

BINTI copyright © 2015 by Nnedi Okorafor.

BINTI: HOME copyright © 2017 by Nnedi Okorafor.

BINTI: THE NIGHT MASQUERADE copyright © 2018 by Nnedi Okorafor.

BINTI: SACRED FIRE copyright © 2019 by Nnedi Okorafor.

All Rights Reserved.

Jacket art by Greg Ruth.

Jacket design by Jim Tierney.

Book designed by Fine Design.

DAW Book Collectors No. 1813.

Published by DAW Books, Inc.
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious.
Any resemblance to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Nearly all the designs and trade names in this book are registered trademarks. All that are still in commercial use are protected by United States and international trademark law.

First Printing, February 2019
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9



DAW TRADEMARK REGISTERED
U.S. PAT. AND TM. OFF. AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES
— MARCA REGISTRADA
HECHO EN U.S.A.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

BINTI

I powered up the transporter and said a silent prayer. I had no idea what I was going to do if it didn't work. My transporter was cheap, so even a droplet of moisture, or more likely, a grain of sand, would cause it to short. It was faulty and most of the time I had to restart it over and over before it worked. *Please not now, please not now*, I thought.

The transporter shivered in the sand and I held my breath. Tiny, flat, and black as a prayer stone, it buzzed softly and then slowly rose from the sand. Finally, it produced the baggage-lifting force. I grinned. Now I could make it to the shuttle. I swiped *otjize* from my forehead with my index finger and knelt down. Then I touched the finger to the sand, grounding the sweet smelling red clay into it. "Thank you," I whispered. It was a half-mile walk along the dark desert road. With the transporter working, I would make it there on time.

Straightening up, I paused and shut my eyes. Now the weight of my entire life was pressing on my shoulders. I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of night and they had no clue. My nine siblings, all older than me except for my younger sister and brother, would never see this coming. My parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years. By the time they all realized what I'd done and where I was going, I'd have left the planet. In my absence, my parents would growl to each other that I was to never set foot in their home again. My four aunts and two uncles who lived down the road would shout and gossip among themselves about how I'd scandalized our entire bloodline. I was going to be a pariah.

"Go," I softly whispered to the transporter, stamping my foot. The thin metal rings I wore around each ankle jingled noisily, but I stamped my foot again. Once on, the transporter worked best when I didn't touch it. "Go," I said again, sweat forming on my brow. When nothing moved, I chanced giving the two large suitcases sitting atop the force field a shove. They moved smoothly and I breathed another sigh of relief. At least some luck was on my side.



Fifteen minutes later I purchased a ticket and boarded the shuttle. The sun was barely beginning to peak over the horizon. As I moved past seated passengers far too aware of the bushy ends of my plaited hair softly slapping people in the face, I cast my eyes to the floor. Our hair is thick and mine has always been *very* thick. My old auntie liked to call it "ododo" because it grew wild and dense like ododo grass. Just before leaving, I'd rolled my plaited hair with fresh sweet-smelling *otjize* I'd made specifically for this trip. Who knew what I looked like to these people who didn't know my people so well.

A woman leaned away from me as I passed, her face pinched as if she smelled something foul. "Sorry," I whispered, watching my feet and trying to ignore the stares of almost everyone in the shuttle. Still, I couldn't help glancing around. Two girls who might have been a few years older than me, covered their mouths with hands so pale that they looked untouched by the sun. Everyone looked as if the sun was his or her enemy. I was the only Himba on the shuttle. I quickly found and moved to a seat.

The shuttle was one of the new sleek models that looked like the bullets my teachers used to calculate ballistic coefficients during my A-levels when I was growing up. These ones glided fast over land using a combination of air current, magnetic fields, and exponential energy—an easy craft to build if you had the equipment and the time. It was also a nice vehicle for hot desert terrain where

the roads leading out of town were terribly maintained. My people didn't like to leave the homeland. I sat in the back so I could look out the large window.

I could see the lights from my father's astrolabe shop and the sand storm analyzer my brother had built at the top of the Root—that's what we called my parents' big, big house. Six generations of my family had lived there. It was the oldest house in my village, maybe the oldest in the city. It was made of stone and concrete, cool in the night, hot in the day. And it was patched with solar planes and covered with bioluminescent plants that liked to stop glowing just before sunrise. My bedroom was at the top of the house. The shuttle began to move and I stared until I couldn't see it anymore. "What am I doing?" I whispered.

An hour and a half later, the shuttle arrived at the launch port. I was the last off, which was good because the sight of the launch port overwhelmed me so much that all I could do for several moments was stand there. I was wearing a long red skirt, one that was silky like water, a light orange wind-top that was stiff and durable, thin leather sandals, and my anklets. No one around me wore such an outfit. All I saw were light flowing garments and veils; not one woman's ankles were exposed, let alone jingling with steel anklets. I breathed through my mouth and felt my face grow hot.

"Stupid stupid stupid," I whispered. 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.

I was sixteen years old and had never been beyond my city, let alone near a launch station. I was by myself and I had just left my family. My prospects of marriage had been 100 percent and now they would be zero. No man wanted a woman who'd run away. However, beyond my prospects of normal life being ruined, I had

scored so high on the planetary exams in mathematics that the Oomza University had not only admitted me, but promised to pay for whatever I needed in order to attend. No matter what choice I made, I was never going to have a normal life, really.

I looked around and immediately knew what to do next. I walked to the help desk.



The travel security officer scanned my astrolabe, a full *deep* scan. Dizzy with shock, I shut my eyes and breathed through my mouth to steady myself. Just to leave the planet, I had to give them access to my *entire* life—me, my family, and all forecasts of my future. I stood there, frozen, hearing my mother's voice in my head. "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. I wanted to ask the officer if he did this for everyone, but I was afraid now that he'd done it. They could do anything to me, at this point. Best not to make trouble.

When the officer handed me my astrolabe, I resisted the urge to snatch it back. He was an old Khoush man, so old that he was privileged to wear the blackest turban and face veil. His shaky hands were so gnarled and arthritic that he nearly dropped my astrolabe. He was bent like a dying palm tree and when he'd said, "You have never traveled; I must do a full scan. Remain where you are," his voice was drier than the red desert outside my city. But he read my astrolabe as fast as my father, which both impressed and scared me. He'd coaxed it open by whispering a few choice equations and his suddenly steady hands worked the dials as if they were his own.

When he finished, he looked up at me with his light green piercing eyes that seemed to see deeper into me than his scan of my

astrolabe. There were people behind me and I was aware of their whispers, soft laughter and a young child murmuring. It was cool in the terminal, but I felt the heat of social pressure. My temples ached and my feet tingled.

"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.

"Oh." My eyes pricked with tears. "Thank you, sir," I said, hoarsely, as I took my astrolabe.

I quickly made my way through the many people in the terminal, too aware of their closeness. I considered finding a lavatory and applying more *otjize* to my skin and tying my hair back, but instead I kept moving. Most of the people in the busy terminal wore the black and white garments of the Khoush people—the women draped in white with multicolored belts and veils and the men draped in black like powerful spirits. I had seen plenty of them on television and here and there in my city, but never had I been in a sea of Khoush. This was the rest of the world and I was finally in it.

As I stood in line for boarding security, I felt a tug at my hair. I turned around and met the eyes of a group of Khoush women. They were all staring at me; *everyone* behind me was staring at me.

The woman who'd tugged my plait was looking at her fingers and rubbing them together, frowning. Her fingertips were orange red with my *otjize*. She sniffed them. "It smells like jasmine flowers," she said to the woman on her left, surprised.

"Not 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. My father told me that when he was around Khoush merchants when they came to our city to buy astrolabes, he tried to make himself as small as possible. "It is either that or I will start a war with them that I will finish," he said. My father didn't believe in war. He said war was evil, but if it came he would revel in it like sand in a storm. Then he'd say a little prayer to the Seven to keep war away and then another prayer to seal his words.

I pulled my plaits to my front and touched the *edan* in my pocket. I let my mind focus on it, its strange language, its strange metal, its strange feel. I'd found the *edan* eight years ago while exploring the sands of the hinter deserts one late afternoon. "*Edan*" was a general name for a device too old for anyone to know it functions, so old that they were now just art.

My *edan* was more interesting than any book, than any new astrolabe design I made in my father's shop that these women would probably kill each other to buy. And it was mine, in my pocket, and these nosy women behind me could never know. Those women talked about me, the men probably did too. But none of them knew what I had, where I was going, who I was. Let them gossip and judge. Thankfully, they knew not to touch my hair again. I don't like war either.

The security guard scowled when I stepped forward. Behind him I could see three entrances, the one in the middle led into the ship called "Third Fish," the ship I was to take to Oomza Uni. Its open door was large and round leading into a long corridor illuminated by soft blue lights.

"Step forward," the guard said. He wore the uniform of all launch site lower-level personnel—a long white gown and gray

gloves. I'd only seen this uniform in streaming stories and books and I wanted to giggle, despite myself. He looked ridiculous. I stepped forward and everything went red and warm.

When the body scan beeped its completion, the security guard reached right into my left pocket and brought out my *edan*. He held it to his face with a deep scowl.

I waited. What would he know?

He was inspecting its stellated cube shape, pressing its many points with his finger and eyeing the strange symbols on it that I had spent two years unsuccessfully trying to decode. He held it to his face to better see the intricate loops and swirls of blue and black and white, so much like the lace placed on the heads of young girls when they turn eleven and go through their eleventh-year rite.

"What is this made of?" the guard asked, holding it over a scanner. "It's not reading as any known metal."

I shrugged, too aware of the people behind me waiting in line and staring at me. To them, I was probably like one of the people who lived in caves deep in the hinter desert who were so blackened by the sun that they looked like walking shadows. I'm not proud to say that I have some Desert People blood in me from my father's side of the family, that's where my dark skin and extra-bushy hair come from.

"Your identity reads that you're a harmonizer, a masterful one who builds some of the finest astrolabes," he said. "But this object isn't an astrolabe. Did you build it? And how can you build something and not know what it's made of?"

"I didn't build it," I said.

"Who did?"

"It's . . . it's just an old, old thing," I said. "It has no math or current. It's just an inert computational apparatus that I carry for good luck." This was partially a lie. But even I didn't know exactly what it could and couldn't do.

The man looked as if he would ask more, but didn't. 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. So he quickly moved me along and, finally, there I stood at my ship's entrance.

I couldn't see the end of the corridor, so I stared at the entrance. The ship was a magnificent piece of living technology. Third Fish was a Miri 12, a type of ship closely related to a shrimp. Miri 12s were stable calm creatures with natural exoskeletons that could withstand the harshness of space. They were genetically enhanced to grow three breathing chambers within their bodies.

Scientists planted rapidly growing plants within these three enormous rooms that not only produced oxygen from the CO₂ directed in from other parts of the ship, but also absorbed benzene, formaldehyde, and trichloroethylene. This was some of the most amazing technology I'd ever read about. Once settled on the ship, I was determined to convince someone to let me see one of these amazing rooms. But at the moment, I wasn't thinking about the technology of the ship. I was on the threshold now, between home and my future.

I stepped into the blue corridor.

So that is how it all began. I found my room. I found my group—twelve other new students, all human, all Khoush, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. An hour later, my group and I located a ship technician to show us one of the breathing chambers. I wasn't the only new Oomza Uni student who desperately wanted to see the technology at work. The air in there smelled like the jungles and forests I'd only read about. The plants had tough leaves

and they grew everywhere, from ceiling to walls to floor. They were wild with flowers, and I could have stood there breathing that soft, fragrant air for days.

We met our group leader hours later. He was a stern old Khoush man who looked the twelve of us over and paused at me and asked, "Why are you covered in red greasy clay and weighed down by all those steel anklets?" When I told him that I was Himba, he coolly said, "I know, but that doesn't answer my question." I explained to him the tradition of my people's skin care and how we wore the steel rings on our ankles to protect us from snakebites. He looked at me for a long time, the others in my group staring at me like a rare bizarre butterfly.

"Wear your *otjize*," he said. "But not so much that you stain up this ship. And if those anklets are to protect you from snakebites, you no longer need them."

I took my anklets off, except for two on each ankle. Enough to jingle with each step.

I was the only Himba on the ship, out of nearly five hundred passengers. My tribe is obsessed with innovation and technology, but it is small, private, and, as I said, we don't like to leave Earth. We prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward. No Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni. So me being the only one on the ship was not that surprising. However, just because something isn't surprising doesn't mean it's easy to deal with.

The ship was packed with outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing. The people on the ship weren't Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood out as a Himba, but the commonalities shined brighter. I made friends quickly. And by the second week in space, they were *good* friends.

Olo, Remi, Kwuga, Nur, Anajama, Rhoden. Only Olo and Remi were in my group. Everyone else I met in the dining area or the learning room where various lectures were held by professors onboard the

"Keep moving," Okwu said.

When they reached the breathing chamber, Okwu went right in. Mwinyi hesitated and then followed. He shut the door behind him. There, among the lovely plants, irrigated by clean waters that ran throughout New Fish to other breathing rooms, was Binti's body wrapped in its red soft cloth, lying on the costume of the Night Masquerade.

"She looks the same," Okwu said and Mwinyi shivered, understanding exactly what it meant. Her body wasn't bloating yet. Making an effort not to look at the unnerving Night Masquerade costume, Mwinyi put the transporter on the floor beside her body and powered it up. Within a second, it shivered and then buzzed softly. Binti's wrapped body and the Night Masquerade costume lifted off the ground.

Mwinyi sighed. "Okay," he muttered, his voice thick. He gave her a gentle push and she smoothly glided toward the door. Mwinyi stopped her, looking at Okwu.

"What?" it said. "We must do this fast." It moved quickly toward the door. The door slid open and Okwu squeezed through. Just outside the room, Mwinyi could see it let out a great blast of gas and inhale it back in. Then it let some out again, as it moved away from the door.

Mwinyi looked down at Binti. He inhaled and held his breath; he didn't want to smell her. He reached down. He had to see her face one more time. He did not care if it was bloated from death or even eaten by organisms that lived in the breathing room. He had to see her, to truly say goodbye. He flipped the red cloth aside. He stared. He let out his breath.

Her *okuoko* were writhing like snakes.

I was staring back.

CHAPTER 9

Awake

I was there.

Then I opened my eyes.

"It's all mathematics," I said.

I don't know where the words came from or why I said them. Mwinyi was staring at me, his mouth agape. "Life, the universe, everything." I turned my head to the side and caught a glimpse of the Night Masquerade I lay on. The costume.

Mwinyi reached a hand forward and pulled more of the cloth off me. I looked down too, as he gasped, jumping up and stumbling back. "*Okwu!*" he finally called. "Okwu! Get in here!"

I looked toward the door where Okwu hovered, just outside the room. The moment I laid eyes on it, I saw it float quickly back, leaving a great cloud of its lavender gas as it went. Then I could hear it puffing it out, sucking it back in, puffing it out, sucking it in.

"Binti," Mwinyi whispered. "What . . . is this really you?" He had tears in his eyes, his lips were quivering. I'd been watching him move about the ship for hours. It had been as if I were swimming, rolling, floating in the tree. Then I was pulled into this place, this ship, and it had embraced me with delight. And I'd seen Okwu and Mwinyi moving about, both of them so sad, numb, and quiet. I'd followed them here and opened my eyes.

I sat up as he stared at me. I touched my left arm. I had a left arm. Mwinyi sank to the floor, his back against the slender trunk of a young tree with tough rubbery-looking leaves growing from a hole in the floor. A tree that looked oddly like an Undying tree.

Home, I thought as I pressed my chest. I remembered most clearly when the Khoush fire bullet hit me in the chest. The punching, then stabbing pain, and once inside me, it had hungrily bitten at me with its fire. I pressed my soft breasts now, beneath the red dress I wore. I rolled to the side and touched the sticklike hand of the Night Masquerade costume. I held it with my left hand, kneading the actual sticks used for the knuckles with my fingers.

I nearly laughed now when I thought back to that moment when I'd stood at my bedroom window staring down at the Night Masquerade that first time. Deep down a tiny, tiny voice in me had wondered if something were wrong with me, if my spirit was that of a man's, not a woman's, because the Night Masquerade never showed itself to girls or women. Even back then I had changed things, and I didn't even know it. When I should have reveled in this gift, instead, I'd seen myself as broken. But couldn't you be broken and still bring change?

I powered down the transporter beside me and it lowered me to the ground. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer to thank the Seven for Their Mysterious Mystery. Then slowly, my muscles creaking and aching, old *otjize* flaking to the floor, I stood up. I had legs, too. I felt the ship rumble, the leaves, flowers, stems, and branches around us shaking. I felt the ship's voice more than heard it, in every part of me, but especially my chest, left arm, and legs. "Hello, *Binti*," it said. It spoke in Khoush. Mwinyi looked around and then back at me.

"New Fish is speaking to you, isn't she?" he asked. "I can hear her, but barely."

I nodded.

"Hello," I said aloud, not sure how else to speak to it. "You are New Fish? Is that—"

"Yes. *Third Fish's daughter*," she said.

"I died," I blurted. "I remember. They had agreed to stop fighting and then something happened and they started fighting any-

way. They forgot about me and I got caught in the crossfire. I don't know if Khoush or Meduse killed me. . . ." I paused, as more of those moments returned to me. I'd seen flashes of blue and red, felt heat and cold. I'd been shot by Meduse and Khoush alike. "How is it possible that I'm standing in your breathing room looking at Mwinyi. Breathing." I held out my arms to him and immediately he rushed over.

He gathered me in his arms.

"Microbes," I heard Okwu say from the door. It stood in it, filling it up completely as it floated.

"Okwu," I said, feeling my *okuoko* writhe. And for the first time I knew how to do it. I sent the small spark toward it and it popped in a series of blue sparks at its tentacles. Okwu's dome expanded, filling the doorway even more tightly, and then deflated.

"My mother said it would happen if they put you in my breathing chamber, because I am so young," New Fish said. "That is why she sent me instead of coming herself. She would have broken through the curfew gate they set up for all launch port ships once the fighting started. My mother isn't afraid of her bond to the Khoush. But she knew. And she saw your soul when everything happened on your journey to Oomza Umi. She calls you the 'gentle warrior' and believes our union would bring Miri 12s forward."

"Union?" I asked. Again, another connection.

"What's she saying?" Mwinyi asked. "I can't quite—"

"Shhh," I said to Mwinyi, still holding him.

"Come up to my Star Chamber and I will explain," New Fish said.



I sat on the Star Chamber floor looking out the large window before me. This was where Mwinyi had been staying and I could see why. I stared out at the distant Saturn as I drank a second cup of water and finished a bowl of dried meat. The water tasted soily,

having been drawn from one of New Fish's wells, and the meat was spicy and tough. It was delicious. I didn't have to ask to know that this was meat someone from my town had supplied for the journey. Goat meat, sliced thin and cured in an Osemba smokehouse.

I had followed Mwinyi up the corridor, marveling at New Fish's young interior design. I soon slowed down, overcome with a thirst and hunger so strong that I felt as if my body were trying to consume itself. By the time we reached the Star Chamber, I'd sat down right there in the middle of the room and could say nothing but "Water," and then when I had that, "Food."

As I ate and drank, things around me cleared and soon I was just chewing on the meat because it was tasty. Mwinyi sat beside me, eating a handful of dates. Okwu hovered near the other wall of windows, chicken bones scattered on the floor beneath it. I'd never actually watched Okwu eat; Okwu liked to go off and eat alone and for a while, I'd wondered if it ate at all. Thus, seeing it consume the roasted chicken it had brought up from storage had been a sight. Meduse eat like delicate old ladies, slowly picking at and drawing in the meat bit by bit with their *okuoko*. Watching it eat had brought me my first real smile since I'd sat up and had a living body to smile with.

"Okay," I finally said, taking one more gulp of water. "I'm listening." I looked at my right arm, flaking the remaining old *otjize* off to reveal my dark brown skin.

"Wait," Mwinyi said. "Before New Fish speaks to you, Okwu and I want to tell you what happened after you . . . after they killed you." He frowned, a pained look on his face. "I can't believe I can say that to you. 'Killed.'" He let out a breath.

"I know," I said. But somehow, out there in space on New Fish, with a Meduse and an Enyi Zinariya master harmonizer, it all seemed so bizarre, what was the added detail of me coming back from the dead? "When one dies, the Seven take you, no matter who you are. You join the whole again. The wilderness. You don't come back."

"Meduse always come back," Okwu said, quietly. "We reincarnate."

"Do you remember the Seven?" Mwinyi asked, ignoring Okwu. "The Principle Artists of All Things?"

"I do," I said. Seeing the shock on Mwinyi's face and the puff of gas that Okwu blew out amused me. They hadn't expected me to say that; however, I *did* remember. "But tell me what you need to tell me."

When he got to the part about my family, I screamed. I jumped up, knocking over my cup of water. I didn't know where to go, so I just stood there. I just stood there. My chest tight, the heart inside it beating strong again. My legs strong. My flesh naked. My *okuoko*, which were now past my waist, vibrating. I pressed my hands against the sides of my face. Then I lifted my dress to my knees and did my village's fire dance, stamping my feet hard to make my anklets jingle. When I looked at my legs, I saw that I didn't have any anklets. I danced anyway, hearing the jingling in my mind.

"I spoke to the Root," Mwinyi laughingly explained as I danced and danced with joy. "And it opened up. And we were able to get everyone out."

"Everyone," I said, stretching my hands toward the window, toward outer space. "No one was hurt?"

"Everyone was well," Mwinyi said.

I whirled around, ran to him, threw my arms around him, and kissed him long and hard. And through my *okuoko*, I threw a blue spark, the size and shape of a large tomato, at Okwu. I jumped back and began to dance again and when I saw Okwu vibrating its dome with laughter, I danced harder. My family was *alive*! My family was *alive*! The Root was alive, even if the house built on it had been burned to ash. We *survive*.

"How?" I asked.

When Mwinyi told me what my mother had said, I stared at him in awe. "She used her mathematical sight?" I whispered. "My

mother, she sees the math in the world, she was born with it. That's where the sharpness of my gift comes from. She was never trained, though. She just used it to protect the family during storms, to fortify the house, sometimes to heal you if you were sick. My mother is so powerful." I laughed to myself, tears welling up in my eyes. "I can't believe it! Thank the Seven, praise the Seven, the Seven are great, they make circles in the sand!" *That was why I couldn't see her during my fevered zinariya visions. While everyone else had moved from the walls to get away from the smoke and heat, my mother had gone toward the danger to find the spot that woke the Root's defenses.*

"I've contacted my home," Mwinyi added. "They are sending people to meet with the Himba. Your man Dele will lead the meeting with them."

I paused at him referring to Dele as my "man," but quickly moved on. "Dele was there?" I remembered. "Oh! Mwinyi, he was the Night Masquerade! I saw him! I saw him!" I wrapped my arms around myself, tears welling in my eyes.

"The Himba Council *did* betray you," Mwinyi said. "But Dele didn't. He was there as the Night Masquerade to give you hope and strength."

I listened in silence as Mwinyi explained. This part I had to let sink in. The Night Masquerade was a secret society of men? And Dele was in it? A part of me still rejected this. That first time I'd seen it from my bedroom window, it had looked like a creature, not a man in a costume. And what of my uncle and my father who had also seen it? Did they know of the tradition too?

Regardless, I felt good. About everything. The war had begun again, my home would never be what it was, but this, I understood more than ever now, was inevitable. Change was inevitable and where the Seven were involved, so was growth. My family was *alive*, the Enyi Zinariya were going to meet them and help Osemba

survive and evolve. And if any people knew how to survive and evolve, it was the Enyi Zinariya. Osemba would change and grow.

Dele was not a harmonizer, but he had come of age with me and he had to have learned something about himself after what happened with the Himba Council. He'd just started his apprenticeship to be the next Himba chief and, rigid and traditional as he was, he'd already broken out of the mold when he believed the council had made a mistake. His love and protectiveness of his people was strong enough to push tradition to grow. Dele was ready for what was coming and I felt good about what he'd do.

It was then that I remembered something else and my heart began to pound like crazy because it had already been three days. There was no going back home with ease. I reached into the pocket of my right hip where I had kept it. I wasn't wearing the same dress, but maybe . . . my shoulders slumped. The *edan* pieces and its inner golden ball weren't there. It was lost.

"New Fish," I said. "Okay, I am ready to hear your explanation." I reached into my left front pocket as I sat down. I felt the edge of something sharp. I grinned as I shoved my hand further in and grasped the golden ball. "*Thank the Seven*," I whispered. "And thank my family."

"*I am young and there wasn't much time*," New Fish said to me.

Mwinyi was sitting on the floor, with his chest pressed to it, his arms out as he pressed his palms to the floor. "It's how I hear her clearest," he said when I looked at him questioningly.

I nodded at him and looked at Okwu, who just said, "Tell me when she has finished."

"*I don't know much*," New Fish continued. "*Most Miri 12s never do this. We don't become more. We are ships because we like to travel, that's what mother said. Until she harbored you. Then she started thinking. Even before Mwinyi called out to her. So she told me about 'deep Miri' and how I had to work it. We have breathing chambers.*"

"My mother said that before I was born, my chambers were seeded from her inner plants. Those plants not only produce the gases for us to breathe when we leave planets with breathable atmospheres, but they also carry bacteria, good viruses, and other microorganisms, and these microbes go on to populate every part of my body. But they populate the breathing chamber most passionately when a Miri 12 is new born like me.

"When your body was placed in my chamber, my microbes went to work. You are probably more microbes than human now."

I frowned. "What does that mean? I look and feel like myself. I remember who I am. I was dead, right?"

"That is the 'deep Miri' my mother said would happen. I don't understand it, myself. But they blended with your genes and repaired you, re-grew your arm and legs, then pulled you back. There is one thing, though." She stopped talking for a moment and I was relieved. I needed to think.

I was dead. This fact echoed through my brain, ricocheting off the walls and slamming back again and again. I was dead, I was dead, I was dead. I remembered joining the Seven. Was I even me now? I was physically more Miri 12 than human. I touched the *okuoko* on my head and my temples throbbed. I raised my hands and typed and pushed the message to Mwinyi with more ease than I'd experienced while on Earth. "Am I still Enyi Zinariya?" I asked. My world stayed steady and there were no voices. I didn't look toward the window to see if there was a tunnel in space or a strange planet bouncing beside Saturn.

"You will always be Enyi Zinariya," he responded, his green words appearing before me in crisp letters. I touched them and they faded away like incense smoke.

"What is Enyi Zinariya?" New Fish's words floated at me in bright pink and I gasped.

Mwinyi gasped too.

"Did she send it to you, too?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I've absorbed some of you, too, Binti," she said. And again, the room lit up with the orange-pink color.

"The Enyi Zinariya are my tribe, our tribe," Mwinyi said. "We got our name from the Zinariya people who visited and changed us long ago." He cut his eyes at me and added, "You might know us as 'the Desert People.'"

"Oh," New Fish said. "Yes, my mother liked to talk about Binti's dark skin, dense hair, and old African face. She said that may be what gave Binti her fight, desert bloods. We weren't even sure if you were really Himba."

"I am Himba," I snapped.

The room became orange-pink again, and this time stayed that way. Mwinyi rolled his eyes and said, "Yes, yes, Binti, you are Himba. No one's taking that from you."

I frowned even more deeply and turned my back to him, for the moment angry and frustrated with too many things to focus on a response.

"Can I ask you something, New Fish?" Mwinyi said.

"Ask," New Fish said.

"If you were only born a few days ago, how come you can communicate so well?"

The ship's room flashed a soft orange-pink so pleasant that I instantly felt less annoyed. It was the same color as the ntu bugs on Oomza Uni. "I have been talking to my mother for five Earth years and my mother is old, so very smart. A Miri 12 is 'pregnant' when she is near her time to give birth. And birth is not the beginning for us; it's just a change."

Mwinyi nodded, looking amazed. "So you have been inside your mother for five years and you two talk?"

"I've been all over the galaxy with my mother, who was born on Earth. But mostly to Earth and Oomza, since my mother has been doing that route since I spawned. This is why I can speak Khoush."

"So you were there when . . . did you know when the Meduse killed everyone on board your mother?"

"Mooj-ha ki-bira," she said. "Yes. My mother said she and I should stay quiet until we reached Oomza. That was the first time in my entire life that I had nightmares when I slept."

We were quiet for a few moments. Then I asked, "What was it that you were going to tell me? You said there was something I needed to know."

"I may have spoken too soon," New Fish said, after a moment. "You've just woken. You've just eaten."

"I'm fine," I said impatiently. "Please, tell it all to me now. I'd rather be shocked all at once. Tell me everything." I was breathing heavily. I'd had a strange feeling as New Fish spoke to me. It was leading up to telling me something big. "Should I let myself tree first? When I do that I can handle any shock, any—"

"No. Don't tree. That won't help."

"Why?"

"You will see."

And then I did.

Suddenly, the Star Chamber, Mwinyi, Okwu, everything was gone. I was in space. Infinite blackness was all around me, except for Saturn, pale and blue in the distance, and the sun in the other direction. The blue-pink bioluminescent light of New Fish seemed to radiate from me. With each second, I became more aware of this and then I began to fall. And as I fell faster and faster, I didn't have any arms with which to flail and I began to panic. I started screaming. I shuddered and my scream came out as a deep groan.

Relax, I heard New Fish say. She spoke in my head. *Just be. You are safe.*

What's . . . what's happening to me? I shouted. Again, my voice was just a rumble. I could feel myself shaking, shuddering. Not myself, not my body. New Fish's body.

Your body too, now, she said.

The word she'd said before came back to me, "union."

Your body is partially me, she said. *That's how the deep Miri brought you back. And in turn, I am partially you.*

As I relaxed, I realized that for the first time, I could do something I'd always dreamed of when I was little. I was in space with no suit, in no ship, and I wasn't dying. This was my chance to do that for real. I let myself be New Fish and noticed that I was just floating. There was no up or down. I felt neither cool nor hot, though I felt a warmth from within and that was enough. I looked straight ahead at Saturn.

The Seven are Great, I said.

They are.

How do I—

But then I was doing it. I was flying forward. I flipped and flew what my body perceived as down. I laughed with glee and flew fast and stopped and flew faster and stopped. The feeling of floating in space made me euphoric. It was such freedom. I was doing a barrel roll when I remembered Mwinyi and Okwu were on the ship and in that moment, something odd happened. I could feel myself gradually slow down. Then I was back inside, looking down at Okwu and Mwinyi in the Star Chamber. Mwinyi was hanging on to a pole, a look of horror on his face. Okwu was simply hovering, now on the other side of the room. Then I was back in my body, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the room. I looked around, blinking.

"Binti? Can you hear me now?" Mwinyi shouted.

"Huh?" I said, resting a hand on the soft floor.

"You nearly killed us!" Mwinyi said.

"She nearly killed *you*. Not me," Okwu said. "And I caught you. You are fine."

Mwinyi frowned angrily at Okwu.

"Sorry," I said. When I stretched my legs, I had to use some effort because the bottoms of my legs were adhered to New Fish's

surface with some kind of mucus. This was why I hadn't been thrashed around like Mwinyi. I pulled some of the gummy substance from the backs of my legs and dress. "Can you become me as I became you?" I asked New Fish.

"It is not that you became me. I'm a Miri 12, it is how we connect. But no, I would not connect with you in that way. You don't have the capacity."

I was too tired to address New Fish's quiet condescension.

"The final thing I must tell you is that if we were on Earth, because you've taken so much from me to live, you and I can never be too far from one another."

I yawned. "Why? What would happen?"

"I don't know."

"How far is too far?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "When my mother sent me, she couldn't answer every question I had. With all the shooting near the launch port, I was more worried about getting shot down on my way to you."

"It's alright," I said, standing up. I didn't have the energy to wonder about this, either. Not at the moment. Plus we were in space and I wasn't going to move away from New Fish any time soon. And where were we going now, anyway? I needed to rest first.

CHAPTER 10

Stones of Saturn

"We're going to go through Saturn's ring," I said hours later, after a long nap. "I'm not discussing it. Then we turn around and head to Oomza Uni, as you planned."

"Okay," was all Mwinyi replied.

Okwu said nothing, nor did New Fish. I turned back to the large window feeling satisfied with myself. I'd been ready to argue with all of them and it was nice to get what I wanted so easily.

After waking from my nine hours of sleep, I'd connected with New Fish again. This time, I did it on my own. New Fish might have been asleep, for I didn't sense her presence at all. It was just me out there as a living ship. I felt the air in my breathing chambers, the strength in my body. I even felt Mwinyi standing in the corner, moving his hands about as he talked to several people in the desert on Earth and Okwu in the room below. Okwu was not talking to the other Meduse on Earth, it was observing. When connected to New Fish, I brought all my skills with me. I considered attempting to tree while connected, but decided against it. The results of tree-ing were affected by size, and who knew what I'd call up.

As I floated out there in space, enjoying the absolute quiet, I gazed at Saturn. We were near enough to see its shape and rings. Saturn was close enough to reach within hours, even if New Fish took her time. This was when I'd decided we should go.

"My mother says edans are unpredictable," New Fish said now. *"She said yours especially could have its own consciousness."*

But I wanted to see. Had to see. After all I'd been through, I