

Binti



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NNEDI OKORAFOR

Nnedi Okorafor's parents immigrated to the U.S. both for their education and to escape the Nigerian Civil War. They took Okorafor to visit Nigeria often throughout her childhood and teenage years, though Okorafor was considered “too American” in Nigeria and “too black” at home in the US. She spent her teenage years as a track and tennis star and also loved math and science, but a scoliosis diagnosis put her involvement in sports to an end. She underwent surgery for her scoliosis at age 19, became briefly paralyzed from the waist down, and began writing short stories during her time in the hospital. Throughout her time as a student, during which she earned a master's in journalism and English and a PhD in English, Okorafor's professors discouraged her from writing science fiction—but eventually, she began writing anyway. She began winning awards for her short stories in 2001, and since then, her stories and novels have won various science-fiction awards including Nebulas, Hugos, and the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. Okorafor is inspired to write science fiction in part because of the lack of diversity she sees in the genre. *Binti* was inspired in part by Okorafor's experience of leaving a close-knit Nigerian community in Chicago to teach at the University of Buffalo, New York, a decision that she feared she'd regret, as well as a trip to the United Arab Emirates where Okorafor saw a blue jellyfish. Okorafor currently lives in Illinois with her family.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though many of the events and technologies in *Binti* are entirely fictional, Okorafor portrays the real-world Himba people of Namibia and Angola in the novella. As Binti explains, the Himba cover their bodies and hair in *otjize* (a clay mixture), and most live off the land as subsistence farmers. A Himba person's particular hairstyle denotes a variety of things about them, including whether they're married and whether a woman has had a child. Okorafor has said that the Khoush, meanwhile, were inspired by Arab people and culture, specifically the ultra-modern cities Okorafor visited in the United Arab Emirates. The theft of the chief Meduse's stinger, meanwhile, draws on the long and bloody history of Westerners seizing the bodies, artifacts, and artwork of native populations around the world in the name of research. In the last few decades, countries and tribes have begun to ask for museums to return their artifacts, with varying degrees of success. More broadly, it's possible to trace the success of Okorafor's work and other black science-fiction writers to increasing demand for science fiction that's

increasingly diverse—and that demand spills over into other art disciplines as well. Many cite the 2018 *Black Panther* film as proof that Afrofuturism is going mainstream. It's possible to identify Afrofuturist styling and elements in the music, costume choices, and music videos of artists like Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Janelle Monáe.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Binti is the first in a trilogy of novellas. It's followed by *Binti: Home* and *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, which continue Binti's journey as she returns home from Oomza Uni and learns more about the war between the Meduse and the Khoush. Though many consider Okorafor's work to be Afrofuturism, Okorafor is adamant about labeling her work as “Africanfuturist” instead. The difference, she explains, is that Africanfuturist works center on Africa, African cultures, and black characters, both in Africa and in the diaspora; while in her estimation, Afrofuturist works tend to center the Western world despite being about black characters. Other novels that fit Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism (though most are still considered Afrofuturist) include Tade Thompson's *Rosewater* and *Nigerians in Space* by Deji Olukotun. Okorafor has written several issues for the Marvel comic *Black Panther*, including a spinoff series that focuses on Shuri, the Black Panther's little sister. She took over writing *Black Panther* from journalist and author Ta-Nehesi Coates ([Between the World and Me](#); [The Water Dancer](#)). She is open about her love for graphic novels, especially Craig Thompson's *Blankets* and *Habibi*. As a young person, Okorafor turned to novels like Mary Shelley's [Frankenstein](#) instead of classic sci-fi novels because of the whiteness of many classic works of science fiction. However, in recent years, black authors have won many prominent science-fiction awards, including N. K. Jemison (*The Stone Sky*; *The Obelisk Gate*) and P. Djèlí Clark (*The Black God's Drums*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Binti
- **When Written:** 2014
- **Where Written:** Buffalo, New York
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science Fiction; Space Opera
- **Setting:** Namibia; a spaceship; Oomza University
- **Climax:** Binti brokers an agreement between the Meduse and the department heads of Oomza University.
- **Antagonist:** The Meduse initially seem to be antagonists, but

Binti discovers that some researchers at Oomza University are actually at fault.

- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Call on Your Daughter. Okorafor is open about the fact that when she gets stuck writing, she often enlists her young daughter for help.

African Roots. Okorafor draws from various African languages and cultures as she comes up with names for characters and objects in her writing. *Okwu* means “word” in Igbo, while an *edan* is a mystical Yoruba object. Binti, meanwhile, means “girl” in Kiswahili.



PLOT SUMMARY

Teenage Binti nervously pokes at her finicky transporter, praying for it to lift her luggage. When it does, she breathes a sigh of relief—now, she can make it to the station on time. She knows that her family will be distraught when they realize she’s gone, but by the time they figure it out, she won’t be on Earth anymore. Binti boards the shuttle and tries not to notice her braided hair hitting people in the face. She rolled her braids in *otjize* that she made especially for the journey, but she knows she must look odd—she’s the only Himba on board. As the shuttle pulls out, Binti looks back and can see her parents’ huge house, the Root, rising up out of the city. She asks herself what she’s doing.

At the launch port, Binti is immediately overwhelmed. She’s uncomfortably aware that she looks undeniably Himba. Typically Himba don’t leave their ancestral land because it’s extremely important to them—that’s why they cover their bodies in *otjize*, which is made from clay. Binti feels alone and unsure, and she knows her life will never be the same. She reasons that it was never going to be normal, though; that would’ve been impossible after being offered a full scholarship to Oomza Uni far across the galaxy to study mathematics. A security officer does a deep scan of Binti’s astrolabe. This is invasive, but Binti is surprised when the officer congratulates Binti and says that her people are proud of her—he learned from her astrolabe about her acceptance to Oomza Uni. Next, Binti crosses the station to board, noticing that almost everyone around her is Khoush. In line, a group of Khoush women tug on Binti’s hair, sniff her *otjize*, and are surprised it doesn’t smell like feces. One woman sniffs that “dirt bathers” are filthy. Binti ignores them. The security guard scans Binti’s body and pulls a device, known as an *edan*, out of her pocket to inspect. Binti isn’t sure what it does; she found it in the desert. The guard isn’t well-educated, so he lets Binti on the ship without a fuss when she makes it clear she has more education

than he does.

On the ship, Binti finds a group of 12 other new Oomza Uni students, all Khoush and about her age. A technician shows them parts of the living spaceship, and then the stern group leader calls Binti out for her Himba appearance. Over the next few days, Binti is uncomfortably aware that she’s the only Himba. However, Binti also discovers that her future classmates are true friends. They’re just as interested in math, science, and education as she is, and they bond by holding treeing competitions. Binti develops a crush on a boy named Heru, who is the first to notice that her hair is braided into a specific coded pattern that reveals her family’s history. One day during dinner, five days before the ship is supposed to land, Binti holds onto her *edan* and watches, horrified, as all her friends explode and die—jellyfish-like Meduse have infiltrated the ship. Binti prays to the *edan* to protect her and wonders why the Meduse attacked. They have old issues with the Khoush, but the two groups agreed to not attack each other’s ships.

In her grief and confusion, Binti thinks of her family at home. No one wanted her to leave—even her best friend Dele laughed after congratulating her on her acceptance. However, Binti has wanted to attend Oomza Uni since she learned what a university was. She’s a “master harmonizer” who can understand math in a different way. For her, the future isn’t just taking over her father’s astrolabe workshop—it’s following her destiny across the galaxy. Binti opens her eyes and notices a dead Meduse in front of her. When she thrusts the *edan* at another Meduse, it jerks back. Binti begins to tree to calm herself, grabs food and water, and heads for her room. She collapses on the floor and attempts to report an emergency, but the Meduse must be controlling signals in and out of the ship. Binti discovers that she’s five days from Oomza Uni. She spends the next few days pacing and crying, trying not to think about how security at Oomza Uni will blow up the ship.

A knock at the door startles Binti. She hears angry hisses when she picks up her *edan* and shrieks for the Meduse to leave her alone. She decides to accept her death, but as she holds the *edan*, she suddenly understands how to use it. Binti rolls more *otjize* into her hair, and when she hears another knock, she begins to rub *otjize* onto the *edan*. She notices a button, presses it, and then hears “girl” from the other side of the door. This nearly makes her scream. She can understand everything the Meduse say, and her hands are stuck to the *edan*. Voices outside argue, saying that Binti and the *edan* are evil and that they want to kill her. When she hears that one Meduse is named Okwu, Binti calls to Okwu. She tries to tell Okwu that she’s not evil or violent like other humans, and she reiterates that she doesn’t know how they can speak.

Binti falls asleep, but she wakes up to the Meduse sucking her door off the frame. One flies at her; a tentacle brushes her arm and its stinger begins to shrivel. Okwu tells Binti that she’s evil

and leaves. Okwu returns several hours later, demanding to know more about Binti's *otjize*. Binti notices that Okwu's injured tentacle seems better where it brushed her *otjize*. Okwu demands the *otjize*, but Binti refuses—the *otjize* is her culture. After a while, Okwu offers to bring her food. Binti struggles to eat with her hands still stuck to the *edan*. Okwu observes that she's not a normal human, since she has **okuoko**. Binti is confused but ascertains that Okwu is referring to her thick braids. Okwu laughs and confirms this. As they talk, Binti realizes that Okwu sounds like her brother Bena—Okwu has every right to hate humans, but it doesn't know what it's talking about. Okwu is also young and reminds Binti of herself. Okwu finally reveals why the Meduse attacked: their chief's stinger was stolen and is now at Oomza Uni in a museum. Okwu isn't concerned when Binti insists that the Meduse will die. Suddenly, Binti shrieks that she's a master harmonizer and asks to advocate for the Meduse. She's certain that she can persuade the educated people at Oomza Uni to give back the stinger.

Okwu isn't certain, but it later leads Binti to the Meduse ship and points out the chief. Both Okwu and Binti are risking their lives by doing this. Binti can see that some Meduse are walking astrolabes—their technology is advanced. Binti bows to the chief and explains about astrolabes. She realizes that she can use the *edan* because she's a master harmonizer and asks to advocate for the Meduse. She can feel a stinger pressed to the back of her neck and makes the case that all the Meduse will die if they try to get the stinger back violently. The chief and Okwu, however, say that they need Binti to show she's serious by dropping the *edan* and making herself vulnerable. Binti painfully pulls her fingers off the *edan*. She sees a current running between herself and the Meduse and feels a stinger plunge into her neck. To the reader, Binti says that she died when she left home because she incorrectly assumed she'd be able to return and continue her life as though nothing happened. She had to die again to earn the respect of the Meduse—and now she knows that the Meduse aren't senselessly violent but truthful and honorable.

Binti can smell home. She wakes up, covered in a fresh layer of *otjize*, with the *edan* on her lap. Most of her *otjize* is gone, and the ship will land in an hour. Binti watches the multicolored planet come into view. She struggles to stand when they land, but Okwu appears and warns her to be careful. Binti realizes that she can actually hear Okwu's voice. It says that the sting didn't cause this; Binti can hear because she's a master harmonizer. It also says that they used *otjize* to heal their sick, and they'll always remember the Himba. Binti leaves the *edan* behind as she follows Okwu to join the chief. Before Binti left her room, she rolled fresh *otjize* into her braids. Her head tingled and she remembered how as a kid, she and friends snuck out and washed all their *otjize* off one night—it was horrifying but thrilling. Binti considered washing her *otjize* off

to start at Oomza Uni, but she decided against it.

Human soldiers meet Binti, the chief, and Okwu. The guards lead them to a large blue room filled with professors, where a professor named Haras introduces itself and invites Binti to speak. Binti tells the professors about the Himba and their *otjize*. It's annoying but somewhat comforting when several professors chuckle—prejudice exists everywhere. Binti shares what happened on the ship and notes that no one has studied the Meduse up close—except for, possibly, in the case of the chief's stinger. Binti tells them how to solve this peacefully. The chief speaks, and then the professors turn away to talk amongs themselves. Binti sits down until the professors turn back to them. In the Meduse language, Haras apologizes to the chief. It promises to expel the researchers who stole the stinger and give back the stinger. Binti falls from relief, but Okwu steadies her. Then, Haras congratulates Binti and asks her to work with a professor named Okpala to study her *edan*. Haras also invites Okwu to stay as the first Meduse student. The chief is shocked and pleased. Binti feels alone and like she's a part of history. She wonders if her family would understand. Okpala asks if Binti will return home, since the Himba don't like outsiders. Binti is offended, but then she sees that her braids have turned into blue *okuoko*, and she drops into a meditative state. Okwu and the chief explain that this was the only way to allow Binti to understand them and make it clear that she's not a prisoner. The chief says that Binti will always be a friend of the Meduse, but Binti wants to scream. The group heads for the weapons museum, where the chief reattaches its stinger. Only a thin scar remains, a mark of what humans at Oomza Uni would do for research. Binti smears it with *otjize* to make the scar disappear.

Over the next few weeks, Binti tracks down the ingredients to make *otjize*. She buys oil in the market and harvests clay from the forest. When the concoction is ready, Binti showers off all the *otjize* from home, sobbing. She wonders if her *okuoko* will grow like hair, and she's sad that she can't braid the 10 *okuoko* in the pattern of her family. When it's dark, Binti panics, unsure if she made real *otjize*. She realizes that if she can't make *otjize* here, she'll have to change—but what she scoops out of her jar seems real and makes her cry. Then, she visits Okwu. Okwu is thrilled to see Binti covered in thick *otjize* again and holds out a tentacle that was burned during an experiment. Binti is nervous, but she covers the burn in *okuoko*. She knows that the Meduse respect her for her *otjize*, so she wonders what Okwu thinks about her now. Binti whispers that she knows the Meduse are traditional, but that Okwu is her only friend. Okwu tells Binti to call home but assures her that they're friends no matter what. It vibrates a tentacle, and Binti's *okuoko* vibrate in response, which Okwu says means that they're family. When Binti rubs off the *otjize* from the tentacle, the burn is gone. Later, Binti calls home, and her mother answers.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Binti – Binti is the novella’s titular protagonist; she’s a 16-year-old girl from the Himba tribe. Binti is a gifted mathematician and “master harmonizer”; she, like many Himba, can manipulate mathematical currents and create sophisticated devices like astrolabes. Because of her talents, Binti was accepted to Oomza University across the galaxy on a full scholarship. This presents major issues because Binti is Himba. Himba generally never leave home, but Binti’s love of math and her desire to pursue her education is strong enough to cause her to leave. Even as Binti experiences instances of racism and overt rudeness, she remains proud of being Himba and is especially proud of the **otjize** that covers her skin and hair and denotes her Himba identity. Things improve once she discovers that all her future classmates love math just as much as she does—and though they’re all Khoush, they can all still connect over this shared interest. This helps Binti feel more secure in her choice to leave home. When disaster strikes and Meduse aliens hijack the ship, killing everyone but Binti, Binti clings tightly to a device she found known as an *edan*, which seems to protect her. Over the course of the next five days, Binti learns how to use the *edan*, which allows her to communicate with the Meduse. She forms a fragile friendship with a Meduse named Okwu and begins to learn about Meduse culture and share information about her own. When Binti discovers why the Meduse are headed for Oomza Uni, she uses her skills as a master harmonizer to convince the Meduse to trust her—and the researchers at the university to hand over the chief Meduse’s stinger. Through doing this, Binti’s identity fundamentally changes. She must give the Meduse her jar of *otjize*, and a Meduse stings her. The sting turns her hair into **okuoko**, blue Meduse-like tentacles, that mean Binti cannot braid her hair into the special pattern of her family—but the *okuoko* allow her to communicate with the Meduse. Through her friendship with Okwu and her discovery that she can make more *otjize* on her new planet, Binti begins to feel more secure in her new identity and even calls home to speak with her family.

Okwu – Okwu is a young, hotheaded Meduse. Though Binti occasionally uses he/him pronouns for Okwu, she most often uses “it.” Okwu has a distinctive voice—Binti describes it as almost female-sounding, which sets it apart from the low rumbling voices of the other Meduse—and it also sounds angrier than the others, which are the main reasons that Okwu stands out initially to Binti (Okwu is also the only named Meduse, aside from the chief). Initially, Okwu engages with Binti angrily and fearfully. It’s afraid of the *edan* and afraid of Binti, but the two gradually begin to trust each other after Okwu brushes Binti’s arm and rubs off some of her **otjize**—and the *otjize* heals the wound on Okwu’s stinger, which it suffered

trying to sting Binti. Okwu is instrumental in teaching Binti about the Meduse ethos and way of life. Like all Meduse, Okwu is rational, honorable, truthful, and violent when it needs to be. It insists that it’s essential for an individual to act with purpose, and that if someone acts with purpose, violence can be acceptable and even honorable. Okwu also hates humans (Binti included) as a general rule due to the Meduse’s conflict with the Khoush. This hatred increased some time before the novel began, when researchers at Oomza University stole the chief Meduse’s stinger. As Binti and Okwu begin to share information about their cultures and even laugh together, they form a tentative friendship. Okwu is willing to risk its life to help Binti speak to the chief and advocate for a nonviolent negotiation for the chief’s stinger. During the negotiations, Okwu shows itself to be far more like Binti and far more of a friend than Binti initially suspected. Okwu supports Binti when she almost faints, and it gladly accepts a spot as a student at Oomza Uni after the negotiations and takes pride in the fact that most of the other students are scared of it. Though Okwu’s rationality and lack of emotion occasionally hurts Binti’s feelings, Okwu also makes sure to be clear that they’re friends, no matter what.

The Chief – The chief of the Meduse, like all Meduse people, is rational, honorable, and has no issue being violent if that violence is undertaken for an honorable reason. Some time before the novella begins, researchers at Oomza University attacked the chief and stole its stinger to use for weapons research. Because of this, the chief hates human beings and believes that they only understand violence and force. Despite this, Okwu is able to convince the chief to hear Binti out, and the chief shows itself capable of change when it agrees to allow Binti to advocate for the Meduse—though the chief also insists that Binti make herself totally vulnerable to the Meduse so she doesn’t look like a prisoner. The chief’s experience negotiating with Oomza University fundamentally changes how it sees humanity. It begins to look far more favorably on human beings and even makes sure to tell Binti that the Meduse will forever honor her. Though the chief glows blue for most of the story, it becomes clear and translucent once its stinger reattaches.

Okpala – Okpala is a professor in the mathematics department at Oomza University. She’s a Khoush woman who is covered head to toe in green garments. Haras insists that Binti take classes with Okpala so they can study the *edan*; due to the research that Okpala has done, she doesn’t believe that what Binti did with the *edan* should be possible. Okpala also seems like a curious and caring individual. She has studied the Himba people and is the first to draw attention to Binti’s new **okuoko**, which she knows will make it hard for Binti to reintegrate into her Himba family.

Binti’s Father – Binti’s father is a skilled maker of astrolabes. Prior to Binti leaving the planet, he’d planned to leave his workshop and business to her, but Binti believes he won’t do

this now that she's run away. Binti's father doesn't like the Khoush and even mutters about fighting them if provoked, though he doesn't believe in war or violence. Binti knows that both her parents will be distraught and angry when they discover that she left for Oomza Uni.

Haras – Haras is the professor who acts as the representative for Oomza University during the negotiations between the university and the Meduse. Binti describes him as looking like “a spider made of wind.” He eloquently and humbly agrees to give back the chief's stinger and invites Okwu to attend the university as a student.

Heru – Heru is a fellow future student at Oomza University. Binti has a secret crush on him, and they finally begin to speak to each other after about two weeks in space, when Heru notices that Binti's braids are braided in a specific pattern that creates a code. Soon after this, Binti witnesses the Meduse murder Heru.

Bena – Bena is one of Binti's older brothers. He's an angry young man and often spouts off about how evil the Khoush are—even though he's never really known a Khoush person. Binti believes that while Bena justified in being angry about how the Khoush treat the Himba, he also knows nothing about the Khoush.

Binti's Mother – Binti says little about her mother, but her mother's warnings about Oomza University wanting to coopt Binti's talents for their own nefarious uses ring in Binti's head as she travels. Binti's mother also has the gift of “mathematical sight,” which she primarily uses to protect her family and which Binti inherited.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dele – Dele is Binti's best friend at home. Though he's proud of her and of her acceptance to Oomza University, he still laughed at the thought of her actually leaving home to attend the school.

TERMS

Astrolabe – An astrolabe is electronic device akin to a cellphone. In addition to allowing people to communicate, astrolabes also contain their owner's entire past, possible futures, and family history. In **Binti's** world, they act as a person's passport or government identification. Everyone has one, and most are created by the Himba.

Bitolu – A *Bitolu* is a person, like **Binti** and her **father**, who is gifted with knowledge of “deep mathematics.”

Edan – *Edan* is a general term for an electronic device that's too old to be useable; **Binti's** *edan*, which she can't figure out how to use for much of her life, suddenly allows her to communicate with the Meduse.

Himba – The Himba are an indigenous ethnic group that inhabits Northern Namibia in Southern Africa; **Binti** and her family are Himba. Like their real-world counterparts, the Himba in the novel cover their skin and hair in *otjize*; within the world of the novel, they're “harmonizers” who are skilled at channeling electronic and mathematical currents and therefore make most of the world's astrolabes. They don't leave their homeland as a general rule. Binti is the first Himba to attend Oomza University, which causes quite a stir on her travels as few people have ever seen a Himba person before. Other groups, particularly the Khoush, look down on the Himba.

Khoush – The Khoush are the majority ethnic group in **Binti's** world on Earth. They're lighter-skinned than the Himba and they're mostly city-dwellers. Men wear all black, while women wear white garments with multicolored veils and belts. Khoush generally consider themselves superior to all other groups, races, and species; their conflict with the Meduse stems from the fact that they think the Meduse are inferior, and all the Khoush people whom Binti encounters in her travels to the spaceship treat her with scorn and disdain because she's Himba.

Meduse – The Meduse are a race of beings in the galaxy of the novella. They look like large, translucent jellyfish and are universally feared due to their instant and bloody method of killing groups, known as *moojh-ha ki-bira*. The Meduse have conflicts with the Khoush on Earth, as well as with Oomza University, and they worship water like a god. They're rational, seemingly to the point of being emotionless, and are very honorable.

Moojh-ha ki-bira – *Moojh-ha ki-bira* is the Meduse method of killing many people at once; they infiltrate a ship and with their poisonous stingers, kill everyone in an instant. It's a Khoush term that means “great wave,” as the Meduse move like water when they fight.

Treeing – Treeing is a mental math exercise that entails halving complex equations. **Binti** does the exercise to calm herself, and she also trees competitively with her friends.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



IDENTITY, HOME, AND TRAVEL

Binti, the novella's titular character, is a mathematically gifted young woman of the South African Himba people. Her world turns upside down when she's admitted to Oomza University far across the

galaxy—on a full scholarship. In the world of the novella, the Himba stick close to home and seldom leave their ancestral lands, even for nearby cities—and no Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni. Notably, Binti leaves her home believing she knows exactly who and what she is: a proud Himba, a talented mathematician, and a skilled “master harmonizer” (a person who can control electrical currents to create various technologies). However, as Binti travels and meets people and beings very different from the Himba, including the jellyfish-like aliens known as the Meduse that hijack her spaceship, she begins to see her identity and her home in a new light. Ultimately, the novel suggests that while staying close to home may help a person feel secure, traveling offers people the opportunity to see their home and their culture through fresh eyes, thereby gaining a more nuanced understanding of who they are.

Binti is at a crossroads in how she thinks of her identity as she leaves her family home for the spaceship bound for Oomza Uni under the cover of night. She knows what her life will entail if she stays: she'll marry, she'll take over her father's workshop, and she'll always have access to the **otjize** (a mixture of oil, clay, and scent that Himba spread over their bodies and hair) that marks her as a proud member of the Himba people. However, she also knows that the only way to reach her full potential as a mathematician is to leave her home and pursue her education across the galaxy, where no Himba has ever been. This will destroy her prospects for marriage, if not permanently damage her relationships with her family members. Already, then, Binti sees herself as flouting the traditions and expectations of her people, even as she constantly—and proudly—thinks of her *otjize*, traditional ankle bracelets, and special braided hairstyle to ground and calm herself in stressful moments. In this sense, as Binti sets off into the wider world, she purposefully takes pride in the things that *do* mark her as Himba—even as she does the one thing that Himba never do—to help her feel more at peace with her decision to leave. It's puzzling, then, when a security guard at the station reads her astrolabe (a communication device that contains Binti's past and future) and not only congratulates her on her admittance to Oomza Uni but warmly says that Binti is the pride of her people. This offers the hope that Binti won't suffer as much as she believes she will for her “transgression”; it may well be possible to reconcile her choice to go to Oomza Uni with the beliefs and expectations of her culture.

Leaving, however, is only the first challenge to Binti's identity—even as she tries to reconcile her transformations with the home culture she loves. Following the Meduse's attack on the spaceship, Binti befriends a young Meduse named Okwu and brokers peace between the Meduse and Oomza Uni (the university stole the chief Meduse's stinger; the Meduse attacked the ship to try to get the stinger back). Following this and as Binti begins her education, she's disturbed by how the

things that marked her as Himba seem to change or slip away altogether. To earn the Meduse's trust, she not only promises them a jar of precious *otjize*, which they discover has healing powers; they also sting her and transform her braids into **okuoko**, or blue Meduse tentacles. The *okuoko* in particular present a major problem for Binti. Traditionally, her hair is braided in a pattern devised by her family members and which, if a person knows how to “read” her braids, tells the story of her family. The 10 thick *okuoko* make these braids impossible, thereby making Binti feel unmoored and separated from her family, her home, and her history. However, the *okuoko* tell a story of their own: Okwu explains that Binti's *okuoko* symbolize that she's become a part of the Meduse family. In this sense, though her identity is changing, it's not necessarily changing for the worse—her new hair simply reflects what she's been through and conveys that her family is bigger than when she left home.

Similarly upsetting is Binti's dwindling supply of *otjize* and her quest to track down the ingredients to make more once she's on the planet that's home to Oomza Uni. It's heartbreaking when she agrees to give the Meduse her jar of *otjize* from home, as Binti feels like she's quite literally giving her home and her culture away—the *otjize* is made with clay that's only found in her ancestral lands, and it smells undeniably of Earth and of the life she left behind. However, as with her new *okuoko*, exchanging the *otjize* with the Meduse symbolizes Binti's expanding family and her shifting place in the world. Meanwhile, it's telling that while Binti agonizes over whether the *otjize* she makes with new ingredients is real, it stills behaves exactly as Earth-made *otjize* does, colors Binti's skin the same reddish color, and even heals Okwu's injuries like the original *otjize* did. Through this, Binti begins to see that even as her identity changes and her family expands over the course of her travels, it's still possible to keep the rituals and practices that make her feel secure and at home alive. Traveling, the novel suggests, may change a person's identity, but it also has the power to make clear what's important to maintain in terms of one's traditions and customs from home.



SCIENCE, HUMANITY, AND THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH

Math and science guide life in Binti's technology-rich world. Binti's father is a skilled maker of astrolabes which, in the world of the novel, are handheld communication devices that also store a person's entire life history. Binti herself ultimately travels to study math at Oomza Uni, far across the galaxy, on a spaceship that is a genetically engineered living creature. For Binti and for many of her future classmates that she meets on her journey, math and science are almost their own form of spirituality, and in this sense, these fields are overwhelmingly positive. However, once the alien Meduse hijack the ship, killing everyone but Binti and the pilot,

Binti gradually discovers that in a university setting, science and math sometimes have a dark and predatory underbelly. While the novella overwhelmingly positions science and math as forces capable of bridging all manner of divides, it also makes it abundantly clear that in order for this to happen, science must be backed with ethics and sensitivity—especially when the subjects of scientific research are living beings.

For Binti, math and science are almost spiritual pursuits. Binti is a “master harmonizer,” which is why she and the Himba are known for their astrolabes—they can connect different currents of energy and channel them into a single device. Though the how and why of this isn’t a major feature of the novella, the way that Binti describes creating new technology and studying math nevertheless shows that for her and her people, math and science are their pride and joy. Fortunately for Binti, this isn’t a quality that’s inherent only to the Himba. Though her future classmates on the ship—all of whom are Khoush, the lighter-skinned, powerful ethnic group in Binti’s world—initially greet her with suspicion and disdain for being Himba, they’re all able to put this aside when they learn just how talented of a mathematician Binti is. Binti and her future classmates spend hours treeing—doing mental math exercises with complex equations. This time spent together, focusing on math, is a positive experience and makes the case that math and education have the ability to bring people together despite their differences. Indeed, a shared love of science or technology is what makes Binti *human*, not just Himba, in the eyes of her classmates.

However, it’s important to keep in mind that Binti and her new friends are interested primarily in math and creating *inanimate* technology. Astrolabes and the “transporters” that Binti uses to ferry her suitcases to the station are, within the world of the novel, neutral pursuits, if not positive: they help people perform tasks and connect with each other. Though Binti is well aware that Oomza Uni is the epicenter of weapons research in the galaxy, she still doesn’t fully grasp that it’s possible to harness science and technology—the very things that give her life and keep her connected to her home and culture—for questionably unethical purposes. As far as she’s concerned, Oomza Uni is going to be a utopia where she can connect with others like her and receive an education that will allow her to give back to her community. It’s therefore shocking for Binti when, in the days after the Meduse hijack her ship, she finally learns why the Meduse are headed for Oomza Uni in the first place: researchers at Oomza Uni severed and stole the chief Meduse’s stinger and are using it for weapons research, and the chief understandably wants this important part of his body back.

The fact that researchers would steal the chief Meduse’s stinger drives home for Binti that while the Meduse may be seen as powerful antagonists in the galaxy, they’re still seen as fundamentally not human. Their lives, their customs, and even

their bodies are, to researchers at Oomza Uni, not worth respecting—instead, various aspects of Meduse culture and Meduse bodies are seemingly there for the taking. Through this, Binti begins to see that while Oomza Uni represents a utopia for her, for marginalized races like the Meduse, the entire university system likely looks like an oppressive and nefarious method of choosing who is worthy of being a student—and who, alternatively, is just a subject of scientific curiosity. Through this, it’s possible to read *Binti* as an allegory for the way in which Western cultures have colonized native peoples and seized their artifacts, sciences, and even their bodies under the auspices of anthropological or scientific research. Research, the novel suggests, isn’t an appropriate excuse for theft, bodily harm, and dehumanization—the subjects of this “research” deserve the same respect and kindness as anyone else.

Fortunately for everyone involved, the Meduse agree to trust Binti and allow her to advocate for them to the heads of the different Oomza Uni departments rather than simply turning to violence. And the result sets an example of what the novel suggests should happen to remedy years of unethical research: the university quickly and willingly hands over the chief’s stinger with an apology and an invitation for Okwu, a young Meduse, to attend the university as a gesture of friendship and goodwill. By opening the university to a Meduse, Oomza Uni makes way for Okwu to take control of how the Meduse are thought of by the rest of the galaxy. Even more importantly, admitting Okwu to Oomza Uni makes it clear that the university now wants to recognize the humanity and dignity of all beings in the galaxy. Through this, the novella makes the point that while science, math, and the education system can connect people and forge important alliances, it’s also essential to crack down on unethical and dehumanizing research practices. It’s also important to pay attention to who is left out of the system, bring those individuals in, and set the precedent for treating them like fellow beings worthy of respect and empathy.



COMMUNITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND BELONGING

As teenage Binti details her friends’ and family’s less-than-ideal reactions to her acceptance to Oomza University in the weeks before she secretly leaves home to attend the school, it becomes clear that Binti doesn’t feel she belongs at home quite as much as she originally thought she did. By leaving home, Binti is able to discover that belonging isn’t as simple as staying home and following her family’s wishes for her future. Rather, Binti realizes that she can create a sense of belonging for herself anywhere by making friends who share her interests and support her endeavors.

Binti is intimately connected to her home—that is, the land she calls home and the Himba culture she was born into. She’s

extremely proud of her father, who makes prized astrolabes (communication devices that hold a person's history and future) and finds meaning and solace in her culture's hygiene and beauty practice of covering one's body and hair with **otjize** paste, which is reddish brown and helps a user stay clean without regular access to water for bathing. However strong her cultural connections are, though, Binti nevertheless begins to feel like an outsider when she learns of her acceptance to Oomza Uni, a prestigious school across the galaxy where no Himba has ever been accepted. Disappointingly, Binti's family and close friends react poorly to her acceptance. It's not common or even culturally acceptable for Himba to leave their lands, so it's unthinkable that Binti would choose to do so in pursuit of a higher education—especially when, by all accounts, she's gifted and poised to take over her father's astrolabe workshop in the future. Especially given that even Binti's best friend Dele laughs at her when she shares the news of her acceptance, the novel implies that it's impossible to maintain strong connections when one's friends and family aren't supportive. In some regards, *Binti* implies that while the relationships one forms through cultural connections are extremely important, they cannot be the only thing driving a friendship—friends must support one another's dreams and desires, even when those conflict with their culture.

Indeed, though Binti's journey to the spaceship that will take her to Oomza Uni and her first day onboard are peppered with incidences of racism and prejudice, she nevertheless makes a number of close friends very quickly, once she and her future classmates are able to bond over their shared loves of math and science. Through these budding friendships, Binti is able to start to conceptualize what life is going to be like at Oomza Uni. She can see that while she won't necessarily be able to easily fix her issues with her family at home, she'll nevertheless be part of a thriving academic community where all people—no matter what they look like or where they come from—are respected for their academic achievements and supported as they work toward those achievements. In other words, the friendship Binti knows she's going to make at Oomza Uni are clearly going to be stronger and more meaningful for her (at least during her time at school) than those she left behind. Despite not sharing cultural roots, Binti and her classmates will still be able to bond over their mutual interest in mathematical equations, scientific discoveries, and new technologies.

Following the Meduse's hijacking of the ship (during which they murder everyone but Binti and the pilot), Binti begins to understand that it's also possible to form friendships based on genuine respect for individuals' cultures and their academic pursuits; friendship doesn't have to be based on just one or the other. Over the few days that Binti is on the ship with the Meduse, she forms a fragile friendship with a young Meduse named Okwu. Through their interactions, Binti comes to see that Okwu is a lot like her: young, headstrong, and independent.

Binti learns about the Meduse and comes to respect how honorable they are, while Okwu immediately latches onto the newly discovered healing powers of Binti's otjize—a symbolic respect for Binti's entire culture. Their friendship, in this sense, begins as they gain an appreciation for the other's very different culture; it grows and matures as they spend more time together as fellow students at Oomza Uni.

In the brief descriptions of Binti and Okwu's first few months at Oomza Uni, Okorafor makes the case that especially because both individuals come from such wildly different cultural backgrounds—and backgrounds that are so different from any of their other classmates—they're able to find a sense of camaraderie with each other that is harder to form with other individuals at school. And most importantly, it's Okwu who ultimately pushes Binti to reach out to and reconnect with her family. Through this, *Binti* positions friendship as both a powerful force that can help a person feel at home in a new environment and as a supportive link between a person's culture and family and their future.



FEAR AND PREJUDICE VS. CURIOSITY

Teenage Binti, as the first member of the Himba tribe to be accepted into the prestigious Oomza University, is an object of curiosity and scorn when she enters the wider world populated primarily by the Khoush people, who are lighter-skinned and hold political power in Binti's world. However, when jellyfish-like aliens known as the Meduse take over Binti's spaceship, killing everyone but Binti and the pilot, Binti finds herself not just the only Himba on the ship—she's also the only non-necessary human on the ship. Therefore, in the eyes of the Meduse, Binti is the enemy. As Binti discovers that she can communicate with the Meduse and begins to get to know a young Meduse named Okwu, both Binti and Okwu begin to understand that the only way to move past one's prejudice is to replace feelings of fear and suspicion with genuine curiosity.

As part of the minority group at home, Binti is well aware of how prejudice works. She knows that the Himba tribe's deep connection to their lands (to the point that most never leave home) and their practice of applying a perfumed clay substance called **otjize** to their skin make others—notably the Khoush—think of the Himba as uncivilized, provincial, and dirty. Importantly, the Khoush persist in this line of thinking even though the Himba are celebrated for their astrolabes, communication devices that also hold information about an astrolabe's owner, including their past and future. Especially given that most of the discrimination Binti experiences over the course of her journey has to do with her looks, regardless of her unusual aptitude for math, Binti understands that the prejudice of the Khoush is ridiculous and stems from their lack of knowledge about the Himba. If the Khoush could learn to admire and respect what the Himba contribute to the world,

Binti believes they'd be far less nasty—and indeed, this is exactly what happens once Binti proves herself to her future classmates.

When the Meduse enter the picture, however, Binti is forced to confront another aspect of prejudice that she hadn't entirely considered when thinking about the issues between the Himba and the Khoush: fear. The Meduse and the Khoush have an uneasy relationship after a bloody war and still don't trust each other. Due to the fact that the Khoush came out on top of that conflict and the fact that the Khoush are a powerful majority on Earth and in the galaxy, nearly everyone fears the Meduse—in addition to considering them subhuman, given that they resemble jellyfish and don't communicate with people. This includes Binti. Even though she's not Khoush, she was still taught about the Meduse in school (the Khoush design curriculum for everyone and make sure that everyone knows about their war with the Meduse). Given what Binti knows, she's understandably terrified when she realizes she's the only person to survive the Meduse's attack thanks to a piece of old technology, called an edan, that she keeps as a memento and that turns out to be poisonous to the Meduse. And to the Meduse, Binti's identity as a Himba who *also* has issues with the Khoush doesn't matter. To them, she's human and therefore, part of the problem. On all sides, fear and prejudice reign supreme and keep everyone involved in the conflict from coming to a meaningful solution.

Communication and curiosity, the novel suggests, are some of the best and only ways to counteract fear and prejudice. On the ghostlike ship, with the Meduse prowling through the corridors trying to come up with a way to kill Binti, things only begin to change when Binti discovers that her *edan* enables her to communicate with the Meduse. Once it becomes clear that the Meduse cannot kill Binti without hurting themselves—and when they understand that Binti can't and won't do anything to them unless provoked—each side becomes increasingly comfortable and curious about the other. Through Binti's budding friendship with the Meduse Okwu, she begins to learn about the Meduse culture and the conflict with the Khoush. At the same time, the Meduse discover that Binti's *otjize* can somehow heal their wounds. Through this, both Binti and the Meduse begin to gain respect for the other's culture and start to understand that they're all individuals deserving of respect and kindness.

This mutual respect culminates in the novel's climax, in which Binti is able to broker peace between the Meduse and the final targets of their attack at Oomza Uni—and ultimately, when the university offers Okwu a spot as a student. Through conversation, listening, and curiosity, Binti, the Meduse, and the faculty at Oomza Uni are able to make a start at repairing many years of strife, fear, and the prejudice. With this, the novel makes the case that the first step to overcoming prejudice is to approach new individuals and new situations with curiosity and

openness, not fear.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



OTJIZE

The *otjize* symbolizes Binti's Himba culture and her changing relationship to it. *Otjize* is a traditional mixture of reddish clay, oils, and perfumes that the Himba spread over their bodies and hair. It marks them as Himba, and especially for Binti, it's a point of pride to wear it. Because of the significance of the *otjize* to Binti's identity, it's understandably anxiety-inducing to leave the planet and the galaxy—she might not be able to find the supplies she needs to make *otjize* at Oomza Uni, and things become even more complicated when she and the Meduse discover that *otjize* can heal the Meduse's injuries. However, as Binti shares her Earth-made *otjize* with the Meduse and ultimately is able to make *otjize* at Oomza Uni, it suggests that culture might not be as tied to a single place as Binti originally thought. Rather, it's possible to share one's culture with others, and it's possible to recreate important cultural practices in a new environment.



OKUOKO

Okuoko represent Binti's changing identity in relation to her new friendships. The word *okuoko* refers to the tentacles of the Meduse—as well as Binti's thick, tentacle-like braids—and it's the first word of the Meduse language that Okwu shares with Binti. Thus, through sharing this word, Binti and Okwu are able to start to construct their fragile friendship. Later, when Binti must put her edan down to show that she trusts the Meduse, she discovers afterwards that the sting from a Meduse transformed her braids into blue *okuoko*. As Okwu explains, this is an indicator that Binti is now part of the Meduse family. For Binti, this reinforces how much she's changed over the course of her journey to Oomza Uni. While her braids once told the story of her family on Earth, her *okuoko* now tell the story of her acceptance into a new, intergalactic family.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Tom Doherty edition of *Binti* published in 2015.

Binti Quotes

☞ We Himba don't travel. We stay put. Our ancestral land is life; move away from it and you diminish. We even cover our bodies with it. *Otjize* is red land. Here in the launch port, most were Khoush and a few other non-Himba. Here, I was an outsider; I was outside. "What was I thinking?" I whispered.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

Binti describes her shock and sense of being overwhelmed and out of place as she gets to the launch port to leave Earth for Oomza Uni, a university far across the galaxy. Importantly, Binti makes it clear just how important the specific lands that the Himba inhabit are to her identity as a Himba. In the Himba value system, the land and the *otjize* (a ritualistic clay mixture) that cover Himba bodies are what make a person a person. Now that Binti is outside of her ancestral homeland and away from her family for the first time, it becomes increasingly clear to her just how out of place she is. At this point, this only increases Binti's sense that she's doing something bad and wrong by leaving home for Oomza Uni.

However, though it's important to not diminish the beliefs of the Himba, Binti does go on to discover that being on one's homeland isn't the only way to be at home. It's possible for her to find friendship, community, and a sense of belonging if she's around people who share her interests and who support her academic endeavors—something her family at home stopped doing when she was accepted to Oomza Uni. This quote thus speaks to Binti's youth and inexperience in the wider world; as she grows and develops, she begins to rethink these ideas.

☞ "There is a reason why our people do not go to that university. Oomza Uni wants you for its own gain, Binti. You go to that school and you become its slave." I couldn't help but contemplate the possible truth in her words. I hadn't even gotten there yet and already I'd given them my life.

Related Characters: Binti, Binti's Mother (speaker), The Chief

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As Binti goes through security and undergoes a deep scan of her astrolabe, she recalls her mother's insistence that Oomza Uni wants to use Binti for its own purposes. Binti wonders if her mother is correct because this procedure is invasive: the person scanning the astrolabe has access to Binti's entire past, her family history, and all of her possible futures. She recognizes that all this information would be easy to use against her. At this point, then, Binti begins to suspect that the school might not be as idyllic as she once thought it would be. Even though, as far as Binti is willing to share, Oomza Uni doesn't turn her into a "slave," Binti nevertheless discovers that it abuses other marginalized groups in the name of research. Indeed, the conflict Binti goes on to face is that the Meduse aliens want to attack the university to take back a stinger that was stolen from its chief—something the university acquired without consent. It's possible that even if Binti and her family don't know the full extent of this kind of unethical behavior from the university, Binti's mother might still suspect that there are questionable things going on—and especially because Binti is Himba and is therefore already part of a marginalized group, she could be at even greater risk.

☞ "Congratulations," he said to me in his parched voice, holding out my astrolabe.

I frowned at him, confused. "What for?"

"You are the pride of your people, child," he said, looking me in the eye. Then he smiled broadly and patted my shoulder. He'd just seen my entire life. He knew of my admission into Oomza Uni.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When the Khoush man scanning Binti's astrolabe congratulates her on her acceptance to Oomza Uni and says she's the "pride of her people," Binti is shocked. Part of Binti's surprise likely comes from the fact that the person telling her this is Khoush. In her experience, the Khoush

don't treat Himba so kindly or give them this kind of praise. Instead, they more often look down on the Himba as unintelligent, uncultured, and dirty. Thus, in this moment, Binti has to face her own narrow view of what the Khoush are like, as this Khoush man's kindness offers hope that there are Khoush who are happy to see Himba and other marginalized groups succeed.

What the guard says, meanwhile, offers hope that Binti might not suffer as much for her transgression of leaving the planet as she fears she will. Her family's pride in her intelligence—and possibly in the future, their pride in what Binti does during her time at school—may make them more willing to allow Binti to move back and forth between their worlds without punishing her socially or shutting her out of cultural events and rites of passage.

“It smells like jasmine flowers,” she said to the woman on her left, surprised.

“No shit?” one woman said. “I hear it smells like shit because it is shit.”

“No, definitely jasmine flowers. It is thick like shit, though.”



“Is her hair even real?” another woman asked the woman rubbing her fingers.


“I don't know.”

“These ‘dirt bathers’ are a filthy people,” the first woman muttered.

I just turned back around, my shoulders hunched. My mother had counseled me to be quiet around Khoush.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Binti's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16


Explanation and Analysis

While Binti is standing in line for security, a group of Khoush women pick up one of her braids to inspect it and the *otjize* coating it, and they talk about Binti and Himba people as though Binti isn't there. This moment highlights and exposes how the Khoush think about Himba people: to them, the Himba are barely people, and so these women speak with no indication that they feel they need to be polite in front of Binti as a fellow human being. Because she's Himba, she's an object to them.

The way that Binti reacts to these women then drives home how little power she has socially as a Himba. It may be unsafe for her to stand up for herself at all, especially since she's the only Himba in the entire launch station and most everyone else is Khoush. By including an incident like this, Okorafor is able to draw attention to and call out the way that some people either take issue with or inappropriately fetishize black hair. Black hair is sometimes unfairly discriminated against as novel, unclean, or unprofessional—and it's never acceptable to touch a stranger's hair like this, especially if such a violation is accompanied by racist insults.

Inside, I smiled. Government security guards were only educated up to age ten, yet because of their jobs, they were used to ordering people around. And they especially looked down on people like me. Apparently, they were the same everywhere, no matter the tribe. He had no idea what a “computative apparatus” was, but he didn't want to show that I, a poor Himba girl, was more educated than he. Not in front of all these people.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19



Explanation and Analysis

When a security guard asks Binti about her *edan* and she calls it a “computative apparatus,” the guard's reaction gives her some pleasure. The Khoush people believe that they're superior to everyone else, especially the Himba. Because of this, this security guard has probably grown up believing that he's better than the Himba, even before he knew he was going to be a security guard. Thus, it's a nasty shock for him to discover that at least in terms of education, Binti is better than he is—and at the very least, she's not uneducated and provincial like the guard believes the Himba are.

This also speaks to the fact that within the world of the novel, education rules. People are “better” if they have more education and lesser if they're uneducated, though this is complicated by what ethnic group a person belongs to. Sharing an education level with someone can bring people together regardless of racial or cultural differences, while the stark difference in education level between Binti and the security guard pushes them even further apart.

“The people on the ship weren’t Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood out as Himba, but the commonalities shined brighter. I made friends quickly. And by the second week in space, they were good friends.”

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Binti explains that within a day or two of being on the ship to Oomza Uni, she learned that the other students are still worthy friends and fellow students despite not being Himba. Importantly, Binti and these friends connect over their shared interests in math, science, technology, and inventing. What binds them together, in other words, is their interest in education. This clearly makes the case that education, especially in a diverse university setting like Oomza Uni, is capable of bridging all manner of divides. If people are united around a shared interest in a certain subject, the novella suggests that it becomes far easier to look past the myriad other ways that people are different and focus on what they share.

More broadly, this suggests that shared interests can even make someone human in the eyes of others rather than merely a representative of their particular ethnic group (in this case, Himba or Khoush). Binti becomes a real person to her future classmates because she’s so good at math where otherwise, she’d likely be treated with scorn and disdain because she’s of the Himba minority group.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said, his fingertips reddish with my *otjize*.


“You can’t control yourself?” I snapped.

“You have exactly twenty-one,” he said. “And they’re braided in tessellating triangles. Is it some sort of code?”

I wanted to tell him that there was a code, that the pattern spoke my family’s bloodline, culture, and history. That my father had designed the code and my mother and aunties had shown me how to braid it into my hair.

Related Characters: Binti, Heru (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Binti is angry and horrified when Heru grabs one of her braids one day, but she’s shocked that he does so because he identified the code braided into her hair. While it’s important not to excuse Heru’s behavior—grabbing Binti’s hair rather than just asking her about the code is extremely rude and suggests he doesn’t respect Binti’s personal space—it’s nevertheless important to note that he does so out of curiosity, not animosity. As a person who’s interested in code, he’s doing everything he can to figure out what the code is. In this way, he and Binti learn that they have a lot in common. If Binti and Heru were able to continue their relationship, this discovery about Binti’s braids might help Heru understand that the Himba are people like any other and are worthy of respect, a view that goes against the racist perspective that many Khoush hold.

“In my culture, it is blasphemy to pray to inanimate objects, but I did it anyway. I prayed to a metal even my father had been unable to identify. I held it to my chest, shut my eyes, and I prayed to it, *I am in your protection. Please protect me.*”

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Binti’s Father, Okwu, Heru

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 24



Explanation and Analysis

When the Meduse attack the ship to commit *moojh-ha ki-bira* (killing everyone quickly and violently), Binti clings to her *edan* and prays to it. While it’s entirely understandable that someone in Binti’s situation would pray—she has no way of knowing at this point that the *edan* is going to save her life and make her untouchable to the Meduse—it’s telling that she prays to something that, per Himba spirituality, she shouldn’t pray to. This speaks to how much Binti has already changed in the two weeks since she left home: while she’s no less proud of being Himba now that she’s far away from her ancestral lands, she’s nevertheless making choices that might make someone question whether she’s truly Himba. Her identity is, in this sense, beginning to reflect her journey and how she’s changing, not just the

place from which she came. The fact that she notes that even her father can't identify the metal the *edan* is made out of highlights how far away from home she is and how little her family understands about who she is and where she is now.

●● We'd all been taught this Meduse form of killing in history class. The Khoush built the lessons into history, literature, and culture classes across several regions. Even my people were required to learn about it, despite the fact that it wasn't our fight. The Khoush expected everyone to remember their greatest enemy and injustice. They even worked Meduse anatomy and rudimentary technology into mathematics and science classes.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25-26

Explanation and Analysis

Binti explains that she knows about *moojh-ha ki-bira* (the Meduse method of killing a group of people quickly and violently) because the Khoush are responsible for creating curricula, even for Himba people like Binti. This speaks to how powerless Himba are on Earth—they can't even create curricula for their own Himba students that reflects the concerns and the needs of Himba youth. Instead, because the Khoush are the politically powerful ethnic group, everyone—no matter how much the Khoush's conflicts don't affect them—has to care about those very conflicts. Binti's tone also suggests a degree of disdain for this practice, especially because of the ways in which the Khoush mistreat the Himba. The Khoush feel mistreated by the Meduse in a way similar to how the Himba are mistreated by the Khoush—but the Khoush are the ones who get to complain, because they're the ones in power. The Himba are silenced.

Then, it's important to note that Binti refers to the "rudimentary technology" of the Meduse that the Khoush teach. It seems that as far as the Khoush are concerned, the Meduse aren't a sophisticated species; they're seen as subhuman and senselessly violent. And because Binti is at the mercy of the Khoush education system, she goes into her negotiations with the Meduse on the ship believing them to be frightening and dangerous, but not necessarily as intelligent as she is.

●● My brothers had all just laughed and dismissed the idea. My parents said nothing, not even congratulations. Their silence was answer enough. Even my best friend Dele. He congratulated and told me that I was smarter than everyone at Oomza Uni, but then he'd laughed, too. "You cannot go," he simply said. "We're Himba. God has already chosen our paths."

Related Characters: Dele, Binti (speaker), Binti's Mother, Binti's Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis


In a flashback, Binti describes her family and friends' reactions to her acceptance at Oomza Uni. No one was particularly excited for her, and no one wanted her to leave. The way that Binti's community reacts to her acceptance makes her feel very alone (and indeed, she goes on to apply and attend Oomza Uni alone, with no help), something that makes her feel alienated among her own people. This begins to suggest that friendship and community that's based only on sharing culture, religion, or a hometown isn't always sustainable in the long run. Rather, even if a person's dreams conflict with the general beliefs and practices of a particular belief system or community, it's necessary to support a person in their endeavors if one wants to maintain the relationship. Binti discovers that the opposite of this is also true: though her friends on the ship aren't Himba, they share her love of math and science. Because of their shared interests, they're able to look past their different cultural backgrounds and bond. In this sense, the novel proposes that a person's interests and aspirations can, at times, be far more important to their identity than their culture—and finding a community rooted in shared interests rather than beliefs can be far more fulfilling.

●● When I'd sit in the desert, alone, listening to the wind, I would see and feel the numbers the way I did when I was deep in my work in my father's shop. And those numbers added up to the sum of my destiny.

So in secret, I filled out and uploaded the acceptance forms. The desert was the perfect place for privacy when they contacted my astrolabe for university interviews.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Binti's Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29



Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback, Binti explains how she experiences math and her process of getting into Oomza Uni. Importantly, the way that Binti describes math portrays it as something like a spiritual pursuit. She sees numbers in the natural world the way others might see the work of the divine, and math gives her a sense of peace and control over her world. Because of the way math makes Binti feel, she's compelled to go behind her family's back to attend Oomza Uni. Studying math, she believes, is even more important to her identity than remaining on her ancestral lands as a Himba.

However, it's important to note that she mentions sitting in the desert to listen to the wind and work on her acceptance materials. The desert is extremely important to the Himba—it's where their *otjize* (ritualistic clay) comes from and it makes them who they are. It's telling, then, that Binti roots herself in a physical representation of her culture, even as she does something against her culture by going to Oomza Uni. Regardless, being Himba grounds Binti and makes her feel safe as she takes the next dangerous step to follow her destiny.

“Evil thing,” I heard the one called Okwu say. Of all the voices, that one I could recognize. It was the angriest and scariest. The voice sounded spoken, not transmitted in my mind. I could hear the vibration of the “v” in “evil” and the hard breathy “th” in “thing.” Did they have mouths?

Related Characters: Binti, Okwu (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis


As Binti listens to the Meduse outside her door by using the *edan*, she picks out the voice of a Meduse named Okwu. Okwu believes that Binti's *edan* is evil because it's capable of killing and injuring Meduse. At this point, all Binti knows about the Meduse is what she learned from the Khoush, who don't like or trust the Meduse at all. And clearly, the Khoush left out some important information in their lessons about the Meduse, such as whether or not they have mouths. This very simple omission begins to suggest that

the Khoush didn't take the time to learn much about the Meduse before creating mandatory lessons about the beings in schools. In this sense, Binti's lack of knowledge about the Meduse reflects the fact that the Khoush are prejudiced and afraid of the Meduse, and that they know little about them.

However, it's important that Binti has already picked out an individual out of the Meduse and is asking questions. She's already moving past the lessons on the Meduse she learned in school, as she's no longer thinking of them as just a mass of creatures that are all the same. She's curious, and she's starting to see that they might have a culture just like she does, highlighting the importance of getting to know others firsthand rather than relying upon biased secondhand information.

“I couldn't give all my *otjize* to this Meduse; this was my culture.”

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Okwu

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis



When Okwu returns to Binti's room and demands her jar of *otjize*, Binti is horrified. Okwu and Binti recently discovered that the *otjize*, when applied to the Meduse, heals their wounds. Though the discovery of *otjize*'s healing powers is a positive thing, Binti sees it as threatening because of the very emotional cultural connection she has to *otjize*. *Otjize* isn't just a favorite beauty product; it's made from the clay of her homeland, and it connects Binti to that land and to her people. It is the symbol of Binti's Himba culture, so it's understandably horrifying for her that she might have to give up her culture in order to survive this ordeal.

However, in some ways, this is exactly what Binti ends up doing over the course of the novella. Though she doesn't ever stop covering herself in *otjize*, she still has to figure out how to make the substance without the specific clay from her homeland, something that makes her feel less Himba. She eventually loses her culturally meaningful hair, which also makes her feel less connected to her family and her heritage. However, the novel proposes that this is all a part of traveling and growing up. Binti's choice to leave the

planet meant that she was never going to be able to stay fully Himba—Himba, she explains many times, don't leave their homelands. However, this doesn't mean that Binti can't find a way to be Himba even as she flouts its traditions in this one respect. But this is all in the future for Binti at this point—for now, Binti is still understandably nervous about all these changes and about having the possibility of change thrust on her like this.

“I sat up straight, ignoring the fatigue trying to pull my bones to the bed. “I am Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib.” I considered speaking its single name to reflect its cultural simplicity compared to mine, but my strength and bravado were already waning.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Okwu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50



Explanation and Analysis

As Okwu and other Meduse come and go, negotiating curiously with Binti, Okwu asks for Binti's name. Binti's insistence that Okwu's culture is “simple” compared to hers reflects what she's learned in school from the Khoush—which insists that the Meduse are violent and entirely unsophisticated. Binti believes that because she's a human being, she's naturally more advanced than Okwu and the Meduse.

However, this belief betrays Binti's own prejudice instead of proving her point that she's better than the Meduse. For one, the length of a person or being's name isn't a reflection of the sophistication of one's culture—it merely reflects a different naming system. Further, Binti has grown up as part of the Himba tribe, who are thought of as culturally simple by the Khoush despite the fact that Himba make necessary and sophisticated technology for the Khoush. Clearly, the perception of “cultural simplicity” doesn't have to be tied in any way to how sophisticated a culture actually is. Rather, it's far more likely that thinking a culture is “simple” only reflects on that person's racism or prejudice.

“I frowned at it. Realizing something. It spoke like one of my brothers, Bena. I was born only three years after him yet we'd never been very close. He was angry and always speaking out about the way my people were maltreated by the Khoush majority despite the fact that they needed us and our astrolabes to survive. He was always calling them evil, though he'd never traveled to a Khoush country or known a Khoush. His anger was rightful, but all that he said was from what he didn't truly know.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Bena, Okwu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54



Explanation and Analysis

As Okwu nastily insults Binti and humanity more generally over the course of their conversation, she comes to realize that Okwu doesn't know much about people. It's especially significant that Binti comes to think of Okwu as being like her brother Bena. The fact that Binti can draw comparisons between a Meduse and her brother (even though she and her brother aren't close) suggests that she's already starting to humanize the Meduse. They're now living, human-like beings in Binti's mind, rather than just dangerous killers. And just like people, they're prone to speaking about a group without truly knowing what that group is all about.

However, the way that Binti frames the comparison suggests that Binti doesn't deny that the Meduse have every reason to be wary of humans. Though Binti doesn't describe the war in detail, the Meduse and the Khoush went to war some time before the novel begins and have never fully made peace after that. In other words, Binti is able to understand that there's a lot of nuance here. Okwu may have every right to be upset and wary of people, but he also leaves no room for the possibility that some people—like Binti—don't really have any issue with the Meduse.

“In your university, in one of its museums, placed on display like a piece of rare meat is the stinger of our chief,” it said. I wrinkled my face, but said nothing. “Our chief is...” it paused. “We know of the attack and mutilation of our chief, but we do not know how it got there. We do not care. We will land on Oomza Uni and take it back.”

Related Characters: Okwu (speaker), The Chief, Binti

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56



Explanation and Analysis

Okwu finally explains why the Meduse are headed for Oomza Uni: they intend to take back their chief's stinger, which was violently and wrongfully taken from the chief. This begins to humanize the Meduse for Binti, as it allows her to see that the Meduse are, in many ways, a marginalized group—just like the Himba are. Like Binti's own people, the Himba have suffered abuses and injustices, and they seemingly believe that they have no way to right these wrongs aside from violence.

More importantly, however, this makes it clear that Oomza Uni isn't the utopia that Binti hoped it would be. It may offer some students a world-class education, but it also is the organization that decides who gets to be a student and who is merely an interesting research subject. The Meduse are, more broadly, fighting back against a group that wants to dehumanize them and keep them outside the circle of who counts as a person. Though Binti isn't wrong that science, math, and education can bring people together, this can't happen when universities and groups like Oomza Uni so violently make it clear that only some are welcome to attend as equals—while others are only welcome as curiosities.

☞☞ Spongy. As if it were full of the firm jelly beads in the milky pudding my mother liked to make. I could sense current all around me. These people had deep active technology built into the walls and many of them had it running within their very bodies. Some of them were walking astrolabes, it was part of their biology.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Binti's Mother, The Chief, Okwu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Binti enters the Meduse ship to negotiate with the chief and is surprised to discover that the texture of the ship (a living being) reminds her of a pudding her mother makes—and that the Meduse are far more sophisticated than she ever thought possible. Connecting the texture of the ship to her mother's pudding speaks to Binti's homesickness and her natural desire to connect everything she sees to something familiar from home. While doing this reflects her longing for


the life she left behind, it also helps her make sense of her surroundings and see things positively, not as a threat.

Then, discovering that there's technology built into the walls of ship and into some of the Meduse themselves shows Binti how woefully uninformed she was about the Meduse. While she grew up thinking of the Meduse as uncivilized, uncultured, and unsophisticated, her newfound ability to sense their currents with the *edan* allows her to see that this isn't true. By having this made very clear to her, Binti is able to shift her thinking even more to see the Meduse as beings deserving of respect and kindness, from her as well as from Oomza Uni.

☞☞ “Was it the sting?” I asked.

“No,” it said. “That is something else. You understand, because you truly are what you say you are—a harmonizer.”

Related Characters: Okwu, Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70


Explanation and Analysis

After Binti discovers that she can suddenly understand the Meduse, she asks if it's because a Meduse stung her. Okwu, however, makes the point that Binti understands because she's a “master harmonizer.” Previously, Binti explained that this distinction is something that happens to some Himba, who are known for their astrolabes and their ability to manipulate mathematical currents and put them to work. Okwu suggests that Binti's ability to understand is merely an extension of her ability to understand currents—in other words, she has her Himba identity to thank for her ability to understand. This suggests that as people become more comfortable with other cultures, communication between different groups becomes easier. Binti and Okwu are on their way to becoming friends—and Binti will end the novella as a lifelong friend of the Meduse—because she and Okwu have shared information about their cultures with each other. At a certain point, Binti and Okwu figured out how to communicate with each other, something that allows their friendship to flourish.

●● But above all this, outside of the horror of what we'd done, we all felt an awesome glorious...shock. Our hair hung in thick clumps, black in the moonlight. Our skin glistened, dark brown. *Glistened*. And there had been a breeze that night and it felt amazing on our exposed skin.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72


Explanation and Analysis

While Binti puts *otjize* on her hair in preparation for landing on Oomza Uni, she thinks back to a time when she and some friends snuck to the lake and washed off their *otjize*. They were horrified, but it also felt freeing and exciting. It's telling that Binti doesn't say it was just an amazing experience for her—it was amazing for all her friends. With this, she begins to understand that the desire to move away from one's culture may actually be something that lots of people experience to some degree, even if many of them don't actually leave the planet like Binti does. There remains the possibility that it's just exciting to experiment with different identities, if only for a little while. This creates some possibility that Binti will be able to return home more easily than she believes she'll be able to. If her friends can also recall this moment, it may be easier for them to understand why Binti chose to take this a step further and attend Oomza Uni.

●● Several of the human professors looked at each other and chuckled. One of the large insectile people clicked its mandibles. I frowned, flaring my nostrils. It was the first time I'd received treatment similar to the way my people were treated on Earth by the Khoush. In a way, this set me at ease. People were people, everywhere. These professors were just like anyone else.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Okwu, The Chief, Haras

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

As Binti begins her impassioned speech to the Oomza Uni professors, she begins by explaining about the Himba culture and her *otjize*. Some of the professors laugh at her. For Binti, this is comforting because she realizes now that she might not experience as much culture shock at Oomza Uni as she initially thought. While the professors' choice to laugh is certainly disheartening, it nevertheless makes Binti suspect that things aren't so different on Oomza Uni than they are at home.

This also adds to Binti's growing understanding that Oomza Uni isn't the paradise she hoped it'd be. While in some ways, she's right—the professors are educated, everyone cares about math and science, and people will support her academic endeavors—she also discovers in moments like these that the university still looks down on some of its students. Moreover, the university also keeps entire races out of the university by turning them into research subjects instead of students, as they do with the Meduse. Though this particular instance doesn't sour Binti's love for the school and for education, it still shows that schools must continually strive to include more people, train professors and authority figures to be sensitive to difference and treat students with kindness and compassion.

●● “You've never seen the Meduse, either. Only studied them...from afar. I know. I have read about them too.” I stepped forward. “Or maybe some of you or your students have studied the stinger you have in the weapons museum up close.”

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), Haras, Okwu, The Chief

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75-76


Explanation and Analysis

During her speech to the Oomza Uni professors, Binti brings up the chief Meduse's stinger that the university has in its museum collection. It's telling that she calls out the way that the university has very purposefully held the Meduse at a distance, treating them as research subjects and as animals instead of the complex, sophisticated beings that they are. Binti makes the point that the university—and for a long time, she as well—thinks of the Meduse as simple, due to how little other species know about them. And for that matter, most of what others seem to know about the

Meduse has to do with their violence and their killing methods, which reduces the entire Meduse culture down to a single element. This, of course, ignores the fact that that the Meduse are honorable and rational. At least according to Okwu, the Meduse don't want to use their stingers—but they will if necessary, in order to uphold their honor. Because the university doesn't know any of this about the Meduse, it's easier to belittle them. Bringing people and groups into the circle entails learning about them and seeing them as beings who are worthy of respect and power.

“The spiderlike Haras raised two front legs and spoke in the language of the Meduse and said, “On behalf of all the people of Oomza Uni and on behalf of Oomza University, I apologize for the actions of a group of our own in taking the stinger from you, Chief Meduse. The scholars who did this will be found, expelled, and exiled. Museum specimen of such prestige are highly prized at our university, however such things must only be acquired with permission from the people to whom they belong. [...] We will return it to you immediately.”

Related Characters: Okwu, Binti, The Chief

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Following Binti and the chief's appeals to the Oomza University professors, the speaker for the professors, Haras, apologizes to the chief. First, it's important that Haras gives this speech in the Meduse language, as this allows him to show the Meduse even more respect than giving the speech in his native language and translating. It's a way to make the Meduse feel accepted and as though they and their culture and language belong here. Then, it's also worth noting that Haras's apology doesn't try to make excuses for what happened. Haras simply admits that the university did wrong, promises to expel the individuals who are responsible, and then make things right by returning the stinger without any issue. This is, the novel suggests, the only acceptable way for universities or museums to deal with claims by native peoples whose artwork, spiritual items, or very bodies have been seized by universities or collectors in the name of research. Research, the novel, makes clear, isn't an excuse for doing unethical, inhumane things and stealing from people.



“That is true, but what about your home? Will you ever return?”

“Of course,” I said. “Eventually, I will visit and...”

“I have studied your people,” she said. “They don't like outsiders.”

“I'm not an outsider,” I said, with a twinge of irritation. “I am...” And that's when it caught my eye.

Related Characters: Binti, Okpala (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 80


Explanation and Analysis

Binti and the professor Okpala speak briefly after the negotiations with the Meduse; Okpala has noticed that Binti's hair has transformed into *okuoko*, and Binti realizes this fact herself at this moment. Okpala brings up the fact that Binti's *okuoko* are a clear symbol that she's changed since she left home. She's no longer just a very mathematically gifted Himba teenager—she's someone who brokered peace with the Meduse and is going to study mathematics at Oomza Uni. This is reflected in her new hair. While this may not seem like a terrible thing to an outsider—and possibly at some point, even to Binti—Okpala still suggests that it means that Binti can never really go home. Because she left and because she's changed so much, she's no longer really Himba. If she returns home, she'll face prejudice not just because she left, but because she no longer fits in due to her new relationships with other beings in the galaxy. Binti is, in this sense, an outsider to her Himba community.

“I'll never forget the way the chief's body went from blue to clear the moment the stinger became a part of it again.

Only a blue line remained at the point of demarcation where it had reattached—a scar that would always remind it of what human beings of Oomza Uni had done to it for the sake of research and academics.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker), The Chief

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 84



Explanation and Analysis

Binti details the moment when the Meduse chief got its stinger back. Binti understands that getting the stinger back made the chief into the being it's supposed to be. Just as the *otjize* or Binti's special braided hairstyle made her Himba and makes her who she is, the chief's stinger makes it a Meduse. However, both Binti and the chief now bear scars of how their journey has changed them. The chief's scar will, in Binti's estimation, be a constant reminder of the fact that until this moment, the Meduse have been seen as dangerous but inferior antagonists in the galaxy. They've been only research subjects, not people worthy of a place in the university as students or professors. Binti's "scars," to some degree, also speak to the trauma she's experienced in her journey to becoming the kind of person the university sees as worthy of being a student. She had to unwillingly give up her hair in order to communicate with the Meduse. Though she was already admitted to the university before this, her newfound abilities over the course of her journey make her even more compelling to the university.

☛☛ I pulled my hand away and took a deep breath. If I couldn't make *otjize* here, then I'd have to...change. I touched one of my tentacle-like locks and felt a painful pressure in my chest as my mind tried to take me to a place I wasn't ready to go. I plunged my two fingers into my new concoction...and scooped it up. I spread it on my flesh. Then I wept.

Related Characters: Binti (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Following a rare bath in which Binti washes off all her *otjize* from Earth, Binti prepares to cover herself with new *otjize* she made from ingredients found on Oomza Uni. She's afraid that the concoction she made isn't real *otjize* and if this is the case, her identity will fundamentally have to change. This drives home just how important *otjize* is to Himba culture, and how strongly Binti identifies with being Himba. Without this aspect of her identity, Binti feels lost and unmoored—though now, Binti is in a place of maturity where she can see that the world won't end if she can't make *otjize*. She'll just have to continue changing, just as she's already done as her hair did when it transformed into *okuoko*.

When Binti is successful in making the *otjize*, she discovers that it's entirely possible to figure out how to recreate one's cultural traditions in a new environment. It may not be exactly the same, but it can still provide the same sense of comfort and of home that it could at home. This also allows Binti to reaffirm for herself that even as so much else changes, her Himba identity—at least in her mind—doesn't change just because she's no longer at home.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BINTI

Binti turns on her transporter, praying silently. She doesn't have a backup plan if her cheap transporter doesn't work—and anything, from a drop of water to a grain of sand, could keep it from working. It shivers, buzzes, and lifts Binti's baggage. Smiling, Binti wipes **otjize** off her forehead, touches her finger to the sand, and whispers "thank you." Now, she can make it the half-mile to the shuttle in time. Suddenly, Binti feels "the weight of [her] entire life" on her shoulders and feels lost. She knows that her nine siblings and her parents will be shocked—and by the time they figure out where Binti went, she won't be on the planet anymore. Her family will accuse her of causing a scandal. Binti tells the transporter to go and gives her suitcases a shove, and the transporter begins to move.

At the station, Binti purchases her ticket and boards the shuttle. She notes the rising sun as she threads her way down the aisle, aware of the fact that the bushy ends of her braided hair are hitting people in the face. Though Binti's entire family has thick hair, Binti's is especially thick. Before leaving, she rolled her braids with **otjize**, a special scented clay. Now, she wonders how she looks to these people who don't understand this practice. Binti ignores people's stares but glances. Everyone else is pale; Binti is the only Himba. Binti knows it's easy enough to make a shuttle like this with the right equipment and the time—and it's great for traversing roads that are poorly maintained, which these are since the Himba don't often leave their homeland.

Binti looks back and can see the lights from her father's astrolabe shop, the sand storm analyzer her brother built, and the Root—her parents' house—as well. The house is huge and is possibly the oldest in the city. It's covered in solar panels and bioluminescent plants. As the shuttle starts to move, Binti asks herself what she's doing. An hour and a half later, she arrives at the launch port. She's glad that she's the last one off; the busy port is overwhelming. Binti becomes aware of her long silk skirt, stiff top, sandals, and anklets—no one is dressed like her. Turning red, Binti feels stupid and is reminded again that the Himba don't leave their ancestral land. This is why they cover their bodies in **otjize**, which is made from the clay of their land. Moving away from the homeland makes a person lesser.

Wherever Binti is headed, it's clear that her life is going to change forever because she is leaving behind her family and her home. This paints Binti as a strong and independent young person, as she's someone willing to defy familial expectations to follow what she wants to do with her life. The way she prays for her transporter to work, however, suggests that even as Binti defies everyone to leave, she's still rooted in the spiritual practices of home—and she's willing to call on those spiritual practices to facilitate her journey.



What Binti says about the Himba paints them as a traditional people who are deeply connected to their home, as evidenced by the very existence of otjize—but they're people who nevertheless look ahead to the future by creating technology like these shuttles. Binti's aside that making a shuttle like this isn't difficult indicates that she has an aptitude for science and invention. However, the way she describes how others react to her suggests that the people on the shuttle instead see Binti as odd and as an "other," not as someone intelligent or innovative.



By leaving her homeland, Binti feels that she's becoming less Himba and therefore less herself—and indeed, less of a person. This means that Binti's journey is one in which she'll discover who she is in ways that aren't strictly related to being Himba. However, it's also clear that Binti takes pride in her home and her culture, as evidenced by the reverent way she talks about the otjize. This doesn't mean that it's easy for Binti to be the only Himba at the launch port, however. Now, she has to confront that she's among a bunch of people, like those on the shuttle, who view her as a curiosity.



Binti thinks again that she's 16 and has never left her city. She feels all alone and unmoored. Leaving home means that her bright marriage prospects are gone, meaning her chances of a normal life are shot. However, Binti also scored so high on the mathematics planetary exam that Oomza University across the galaxy admitted her and agreed to pay for whatever she needed. She reasons that she was never going to be normal and approaches the travel security officer. He scans her astrolabe deeply; Binti has to steady herself from the dizziness. The scan gives the officer access to everything about Binti, from her family and past to her possible futures. Binti can hear her mother's voice suddenly, reminding her why the Himba don't attend Oomza Uni: the school wants to make Binti its slave. Now, Binti suspects that this is true.

Binti wants to ask the officer if he scans *everyone's* astrolabe so deeply, but now she's afraid. The officer can do anything to her. Binti stops herself from angrily snatching back her astrolabe from the elderly Khoush officer. He'd insisted that he had to do the full scan since Binti hasn't traveled before, but he read it as fast as Binti's father could. This almost frightens Binti. When he's done with the scan, he stares at her. Binti feels like everyone, including the people behind her, are staring. The officer congratulates her and explains that Binti is "the pride of [her] people." He smiles and pats her shoulder as he gives back the astrolabe, and Binti almost cries from surprise.

Binti moves fast through the crowd. She considers finding a restroom so she can apply more **otjize**, but instead she keeps moving. Most people in the crowd are dressed like the Khoush, in flowing black and white garments. Binti has seen Khoush on TV and a few in her city, but she's never seen this many in one place.

As Binti stands in line for boarding security, a group of Khoush women tug at Binti's hair. When Binti turns, she notices that everyone else behind the woman is staring. The woman frowns at her **otjize**-covered fingers and remarks to the woman next to her, surprised, that it smells like jasmine flowers. The other woman insists it must smell like feces, and a third asks if Binti's hair is even real. The first woman mutters that the "dirt bathers" are filthy. Binti faces front again. Her mother always told her to be quiet around Khoush, while Binti's father always tried to make himself small around Khoush. The alternative, he said, was to start a war with them—and he doesn't believe in war.

As far as Binti is concerned, it would've been unthinkable to stay at home after being accepted to Oomza University. This suggests that Binti prides herself in her intellectual abilities more than anything else—even more than the prospect of leading a normal life. By declaring that she was never going to be normal, Binti tries to make herself feel better about leaving, knowing that it's something she's not supposed to do. However, hearing her mother's warning about Oomza Uni suggests that not everything Binti encounters in the outside world will be as wonderful as she hopes. Her view on education is still idealistic and possibly naïve.



Binti looks different from everyone else here here—and most people stare at her like she doesn't belong. The officer's smile and his reminder that Binti's people are proud of her makes it clear that not everyone thinks poorly of Binti just because she's Himba. Because of her choice to leave—a very non-Himba choice—Binti becomes more than Himba to people like this officer. This reality reveals people's prejudice, however; people should respect Binti for being Himba in addition to being smart.



As a symbol of Binti's home and culture, otjize is a comfort for her. In a world that looks so different than what she's used to, what Binti craves is to immerse herself in the rituals of home so that she doesn't feel so alone.



The Khoush women's behavior is cruel and racist, as they judge Binti based on her ethnicity and culture practice of otjize. The second woman's insistence that the otjize must smell like feces, even though it clearly doesn't, speaks to how entrenched racist ideas about the Himba are in Binti's world. It's telling that Binti doesn't confront the women. She clearly doesn't have the power to do so safely, which begins to illustrate that the Himba are considered lesser than the Khoush in Binti's world.



Binti pulls her hair to the front and touches the edan concealed in her pocket. It's a strange device of odd metal and with a strange language on it. Binti found it eight years ago and has kept it ever since. Binti thinks that the people talking about her don't know about her *edan*, and they don't know where she's headed. The security guard scowls when Binti reaches the front of the line. Binti struggles to keep herself from giggling at his uniform and feels warm as he scans her body. He pulls out her *edan*, inspects it, and asks what the metal is. Binti shrugs, uncomfortably aware of the people behind her. The guard notes that Binti builds fine astrolabes and asks if Binti built the *edan*. Binti explains that it's just an old "computative apparatus" that she carries as a good luck charm.

The guard waves Binti through. Binti smiles to herself, as government security guards have lots of power but only receive education until they're 10. They're often especially rude to Himba, but this man doesn't want to betray that he's less educated than Binti is. Binti enters her ship, Third Fish, a living creature related to a shrimp. It has a hard exoskeleton that holds up in space and three breathing chambers containing plants. The chambers produce oxygen and absorb chemicals. Binti vows to get someone on the ship to show her one of the rooms and steps into the ship, knowing that she's leaving home behind in exchange for her future.

Binti finds her room and her group of 12 other new Oomza Uni students. They're all Khoush and all between 15 and 18 years old. An hour after boarding, the group finds a technician to show them the breathing chambers. The chamber smells like a jungle, and Binti loves it. Then, a few hours later, they meet their group leader, a stern old Khoush man. He looks the group over and then coolly asks why Binti is covered in "red greasy clay" and wearing heavy anklets. He forces her to explain that the Himba use the **otjize** as skincare and wear the anklets to protect from snakebites. He pauses for a moment and then tells her to wear *otjize* lightly but to take off the anklets. Binti removes all but a few so that she still jingles.

Especially after her experience with the first security officer, Binti knows that people look at her differently when they figure out she's headed to Oomza Uni. This challenges what they know about the Himba and forces them to see that Binti isn't just a provincial Himba—she's possibly more intelligent than they are. But once again, Binti doesn't have the power to point this out to anyone without jeopardizing her safety, which reinforces just how marginalized and powerless Himba are in this society.



Again, Binti confirms that Khoush people think of Himba as being uneducated in order to make themselves look better and smarter in comparison—even though the Khoush purposefully don't educate certain sectors of their population. Binti conceptualizes boarding the ship as a choice between home and her future—her future across the galaxy means that to some degree, home as she knows it won't be available anymore.



Everything that Binti encounters in this passage reinforces her status as a minority student at Oomza Uni. The behavior of her group leader sadly suggests that not much is going to change for Binti as she leaves the planet—people will still be rude and racist to her because she's Himba, and they still won't understand the significance of the otjize. Though Binti likely takes off some of her anklets as to not cause a scene, it's significant that she insists on keeping some. Her identity as a Himba is far more important to her than acquiescing to authority figures to fit in.



Binti is the only Himba on the ship. The Himba are known for their innovative technology, but the tribe is small, private, and prefers to stay on Earth. They believe in exploring the universe through travel inward, not by leaving the planet. Binti isn't surprised that she's the only Himba on the ship—she's the first to go to Oomza Uni, after all—but this doesn't make it easy. However, she soon discovers that everyone on the ship, even if they're not Himba, loves math, learning, studying, and inventing. Binti realizes that these are her friends. Their similarities are more meaningful than their differences, even though most of Binti's new friends grew up in large houses and didn't spend much time outside. They spend most of their time in Binti's room and challenge each other to treeing competitions, where they divide complex equations in half again and again.

A boy named Heru catches Binti's eye. They don't speak, but they smile at each other sometimes. He comes from a city far away from Binti's. One day, while they're in line for dinner, Binti feels someone pick up one of her braids. She whips around, ready to explode, but Heru drops her braid and says he couldn't help it—she has 21 braids braided in tessellating triangles. He asks if there's a code. Binti's heart beats too fast, and instead of telling him the truth—that her father designed the code and that the braids tell the story of her family's history and culture—she just takes her soup and walks away.

Binti never gets to tell Heru the truth about her braids. Five days before the ship arrives at Oomza Uni and two weeks after they began, Binti is happier than ever. She eats a savory dessert, watches Heru, and messes with her edan. Two friends are singing a song from home when suddenly, someone screams. Heru's chest explodes, and Binti is covered in blood. There's a Meduse behind Heru. Even though it's blasphemy in Binti's culture to pray to inanimate objects, Binti still prays to her *edan* to protect her. She shudders, terrified, and tries not to smell the Meduse. Binti opens an eye and shuts it—the Meduse are a foot away and the tentacle of one that tried to touch her is gray and dry.

Here, Binti discovers that education, math, and science can create bridges between cultures and communities where nothing else can. The university, she believes, is going to be a utopia where being Himba isn't going to be the characteristic that defines her for others. Rather, fellow students will appreciate her and want to be her friend because of her intellectual capabilities and their shared interests in their studies. This begins to suggest that friendships and communities are strongest when they're founded upon shared interests and a willingness to support each other in those interests.



For Binti, it's shocking that someone even noticed the code—in her experience, people don't look closely at how she grooms, instead just seeing her as an otjize-covered Himba. Even though Heru's interest in Binti's braid is still questionable and somewhat rude, his ability to pick up on the possibility of a pattern introduces the idea that if people approach one another with curiosity, they can learn to put their prejudice aside.



Having Binti's idyllic journey end so quickly—and so violently—is an indicator that Binti's idea of what school was going to be like is incorrect. Neither she nor her classmates can be totally safe there, for one reason or another. However, Binti's observation that the Meduse might not be able to touch her suggests that something about her makes her safe from these creatures. Her choice to pray to the edan, even though it's considered blasphemy, speaks to how out of her element she is—she has to turn to new things for comfort.



The Meduse rustle. They're tall, with silk-like domes for bodies and tentacles that spill to the floor. Binti can hear them breathe. She pulls her edan closer and prays to it to protect her again. Everyone else is dead. The Meduse's method is known as moojh-ha ki-bira, a term that Binti knows even though it's a Khoush term. Binti and her fellow Himba learned about it in history class, though they have nothing to do with the Meduse or the fight between the Khoush and the Meduse, as the Khoush are responsible for the curriculum. The Meduse worship water like a god, even though there's no water on their planet. They began fighting the Khoush, who settled on watery lands on Earth and thought the Meduse were inferior. Both sides eventually agreed to not attack each other's ships.

Binti suddenly remembers that she was just talking to her friends. She remembers how they'd spent their nights laughing over their fears about Oomza Uni. While with them, Binti didn't think about home or the awful messages she'd received from her family hours after she left. Instead, they helped her look ahead toward her bright future. She thinks of watching the Meduse punch through Heru's chest. For no reason she can think of, Binti begins to think of the number five over and over again in her mind as she looks at Heru's unseeing eyes. Everything smells of blood.

Binti explains that no one in her family wanted her to go Oomza Uni, and that her best friend, Dele, didn't want her to go either. Not long after Binti was accepted, Dele joked that Binti wouldn't have to worry about the Meduse as the only Himba on the ship. Binti thinks of how she's ignored everyone since getting her scholarship and acceptance. When she first got the news, she went to the desert and cried joyfully for hours. This is what she's wanted since she learned what a university was—and there, she'd join a student body that is only five percent human but entirely obsessed with knowledge. Then, she told her family. Binti's sisters scolded her, while her brothers laughed. Her parents said nothing. Dele laughed after congratulating her. He insisted that God has already chosen the path of the Himba.

Binti is the first Himba ever to be accepted into Oomza Uni. Even though the hateful messages and threats from Khoush in her city scared her, Binti knew she needed to go. For her, numbers are her life and her destiny. She filled out the acceptance forms in secret and attended interviews in the desert over her astrolabe. Binti explains that she and her family are Bitolus, or master harmonizers who deeply understand math and math currents. *Bitolus* are relatively rare, and according to Binti's father, God favors them.

Binti's explanations here expand on how much power the Khoush have—not just on Earth, but in the galaxy. The Khoush seem convinced of their superiority, and moreover, they're able to enjoy power in their world. For instance, it's telling that Binti doesn't learn about Himba concerns in school; she learns about the Khoush. It's possible, then, that everything Binti has learned about the Meduse is naturally filtered through how the Khoush see the Meduse. Given how the Khoush see and treat the Himba, it's likely that Binti is missing a lot of the story.



Binti's friends once represented her bright future, filled with math and a sense of community at Oomza Uni. Losing them so suddenly and shockingly makes Binti question whether she should've stayed home. She wouldn't have had access to the kind of education she'd get at Oomza Uni, but she also wouldn't be wrapped up in an intergalactic fight that isn't her own.



For as supportive and interested in education and technology as the Himba are, it's clear that they value their culture and their social practices more than education. However, when Binti notes that she comforted herself in the desert, it's a veiled reference to the otjize. In a sense, then, Binti comforted herself about taking this very un-Himba risk by immersing herself in the Himba's ancestral land and in the comforting aspects of her culture. Her note that the student body is only five percent human, meanwhile, speaks to Binti's desire to be part of a more diverse (and hopefully, openminded) group of individuals.



The very term "master harmonizer" suggests that Binti's ability to harmonize might be about more than math. Her desire to go to Oomza Uni, for instance, suggests that she wants to find harmony between all different types of life forms, including her own human Himba form. Her path may be more of a diplomatic one than a strictly mathematical one.



Back in the present, Binti opens her eyes and clutches the edan to her chest. The Meduse in front of her is blue, except for one tentacle that's pink and curled. Binti shoves the edan at it, and it jerks back in fear. Realizing she has a weapon, Binti stands up. She draws the Meduse's attention to its dead brethren, grabs a satchel, and notices that she can see numbers and blurs. This is good. Binti repeats her full name, thinks of her father, and remembers how he taught her about astrolabes. Binti was a "master harmonizer" by age 12 and is gifted with "mathematical sight," like her mother. Binti's mind grows clear as she thinks of complex equations and trees.

Binti fills a tray and her satchel with food and water and then leaves the cafeteria. The Meduse follow her; they have no eyes, but they "see" through smelling with their tentacles. Binti heads for her room. All the doors are plated with gold sheets; Binti's father would be aghast, as gold is a strong information conductor. As soon as Binti gets to her room, her confidence suddenly disappears. She stops treeing, scans her eye to enter her room, and the door seals behind her. She puts her food on her bed before collapsing onto the floor. Her friends' faces swim in her mind, and she hears Heru's laughter. She cries for a while.

Binti picks up her astrolabe, which she made to fit her own needs before this trip. It's so well-made that Binti believes it'll outlast her own children. She starts to call her family but then decides they can't help her. Instead, she tries to call and report an emergency. The astrolabe heats up and vibrates, but then it goes cool again. Binti asks for a map and keeps an eye on her door. Though she read that the Meduse can't get through walls, she understands that she can't blindly believe that just because it was in a book. She also figures that the Khoush gave her a room with subpar security, since she's Himba—and because she's the only human on a Khoush ship, she's still a target for the Meduse.

The astrolabe finally says that Binti is 121 hours from Oomza Uni and projects a map. Binti recognizes that she's in the middle of what's known as "the Jungle," and the pilot should've been more careful. She's relieved that it's still headed for Oomza Uni. Binti closes her eyes and prays to the Seven. Though she wants to ask why, she doesn't. Instead, she says that she's going to die here. However, Binti is still alive 72 hours later, though she's running low on water and is out of food. She spends her time pacing, reciting equations, creating currents, and trying not to think about the inevitable—security at Oomza Uni will blow up the ship, though she thinks it doesn't make sense that the Meduse plan to commit suicide.

Math isn't just an educational or vocational life path for Binti. Rather, it's something spiritual and is just as rooted in her Himba culture and her family as it is in anything else. Using treeing to calm herself shows that Binti already has a tried and true way to help soothe her fears, especially when confronted with major differences or unknowns. This again speaks to the novella's suggestion that math and science can bring people together. The ability to not react rashly out of fear is the first step to forming meaningful relationships.



Even though Binti felt moments ago that she was right where she belonged—on the way to Oomza Uni to study—in this moment of fear, she becomes suddenly aware of all the ways in which she doesn't fit in. The ship was clearly created by people who are far wealthier than Binti and her family, if they can afford to use precious materials like gold to decorate doors instead of reserving it for technology.



Deciding not to call home speaks to Binti's desire to make her choice to leave work for her. She doesn't want to admit to her family that the very worst they could've imagined actually happened. That will only reinforce in their minds that she made a mistake. Instead, Binti has to gather all her wits and try to figure out how to get through this ordeal on her own. It's commendable, though, that Binti already questions what she knows about the Meduse. She seems aware that she doesn't have the whole story on the race.



The Seven are, presumably, Himba gods. Binti's choice to pray to them now reinforces her deep pride in and care for her Himba identity, as she hopes that this is what will get her through this and out the other side. This outcome would likely give her a new appreciation for her culture, its beliefs, and what it can do. The knowledge that Oomza Uni will blow up the ship suggests that the university is more wary of outsiders than Binti may have thought, and it makes clear that the Meduse are seen only as antagonists.



Something knocks at Binti's door, scaring her. She jumps and then freezes to listen. Whatever's on the other side knocks and kicks a few more times, and Binti shrieks for it to leave her alone. She grabs her edan and hears an angry hiss outside. Binti wracks her mind to try to find a weapon. The *edan* is all she has, and she's not sure what makes it a weapon. She knows that it's an abomination to commit suicide or give in, but she also knows that the Meduse are intelligent and will find a way to kill her, no matter what. Instead of fighting, Binti sits on her bed and waits for death. Her body feels oddly separate. As she gazes down at the *edan*, she notices the fractals on its surface. Suddenly, she understands.

Binti sits at the window and rolls **otjize** into her braids. The *otjize* smells like home and Binti thinks she never should've left. She picks up the *edan* again, and when she hears a thump on the door, she mutters for whatever's out there to leave her alone. Binti smears some *otjize* on the *edan* and then drops into a "mathematical trance." Her mind clears as she rubs the *otjize* into the *edan*. She can hear and smell home, and the *edan* feels heavy. Binti suddenly realizes that there's a button on the *edan* that she hadn't noticed until now. She presses it, and the *edan* feels warm. The world seems to shudder, and then she hears a voice say, "Girl."

Binti snaps out of her trance and nearly screams. She hasn't heard anyone speak since the Meduse killed everyone, so she makes sure that she's alone in her room. Binti hears more voices outside, and then someone says that suffering is against "the Way"; the Meduse want to kill Binti. Binti leaps up but falls to the floor again, unable to drop the *edan*. It glows with a bright blue light, and Binti finds that the current emanating from it is so strong that she can't let the device go. She grits her teeth and spits that she'd rather die in her room on her own terms. Voices outside talk about evil and say that "it" contains shame. One voice sounds more high-pitched than the others, and it says that the "shame" allows Binti to talk to them.

Both Binti and seemingly the Meduse are reacting to each other out of fear. In this situation, this is totally understandable—Binti knows little about the Meduse except for their murderous tendencies, and the Meduse are likely annoyed that they weren't able to kill this one human. However, approaching each other with this fear means that Binti and the Meduse won't be able to come together to figure out how to deal with the situation. It's possible that Binti's calm look at the edan will change this, as it channels her fear into a more productive endeavor.



It's telling that Binti is able to understand the Meduse when she combines math, otjize (and symbolically, her home and Himba culture), and this mysterious device. This suggests that Binti cannot separate her identity as a master harmonizer from her identity as a Himba or as a mathematician if she wants to be successful. She must honor and draw on all of these elements of her identity as she learns new things about herself and the world around her.



This is understandably terrifying for Binti, given that she had no idea before this what the edan did. Now, she discovers that it's a communication device, at least when combined with her otjize from home. Now that she can more effectively communicate with the Meduse, Binti and the Meduse will hopefully be able to talk to each other rather than just lash out violently because they're afraid. If they can engage diplomatically, they may be more successful.



The voices argue. One Meduse, whom the others call Okwu, wants to break down the door and kill Binti. Binti interrupts their arguing and calls to Okwu to talk with her. She looks down at her hands on the edan and knows that she's creating the current coming from it. It's the strongest she's ever produced, and it touches the Meduse—and Binti can't control it. She's revolted, but she knows she has to save her life. Binti stands slowly and moves to the door. Green leaves appear where the current touches the steel of the door. Trying to focus on the leaves and the comforting weight of her **otjize**-covered hair instead of the danger on the other side of the door, Binti stands her ground. Something hits the door, and Okwu spits, "Evil thing." Its voice sounds the angriest, and it's the most frightening.

Binti says she's not evil and refuses to open the door. As the Meduse mutter outside, Binti sits against the door. Leaves appear above her shoulder and make her giggle. Calmly, Okwu asks if Binti understands them. Binti says she does, but Okwu says that all humans understand is violence. With a sigh, Binti assures Okwu that she only kills small animals for food, and she's sure to pray and thank the animal for its sacrifice. Okwu doesn't believe her, but Binti points out that she also doesn't trust the Meduse to not kill her if she opens the door. Suddenly, Binti feels energized and shouts that the Meduse killed her friends. As Binti cries, Okwu says that they have to kill humans before humans kill them. Binti deems this stupid and wipes her tears.

Okwu speaks again and asks about the "blue ghost" that Binti created to help them converse. As Binti moves away from the door, she admits that she doesn't know what it is. Being farther away makes her feel better. Okwu again asks how they can understand each other, points out that the Meduse haven't spoken to humans in years, and promises not to harm Binti—but Binti refuses to say anything. She insists she doesn't know and doesn't care. She falls asleep for a while and wakes up to a sucking sound. Binti figures it's the ship, but then the door crumples and reveals a group of Meduse in the hallway. Binti can't tell how many there are; they're translucent and blend together. She shrinks against the window.

Learning Okwu's name is a major step for Binti, as she begins to see the Meduse as individuals with their own opinions, not just as a monolithic mass. It's also important to note that Binti can pick up on the emotions in Okwu's voice: clearly, the Meduse can experience emotion and react without thinking, just like humans can. The green leaves that come from the door, a symbol of life, suggests that it is indeed necessary to speak to each other if everyone involved in this conflict wants to live.



Given Okwu's disbelief that Binti can truly understand and that she isn't violent, it becomes clear that the Meduse don't have a lot of experience with humans. They think of humans as a monolithic mass—in much the same way that humans think of the Meduse. Clearly, there's a lack of communication and understanding on both sides of this conflict, so it's a good thing that Binti can actually speak to the Meduse. It's also important that she seems to be telling them the truth about her own history with killing. By being honest, she'll give the Meduse more reason to trust her.



The Meduse aren't doing themselves any favors as they engage with Binti. Though it's impossible to say whether Binti would've ever trusted them enough to open the door herself, invading her space like this makes it clear that the Meduse don't care about their potential to actually converse and negotiate with Binti. Instead, they see her only as a problem, and their goal is to make this problem go away. Binti's truthful insistence that she doesn't know what's happening speaks to her own humble nature.



One of the Meduse darts forward. Binti sees her entire family at her funeral flash before her eyes, and she sees her spirit return to Earth and her desert. Then, the Meduse stops, inches from Binti, and a withered pink tentacle brushes Binti's **otjize**-covered arm. It feels soft and smooth. Binti stares, fixated on the Meduse's stinger, which is as long as her leg. When the stinger gets close to her chest, it turns gray. Binti whispers that she hopes it hurts as the Meduse backs away. Binti can see her *otjize* on a tentacle. The Meduse tells Binti that she's evil, and Binti recognizes the voice as Okwu's. The Meduse leave.

Ten hours later, Binti is out of provisions. She tries to stay busy, but doing anything is difficult since the *edan*'s current sticks her hands to the device. When she takes breaks from packing and unpacking, she studies the patterns on the *edan* and tries to figure out how it's allowing her to speak to the Meduse. It reveals nothing. Binti lies down and lets herself tree. Suddenly, Okwu surprises her and demands to know what's on Binti's skin. Binti snaps that she's the only human who wears **otjize** because she's the only non-Khoush on the ship. Eventually, Binti explains that her people live in a desert with sacred red clay, and they spread it on their bodies because they're the children of the soil—and the *otjize* is beautiful. Binti studies Okwu and notices that its withered tentacle looks like it's healing. Okwu leaves.

Fifteen minutes later, Okwu returns. Binti checks to see that she was right—the tentacle that touched her **otjize** isn't as damaged now—and Okwu demands more *otjize*. Panicking, Binti insists she doesn't have any. She only has one jar, and it's just enough to last until she can find the supplies at Oomza Uni to make more. Binti isn't even sure if she'll be able to find the *right* red clay on Oomza Uni's planet; she didn't do enough research before she left. It's possible that any clay on the planet might irritate her skin. Binti knows she can't give the *otjize* to the Meduse because it's part of her culture. Okwu says that its chief knows about the Himba and knows Binti must have more with her, but Binti snaps that the chief will then also know that taking *otjize* will be like stealing Binti's soul.

Okwu doesn't move. Binti asks if the **otjize** helped its tentacle, but Okwu blows an irritated breath and leaves. It returns a few minutes later with five other Meduse. Okwu asks again about the *edan*. Binti shares that a woman once told her it's made of "god stone," but Okwu interjects that the *edan* is shame. After a minute, Binti says that an object that keeps her alive can't be shameful. Another Meduse points out that it poisons the Meduse, but Binti snaps that it only does that if they get too close or try to kill her.

It seems as though the Meduse believe that anything that can hurt them is evil. This is understandable, especially given that they seemingly haven't had to contend with weak spots in their defense recently. It's telling, though, that Binti has the presence of mind to think of the texture of the tentacle when it touches her. She's coming up with more ways to describe the Meduse besides just "frightening and dangerous."



*Now that Okwu is relatively certain that it can't just burst in and kill Binti, it has to turn to new methods of figuring out how to handle this conflict. Fortunately, Okwu turns to communication, and for the first time, it approaches Binti with curiosity and interest. Okwu still isn't being polite, but by listening to Binti talk about the Himba and her *otjize*, it's able to build up a more nuanced understanding of the Himba. Through this, the Meduse can begin to think of humanity as a multifaceted group of individuals, not as a monolithic group intent on the Meduse's destruction.*



*The simple fact that Binti is so afraid of not being able to make *otjize* on Oomza Uni reveals her deep discomfort with her choice to leave. Leaving home could have massive implications for her identity, as she may not be able to engage in the one ritual that clearly marks her as Himba. The revelation that the *otjize* has healing powers, however, begins to add more significance to the *otjize*. Its healing powers—especially since it can heal the Meduse—might be a sign that Binti needs to trust these beings, as they may be somehow connected to her culture.*



*Binti is right: the *edan* can kill Meduse if they try to kill her. But if they keep their distance, the *edan* is actually anything but shameful since it helps them communicate. This may reflect the Meduse culture's lack of practice with communicating openly with other beings—they may simply be used to dealing with problems through violence.*



Okwu again asks how they're able to communicate. Binti makes herself sound powerful and admits she doesn't know. When Okwu asks, she gives her full name: Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib. She thinks about repeating Okwu's one-word name to drive home the Meduse's "cultural simplicity," but her bravery begins to slip away. Okwu approaches and asks Binti what she needs. Knowing she has no choice, Binti says that she needs food and water. Okwu leaves. Feeling totally out of control, Binti falls asleep.

Binti wakes up to find a plate of smoked fish and a bowl of water right in front of her face. Still gripping the edan, she struggles to drink the water and then get the fish to her mouth. She knows that the chefs on the ship kill the fish by lulling them into a sleep and then slow cook them to perfection. Though the chefs are Khoush and Khoush don't usually perform rituals like this, the chefs are Oomza Uni students. That made Binti feel good about heading to the school. However, this fish is full of bones. As Binti tries to work a long bone out of her mouth, Okwu suddenly appears. Surprised, Binti almost chokes on the bone. Okwu just hovers and breathes as Binti eats and wonders if this will be her last meal.

Eventually, Binti says that there are a people in her village who live on the edge of the lake. They prepare their fish much like the chefs on the ship do, but they remove all the bones. Hesitatingly, Binti thanks Okwu for the food. Okwu says it wishes it could just kill Binti, but Binti parrots a phrase her mother used often: "we all wish for many things." Okwu observes that Binti doesn't look like a normal human Oomza Uni student, since she's dark and has **okuoko**. Binti asks what **okuoko** is, and Okwu begins to jiggle its tentacles playfully. Binti laughs and asks if it means her hair. Okwu confirms this, and when Binti asks why the word is different, Okwu doesn't know—but it hears Binti in its language, so when Binti said "**okuoko**," it heard "**okuoko**."

Okwu remarks that the Khoush's skin is the color of the flesh of Binti's fish. They don't have **okuoko**. Meanwhile, Binti is colored like the fish's skin, and she has small but Meduse-like **okuoko**. Binti points out that there are lots of different types of humans, and it explains that the Himba don't usually leave Earth. As several Meduse enter the room, Okwu moves closer to Binti. She coughs at the stench of its breath. Okwu asks why Binti left then and suggests she's evil. Binti frowns. She thinks that Okwu sounds a lot like her brother Bena, who speaks often about how horrible Khoush people are—even though he doesn't know any Khoush people. He's justifiably angry about what the Khoush do to the Himba, but he speaks out of ignorance.

The aside that the Meduse are "culturally simple" likely reflects what Binti has learned from the Khoush curriculum at school. Given that she believes the Meduse's culture is less sophisticated because the Khoush told her so, it's possible that she shouldn't believe a word of it. After all, she herself has experienced unfair discrimination from the Khoush for being Himba. Okwu's offer to bring Binti provisions is a turning point and offers hope that Binti and the Meduse might be able to use the edan for communicative purposes.



Binti felt comforted by the ship's chefs because it seemed as though they were more like the Himba than Binti initially realized. This shows that as Binti embarked on this journey, she kept a lookout for things that made Oomza Uni feel more like home and didn't focus so much on what made it different or hostile. Binti's habit of looking for the good and the familiar means that she'll be able to come to new understandings about her home as she recognizes things all over the universe. Her mind is, in this sense, more open.



Binti's exchange with Okwu offers more insight into how exactly the edan works: Binti hears the Meduse in her language, while the Meduse hear Binti in theirs. It's significant, then, that both Binti and Okwu hear "hair" and "okuoko" in the Meduse language. This suggests that Binti and the Meduse have more in common than they initially thought. Indeed, it's a major step for Okwu that it can recognize a way that Binti is like the Meduse. This suggests that it's becoming less afraid and more curious.



Again, Okwu demonstrates that it's getting more comfortable seeing humanity as varied, not just a monolith. This doesn't mean that Okwu is suddenly a caring and understanding individual, but it's on its way. In the same vein, it's important to Binti's growth that she sees her brother Bena in Okwu. In this sense, Binti discovers that certain qualities—especially fear and ignorance—exist in all populations, whether they're human or alien. Through this, she can begin to empathize more with the Meduse.



Binti can tell that Okwu is young. In a way, it reminds Binti of herself. It's curious. Maybe this is why it's so willing to talk to her and potentially die in the process. Feeling suddenly hot, Binti says that Okwu doesn't know anything about her—the ship was full of professors and students. Okwu chuckles and notes that they didn't kill the pilot. Binti understands that they're going to infiltrate the university's security and then invade the university itself. Okwu explains that they could fly the ship themselves, but the pilot can communicate better with those on the ground. Menacingly, Okwu says that they don't need Binti. Binti feels terrified and trapped.

Binti reminds Okwu that its **okuoko** is healed and asks if it'll let her live in thanks. Angrily, Okwu says the Meduse aren't human—they don't kill for gain or for sport. They only kill for purpose. Binti is confused, but Okwu elaborates: it says that their chief's stinger is displayed in one of the Oomza Uni museums. The Meduse know, of course, that the chief was attacked, but they don't know or care how the stinger got to Oomza Uni. They're headed there to take it back—they have purpose. Okwu billows away. Later, Okwu returns with more food and water for Binti and sits with her while she eats. Binti tries to point out that what the Meduse plan to do is suicide; there's a city on Oomza Uni where all people do is study and create weapons. Okwu is unmoved.

Binti asks Okwu about the “current-killer” it used in the Meduse-Khoush war and reminds it that suicide means dying on purpose. Okwu says simply that the Meduse aren't afraid, and they'll die with honor having taught humans a lesson. Suddenly, Binti shrieks. She asks to talk to the chief and explains that she's a master harmonizer. She can create harmony anywhere and wants to speak for the Meduse. Binti believes that everyone at Oomza Uni will understand “honor and history and symbolism and matters of the body.” Binti doesn't know this for sure, but she hopes she's right. Okwu insists this is madness and points out that the chief hates humans, but Binti offers to hand over her jar of **otjize**. She suggests it might help the Meduse sting harder, but Okwu says that they don't *like* to sting. Binti begs and points out that Okwu will be a hero.

Binti bravely walks through the corridor linking the Meduse ship to the Third Fish, trying to ignore that she probably won't return. Even though Binti wears a breathing mask, she's certain that the Meduse ship stinks—*everything* related to the Meduse stinks. There are Meduse of every color on every surface. Okwu leads Binti into an enormous room that feels almost like the outdoors. The chief, surrounded by other Meduse, looks just like the others; Okwu has to stand next to the chief to show Binti which one it is. The current from the edan branches wildly in every direction, bringing Binti the Meduse's words.

In Binti's mind, a ship full of professors and students should be seen as innocent victims. Okwu's reaction suggests that it thinks otherwise, which makes it clear that there's more to what the Meduse are up to. This isn't a simple military exercise—they mean to target the university specifically for some reason. However, Binti can also see that Okwu isn't so different from her: it's a curious creature and possibly less set in its ways than the other Meduse because it's so young.



Finally, Okwu reveals that Oomza Uni isn't a neutral or positive organization to the Meduse. Instead, it's actually an evil, nefarious organization that seeks to cut down the Meduse for its own gain—and possibly, to make weapons capable of destroying the Meduse. With this explanation, it becomes understandable why the Meduse plan to infiltrate the university: they have every right to take back parts of their bodies that the university stole. This also adds another reason why the Meduse don't trust humans, since it seems likely that humans are to blame for this.



Even if Binti was just forced to reckon with the revelation that the university isn't the idyllic place she thought it was, she still believes that the people in charge will be able to rise above their unethical behavior. This may be naïve on Binti's part, as it's very possible that a university willing to steal body parts from fellow beings won't be interested in listening to a teenager and a bunch of Meduse. Okwu also begins to make the case that the Meduse aren't violent for no reason—they'll be violent when necessary, but their goal isn't to have the best weapons in the galaxy. Indeed, it's likely that they need the weapons they do to protect themselves from others.



Binti's belief that the Meduse stink could still just be a reflection of her fear and distrust for these beings, as she still doesn't understand who and what exactly they are. Though she knows enough to not think of them just as a monolith, she is nevertheless just prejudiced enough to reaffirm her own belief that they smell bad. This helps her remain convinced of her own superiority, even though she's in the minority here and has experienced unfair discrimination herself.



Binti knows she should be terrified. The chief hates humans, so both she and Okwu are risking their lives. But the ground feels spongy like pudding that Binti's mother likes to make, and Binti can see that the Meduse have technology running through the walls of the ship and their bodies. Some are almost living astrolabes. Her facemask makes everything smell like desert flowers, which is typical of the Khoush women who probably made it. However, Binti loves it. It makes her feel calm and connected to Earth. She stops treeing, clears her mind, and prostrates herself in front of the chief. Okwu introduces her, and the chief spits for Binti to sit up and says that if she damages the ship at all, both she and Okwu will die.

Binti closes her eyes and focuses on the edan's current. She can hear that the floor is humming to itself and she sits up. Binti tells the chief that the Himba create and build astrolabes using math to create their currents. Suddenly, Binti realizes why the edan works for her: she's a master harmonizer. A woman once told her it was a "god stone," but it only worked now, among the Meduse after the Meduse murdered her friends. Binti begs the chief to let her speak for the Meduse to spare other lives, lowers her head, and pulls the edan to her belly like Okwu told her to do. She confirms that she knows about the chief's stinger, and Binti insists that her way will get the stinger back. She can feel the point of a stinger on the back of her neck.

With Okwu's prodding, Binti shares her plan to negotiate peacefully with Oomza Uni. Binti insists that many will die—and all the Meduse will die—if the Meduse try to attack. The stinger presses harder against her neck and Binti begs. A Meduse asks how they can trust Binti and points out that human females are great at hiding. Okwu suggests that Binti put down the edan, making herself vulnerable to the Meduse. Terrified, Binti shrieks that the edan is how they can communicate. The chief throws up a tentacle, and everything stops. Binti looks from the Meduse behind her, to Okwu, and then to the chief. Slowly and painfully, she pulls her fingers away from the edan and screams in pain. The edan drops, but the current remains connected to Binti. Binti knows she's dead, and everything goes black.

It's significant that Binti thinks the ship feels like her mother's pudding. Again, Binti looks for the familiar, and this helps her see her home in a new light and gather information about the strange world around her. Then, her realization that the Meduse are living astrolabes helps her see that the Meduse aren't at all simplistic creatures—no matter what the Khoush might say. They're possibly even more advanced in terms of technology than the Himba are—a humbling realization for Binti.



Now, Binti can see that being a master harmonizer doesn't just have to do with channeling currents to make astrolabes. Rather, it means that she can create harmony everywhere she goes—even between cultures that have been at war for a long time. Remembering that a woman once called the edan a "god stone" suggests that there may be something spiritual to the edan suddenly springing to life now, when Binti knows that she must make peace. It seems that her Himba culture may be rising up to help her—even in the far reaches of the galaxy.



As understandably terrifying as it is for Binti to put down the edan, Okwu and the chief have a point: with the edan, Binti will always be armed and could potentially turn on them. If she puts it down, both sides will have to simply trust that they mean what they say and that they genuinely want to help each other. When Binti figures out how to channel the current to talk to the Meduse even without the edan, it suggests that the edan has taught her what it needs to—she is a master harmonizer and if she knows the right way to ask, she can communicate and harmonize with anyone.



Binti says that the Meduse are right: she can't represent them while holding the edan. Someone at Oomza Uni would no doubt know everything about the edan and know it was poisonous for the Meduse; letting it go is the only way to get Oomza Uni to trust her. Binti says that when she left home, she died. She didn't pray to the Seven; she didn't go on her pilgrimage; and she'll never return to her family. She thought she had time for all of these things. Now, she can't go back because she knows that the Meduse aren't what humans think they are. They're truth and clarity, and understand honor. Binti earned their honor by dying again. Just as Binti blacks out, she feels the stinger painfully enter her spine. Then, she leaves the singing ship. She hopes that her family can hear her final thought.

Binti smells home—specifically, she smells the place where she digs up clay to make **otjize**. She opens her eyes and finds herself in her room, naked except for her skirt and smothered in otjize. She sits up, and the edan rolls off her chest. Now, it's back to being blue and dull. The spot where the stinger stabbed Binti is sore, scabbed, and covered with otjize. Binti checks her map, stares outside, and stands up. She discovers her otjize jar, mostly empty. Laughing, Binti dresses and looks out the window—the view is amazing, and she'll land in an hour.

The Meduse don't return, so Binti prepares for landing. She looks out the window at the planet's two suns, giving the planet many hours of daylight. Using the binocular vision on her astrolabe, she studies the planet. It's all different colors; the part the ship heads for is orange with forests, lakes, and skyscrapers. As the ship enters the atmosphere, the sky turns pink and orange. The ship shoots between two huge, gorgeous buildings that Binti thinks makes Earth's skyscrapers look tiny. She laughs as they land and suddenly wonders if the Meduse will kill the pilot, since she didn't negotiate for his safety. Binti unbuckles and leaps up, but she falls. Her legs feel heavy.

Binti hears a horrible, rumbling, angry growl. She's terrified that a monster is coming for her, but it's Okwu—and she understands what Okwu is saying. Binti sits and then drags herself onto her bed as Okwu points out that humans take time to adjust to gravity. As Binti stands, Okwu says that the other Meduse and the pilot—alive—are in the dining room. Binti realizes she can now hear Okwu's true voice and she notices that Okwu's tentacles quiver as it speaks. Okwu says it wasn't the sting that did this; Binti can understand because she's a master harmonizer. Binti brushes past this and notices that Okwu's damaged **okuoko** is now healed. Okwu explains that they used more **otjize** to heal their sick and that they'll always remember the Himba. Okwu sounds less and less monstrous. It leads Binti out. Binti leaves the edan behind.

Binti conceptualizes her choice to leave home as a kind of death. By leaving, Binti gives up on major parts of her Himba culture that, because she did make the very un-Himba choice of leaving, won't be available to her anymore. In this moment, then, Binti reflects on her own naïveté from some point in the future, which suggests that Binti has a more nuanced view of what happened when she's older. This experience also teaches Binti that everything she thought she knew about the Meduse was wrong: the Meduse aren't violent, as humanity believe. They're truthful creatures and simply need people to prove that they're also honorable.



Even though it's possible to argue that the Meduse didn't play fair by stinging Binti, the fact remains that Binti wakes up totally fine and covered carefully in otjize. The Meduse may have hurt her, but they no longer want to kill her. Having gone through this, it's possible that Binti and the Meduse will be able to form something of a real friendship. They can now trust that they won't kill each other—they'll listen instead.



Despite everything that has happened in the last few days, Binti can still revel in the glories of traveling to a new place. The hugeness of the skyscrapers may make Binti feel as though this place truly is better than Earth, given how advanced it is in terms of construction and technology. Her choice to sit and study the planet as she lands speaks to her academic nature. She wants to know everything she can so that she can better conduct herself once she's on Oomza Uni.



Okwu makes it clear that Binti is far more than a gifted mathematician. She's capable of understanding all sorts of beings if she's willing to trust them and put aside her fear and prejudice. Further, hearing Okwu's true voice helps Binti get a better sense of who Okwu is and who the Meduse are. This is especially true as Binti says that Okwu sounds increasingly less monstrous. Now that they can communicate without help from the edan, their communication is more meaningful. The way that Okwu speaks to Binti also suggests that it cares about her—they may be friends.



Binti follows Okwu and the chief through the ship. She sees all the Meduse in the dining room. Fortunately, there are no visible bodies. The chief threateningly tells Binti to prepare what she's going to say. Binti wears her best shirt and wrapper, and she refreshed her **otjize** before leaving the ship. As she rolled *otjize* into her thick braids, she noticed her hair had grown. Her head ached and tingled.

She remembers that once, a long time ago, she snuck to the lake with some other girls at night and they all scrubbed off their **otjize**. Then, they stared at one another, horrified. If anyone were to see them, they'd be beaten and considered mentally unwell. Despite this, they felt happily shocked and enjoyed the breeze on their skin. Binti thought of this as she rubbed *otjize* in her hair and considered washing all the *otjize* off, but she decided that someone would've researched the Himba and would know she was naked.

Outside the ship, human soldiers meet them. The chief growls for Binti to go first and Okwu softly tells Binti to look strong. Her scalp still tingles as Binti steps off the ship. The planet smells like a jungle and there's water in the air. One of the soldiers announces that they'll go to the Presidential Building and asks Binti to translate for the Meduse. When the soldier asks if the Meduse will mind taking a shuttle to move faster, the chief grouses that these people are primitive.

They arrive at a large, light blue room. There are ten professors and many soldiers wearing blue. The professor who represents the university looks like a "spider made of wind" and introduces itself as Haras. Haras invites Binti to speak. Binti explains that she comes from a land where there's so little fresh water that they save it for drinking. Instead of bathing with water, they cover their bodies with **otjize**. Several human professors chuckle, as does an insect professor, and Binti frowns. In a way, though, this is comforting: these professors are just people.

Binti continues her story and details how the Meduse killed everyone on the ship. She makes sure to point out the Meduse are at war with the Khoush, and the Khoush think of Himba people as almost slaves. She points out that the professors have never seen the Meduse in person. They study the Meduse from a distance—and some of them have certainly studied the stinger in the university's possession. The professors murmur to one another. As Binti speaks, she falls into a meditative state and begins to cry. She shares every detail of her time on the ship and insists that her **otjize** saved her. She talks about how honorable, focused, and willing to listen the Meduse are. Finally, she tells them how they can fix this conflict peacefully.

Again, Binti continues to return to her Himba culture as she prepares for new and uncomfortable situations. The things that mark her as Himba help her feel comforted and as though she still knows exactly who she is, even though so many things around her have changed.



Binti's recollection of washing off otjize with her friends—and specifically, their happiness—suggests that she may not have as hard of a time reintegrating into Himba culture when she returns home as she fears she will. It's possible that many Himba are at least curious to experiment with different identities, and Binti's major identity change that occurred when she left might not matter so much.



Okwu's manner of speaking to Binti has become so gentle, both compared to how it spoke to her before and compared to the chief. Through this, it's possible to infer that Okwu is becoming a friend to Binti. It does care about her success in this endeavor, not just for the Meduse, but for Binti's sake.



The professors' unfortunate reaction to Binti's explanation continues to reveal that the university isn't the utopia that Binti hoped it would be. She'll still experience prejudice here, even though these people aren't necessarily the Khoush that have spent so long looking down on the Himba. The fact that this is comforting to Binti speaks to how comfortable she has to be with this kind of prejudice—a damning indictment of how normal discrimination is in her world.



Binti makes the point here that she, the professors, and the world they inhabit has worked very hard to keep the Meduse at arm's length and deny them dignity and personhood. They're included in curriculum, but that curriculum doesn't get at what the Meduse really are—nor does it allow them any sense of dignity or respect. The chief's stinger in the museum is just the cherry on top—it symbolizes the way in which the university has purposefully dehumanized the Meduse and looked at them only as research subjects.



Binti is certain that the professors will agree to her proposal. The Meduse chief speaks angrily but eloquently and says that they have the right to take back the stinger forcefully if the university won't give it up willingly. After this, the professors form a group and talk among themselves. Binti, Okwu, and the chief stand awkwardly. Binti is used to elders talking privately, and Okwu seems just as shocked as she is. Every now and again, Binti catches a bit of the conversation. Eventually, she gets tired and sits down on the floor. After a while, the professors sit down again, and Binti stands up. She notices that the chief is a deep blue now, and that Okwu has its stinger ready to strike.

Haras speaks in the Meduse language and apologizes on behalf of Oomza University. They promise to expel and exile the scholars who stole the stinger, and Haras makes a point to note that they're only supposed to acquire specimens like the stinger with permission from the original owners. Oomza tries to be honorable, respectful, and wise in all things. Haras says that they'll give back the stinger right away, which makes Binti sink to the floor. She apologizes and then feels Okwu steady her from behind. Binti pulls herself back up, and Haras tells Binti that she made her people proud. Haras welcomes her to the university and says that the Khoush woman next to him, Okpala, is in the mathematics department and will help Binti study her edan—from what Okpala knows, Binti shouldn't have been able to do what she did with the edan.

Then, Haras invites Okwu to stay as the first Meduse student at Oomza University. Okwu's attendance will be a show of allegiance between Oomza Uni and the Meduse, as well as a symbolic renewal of the pacts between humans and the Meduse. Okwu rumbles. The chief says that it's learning something "outside of core beliefs" for the first time. It had no idea a human place could be so honorable. The chief says that it will speak with advisors before making a choice, but Binti can tell it's pleased.

Looking around, Binti feels very alone and like she's part of something monumental. She wonders if her family would get it at all if she told them about this. They may just focus on her close brush with death, or they may believe it's too late to go home. Okpala asks Binti what she's going to do now. Binti is confused by the question and says that she wants to study mathematics so she can make astrolabes and understand her edan. Okpala clarifies and asks Binti if she'll ever go home; she knows of the Himba and knows they don't like "outsiders." Irritated, Binti insists that she's not an outsider, but then she notices one lock of hair on her shoulder. Horrified, Binti drops into meditation and trees to calm herself. Her hair isn't hair anymore; it's blue **okuoko** like Okwu's tentacles.

When both Binti and Okwu are equally surprised that the professors are going to have this conversation in front of them, it again makes the case that human beings and the Meduse aren't all that different from each other; some of their customs might even be very similar. As Binti recognizes this, she comes to see that while her home is certainly unique and special to her, she can still find places all over the galaxy that function in similar ways.



It's very important that Haras delivers this speech in the Meduse language—it makes it clear that the Meduse are equals, not just research subjects. Further, the steps that Haras says they'll take to remedy the situation show that the university is serious about living up to the ideal that Binti thought it was. It may be impossible in practice to be perfect, but the university still shows that it's committed to reforming any unethical or questionable practices to make the university a more welcoming place. Okwu's support of Binti shows again that they're becoming friends and that they legitimately care about each other.



Inviting Okwu is the final step to making the university a more inclusive place. It makes it clear that the university will walk its talk—they won't just say that the Meduse are equals; they'll actually take steps to treat the Meduse as beings who are worthy of respect. That this is so shocking for the chief speaks to how prejudiced it was too—clearly, anyone can change as a result of this kindness.



From what Okpala knows about the Himba, she understands that Binti will now be seen as an outsider. This is understandably shocking and uncomfortable for Binti—losing her hair means that she's lost a tangible connection to her family. However, the okuoko don't just represent a loss. Rather, it's possible to read them as a symbolic representation of Binti's new friendship with the Meduse. She has, in many ways, transcended her Himba identity. While many Himba are master harmonizers, Binti has taken that to the next level by working with the Meduse.



Binti inspects her lock and feels her head. She can feel her hand pressing down on her new hair. She desperately wants to inspect the rest of her body to see what else the sting did to her, but Okwu quietly assures her that it was just her hair. Binti asks if this is why she understands the Meduse. Okwu says that it was the only way to allow Binti to understand them, while the chief says that it was the only way to make it clear that Binti is their ambassador, not their prisoner. The chief turns for the ship but tells Binti that the Meduse will honor her forever. Binti thinks that she'd scream if she weren't deep in meditation, and that she's far from home.

Binti explains that supposedly, all that happened spread around Oomza Uni in mere minutes. The story goes that a “tribal” human female saved the university from terrorist Meduse by using “mathematical harmony and ancestral magic.” Binti shares that people at Oomza Uni use “tribal” to describe humans from remote and supposedly uncivilized ethnic groups that seldom attend the school. Over the next few days, Binti discovers that people look at her skin and hair with wonder. When they see her with Okwu, they move away. Binti is fascinating; Okwu is a threat. Okwu enjoys this and declares that all people are afraid of “decisive, proud honor.”

In one of the libraries in Weapons City, Binti and Okwu stare at the empty place where the chief's stinger used to be. The city is a three-hour journey from Math City and is bustling with students and researchers. This is where Binti, Okwu, and the chief came to retrieve the stinger. The head professor let them into the case and the chief slowly held out an **okuoko**. The chief's body changed from blue to clear as soon as its stinger reattached, though a blue scar remained—a reminder of what Oomza Uni did in the name of research. Then, Binti took the chief's stinger in her lap and smeared **otjize** on the blue scar. When she wiped it away a minute later, the scar was gone. The Meduse left with a half jar of otjize, allowed Okwu to remain, and left Oomza Uni happy.

Weeks later, once Binti starts classes and people stop pestering her, Binti runs out of **otjize**. She tracks down a similar oil in the market, but she struggles to find clay. One evening, she walks into the forest in search of clay. She takes her edan with her and squeezes it, feeling naked because her *otjize* is so thin. Binti stops, concerned that she won't find what she needs in a place that looks so different from her desert, but she looks down and sees clay. That night, Binti makes *otjize*. She lets it sit in the sun the next day, fasts, and doesn't attend class. Then, she washes herself with water.

The chief in particular tries to focus on the fact that Binti now looks like one of the Meduse. It seems to think that this will be comforting, but at this point, this is extremely anxiety-inducing for Binti. She's still mourning the loss of her real hair and her ability to braid it in the special code pattern. For that matter, she doesn't yet know the Meduse that well, so it's little comfort that she now has the special power to communicate with them. Because of her close involvement in the situation, this seems like a loss from her perspective.



Once Binti gets settled in at Oomza Uni, she learns again that beings everywhere are remarkably similar. Gossip exists on every planet, and clearly, the distrust of the Meduse extends far beyond just the Khoush. Binti also has to deal with the fact that while being Himba might not make her an object of scorn or curiosity here, it still does in a broader sense. “Tribal” is a way of pointing to Binti's Himba origins and judging them as uncivilized or savage.



The fact that the otjize can heal even this scar speaks to the power of communication, community, and trust. These avenues of support can help heal even scars that denote that a being was once considered subhuman. While the scar might not remain on the chief's body, however, it's telling that Binti and Okwu stare at the case that used to hold the chief's stinger. This suggests that the university doesn't want to so easily forget its mistakes. Perhaps leaving the case is a way to remember its past and learn from its wrongdoings going forward.



Finding the clay in a forest rather than a desert begins to show Binti that even if a place doesn't look at all like home, it's still possible to find things that remind her of home. In this sense, she starts to learn that this planet might not be so different from her own. If she knows where to look, she can recreate a sense of being home and of being immersed in her culture. This will help her feel more secure as she moves forward into her future.



Binti weeps and washes her homeland off her skin. When she's done, she touches her **okuoko**. They're slippery and firm. Binti prays to the Seven and her parents for the first time since she arrived at Oomza Uni and knows she needs to call home soon. When the coast is clear, Binti wraps herself in a wrapper and looks at herself in the mirror. She studies the soft blue **okuoko**, which have darker dots at the tips. They hang a bit longer than her old hair. There are only 10, so Binti can't braid them into the code pattern as she could with her hair. She wonders if they grow like hair or if they *are* hair, but she decides she's not ready to ask Okwu. Binti allows her **okuoko** to dry in the sun.

When it's dark, Binti grabs her container of fresh **otjize**. As she prepares to dig her fingers in, she wonders if her fingers will glide through it. Maybe what she got from the forest isn't clay at all. The **otjize** could be as hard as rock. Binti takes a deep breath and realizes that if she can't make **otjize** here, she'll have to change. She touches an **okuoko**, ignores the tightness in her chest, and scoops out a dollop of **otjize**. After Binti rubs it onto her skin, she cries.

Binti goes to see Okwu at its dorm. Okwu emerges and tells Binti that she looks well; she looked like she was fading before. Okwu holds up an **okuoko** and explains that it suffered a burn during an experiment. Binti and Okwu pause. Binti thinks that while the **otjize** felt normal earlier, this is the real test of its purity. She takes **otjize** from her arm and rubs it onto Okwu's burnt flesh. Binti remembers that her Earth-made **otjize** healed Okwu. That **otjize** was made with Binti's homeland, and it's the reason the Meduse respect her. Now, that **otjize** is gone, and Binti is someone else—and maybe she's not even Himba. She wonders what Okwu thinks of her.

At Binti's dorm, Okwu insists it knows what Binti is thinking. Binti sobs that the Meduse are honorable, but they're also very traditional. She says that Okwu is her friend and is all she has here. Okwu interjects that Binti will call her family, and then she'll have them. Binti is aghast and hurt, but Okwu laughs. It says that they're friends whether or not Binti has healing **otjize**. It makes an **okuoko** vibrate and Binti feels the vibration in one of hers. Binti is shocked and confused, but Okwu explains that this means that Binti is family. Binti smiles and with Okwu's prodding, she rubs the **otjize** off its **okuoko**. The burn is gone. Later, Binti sends signals to her family with her astrolabe. Her mother answers.

In this moment, Binti takes careful steps to accept her new identity. Washing off her homeland is a symbolic way of accepting that she's no longer the same person who left, while taking the time to study her okuoko is a way of looking forward and trying to come up with a way to still honor her home and her culture. The fact that Binti isn't ready to ask Okwu speaks to how lonely of an endeavor this is. Traveling may help someone discover themselves, but it's still a fundamentally individual pursuit.



The realization that she'll have to change if she can't make otjize here reflects Binti's growing sense of peace with her new identity. It's still not easy to accept that she's changed, but Binti feels more ready to try. When the otjize works, however, it's very emotional because Binti now knows for sure that she can create connections with her home from anywhere.



Binti believes that the Meduse respect her only because she essentially brought them a major medical breakthrough. This speaks to how much she still distrusts her relationships with the Meduse and with Okwu in particular. Binti's struggle here really boils down to whether they will be okay with her changes, especially if those changes mean that she's not beneficial to them anymore. Is she just a useful individual to have around, or is she more of a friend?



When Okwu hurts Binti's feelings by telling her to call home, it's likely an indicator that she just isn't used to Okwu's overly rational nature. This becomes apparent when Okwu assures Binti that no matter what, they are friends—and even family, since they can now communicate through their okuoko. Understanding that Okwu is her friend helps Binti work up the courage to call home. Now that she feels more secure in her place at Oomza Uni—and has otjize that works—she feels more comfortable trying to make amends with her family.





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