouth to scream—

Her *actual* mouth opens, too, apparently. And as her eyes fly open, a hand clamps down over it.



It takes Shuri far longer than she’s expressly comfortable with to recognize the figure standing over her. It’s

the queen mother. Looking just as terrified as Shuri feels.

“Do. Not. Scream,” Mother says, barely above a whisper. “We must get to the bunker immediately.”

The *bunker*??

Shuri’s shock must be evident in her eyes because then the queen mother says, “No questions now, Shuri. This isn’t the time. Understand?”

The princess nods, too shaken to do anything but agree.

“I’m going to take my hand away now,” Mother continues.

And she does. Slowly.

Shuri gulps but keeps her lips sealed.

“Come,” Mother says. “Quickly.”

Without a word, Shuri follows the queen mother out of her quarters and into the hallway where Nakia, Ayo, and two other Dora Milaje are waiting. It’s more dimly lit than usual. Well, except for the brightly flashing fluorescent lights every few meters.

Which is when Shuri realizes the siren is still going off.

It’s the palace alarm.

“Mother—”

“Not now, Shuri!” the queen hisses.

Instead of taking a left once they reach the main

hallway, the pair of Wakandan royals—in pajamas—and their guards go right. Shuri opens her mouth to speak again, but Ayo, seeming to sense what Shuri is thinking, cuts the princess a look, so Shuri thinks better of it.

Soon, they are entering the queen’s quarters. “This way,” Nakia says, heading straight for Ramonda’s cavernous dressing chambers.

Shuri looks up at the portraits of all the former queens as if to say: *Do you all have any idea what’s going on?*

None of them respond.

As they approach what is clearly a wall, Shuri is tempted to pipe up and ask if she’s being punk’d. She learned of the concept—basically a synonym for “pranked,” but with cameras involved—from an old television show K’Marah introduced her to on PantherTube.

But then Ayo lays her palm against a random spot on the golden wallpaper . . . and a panel slides open, revealing a lit corridor beyond.

Now the princess wouldn’t be able to speak if she tried.

This isn’t the first time Shuri has been made privy to some secret passageway in the palace, and she is no less irritated than she was the first time it happened.