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People contain many things that can be stolen.

Organs. Blood. Bones.

It's impolite to steal pieces of people.

It's also impolite to steal books.

Don't do the one, and the Bone Gnomes won't do the other.

Sleep tight.

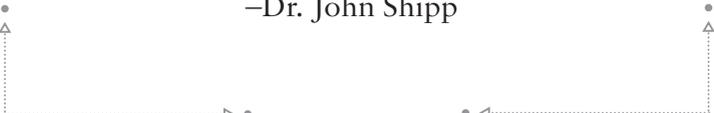
*For Jennifer,  
and all the horror movie  
kids out there.*



*“There are wonders in the cosmos beyond  
all imagining, creatures we may never  
understand and biological processes we may  
never unravel. What a miracle, to live in a time  
when such things are ready to be discovered.”*

–Dr. Katherine Shipp

*“The one constant in the universe is that  
life wants to continue living, whatever the  
consequence. Whatever the cost. Life endures.”*



–Dr. John Shipp

# 1

## ZAGREUS

### THE SKY IS ORANGE.

That's not the worst part—that's a label I try to reserve for about a hundred things more offensive than an orange sky—but it's the most jarring, even after three months' planetary time spent on this specific chunk of rock and water and stupid colonial politics. If the suns are up at all, the sky is orange. Dark orange at sunrise and sunset, bright, artificial orange during the middle of the day, like someone out there decided the actual, literal *sky* is the best safety alert the universe has ever come up with. "Welcome to Zagreus, hope you enjoy the constant, nagging feeling that something is about to catch fire."

When I complain about it—which, to be fair, is basically every day, since there isn't much else to do around here—Viola starts talking about societal drift and recontextualization of the familiar and how, in a few generations, emergency systems on Zagreus will have to use a different color to catch people's attention,

since orange will have become so much background noise. That's going to mess with some standard corporate design schematics. Or maybe it'll just mess with the Zagreans, since I can't really see, say, Weyland-Yutani deciding to change their entire corporate color scheme for the sake of one backwoods colony world.

Too bad the corps don't set the plan for Mom and Dad's research. I might not be looking at a sky like a safety light every time I open the window if they did.

My name is Olivia Shipp, and I am not on this planet of my own free will.

Something rustles deep in the bushes below me. I lean further forward, one foot hooked around the tree branch I'm perched on, for balance, and wait to see what's coming. My dish of bait—some chopped-up local fruits, Mom's special Zagreus "sugar water" recipe that she distills from half a dozen types of flower, and an assortment of native insects with low mobility and high caloric density—sits enticingly below me, ready to lure in at least a dozen types of creature. Maybe more. This is still a new world, as far as humanity is concerned. We're making discoveries every day.

The colony's contract with Mom and Dad covers me as well: when I'm the first one to spot something of interest, the credit goes to the colonists, like *they're* the ones out here risking their necks to document another kind of not-quite-squirrel. I don't mind too much. I get a small payment for every discovery I document, and small payments add up. Viola and I—we're twins—will be eighteen soon, old enough to start making our own decisions about where we go and what we do. I want to take us to Earth. I want to meet distant relatives and let Viola see the best doctors in the known galaxy. That means being prepared to pay whatever it costs.

Besides, it's a beautiful day, orange sky notwithstanding, and Kora isn't coming until this afternoon. The colony schools are closed today for some local holiday. No one's cared enough to explain it to me, a weird outsider girl with the mud under her nails and the pollen on her nose. Vi probably knows. Vi knows everything about a new colony like, five minutes before we land, because she says it makes her feel better about having to pull up roots and move again. I think she just likes to feel like the one who knows things, since she never gets to be the one who goes out and *does* them.

I duck my head, feeling guilty for even thinking that. It's not Vi's fault that she can't go outside as much as we'd both like her to. She has some weird, previously undocumented autoimmune disease. She's seen doctors all over the galaxy, and none of them have been able to help her. Both our parents take extra work, every chance they get, to make sure she has the best care possible. I love my sister. Even when she annoys the pants off of me, I love my sister. I shouldn't be mad at her for things she can't help.

There's another rustle in the bushes. My attention snaps toward the sound, concern for my sister forgotten as I hold my breath and wait to see what emerges.

Slowly, nose pressed to the ground and twitching about a mile a minute, a long, low-slung herbivore comes slithering into the open. I call them "snuffle-squirrels," and my mother calls them something long, scientific, and dull. Either way, it's nothing new, and my shoulders slump in disappointment.

Most of the smaller life-forms on Zagreus skipped evolving proper limbs in favor of fleshy little stumps, like the legs on a caterpillar, or long, fringy things, like cilia. The snuffle-squirrel splits the difference, with four caterpillar legs in front, four more

in back, and cilia along the length of its body. They wave as it walks, giving it a full sense of the space around it.

Mom says the cilia serve the same purpose as a cat's whiskers, and that if a snuffle-squirrel or other member of this planet's evolutionary equivalent to rodents loses too many of them, they'll die, because they won't be able to hunt, climb, or forage. She's a xenobiologist and I'm just a student, so I believe her. Doesn't change the part where it's funny looking as all hell, these weird, super-long squirrel things with waving pom-poms sticking out of their sides.

Waving pom-poms, green fur that has a lot in common with cactus thorns, and four eyes, arrayed sort of like the eyes on a spider. Xenobiology is *weird*.

The snuffle-squirrel makes its cautious way over to the plate of fruit, sniffing repeatedly before deciding the risk is worth the prize. It shoves its whole head into a chunk of bright blue pseudo-melon, and begins to eat noisily. Because it doesn't have paws like an Earth mammal, it has to do its caching internally, storing fat in its tail for the lean seasons. This is a juvenile, tail still thin and fur still evenly spiky.

We've seen snuffle-squirrels in every part of the local biosphere—forest and meadow and arid, scrubby foothills. Zagreus is what people call an "Earth-like planet," meaning it mostly has systems that are at least somewhat cognate to the ones humanity is most familiar with. It's a nice change. Our last colony world, I couldn't go out without massive protective gear, and I'm pretty sure Vi never went out at all, not even during the transfer from ship to living quarters. Air I can breathe without a filter and sunlight on my face is a nice change. I'm not going to object, even if I hate the color of the sky.

Familiar or not, the snuffle-squirrel is a cute little thing. I sketch a quick series of studies, pencil on paper, like the pre-space naturalists. I'll re-create it all on my computer later, but getting a sense of motion with my own hand makes it easier for me to translate it into virtual space. I'm pretty good. I'm getting better. Give me a few more years and I'll be able to get work doing all sorts of graphic design, including the kind that people like my parents need, the kind that charts new worlds for humanity to claim.

Whatever kind of design I wind up doing, it won't be the kind that requires me to travel for years at a time. Once I get my butt Earth-side, it's staying there for at least a little while. I want to know what it's like to have a home, not just a residence.

The snuffle-squirrel is still eating, gulping down melon as fast as it can. It's so focused on what it's doing that it doesn't notice when the ground next to it trembles. I sit up straighter. This, too, is something familiar, but sometimes familiar can be wicked cool.

One moment the ground next to the snuffle-squirrel is smooth and unmoving; the next, it explodes into clumps of dirt and shredded roots as the lion-worm—a sightless, ground-dwelling predator that's sort of like a mole, if moles were made of knives and hatred and cilia—lunges forth and clamps its terrible maw over the snuffle-squirrel's upper body. The poor little herbivore doesn't even have time to squeak.

Exhausted by its lunge, the lion-worm allows the portion of its body protruding from the hole to slump into the dish of tasty treats. The cilia along its sides are bright gold, garishly bright against the muted browns and yellows and blues of the forest; they wave constantly, sampling the air, advising the lion-worm of potential danger. I hold very, very still. Lion-worms have been

known to attack humans when they feel like they can take us, and they don't have a sense of fear: they *always* think they can take us.

An adult lion-worm is about the size of an Earth pig, which is more than enough to give me nightmares about the things burrowing up through the floor of our residence. This is a baby, about the size of a cat and ten times as vicious. It could still take my foot off if it decided to attack the tree. Better not to risk it.

The lion-worm eventually recovers its strength and sucks the remainder of the snuffle-squirrel into its maw before retreating underground. It's young and weak enough—comparatively, anyway—that it's probably still hiding its kills rather than taking them back to the colony. The bigger lion-worms could get excited and shred it.

It's tough to be a predator sometimes.

With snuffle-squirrel blood all over my fruit and a big hole next to the platter, I should probably pack it in and head for home. Nothing else is likely to come sniffing around. Still, I hold my position and count slowly backward from twenty. Experience has taught me that patience is a virtue, and animals . . . they understand their own ecosystem. The creatures on Zagreus still don't know exactly what to make of humans. Sometimes they run from us, sometimes they attack us, but mostly, they avoid us. It's safer and easier for all concerned.

So I hold still, and I count, and as I hit three, I'm rewarded with a rustling sound from the bushes. I stop breathing and watch as a creature that looks sort of like a deer, and sort of like a Sirius XI glass beast, and sort of like a pile of rotting meat steps out of the brush. It doesn't have any sort of visible skin. How can something be walking around when it doesn't have *skin*?

It approaches the platter of treats, lowers its head, and begins delicately licking up the snuffle-squirrel blood with a long, forked tongue. I pull out my recorder and snap several quick pictures before starting the video.

This pretty little monstrosity is getting me and Vi one step closer to Earth.

It takes a long time, but eventually the meat-deer finishes lapping up the blood and trots off for richer, bloodier pastures. I slide down from the tree and retrieve the rest of my gear from the bush where I concealed it. I always pack more than I need. Tip one for wilderness survival: know exactly how much you can carry, and don't take a scrap more, but don't feel like you have to carry everything the whole time. Caching isn't just for snuffle-squirrels.

I'm feeling pretty good about today. The morning has been beautiful, despite the orange sky—that's never going to feel normal to me—and Kora isn't going to be here for hours. I have plenty of time to get ready. I grin to myself as I trot along the familiar path from the woods to the field behind our residence. Kora's never actually come to *visit* me before. Maybe this is the start of something . . . well, something beautiful.

Or maybe she's just one of those colony kids who likes to get a few kicks in with a transient girl, knowing she won't have to live with the consequences of breaking my heart. I've heard stories about a few girls like that, enough of them to leave me a little anxious and leave Vi fiercely, furiously defensive against anyone who thinks they're good enough for *her* twin but hasn't done anything to prove it.

The thought is enough to knock the smile off my face. It's not that I don't love my sister. I do. I love her more than every sun we've ever lived under, and since every sun is technically a

star—as she is grindingly, pedantically fond of reminding me—that means I love her more than all the stars in the sky. She’s my mirror, my echo, the other half of my heart. It’s just that she’s also . . .

She’s also *Viola*. Stubborn and sullen and way too willing to prioritize facts she’s read on a screen somewhere over things she’s experienced for herself. Things like “ninety-five percent of all teenage relationships end in heartbreak, you know,” and “colonists don’t form permanent bonds with the children of transient scientists,” and my personal favorite, “I may not have met her yet, but even I can tell that she is *way* out of your league.”

Sometimes my sister can be a massive brat is what I’m saying here.

The wide stretch of flat, empty plain between the edge of the forest and our residence—which we constructed well outside the bounds of the official colony settlement, according to their by-laws, which are weird and restrictive and verge on what Vi primly refers to as a “cult mentality”—is covered in an array of brightly colored grasses. Each color stops growing at a different height, and while they look like they should belong to half a dozen different species, they’re all part of the same vast, conjoined vegetable colony.

The green ones are sharp. As in flesh-ripping, blood-drawing sharp. Which makes sense, since they’re short enough to be hidden by the purple ones, which are super-absorbent and capable of sucking up any liquid they come into contact with. Mom says the grasses aren’t technically carnivorous, just very, very opportunistic, but if you ask me, any plant that wants to drink my blood is *plenty* carnivorous.

I step around the danger spots, keeping an eye on the ground

as I head for the residence. Lion-worms like to hunt in the grass, letting the grass's natural dangers herd smaller creatures into supposedly safe areas and then striking from below. I can see the furrows where they've attacked before. I'm big enough, and they're confused enough by bipedal locomotion, that I should be safe . . . for now. Dad says they're learning, and what they're learning is that humans can be delicious. The colonists may find themselves with an extermination assignment on their hands sooner than they expect.

He should know. My father is Dr. John Shipp, the second-best behavioral xenobiologist in the known universe. If he can't predict what an alien life-form is going to do, he turns to the best behavioral xenobiologist in the business . . . who just happens to be my mother, Dr. Katherine Shipp. Between the two of them, they have more degrees in more fields of horrifying alien biology than I would ever have believed possible.

Fat lot of good it does Viola and me. Our parents are independent contractors, meaning they went through all courses necessary to land themselves steady, good-paying jobs with one of the megacorps—Mom even did a tour with the colonial marines, since they have access to restricted worlds with horrifying wildlife she wanted to poke; she's a terrifyingly good shot, which isn't helping our dating prospects—and then after all that, they decided choosing their own jobs was more important than, you know, *stability*.

You'd think people who had two kids the first time they tried would be more interested in going where the money is, but not our parents. They want to go where the *science* is, and where the *science* is, well. Apparently, that's middle-of-nowhere colony worlds, ones where the local wildlife has yet to be cataloged,

analyzed, and neatly filed away. We've lived on fifteen different colony worlds since Viola and I were born, and sometimes I feel like our parents would be happier with twice that number. They want to see the cosmos, and we don't get much choice about whether or not we come along.

I step out of the grass and into the perimeter of our residence. The colony we're currently working for is all about reuse and recycling and "minimizing humanity's impact on the galaxy." Pretty words. Not so pretty when the lion-worms are erupting out of the ground and dragging the family cat off to their nest. Our parents burned everything within ten yards of our residence the day we unpacked it, following the burn with the application of quick-setting plast-steel. The stuff hardens in the presence of oxygen, becoming strong enough to be used for repairs that need to hold up to open vacuum, and it dissolves when exposed to certain biodegradable compounds. When we leave, the planet will recover, and by the end of the first growing season, there won't be any sign that we were ever here.

Sometimes it gets to me, living the way we do, skipping across the galaxy, never leaving anything behind. Not even footprints. We're like ghosts, haunting every world we come across.

No one's going to mourn us when we're gone.

# 2

## VIOLA

FIVE FEET PAST THE PERIMETER, OUR electric fence hums and crackles to itself, prepared to keep anything that wants to cause us trouble at a safe distance. I raise my wrist, letting its sensors pick up the signal from my ID bracelet. There's a click. The fence deactivates, and two of the panels swing inward, letting me through.

Visitors have to come through the gate, and have to enter an actual, manual access code, which Dad changes weekly. I've never been able to understand why he puts so much weight on security, since it's not like we're a target. We're the biologists. Without us, the colony is harder to sustain. If we're ever going to be attacked, it's going to happen when we're on our way out the door, not while we're doing the job we were hired for.

The residence is the standard model, low, squat, and sturdy, with solar panels on the roof and deceptively large windows that are almost always sealed, in case the local pollen aggravates Vi's

allergies. Sometimes her body forgets how to breathe. On those nights I feel like I have to breathe for both of us, sucking air in and pushing it out, willing her lungs to remember a time when we did everything together, when there were no differences between us. If I can live, so can she. She just has to remember how.

The rover is gone. Mom and Dad are in the field, or maybe they've gone to the settlement to give another environmental impact report to the planetary governor. Either way, Viola's alone in there, and I have no idea how long she's been that way. I pick up my steps, keying in the lock code almost without breaking stride. The door opens, and I step into the front room, which has been basically the same for as long as I can remember. Couch; coffee table; vidscreen; shelves of interesting biological samples and fossils collected from a dozen colony worlds; family photos on the walls. It even smells the way it always does, a complex mixture of preservatives and Earth spices that I swear Mom mixes in her lab and aerosolizes while we're all sleeping.

When I was little, I thought we carried the front room with us from world to world. Now I realize that our parents reconstruct it each time we land, getting things positioned *just so* before they even bother with our bedrooms. This is where we're a family together, the public space that bonds and binds us. This is home.

Speaking of . . . "Viola! I'm home!"

"Lies! Foul lies and pretense!"

I groan theatrically as I walk toward our shared bedroom. "Are you watching vids for drama or what?"

"Got bored, read some poetry," she calls back. "Shakespeare will never die."

"Witness our names," I agree, and poke my head into her room. "Hi."

“Hi,” says my twin, offering me a wan smile. She’s curled on her bed with a vidscreen against her knees and a heart monitor hooked around her elbow like a misguided fashion statement. She’s beautiful. “See anything interesting today?”

“I dunno. I’m seeing you right now.”

She sticks her tongue out at me.

We were born identical. We still look almost exactly alike, even accounting for all the little differences our lives have sculpted into us. We’re both pale, like Dad, although Viola’s paler: she never goes outside. We have the same white-blond hair. Mom says we don’t appreciate it enough, usually while patting her own messy brown mop and looking sort of inappropriately jealous. I mean, she made us. She should be delighted by her work, not annoyed that we got a better draw on the DNA than she did.

Only Mom has brown hair and brown eyes and Dad has reddish-blond hair and blue eyes, and they should have had comfortably brown-haired children, brown-eyed and healthy. Instead, they got Viola and me. Everything about us is washed-out, from our hair down to our eyes, which look like someone was playing with graphic filters over standard blue and forgot to set us back to full opacity before saving their work. Sometimes I wonder if us being so pale is somehow related to the genetic condition that’s been eating Viola alive since we were born. Maybe it’s not jealousy that makes Mom say our hair will eventually change colors. Maybe it’s regret.

These days, no one mistakes us for one another, not even when we trade clothes and pretend to be interchangeable. Vi is slimmer than me on every axis, a fairy tale girl locked in a tower that moves from colony to colony without ever opening its doors and letting her go. Neither of us tans—I burn fast and bad, enough

so that fears of cancer have kept me covered in sunscreen since I was a toddler—but I’ve still managed to pick up a scattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose. Vi used to count them every day. These days, she pretends they aren’t there. They’re one more difference between us, one more piece of permanent proof that twinhood isn’t forever.

She’s going to keep getting sicker and I’m going to keep getting older, until one day I turn around and she’s not there anymore. Just a bunch of holos and the vague memory that I was supposed to have a sister.

I walk across the room to her window, which she’s propped open to let the morning air in. I prop my elbows on the windowsill, put my chin in my hands, and sigh. Viola doesn’t react. Subprime. I sigh again, heavier this time, really putting my back into it. It’s surprisingly satisfying, and I inhale, preparing to keep going.

A pillow hits me on the side of the head. I turn. Viola is glaring at me, her lower lip pushed out in the beginning of a pout, another pillow in her hand.

“*Don’t* make me throw this,” she says. “I’m weak, remember? Mom will be mad.”

I laugh. “If you’re weak, most people are already dead.”

“Maybe they are. Maybe we’re the last people alive in the universe, and all these colony worlds have been our parents trying to refine their holotech to make us feel like we’re less alone. It would sure explain all the stupid, wouldn’t it?”

I wrinkle my nose. “And then some.”

Living a transient life, hopping between colonies, is a great way to remember that no matter how much humanity changes and grows, it’s always going to be human, and it’s always going

to be sort of awful. Technically colonies are still subject to Earth laws, but in functionality, they get to make their own choices and do their own thing, and most of the time, what they choose to do is pretty irritating.

One world didn't let kids talk in the presence of their elders. Another world insisted everyone work if they wanted to be allowed to stay within the established safe zone—and that included the elderly, the disabled, and children who should have been considered too young to do anything but go to school and make weird construction paper art. Our parents had been locked into that contract, and Vi and I had spent six months officially working for them, labeling samples and feeding their lab specimens. Not fun.

Viola waves a hand languidly until she pulls me back from my temporary contemplation. “Earth to Olivia, Earth to Olivia, come in, Olivia. Or maybe that should be ‘Zagreus to Olivia,’ huh?”

“Shut up.” I throw the pillow back at her. She laughs.

“Oh, you’ve got it *bad* for this colony girl,” she says. “Does she have any idea how firmly you’re already wrapped around her little finger?”

“Shut up.”

“She doesn’t!” Vi manages to sound delighted and conspiratorial at the same time. It’s a nice trick. “How much will you give me if I don’t tell her?”

“I won’t suffocate you in your sleep, how’s that?” I walk over and plop down on the edge of the bed.

Viola snorts. “As if. You’d miss me too much if I were gone.”

“Technically true, I guess.” I watch as she tucks the pillow behind her back, makes an unhappy noise, and squirms around

until she finds a position that doesn't hurt. Her condition means our room is set up to keep her as comfortable as possible, something I think she resents more than I do. Everything about it—the firmness of our mattresses, the material of the pillows, *everything*—reminds her that she's sick, and more, that there's no gene therapy, no real treatment, just trying to stay comfortable.

It sucks. We left the colony before this one because she had an honestly frightening allergic reaction to one of the local plants. Our folks cut their contract half-finished and got us off-world before Viola could stop breathing. Not good.

We both sort of hoped they'd take us back to Earth after that. We have grandparents there that we've never met, cousins who could show us all the sights—the good stuff, not the tourist trash—and doctors who could maybe do more for Vi than these colony quacks. Instead, we're here. Zagreus. The middle of nowhere's middle of nowhere.

Lucky us.

Viola stops squirming, reaches over, and touches my hand. “What are you and Kora going to do?” she asks, pulling me neatly out of my own head. That's the best thing about having a twin. Even when we're fighting—and we fight a *lot*, it's my second-favorite thing to do, after drawing—she always knows when I need her to distract me from myself. I know the same things about her, even if she doesn't need the save as often as I do. We don't have any secrets from each other. Not one.

“Mom said I could check the traps around the main lion-worm nest this afternoon,” I say. “I asked Kora if she wanted to come with me. She's probably going to live here for the rest of her life, and she's never seen most of the local flora and fauna. She thinks it'll be really educational.”

Viola's expression turns smug and knowing. "Educational, huh? Wow. So that's how you got her to notice that you're alive? By offering her something that can make you dead?"

My ears burn red. I cover them with my hair and glower at my sister, who laughs.

"It's okay! It's okay. It's really cute, actually." She sobers, laughter fading. "I'm glad you found somebody you like enough to go poking horrifying predatory things with, that's all."

"She's nice," I mumble.

"Wow. That's all you can say about her? 'She's nice'? Because you've been talking like she's a brand-new skyscraper with all the bells and whistles and also a built-in carbon-power laser that can cut through diamond."

I elbow her. "Stop."

Vi laughs, starting to say something—and catches herself, looking at me carefully. "You really like this girl, don't you?"

I nod, silent.

"Well, then, I'm excited to meet her. I'm sure she's amazing, if you like her this much." She gives me a sudden, unexpectedly hard shove. "But now you need to go shower and change your clothes. You look like a farmhand. Everyone knows city girls don't go for agricultural workers."

"Brat," I say, and get out of the bed.

"You know it." Viola grins. She's still grinning when I walk out of the room.

I have the best sister in the galaxy. Sorry for all those other sisters out there, but it's just simple science.

# 3

## K O R A

EVERY COLONY WORLD I'VE EVER been on has come with its own resource problems. One world, they couldn't get any crops to grow, and they were far enough off the main shipping channels that they only got restocked every four local months, meaning there was constant food rationing, and even more constant threat of robbery by the neighbors if they thought you had a half can more of beans than you were supposed to. Not fun. Another world, two-thirds of the colonists were allergic to some local tree—not anaphylaxis-level allergies, just sneezing and misery—so it was antihistamines on the constantly rationed table.

Zagreus is weird about metal and water. The whole colony is made from salvaged and recycled goods. Nothing goes to waste, nothing gets thrown away, and they expand only at the rate that they can acquire raw materials from off-world. Even using a native stick to prop a window open would be anathema to the lovely

people of Zagreus, who think it's time for humanity to start giving back to the galaxy.

When Dad handed me the colony charter, I was initially afraid—okay, terrified—that the colonists were going to take their “nothing local, no exploitation of the planet” ideals to the worst possible extreme and make us abide by the local rules about water rationing. I've done water rationing. I *hate* water rationing. Humanity has come up with a lot of amazing stuff, but as far as I'm concerned, all of it was in service to the birth of indoor plumbing.

Fortunately, Dad's a solid negotiator, and managed to get us an exemption from the standard colony restrictions. Not that I'd have paid attention to them anyway. There's nothing like a good hot shower. Zagreus has a high water table and we have a medical-grade water filtration system. One of the few true perks of living in a pre-fab residence is the ability to shower for as long as I want to without worrying about either the tanks or the heat running out. I shampoo twice, condition once, scrub, exfoliate, and am starting to consider the virtues of shaving my legs when the residence proximity alert gives one soft, polite chime. Something larger than a snuffle-squirrel is approaching the boundary.

Tapping the key tile on the shower wall brings up a waterproof vidscreen permanently trained on the yard. The residence security system isn't what it could be—what Mom wishes it actually *were*—but Dad upgrades it every chance he gets, and the image of the girl walking toward our front door is painfully crystalline clear.

Kora is taller than I am. Not hard, given my anatomy, but enough that when I talk to her I have to tilt my head back, ever so slightly, and gaze up at her like I'm an astronomer looking at the moon. Her skin is a rich, warm brown, gifted by genetics

and enhanced by regular exposure to Zagreus's twin suns, which move through the sky in a delicate ballet that keeps inspiring local theater groups to choreograph long, boring interpretive dances of what they assume the native creation myths would have been, if there had been anyone here to dream them up.

Her hands are long and slim and her face is perfect, big eyes and soft lips and a chin that comes to a delicate point, so she always looks like she's just heard the cleverest joke ever and is willing to repeat it for you, but only if you feel like being a little bit naughty. She's . . . she's *perfect*. All the geneticists in all the world could work for a thousand years and never build anything as effortlessly flawless as Kora Burton, the love of my life.

I don't care what Viola says about the statistics for teenage love affairs. I don't care if she wants to call this "puppy love" and laugh at my fumbling attempts at convincing Kora I would be the best girlfriend in the known universe. Kora is beautiful and smart and better than I deserve and—

And she's about to ring our buzzer and I'm naked in the shower with suds in my hair.

"Crap!" I grab the nozzle, directing it at my head, ignoring the fact that it means blasting myself in the face with water. Whatever it takes to get myself rinsed off as fast as possible. "Crap, crap, *crap!*"

All right. I've already done all the things that *need* to be done. I slap wildly at the wall until I shut off the water and the vid-screen almost at the same time, then tumble out of the shower and onto the bathroom floor with an almighty *crash*, winding up tangled in my discarded clothes, the bathmat, and my towel, all at the same time.

I'm swearing steadily as I bounce back to my feet, grab my

clean clothes from the rack by the sink, and start jerking them on. Putting socks on wet feet is punishment for anything I may have done wrong in the last year.

The residence proximity alert chimes twice. To make sure I don't miss the relevance of that sound, the buzzer rings a split second later, a loud, piercing sound that punctures every inch of the residence. I wince.

"Olivia?" Viola may be sick, but she can yell when she needs to. Yelling is probably her greatest talent. "You want me to get that?"

"I've got it!" Crap. Crap *crap* *crap* *crap*.

The buzzer doesn't ring again. I pull my shirt on and race, still dripping, hair wet enough that it's plastered to the sides of my head in a solid, sodden sheet, to get to the door before Kora decides I've changed my mind and don't want her here. *Please don't let her leave*, I think frantically. *Please don't let her be mad*.

I wrench the door open, panting, and she's still there. The world is beautiful, the world is perfect, and *she's still there*. On the spot, I decide Zagreus has an orange sky because it matches her curls, which are a thousand shades of brown and a few scattered shades of gold and red. She's like every tiny fragment of an Earth autumn, wrapped in the skin of a single girl and dropped here on this distant colony world so people won't ever forget that we came from someplace beautiful.

She's also smirking at me.

"Your shirt's on backward," she says. "Am I early?"

"What? No. No!" I touch the front of my shirt, which is definitely riding too high. Dammit. So much for being suave. "I was running late. I saw this deer-thing in the woods, and it was cool, and I lost track of time, and anyway, you're here. I'll just . . . go

change my shirt . . . and then we can get going. I'm sure you're eager to see everything, and—”

“Actually, I was sort of hoping I could meet this mysterious sister you've talked about.” Kora's smile is wide, sincere, and heartbreakingly lovely. How can anyone tell her “no”? Ever? Her life must be one long succession of “yes,” and that's fine. That's exactly the way this ought to work.

Then reality crashes down on me, and brings my thoughts to a stuttering halt. “You want to meet Viola? Really?”

“Of course,” says Kora. “All the kids at school are curious about her, and about where you live, I mean—wow!” She spreads her arms. “Look at all this *space!*”

It sounds weird when she puts it like that. The colonists on Zagreus have a whole planet at their disposal. Four continents, a bunch of island clusters, some pretty sweet oceans. They could have their choice of climate zones, most of them reasonably Earth-like, even if the ice caps do have a nasty tendency to start raining sulfur. I'm not sure how that happens, and honestly, I don't really want to know. Planetary geography is creepy when you look at it too hard.

All that space, and what do they do? They cram themselves into a single main settlement, whole families sharing residences barely bigger than the room I share with Viola. It's all part of their “salvage and recycle” mentality, like they can only have more space once they've managed to beg, borrow, or steal the raw materials from off-planet. They never run. They never spin in big circles with their arms out, remembering that the whole *point* of colonization is choosing worlds where they'll have the space to do anything they want, not bound by the population constraints on Earth. As far as I know, apart from two small seasteads and one mining operation in the high mountains, the entire human

population of Zagreus is in the main colony settlement. One good disaster and they're done.

People who live like we do, surrounded by nature, with room to breathe . . . we must be a novelty.

I don't want to be a novelty. I want to be a girl, showing another girl beautiful things so she'll think of me when she thinks of them. So she'll think of me as something beautiful. And I love my sister, but we have the same face, and right now, I don't want there to be any confusion when Kora thinks of that face. I want to know that she's thinking of me, and only me, and not Viola at all.

"She's, uh, sleeping," I say, and smile, hoping it looks real, and not like me making excuses for my own neurosis. "But my folks said we could have a party the next time they go on a research run, so you'll be able to meet her then."

"A party?" Kora perks right up. "Here?"

"Yes." No. "We can have a great time, and there's so much space, it'll be the best party of the year." I am so dead. I am officially a corpse with delusions of animation. I can't throw a *party*. My parents will never allow it. They'll skin and pin me for even suggesting it. And I can't *not* throw a party, not with Kora looking at me all bright-eyed and excited, like I'm the coolest girl she's ever met.

Maybe I *am* the coolest girl she's ever met. I have the residence with space for a party, right? I try to look cool, and like I'm not secretly dying inside. "You're totally invited, of course."

"Uh, I should hope so. Oh, wow, this is going to be so good! I'll make sure everyone in our class hears."

Subprime. Either she's not as interested in me as I am in her, or there's stuff about colony flirting that I do *not* understand. I keep my smile in place as I say, "Let me grab my shoes and my field kit, and we're good to go."

Kora blinks those big brown eyes, and I want to do whatever she wants me to do. I am putty in her hands. “I don’t even get to come inside?”

I want to do whatever she wants me to do *except* let her into the house, where Viola will absolutely want to talk to her, and she will absolutely find out that I’m a liar, and I’ll have to try to explain what I can’t even fully articulate to myself. “Not when Vi’s asleep,” I say, with my best regretful look. “Dad’s rule. If I break it . . .”

“No party,” she concludes, just like I’d hoped she would. Maybe I’m better at this lying thing than I thought I was.

“I’ll be right back,” I promise, and duck inside, racing for my room. Need a jacket, need shoes, need my field kit, need—

“Aren’t you going to invite Kora in?”

Need to smother my sister with a pillow. I freeze in the doorway, giving Viola an apologetic look. “I don’t . . . want . . . to?” I try.

Viola rolls her eyes. “She’s going to have to meet me eventually. Being ashamed of me won’t make me disappear, or make your room available for heavy petting when our parents aren’t looking.”

I want to be scandalized, but I’ve already been trying to figure out whether Kora would be cool with living out an old children’s song—Olive and Kora, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G—and so I just roll my eyes and head for my dresser. “I’m not *ashamed* of you. I just want her to get attached to me as the cool, suave Shipp sister before she gets her pick of twins.”

“I don’t like girls. I’m not going to steal your protogirlfriend.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t decide she likes you better. Maybe you’d be the mysterious twin that doesn’t want her back,

and that'll make all the difference." I sit on the edge of my bed to adjust my socks, trying not to grimace at the way they stick to my damp toes. Mom would yell at me for not taking the time to dry off before dressing. Chafing is a danger in the field. Sorry, Mom. Slowing down is a danger in the field of love.

"If she really likes you, she won't even notice me, and if she doesn't really like you, it's better for us to find out now." Viola looks at me anxiously. "I don't want you to get hurt."

I pull on my boots. They seal themselves around my feet, becoming snug and tight enough to keep any of the nastier local insects from working their way inside. They're not true insects, of course, not in the Earth sense, but humans like to put things into terms we can understand. So we call little skittering things "bugs," and we call soft furry things "bunnies," and we work our way across the galaxy in a river of increasing inaccuracy.

Everything we find gets a scientific name, of course, and colonists usually give things "local names," things that everyone who grows up on that specific world will use to describe the creatures they share it with, but for most of the galaxy, it's bugs, all the way. And there are so many bugs. Almost every world that has life has bugs, something chitinous and quick and impossible to eradicate. It's enough to give a squishy mammalian girl a complex.

"I want to get hurt, Vi," I say, trying—and failing—to keep my voice light, carefree. See? I am Olivia Shipp, adventurer, and I am cool with a little pain. "I want to be in love, and the one thing everyone says is that being in love means getting hurt. So let me get hurt, okay? Let me see what it's like to fall and hope that someone's going to be at the bottom to catch me."

She scowls, disapproval obvious. "*Please* be careful."

"Can't be careful when you're falling." I blow her a kiss and

I'm gone, heading back to the front door with long, loping steps, my kit slung over my shoulder and my hair still dripping. My whole scalp itches from the tacky wetness. I don't care, because when I open the door, there's Kora, waiting patiently.

Okay, not patiently. She's tapping her foot, and I'd have to be terminally distracted to miss the irritated glint in her eye as she asks, "No more last-minute errands? You didn't forget your lucky rock?"

"Hey, everybody needs a lucky rock," I object, stepping outside and closing the door behind me. It locks, audibly. Viola will be safe as long as she stays in bed and doesn't try to push herself. "What else am I going to throw if we get attacked out there? My boots? No, thanks."

For the first time, Kora looks unsure of herself. "You don't really think we're going to get attacked, do you?"

If I weren't so infatuated with her, I'd be annoyed. Colony kids come in two flavors: hard as nails and so soft it's almost offensive. Kora is the second sort. All the kids here on Zagreus are the second sort. Some of them play at being tough, but none of them step foot outside the colony walls when they don't have to; they look at the stars and shake their fists and curse the corps, and they act like that makes them tough. I hate that about most of them.

I don't hate it about Kora. She's soft and she's sweet and I can protect her, I can teach her what it's like to have someone who loves you, someone who's willing to fight for you. I can fight for her. I can do such a good job of fighting for her. I can.

"No, we're not going to get attacked," I assure her, easily. This is my place. Not for long, maybe—we could be on our way to a new assignment tomorrow—but for right now, this is *mine*. No one's getting hurt on my watch, especially not this pretty, pretty

girl with her soft, soft hair. “I’m taking you to see the sights, not to suffer.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she says.

“Please do.” I start around the residence to the pop-up garage in the rear. It’s a luxury to have a private vehicle, especially on a colony world this new: most vehicles get seized by the planetary government as soon as their erstwhile owners touch down, added to the communal fleet that moves people and supplies around the planet. My parents have a clause in their contracts that forbids the seizure of our family’s all-terrain vehicle, because we have to live so far outside the main settlement to observe the native animals behaving normally, and we need to be able to get Viola to the hospital at a moment’s notice. We can’t wait for the loaner fleet to dispatch an available vehicle to our location, not when my sister’s life is potentially on the line.

It’s funny, though. That’s the reason my folks always give for holding on to the ATV, and Vi’s medical history supports it, but I can’t remember the last time we had to rush her to the hospital. She’s not variable, emergency intervention sick. She’s just . . . sick. All the time. Sick but stable.

Kora’s gasp when I turn on the garage light to reveal the ATV is gratifying. I puff my chest out as I take the keys down from their hook. “I’ve been driving since I was eleven,” I say, supposedly to reassure but really to brag. Who wouldn’t, in my position? “I’m pretty good at it. You’ll be totally safe with me.”

“Wow,” she breathes. “This is *cherry*.”

It’s not, it’s really, really not, it’s banged and dented and there’s a scrape in the paint that Dad has insisted be left through three rehabs as an object lesson in what happens when I take the ATV out without permission. Which I am technically doing right

now. Because I am too cool to ask permission, and also because I'm pretty sure my parents would have said no.

"Yeah, she's a beauty," I say, and cringe, because that was *not* cool. Kora's never going to think I'm anything other than sub-prime if I keep breaking out lines like that.

She doesn't seem to have noticed, thankfully. She's running a hand across the fender of our ATV, and I wish she'd caress me like that, that she'd look at me with that much adoration in her eyes. Maybe I didn't need to worry about introducing her to Viola. Maybe it was the ATV I needed to be afraid of all along.

That's stupid. *I'm* stupid. People have been falling in love and figuring out how to deal with it since the dawn of time, or else there wouldn't be people anymore. I can do this. "Come on, get in," I say. "I'm going to show you something gorgeous."

She grins at me, and her teeth are so white against her skin, and there's nothing on this planet as gorgeous as she is.

# 4

## FIELDS OF FLOWERS

KORA MAY BE THE BEST THING Zagreus has to offer, but she's not the only natural wonder of the world. The trail my parents have painstakingly cut through the woods opens onto a field of impossible flowers, their petals as long as my hand and colored in a thousand iridescent shades of rainbow shine. I can't say what color they are, because they're *all* the colors, blue from one direction, red from another, yellow and pink and orange and everything. They catch and refract the light, scattering it like prisms.

The flowers grow on towering stems that stretch taller than the neighboring trees. The colonists are going to be arguing for decades about whether these are bushes or trees or individual flowers. As if the nomenclature matters. They're beautiful. That's the only thing that's important. They're so, so beautiful. I hear Kora's small, half-swallowed gasp and know, without question, that this was the right decision.

“Are these real?” Kora demands. “These can’t be real. They just . . . can’t.”

“They’re real,” I say. “If you ask my father, he’ll say that they’re technically not flowers, they’re fruiting bodies, and they’re closer to being a very large, very complicated fungus than they are to being true vegetable matter. And then he’ll tell you a lot of things you don’t need to know about the way humans categorize alien biologics, and why we need to rethink the entire taxonomy of life. Better to stick with me, and the easy answers.”

“Which are?” Kora sounds amused. That’s good. That’s better than I was hoping for.

“They’re real.”

She laughs, and the sound is even more beautiful than the flowers around us, even more beautiful than the rest of her. I think I’d give just about anything to make her laugh like that again.

“Wow, okay.” She wipes tears from the corner of one eye. “Okay. What else have you got?”

I grin. I can’t help myself. “Hold on.”

The giant flowers furl and unfurl as we pass beneath them, sending little puffs of pollen into the air. It’s virtually non-allergenic, even for off-world species like humans; more interestingly, it’s virtually sterile. It cancels out scents on contact. An Earth dog would get totally lost in this little flower bed, unable to sniff its own trail. We’re still trying to figure out what evolutionary advantage comes with being the opposite of perfume. Clearly there has to be *something*, because these not-really-flowers are thriving. We’ve found them all over the planet, growing in climates from arid, rocky mountainsides to the humid rainforest riverbanks.

They feed the planet’s more mobile creatures, which come

to snack on the sweet fruits that form in clusters around the base of the flowers. They provide shelter for small animals, and good hunting grounds for the large ones. Something about these flowers *works*, and once we figure out what it is, the rest of the ecology of Zagreus will snap into focus.

And then, as always, it will be time for us to leave. I steal a glimpse at Kora, who stares, wide-eyed with wonder, at the flowers all around us. It doesn't matter if she breaks my heart. It's not like I'm going to be here long enough for either one of us to learn to live with the consequences.

The stalks grow thicker, their burdens of purplish-red fruit growing heavier and more frequent. The flowers increase in size at the same rate, like they're trying to maintain a steady ratio. The sprays of pollen become more frequent, too, washing over us in a glittering film.

"Wow," breathes Kora. "Mom was talking about a big score this morning at breakfast, but this is so much *better* than any junker she has in orbit."

I don't want to pry. I don't want to bring Kora's mother into this. I want the moment to last forever. "It's harder to get to orbit, that's for sure," I say, as noncommittally as I can.

"Anyway, Michel was wrong. This is amazing." Kora is laughing as she turns to face me, laughing as she breaks my heart. Not completely: I think it can be mended. But enough.

I stop the ATV. The motion is enough to cause the nearby flowers to shower us in pollen, wiping away any traces of scent that a local predator might follow. Kora blinks, slowly realizing that she's said something to upset me.

"Olivia?" she asks. "What's wrong?"

"Michel," I say. "The kid in our science class? The one who

calls me ‘freaky girl’ and talks about how weird Vi must be if our parents let her stay home when they’re willing to let me out of the house? The one who pushed me off the school porch last week?”

Kora’s cheeks flush red. She’s embarrassed. I’m startled to realize that I’m glad. If she’s saying what I think she’s saying, she *should* be embarrassed.

“I’ve known him since we were kids,” she says. “Our parents were on the colony design committee together.”

And now Kora’s father is gone, off to a colony with less repressive rules for resource allocation, and her mother is the closest thing Zagreus has to a planetary governor, leaving her with little time to keep tabs on her only daughter. I’ve always envied Kora her freedom, the way no one keeps tabs on her inside the colony. Now I’m starting to wonder whether that same freedom turned her cruel.

“He knew you were coming here today.” It isn’t a question.

Cheeks growing even redder, Kora nods.

“Does he know *why* you were coming here today?”

She doesn’t answer.

“I’m perfectly comfortable walking back to the residence. I’ve done it before.” Not usually from this far, but there’s a first time for everything. “Do you want to tell me the truth, or do you want to walk?”

“What? No!” For the first time, she looks more alarmed than embarrassed. “We can’t walk from—”

I pull the keys out of the ignition, bounce them twice in my hand, and lob them into the fruiting stalks in front of us. They land with a clatter and a jingle, vanishing into underbrush. Kora sucks in her breath, the sound sharp and horrified. She didn’t think I’d do it. *I* didn’t think I’d do it. I’m going to be on my hands and knees for, like, an hour before we can get out of here.

Good. I mean, not good, but also good, because she shouldn't have done that. She should have come here because she wanted to, not because . . . because . . .

"Was this a dare?" I ask. "A bet? Did he say that you couldn't stand one afternoon with those freaky off-world kids?" Another idea strikes me. My eyes narrow. "Was that why you wanted to see Viola?"

"He said she didn't exist," Kora blurts.

I stare at her, horrified. "What?" I finally manage to whisper.

"He said . . . he saw the manifest for your transport. He says it only listed three people: Katherine Shipp, John Shipp, and Olivia Shipp. No Viola. And he said that since you were, you know." Her blush is so deep it makes her look bruised. "Since you were sort of into me, he said I could probably get you to invite me over. So I could see whether you really had a sister."

"She comms in for class," I say. This isn't happening. This can't be happening. Kora didn't come out here on a bet, she came out here because she *likes* me, and . . .

And . . .

And I'm not that good at lying to myself. I never have been.

Kora shakes her head. "She comms in, but she looks just like you. It could be a trick. I don't know why you'd be pretending to be your own twin sister, but Michel says your family gets an extra water ration. He thought maybe you were defrauding the colony for extra resources."

The day is warm, but I suddenly feel very cold. I lean back until I'm looking at that awful orange sky, and say, "If he had access to our contract, not just our passage manifests, he'd know that we don't *have* a water ration. We have permission to set up outside the colony grid and filter what we need from the local

water table. The colonial government doesn't like it, since they have this weird thing about making as little impact on the planet as possible—”

“It's not a *weird thing*, it's *responsible custodianship*, and—”

I ignore her. I'm angry, I'm so angry, and this isn't fair, this isn't how the day was supposed to go. I was supposed to show her beautiful things, and then she was supposed to just fall into my arms like they do in the movies. She was supposed to love me. “—but we're recycling almost as much water as we take out, and since we're here to study the wildlife, we *can't* be on the grid. We're not defrauding anyone for anything. My sister is real, and my family has a job to do, and this is awful.”

Viola was afraid Kora would break my heart. I don't think any of us understood how good she'd be at doing it.

Kora's eyes fill with tears. Part of me wants to comfort her. I've been watching her and wishing I could touch her, hold her, let her hold me, a lot longer than I've been angry with her. But most of me is just furious, and maybe kind of sad. This isn't how I wanted my first crush to go.

“I'm sorry, Olivia,” she says. “I shouldn't have said ‘yes’ when he asked if I'd do it, but I was . . . I wanted an excuse to come see you, and . . .”

“Wait.” I blink. “You wanted an excuse to come see me?”

She nods, curls bobbing like they're in agreement, like they have a life of their own. I want to touch them so badly. I keep my hands where they are.

“You kept asking, but we're so far outside the boundary, and my mother *hates* it when I ask about going outside the boundary, I didn't—I didn't want to fight with her, you know? I didn't want to make her mad. But then Michel made it sort of a dare, and it

was enough to make me go ahead and ask.” She snuffles. “I didn’t think she’d say yes. And you kept asking, and she’d said yes, and so I went ahead and said okay, and I’m sorry, honestly I am. I didn’t mean for things to go this far.”

“Sure you didn’t.” I shouldn’t have thrown the keys away. That was stupid. I should have driven away and left her here, let her understand what it feels like to have someone you trust let you down. Maybe she wouldn’t be so quick to be a jerk if she understood the consequences.

I could never have done it. I know myself. When you care about someone, you don’t leave them behind.

“I *didn’t!*” She sounds sincere. But how much of that is real and how much of that is wishful thinking? She looks at me, a single tear escaping and running down the slope of her perfect cheek. “I don’t . . . you’re smart, and you’re pretty, and you know things about other worlds, you’re like this perfect idea of what a teenager is supposed to be, and—”

“Wait. You think I’m pretty?”

Kora nods slowly.

I smile. I can’t help it. “So you’d have come out here with me even if Michel hadn’t dared you to?”

“I was too nervous.”

“Are you still nervous?”

She licks her lips. “Yeah. But not about the same things.”

She starts to lean toward me, *Kora starts to lean toward me*, and all I can think is how I’m going to be kissed, I’m going to have my first kiss and it’s going to be with the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, and I’m leaning toward her, and this is perfect this is perfect this is—

Something bursts from the ground in front of us, sending the

ATV shaking and knocking Kora out of her seat. She falls hard, shouting when she lands. I stand, ready to jump out and help her, and that's when I see it.

The lion-worm—the *adult* lion-worm—that caused the impact is only a foot from her leg, drawing back to strike.