



# **DRAGON PLANET**

**by Dan Wells**

# Chapter One

## THE WINDOW

SOME WINDOWS ARE boring—most windows, maybe. The window Zero Huang was staring through was not one of them. In Zero's opinion, it might be the single most fascinating window in the entire galaxy.

It was a window that looked down on a whole new planet.

"I never get tired of looking at this," said Nyx.

"Me neither," said Zero.

The planet was called Kaguya, and it was the third planet in the Murasaki solar system. More importantly, it was the first planet outside of Earth's solar system that humanity had ever visited. The window that looked down on it was in the pilot's office of the Pathfinder spaceship—a massive colony ship filled with twenty thousand people and all the gear they needed to build a new civilization on a brand-new world. Murasaki was twenty light-years from Earth; the journey had taken them one hundred and five years, and the colonists had spent the whole time sleeping. Most of them, in fact, were still asleep.

Zero was awake early because of an adventure: space pirates had attacked the ship just before it left Earth's solar system, and because of a malfunction he'd been the only one awake to stop them. One of the pirates, a girl named Nyx, decided to stay with the colonists, and the two of them had shared the last functional sleeping pod in the pilot's office. When they'd finally arrived at Kaguya, the ship had woken up Governor Hatendi first and explained the whole story, and then Hatendi had woken up Zero's whole family and explained the story to them. The Governor was grateful, and Zero's parents were proud, but his brothers, Yan and Park, still didn't believe it.

"I don't get it," said Yan. "Who's Nyx?"

"She's my friend," said Zero.

"I'm a pirate," said Nyx. She had bright pink hair that floated around her head in the ship's lack of gravity. "So don't mess with me."



"She was a pirate," said Zero's mom. "Now she's our friend."

"But, like ..." Yan squinted at her. "You hijacked the ship, right? Like, you're literally a criminal?"

"My family hijacked the ship," said Nyx. "I stopped them."

"We both stopped them," said Zero quickly.

"Shut up, Zero," said Yan.

"Don't say shut up," said their father, Yaozu Huang, floating in the back of the room. He was deep in conversation with Governor Hatendi, and didn't even look at them when he spoke.

Zero's father was one of the colony's main engineers, getting ready to build the new city on Kaguya. About a thousand of the colonists were awake by now, all engineers and construction experts and their families—checking the cargo, studying the plans, and prepping the barges for the trip to the surface.

"How did you even hear me?" asked Yan. Mr. Huang didn't respond.

"It's not like she was in charge of the pirates," said Zero. "She's only twelve."

"I'm thirteen," said Nyx. "You're twelve."

"You're only four months older," said Zero. "You're still my age."

"She's not your age," said Yan, "she's thirteen. Your age is twelve."

"We're only four months apart!"

"Stop arguing," said their mother.

"I can't believe he met a girl," said Park.

Mrs. Huang sighed.

"She's not a girl," said Zero.

"Excuse me?" said Nyx.

"I mean ... technically she's a girl," said Zero, and looked at her, "but it's not like you're a *girl* girl. I mean, it's not like 'I met a girl,' met a girl. I just ... met a person who was also a girl."

"You are definitely twelve," said Yan.

"I had to leave my girlfriend behind," said Park. "Twenty light-years away—one hundred and five years ago. She probably has grandchildren by now—probably great-grandchildren! And I'm out here in the middle of nowhere, with nobody and nothing, and frigging Two-Shoe meets a girl."

"Don't call him Two-Shoe," said Mr. Huang. Zero glanced at him, but he was still talking intently with Governor Hatendi.

"How does he do that?" asked Yan. He looked over at him. "Dad,

how do you do that?" He waited, but their father didn't respond. Yan shook his head. "It's like he doesn't even know we're here, but then all of a sudden he does, out of nowhere. We're ninety percent invisible. Think of the nine out of ten things I could get away with."

"He's busy," said Mrs. Huang. "He has a new colony to build."

Park rolled his eyes. "If you want Dad's attention just say something mean to Two-Shoe."

"I told you not to call him that," said their father. "His name is Su-Shu."

"See?" said Park. "Zero's the baby—Dad will always protect the baby."

"I saved the ship from pirates!" said Zero. "Could a baby save a ship from pirates?"

"Because he had a thirteen-year-old helping him," said Nyx. She smiled sweetly, knowing exactly how much the comment would bother him.

Zero stared at her, exasperated. "You too, now?"

"They're just teasing you," said his mother. "Ignore them. Look at the planet with me."

Zero looked back out the window. In some ways, the planet Kaguya looked surprisingly like Earth—it had blue water, brown continents, and bright white snow at the poles. But the continents were all different shapes, and the clouds were green, and Zero was struck by a sudden sense of wrongness that made him feel queasy. Kaguya was almost exactly like home, but ... it wasn't home at all.

A light flashed on their father's tablet, and he looked up for the first time. "Our landing barge is ready," he said. "Governor, do you need anything else?"

"We're all good here," said Hatendi, and shook his hand. "See you on the surface."

Mr. Huang looked at them and smiled. "Well, then, my beautiful family." He nodded to Nyx. "And prestigious guest." He smiled again. "Ready to walk on a new planet?"

## Chapter Two

# THE SCIENTIST

THE PATHFINDER SPACESHIP was a giant cylinder, one kilometer long, ringed with stasis pods and filled with a long, hollow tube down the center. Small struts and scaffolds poked into the tube at regular intervals, and Zero's family jumped from each one to the next, soaring through the lack of gravity toward the boarding door for their landing barge. Other colonists bustled around in the cylinder as well, checking computer screens and waking up new waves of sleepers. Zero ignored them and jumped to catch up to his father.

"Are you ready, Dad?"

"I don't know if I've ever been this excited in my life," said Mr. Huang. He grinned. "How about you?"

"Same," said Zero, and didn't even try to hide his sense of wonder: "What if there are aliens?"

"Our long-range scans didn't detect any signs of civilization."

"But what about alien animals?"

"Well, they wouldn't be *animals*," said his father, "because *animal* is a specific group of living things on Earth's evolutionary tree. Calling whatever creatures we find on Kaguya *animals* would be like Columbus landing in America and calling it India—he wasn't prepared to find something new, so he fell back on old ideas and old labels."

Zero rolled his eyes. "Obviously that's what I mean." He paused. "So do we already have new words?"

"For alien creatures?" Mr. Huang nodded. "Obviously each species will need its own name, but as a broad group we call them exoflora and exofauna," his father said. "Exo means outside, and flora and fauna mean ... well, plants and animals, but those aren't the right words. Living things from outside Earth: exoflora and exofauna."

"Cool."

"Though even those categories might be wrong. Who's to say when we find a living thing down there that it will resemble a plant or an

animal in any meaningful way? Who's to say we'll even be able to recognize it as a living thing? Maybe life on Kaguya resembles life on Earth, or maybe it's completely and utterly different."

"Alien," said Zero.

His father chuckled. "Technically speaking, we're the aliens here. So no matter what we find, we'll need to be veeeeery careful with it. It's a whole new ecosystem."

"There's the barge!" shouted Yan, pointing ahead to a boarding door. "Alright, Kaguya: get ready for an alien invasion!"

Zero grinned like a maniac. "I can't believe we're going to be the first people to walk on an alien planet."

"Not quite the first," said Mr. Huang. "Two barges went down last week, to scout for landing sites."

"Well, okay," said Zero, "but we're still almost the first people to walk on the first alien planet."

"Second alien planet," said Mr. Huang. "Don't forget the Torchbearer—they got to Genji about two months ago."

The Torchbearer was the Pathfinder's sister ship—another colony, taking the same journey from Earth to Murasaki, but stopping at the star's second planet instead of the third. According to their long-range scans, Genji and Kaguya were both Earth-like enough to support human life; the other three planets in the system couldn't support life at all, so nobody went to them.

"Fine," said Zero. "We're almost the first people to walk on almost the first alien planet. That's still awesome."

"It definitely is," said his father.

The barge was plugged into the side of the ship, like a room that could slide out of a building and fly away. A Pathfinder technician met them at the door, scanned their plastic identity cards, and showed them to their seats. Most of the seats were already filled with other engineers and their families, all dressed in identical beige jumpsuits. Nyx was the only one on the ship with unique clothing: cargo pants, flight boots, and a black leather jacket. Every eye on the barge stared as she floated by.

"Everybody buckle up," said Mrs. Huang. "I didn't bring you twenty light-years away just to watch you die in a crash landing as soon as we get here."

"Right," said Yan, "because a seat belt is totally going to keep us alive when we crash into the surface from orbit."

"Just buckle," said Nyx. "Why does everything have to be an argument with you?"

"I don't make everything into an argument."

"You're making this into an argument."

Yan looked past her to Zero. "I don't like your pirate, Two-Shoe."

"Excuse me?" said Nyx. "His pirate?"

"Nobody is a pirate," said Mrs. Huang loudly, trying to assure the barge's other passengers. "Everything is fine."

"Are you an engineer, too?" asked Nyx.

"I'm a chemist," said Mrs. Huang.

"She's the one figuring out what we're allowed to eat down there," said Zero.

His mom laughed. "Eat? I don't even know if we can touch anything yet. We know the atmosphere's not going to kill us, but for all we know the plants could be toxic to human biology."

"Not plants," said Nyx, just a half a heartbeat before Zero said the same thing, "exoflora." Zero frowned; he wanted to show off how much he knew about science. He thought of another angle, and jumped back into the conversation.

"My father helped build the Pathfinder," said Zero. "He made the stasis pods."

"I didn't build the stasis pods," said Zero's father, "I just designed the gel that protects us from acceleration." Zero tried to say what kind of gel it was, but once again his father beat him to it. "It's a perfluorocarbon."

Zero fumed silently, and gave up trying to talk. He knew all of this stuff—why wouldn't anyone just let him say it? His parents were both scientists—almost everyone on the entire ship was a scientist—and he was going to be a scientist, too. But how could he do that if no one would ever take him seriously?

"That sounds complicated," said Nyx.

"I suppose so," said Mr. Huang. "But I studied for years to understand it. Anyone can learn anything, if you're willing to do the work, no matter how complicated it is." He laughed. "Besides, now that we're here and we don't need acceleration couches, I'm basically just a fluid dynamics engineer. Which is just an exciting way of saying Space Plumber."

The barge moved, and everyone froze for a moment, then began babbling excitedly.

"This is it," said Zero. "We're detaching from the Pathfinder. We're going down to the planet!"

"A whole new planet," said Mrs. Huang. "With a brand-new sky."

"I've ..." Nyx started to speak, and then looked down at the floor. "I've never seen a sky."

"Never?" asked Yan.

"She's not from Earth," said Zero's mom. "She was born on a sealed colony, and raised in a ship."

"Which colony?" asked Park. Humans had put colony bases on Earth's Moon, on Mars, on Ganymede, and on a bunch of different asteroids like Ceres, Vesta, and Eros.

"Tacita," said Nyx, obviously more than a little proud. Park looked confused, and no wonder—most people didn't even know that Tacita existed. It was the hidden tenth planet in Earth's solar system, beyond the Kuiper Belt, so distant and so dark that it had only been found by accident—a mining colony that had gone off course. Nyx's parents had been stranded there, though eventually they'd rebuilt their spaceships and used the secret planet as a pirate's lair.

"I've never heard of Tacita," said Park.

"Nobody has," said Nyx. "Which was kind of the point. It has air, but it's poisonous, so we had to stay in buildings and caves the whole time. I've ..." She looked embarrassed, but said it anyway: "I've never been outside, ever in my life. Is it scary?"

"It's fine," said Ms. Huang. "You'll do great."

Yan looked at Zero. "Your pirate is weird—ouch!" he shouted in pain as Nyx punched him in the ribs. He scowled at her and rubbed his side, but didn't dare to retaliate.

"What is Kaguya's atmosphere like?" asked Zero. "Dad, you said the gravity was low compared to Earth, right? But we can still breathe?"

"Kaguya's gravity is about one-sixth of Earth's," said Mr. Huang. "So: back on Earth you played basketball, right? How high could you jump?"

"My coach said I had a vertical leap of about eighteen inches," said Zero proudly.

"That's great," said Mr. Huang. "That's ... pretty amazing for a twelve-year-old, actually; that's a foot and a half. But do the math: on Kaguya, with only one-sixth as much gravity, you'll be able to jump six times higher."



"Whoa," said Zero, and started trying to add it up. "That's twelve—no, six—plus an extra half of a six—"

"That's nine feet in the air," said Nyx. "We'll be able to jump nine feet in the air?"

"Approximately," said Mr. Huang.

Zero marveled at the idea. On the Pathfinder he'd been able to fly because there was no gravity at all, and he'd been dreading going back to a planet after all that freedom. But jumping nine feet in the air was amazing.

And then Zero had a thought, and his heart sank. "Will it hurt when we fall back down? Nine feet is a long way."

Zero's father smiled. "You'll be able to fall even farther than that, and be totally fine. It's not just low gravity: the air on Kaguya is incredibly dense. Fifty-eight percent nitrogen, twenty-two percent oxygen, and twenty percent xenon."

"Can we breathe all that stuff?" asked Nyx. "I thought we just breathed oxygen."

"Most of Earth's air is nitrogen," said Mr. Huang. "It's inert and non-toxic and easy to breathe, so we don't even notice it, but it's there. Only twenty-one percent of Earth's air is oxygen—too much more and it would light on fire all the time." He looked at Nyx. "Most of the air we breathe on spaceships is about the same—twenty-one percent oxygen. And Kaguya is also the same, which is one of the reasons we decided to build a colony here."

"So if the air is still just oxygen and nitrogen," said Zero, "why is it so dense? Wouldn't less gravity make the air less dense?"

"Normally, yes," said Mr. Huang. "But Kaguya threw us a curve ball. Twenty percent of the atmosphere is a chemical called xenon, which is non-toxic but incredibly heavy—almost ten times as heavy as nitrogen. Which means the air on Kaguya is also very heavy. So to answer your original question: when you jump nine feet in the air, you're going to fall back down veeeeery slowly."

Zero stared at his father, trying not to frown, trying not to look as confused as he was. He had no idea why heavy air would make you fall slowly, but he didn't want to admit it—he was trying to impress his father, not look stupid in front of him. None of this made any sense, and that upset him more than he wanted to admit.

"I don't get it," said Nyx. She, apparently, didn't mind asking questions. "Why does heavy air make you fall slowly?"

"Because it makes you buoyant," said Mr. Huang. "You float."

"I thought the lack of gravity made you float," said Zero.

"Gravity is a force that pulls you down," said his father. "Buoyancy is a force that pushes you up. On Earth, we only really experience that force in water, because the air isn't dense enough to exert much force—unless you're an airplane or a bird. Kaguya's air isn't as dense as water, of course, but it's still dense enough that you'll notice it. A lot."

"Golden," said Zero. He started to think about it, putting all the pieces together—low gravity, dense air, swimming, airplanes—and he thought of something amazing, but before he could say it, Nyx said it first.

"So if buoyancy is how airplanes fly, and Kaguya has higher buoyancy, that means it should be much easier to fly here, right?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Huang. "That's very smart! We'll be using that buoyancy to transport heavy equipment—"

"I thought the same thing about the buoyancy!" said Zero, finally fed up with being second place to everything. "She just said it first!"

"Sure," said Yan. "Everybody believes you."

"Shut up!" said Zero, and leaned across Nyx to punch him in the face, but missed and hit the frame of his chair instead. Zero yelped, and Yan laughed, and Zero tried to hit him again but their parents pulled them apart.

"Seriously, Su-Shu," said his father. "Try to behave yourself. This is a momentous occasion."

"My name's not Su-Shu," Zero mumbled. "It's Zero."

"Stop acting like a baby," said Park.

"I'm not a baby," said Zero, "I'm a scientist!"

"You're a twelve-year-old nobody," said Yan. "Shut up and let the real scientists work."

"That's enough," said their mother.

Zero folded his arms and scowled the rest of the way down.

## Chapter Three

# A BRAND-NEW SKY

THE LANDING BARGE had no windows, so Zero had to guess what was happening by feeling the jolts and tremors in his seat. There was a round of intense shaking as they hit the edge of the atmosphere, an occasional bump or shake as they descended through the wind and clouds, another sharp shake when the landing thrusters fired. The landing barge slowed, settled to the ground, and stopped.

They had arrived.

"Be careful," said Mrs. Huang. "The gravity on Kaguya is very weak, so each step will carry you a lot farther than you expect. Stand up slowly, and walk carefully."

Zero unbuckled his seat belt, feeling the gravity drag on his arms. It may have been weaker than Earth's gravity, but it was a whole lot stronger than the complete lack of gravity on the Pathfinder. But if he could handle no gravity, surely he could handle weak gravity, right? He stood up, and found himself accidentally jumping toward the ceiling; he put up his hands to stop himself from banging his head—something he'd done a hundred times on the Pathfinder—but instead of bobbing along the ceiling he started falling again. This wasn't like the Pathfinder at all, and the movements that had helped him on the ship did nothing but get in the way down here. He panicked, spun his arms to try to catch himself, and landed with a soft crash on top of the row behind. The passengers in that row helped him to get himself upright again, and passed him back to his parents.

"Sorry," said Zero. He looked at the floor sheepishly, trying to walk more carefully. When their parents weren't looking, Yan flicked him in the ear.

Nyx was unsteady for a step or two, but adapted almost immediately to the low gravity. Zero figured that this made sense—she'd spent her whole life on spaceships and outlying colonies, so she'd become pretty good at adjusting to new gravities.

Row by row, the people filed out of the barge, and when it was the

Huangs' turn Zero held the chairs for balance and walked lightly, on his toes, making sure not to accidentally launch himself into the ceiling again. He reached the door, peeked through it—  
—and frowned.

"A hallway?" he asked. "I thought we were getting out onto the planet."

"We still don't know what's out there," said his mother. "Remember? Our long-range scans told us there was water and oxygen, so we know we can live here, but until we know what the ecosystem is like we don't know how safe it is to live here."

"You flew for a hundred years without even knowing if it was safe?" asked Nyx.

"So did you," said Yan.

"That's different," said Nyx.

"What's an ecosystem?" asked Zero. His dad was up ahead, talking to one of the other engineers, so Zero felt less embarrassed to ask a science question.

"An ecosystem is the biology of a planet," said Mrs. Huang. "What lives here, and how do they survive, and how do they interact with each other? What eats what, and which of them are toxic or allergenic or infectious? We need answers to all of these questions before we know if it's safe to go outside."

"That's ... disappointing," said Zero.

"A little bit," his mother agreed, but then she caught sight of something and smiled. "But you know how you loved that window on the Pathfinder? I bet you might love this one even more." She took his hand, and pulled him forward. "There it is," she said. "Your brand-new sky."

Zero found himself standing in front of a window; he looked through it, and his eyes went wide, and his jaw fell open, and he stared.

The alien planet stretched out before him, more amazing than he'd dared to hope.

The first thing he saw was flowers: smooth, iridescent stalks, as tall and thick as trees, with wide, flat petals at the top that shone light purple against the blue sky and green clouds beyond them. There seemed to be hundreds of them, a massive forest of giant flowers reaching all the way out to a ring of low hills. The hills rose up on every side of the landing site; the dirt was brown and black, studded

with massive orange crystals in a staggering variety of shapes and sizes; some looked small enough to pick up, while others were as big as cars, and some seemed even bigger than their giant landing barge. The light from the blazing star struck the crystals at different angles, making some of them glimmer, some of them shine, and some of them glow with an inner fire. One of the crystals was broad and flat, like a half-buried table; others were jagged or rippled or cracked. A few looked sharp as razors.

On the ground, where he expected to see grass or bushes or weeds, he saw almost nothing—just black dirt and the wide, solid bases of those enormous flowers. The tallest reached at least a hundred feet up in the air, maybe even more. Zero peered up at them in awe, wondering if it would be possible to climb one, when suddenly he saw something, and he gasped. A moment later, everyone else in the crowd by the window did the same.

Something was moving near the petals of one of the flowers.

“Holy crap,” whispered Yan.

“Golden,” whispered Zero.

Yan stared at the thing in shock. “Is that ...?” His jaw moved without any sound coming out, and after a moment he found his breath again. “Is that an alien?”

From a distance the thing looked like a furry, brown watermelon the size of a cow, with a few short vines dangling from the bottom; as Zero peered closer he saw that what looked like a cluster of vines was actually a small body, like a rabbit or a beaver, and the vines themselves were arms that hung below it, tapping and touching the giant flower petals. The bulbous watermelon wasn’t the main body, Zero realized, but some kind of giant balloon on its back.

“It’s like a beaver,” he whispered, “strapped to the bottom of a blimp.”

It even had a flat, beaver-like tail on one end, and Zero wondered why a floating creature would need a beaver tail—beavers lived in rivers, and used their tails to swim, but there was no way a thing like this, one hundred feet in the air in a giant flower forest, would ever need to swim. He watched it closely, too fascinated to do anything else, and suddenly the creature flapped its tail and drifted forward, moving from one flower to the next. Zero realized that the tail wasn’t for swimming in the water, it was for swimming in the air.

“It’s buoyant,” he said. “It’s floating—it’s swimming through the



air, like Dad said."

"That's incredible," his mother whispered, and then pointed. "Look, there are more of them."

Zero followed her finger, and saw two more of the living blimps floating quietly through the top of the flower forest. Five, seven, maybe eight of the things in total.

"It's a family," said Zero. "Or a herd, I guess. A flock?"

"A swarm," said Nyx. "They're like bumblebees, pollinating the flowers."

"When have you ever seen a bee?" asked Zero. "You lived on a dead planet at the edge of the solar system."

"Our colony ship had a bee colony in the hydroponic garden," said Nyx. "It kept the plants healthy, plus it gave us honey."

"Golden," said Zero, still staring at the blimp creatures. "Do we have bees on the Pathfinder?"

"Probably," said Mrs. Huang. "We'll keep them locked inside the base, so they don't alter the ecosystem, but we probably have them."

"Look!" shouted Nyx. "It's eating a petal!" The whole group oohed and ahed, jostling for position at the window, trying to get a better look. Zero crouched down, so that just his head poked up above the metal windowsill, and watched as one of the blimp creatures gripped a flower petal in its paws or pincers—it was too far away to tell for sure—and then bobbed its head and opened its mouth and started taking bites of it, munching away happily. The flower petals were thick, maybe as much as two inches, and the creature could barely get its mouth around them.

"It makes perfect sense that the local exofauna can fly," said Mr. Huang. "With gravity so low, and the air so buoyant, it was probably easier to evolve flight than any other form of movement. I'd bet that those four limbs dangling down from it are all hands—who needs legs, when you can just float through the air?"

A young woman spoke from the back of the group. "Oh, good," she said, "you've seen our beevers. That's what we call them: beevers, with two *E*'s, like in bee: Bee-Vers. I guess that's actually three *E*'s? That's not the official name, obviously, just a nickname we gave them."

"You should call them bumblebeevers," said Zero.

"That's ... wow," said the woman, "that's so much better. Bumblebeevers. I need to write that down."

"Hi," said Zero's father. "I'm Yaozu Huang. Our barge just landed."

"Yes," said the woman, "I'm part of the landing team." Zero thought he recognized her as the boarding agent who had helped them onto the Pathfinder at the start of their journey; now, she was helping them get settled in to the colony. She fumbled with the stack of computer tablets in her hands, shifting them all to one arm and then holding out her free hand to greet Zero's father. "Hi, I'm Beverly Stott. I know it's hard to tear yourself away from the windows, but if you'll follow me I'll show you to your quarters."

"Our quarters?" asked Zero.

"Your rooms," said Beverly. "Your new homes. Welcome to Kaguya."

## Chapter Four

# THE WELCOMING COMMITTEE

THE BASE ON KAGUYA was laid out like a circuit board: pods and buildings and warehouses connected by a network of walking tubes, so no one ever had to go outside—or ever could go outside, from Zero’s disappointed point of view. The biggest of the buildings were the landing barges: they were only designed to arrive on a planet, not to leave one, so as each one touched down on the surface it stayed there forever; the engineers connected it to the walking tubes and turned it into one more building in the city. Zero wondered what his barge was going to turn into—maybe a garage, or a science lab—but he didn’t have time to wait and see. He had a new base to explore.

“You’re the third barge to land,” said Beverly, leading them down the hall, “so all of you are part of the construction effort to get our base built quickly. The adults, I mean. Your work assignments are in the computer system, reachable from any terminal by using your ID card, though I imagine most of you already know what you’re doing and who’s on your team. There’s a school for the children, and those assignments will be in there as well.”

“Hi,” said Park, quickening his pace so he could walk next to her. “I’m Park Huang; I didn’t realize our colony here would have such an attractive landing team.”

Zero rolled his eyes and made a gagging noise.

The walls of the base were dotted here and there with maps: wide touchscreens showing the layout of the rooms and hallways. Beverly stopped at one and pointed it out to the group. “The base is still under construction,” she said, “so the map is being constantly updated. Don’t be embarrassed to check them often—even those of us who’ve been down here for a week already still use them, because the layout changes every day. Your quarters are ...” She turned to the map,

tapped a few commands, and then pointed to a corridor. "Right here, just down the stairs."

"Downstairs?" asked Zero. "But the window we just looked through was already on ground level. Downstairs will be—"

"Underground," said his father. "Most of the base is being built below the surface."

Zero was shocked. "But we saw all those buildings and walkways when we looked out the window!"

"Those are mostly temporary," said his mother. "Garages to park the mining equipment, and things like that. The permanent settlement will be underground."

"We're going to live in caves?" Zero asked. "We flew all the way to a brand-new planet with giant flowers and weird crystals and floating bumblebees, and we don't even get windows to look out at it?"

"Of course there will be windows," said his mom. "Just ... not in our quarters. I'm sorry, honey."

"The surface is too dangerous," said Mr. Huang.

"Are there predators?" asked Nyx.

Beverly shook her head. "Not that we're aware of."

"The danger is the air," said Mr. Huang. "Let me ask you something: when we looked out of the window, did you see any flowers moving in a breeze?"

Zero thought about it, trying to remember, and then shook his head. "No, there wasn't any breeze at all."

"That's because air this heavy is hard to move," said Mr. Huang. "It takes a lot more force to create wind on Kaguya than it did on Earth."

"Most of the time there's no wind at all," said Beverly. "But when we do have wind—when the atmosphere creates enough force to get that heavy air moving—it's going to be incredibly powerful. It's like the difference between swinging a stick and swinging a hammer: the one that weighs more hits harder. The air on Kaguya, when it hits, is going to hit like a hammer."

"Ouch," said Zero.

"That's fascinating," said Park, and flashed her a smile. "I'd love to learn more about Kaguya if you've got some free time later."

"I'm afraid I'll be in meetings all day," said Beverly, and looked at Zero's father. "You, too, Mr. Huang. We're trying to accelerate the

construction so we can beat the storms: our weather computer is predicting three big windstorms, starting in just a couple of days."

"I'll check my schedule," said Mr. Huang. "Thank you."

"Three storms," said Zero. "With super crazy Kaguya wind?"

"I don't like planets," said Nyx. "Animals and weather are too unpredictable—give me a spaceship every time."

"One more thing," said Beverly, and stopped the group by a tall metal rack. "Your rooms are down the hall, but as you walk by each of you needs to take a mask from this rack, and keep it with you at all times. They're called rebreathers: if there's ever a breach in the base, put on your rebreather and it will filter all the xenon out of your air."

"I thought we could breathe the air here," said Nyx.

"The xenon in Kaguya's air is non-toxic," said Beverly, "but it's a powerful anesthetic. Breathe even a little of it, and your brain shuts down: first you'll get loopy, and then you'll fall unconscious."

Zero took one of the masks—it was small, fitting just over his mouth and nose. A wide, black strap held it in place. "So if we go outside without one of these—"

"It's sleepytime," said Yan. "Though if your brain turns off I don't think anyone will notice."

"Shut up," said Zero. The strap on the mask had a pocket, and Beverly saw him poking at it.

"The pocket has a tiny emergency kit," she said. "Bandages, flashlight, fire starter. You shouldn't ever need it, but space explorers are always prepared."

"Thanks," said Zero, and clipped the mask to his waist.

"How much air does it have?" asked Nyx.

"None," said Beverly. "It just filters the air around you. In a worst case scenario, you could breathe through this for days."

"But let's hope you never have to," said Mrs. Huang. "Stay in the base, follow the safety rules, and everything should be fine. Now: who wants to see our room?"

"Me," said Yan.

"I'd rather have you show me around," said Park, sidling up to Beverly.

"Go find the room," said Mr. Huang. "Beverly and I have a meeting on the observation deck."

Zero perked up immediately. "Observation deck? Can I come?"



Mr. Huang looked at Beverly, who nodded. "Sure," he said. "Just don't touch anything."

## Chapter Five

# THE PREDATOR

NYX WAS MUCH happier to be underground than Zero was.

"This is just like home," she said, following Beverly and Mr. Huang through the twisting tubes of the tunnels. "Walls around us. Rock around the walls. We're totally safe from everything that wants to hurt us."

"What about boredom," suggested Zero, sullenly.

"Spoken like a true Earthling," said Nyx. "Boredom can't kill you—a hole in your walls can." She shrugged. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it," he said, and then he got more excited as they started climbing some stairs—up from the tunnels to the windowed walkways on the surface. "I want to see outside." He ran to the nearest window and stared at the landscape beyond—black rock, orange crystals, and soft purple flowers a hundred feet high. More bumblebees hovered around the tops of the blossoms, and smaller creatures flitted here and there between the stalks: some kind of orange, beakless bird, and what looked like a ten-eared rabbit that could flap them all to fly.

"Keep up," Mr. Huang called after him, and Zero tore himself away from the window to catch back up to the group. They went up another flight of stairs, and found themselves in a wide, round room in the very center of the base: it was built on top of the very first barge that had landed here, and commanded a stunning view of the entire area. Zero and Nyx ran to the nearest windows as a formation of Drill Tanks drove by: they were like military tanks, but with massive, conical drills on the front instead of cannons. One of them angled its drill at the ground and drove straight down into it, burrowing through the dirt and rock and leaving a long, empty tunnel behind. A crew of engineers followed behind it, filling the tunnel with rooms and hallways for people to live in.

"The bumblebees are back," said Nyx, pointing toward a group of tall flowers. A group of four or five blimp creatures floated around

the tops, and Zero and Nyx watched them for several minutes, fascinated.

Zero saw Beverly working at a nearby computer screen, and walked toward her. "Excuse me," he asked. "You're studying the aliens, right? I mean, the exofauna."

"That's right," said Beverly. She looked happy to talk to him, so he dared to ask his question.

"How many exofauna are there? How many kinds, I mean?"

"More than fifty species," said Beverly, "almost all of them flying. One has a wingspan of twenty feet! That's enormous!"

"Whoa," said Nyx. "Are they dangerous?"

"Every ecosystem with this many creatures is bound to have some kind of predator," said Beverly. "We don't think we've seen any yet, but that doesn't mean they're not there. They might just be very hard to see."

"I don't like that at all," said Nyx.

Beverly laughed, but it was cheerful rather than mean. "Our early studies of the atmosphere suggest that hearing might be more important to the exofauna than seeing. With air this dense, sound will travel really well."

"I guess that's pretty cool," said Zero. "I've seen birds before, though—what have you found that's ... amazing?"

Beverly grinned, obviously excited. "We figured out why the clouds are green!"

Zero frowned. Green clouds were even more boring than really big birds.

"It's algae," said Beverly. "Even on Earth, the clouds are full of microbes and bacteria—anything that's light enough to be held up by water vapor. Well, the air on Kaguya is so buoyant that water vapor can hold up a lot more weight. There are entire algae colonies that live in the sky!"

"Golden," said Zero, though he didn't feel it. He'd come expecting a new world full of excitement and adventure, and not only was Kaguya boring, he wasn't even allowed to go outside in it. Even algae had more freedom here than he did.

"Ground Control," said a voice from a speaker. "Ground Control, this is Pathfinder actual. We show a very large biological in your area, are you seeing it? Over."

Several people in the room stopped what they were doing, listened

to this message, and then either walked to the windows or clustered around Beverly's computer screen.

"Pathfinder, this is Dr. Huang," said Zero's father. "How large are we talking?"

"I'm not reading anything on the sensors," said Beverly. "How close is it?"

The speaker crackled again. Zero thought it sounded like Governor Hatendi's voice. "Ground Control, we don't have answers to either of those questions. We can't read this biological on sensors at all; our only sighting is visual, and we lost that almost immediately behind cloud cover. It should be close enough for you to see, though; it looked bigger than anything we've catalogued so far."

Zero and Nyx moved to the window with the rest of the scientists, peering out into the skies for signs of a giant bird. Zero couldn't see anything. He heard a loud rumble, and looked down at the ground—one of the Drill Tanks had just rolled out of the garage, and was driving toward the mouth of the nearest tunnel. It turned on its drill, and somehow got even noisier.

A dark shadow flashed over it.

"Whoa," said Zero. "Did you see that?"

"Yes," said Nyx.

"What?" asked Beverly. "You saw the bird?"

"I saw its shadow," said Zero. "Right over there, by that mining Tank." Another black flash whooshed over the ground. "There it is again!"

"It's close," said Mr. Huang. "Why isn't it showing up on our sensors? We can't see—"

And then they saw it. An enormous shape dove down from the sky, with wings so huge they seemed to block out the sun—a hundred-foot wingspan at least. It had a long tail, and a long neck on the front that ended in a sharp, wedge-shaped head. Zero couldn't see any eyes, but even without seeing it knew exactly what it was chasing—the mining drill. The giant creature opened its orange claws—four of them, just like the bumblebees—and clamped them down on the yellow vehicle with awe-inspiring power. It swept its huge wings downward, lifting itself back up toward the sky, but the edge of the spinning drill nicked its leg, and the giant creature dropped it with a roar.

The roar, more than anything else, stunned Zero so much he

couldn't even move. He'd heard roars before, but this was an alien roar. He'd never heard anything so simultaneously familiar and indefinable in his life.

"Get out!" shouted Beverly, clutching a communicator in her hand. "Whoever's in Drill Tank 7, get out! It's coming back around!"

Zero watched the mining Tank, lying on its side; the drill kept spinning, and the massive shadow circled the base before coming back in for another pass. A door on the side of the truck—now its top—popped open, and a man in a yellow bodysuit jumped out, leaping nearly twenty feet to the side in the low gravity. He cleared the vehicle just in time, for the massive creature came back again, grabbed the truck in its claws, and lifted it up into the air. It was the biggest animal Zero had ever seen. The thing carried the truck into the sky, maybe two hundred feet up, then opened a jagged mouth and tore at the metal. Whatever it had for teeth weren't made for eating mining equipment; it couldn't get through the Drill Tank's side, and dropped it down again. This time the impact crumpled the vehicle, stopping the drill completely. The giant creature circled again, then two times, then three, and finally pumped its massive wings and flew off into the sky.

Governor Hatendi's voice crackled over the speaker. "Did you see it?"

"Yeah," said Beverly, her eyes still wide from fright. "Yeah, we saw it. It was ... a really big bird."

"That wasn't a bird," said Zero. "That was a dragon."



## Chapter Six

# MISSING CARGO

MR. HUANG STARED at the smashed Drill Tank. "There's no way we'll be able to fix that," he said.

"Definitely not," said Beverly. "And that's going to set us even further behind schedule."

"Why are you guys talking about schedules?" asked Zero. "We just saw a dragon."

"We're already behind schedule?" asked Mr. Huang. "What else has gone wrong?"

"You mean besides the dragon?" asked Nyx, eyes wide with terror. "Let's talk about the dragon!"

"I promise you," said Beverly, glancing their way, "I will be studying that dragon as closely and as eagerly as I possibly can, but first things first. If we can't finish the underground tunnels in time, the whole base could be at risk." She looked at Mr. Huang. "We're behind schedule because that Drill Tank isn't the first one we lost. Number 10 is missing."

Zero's father frowned. "It disappeared?"

"It was never here," said Beverly. "This is what we needed to discuss in our meeting. The first barge to land had bays for ten Drill Tanks, but the tenth bay was empty. It's not even on the shipping manifest. As near as we can tell, they just never loaded it onto the Pathfinder in the first place."

Mr. Huang frowned. "That's ... really bad news. And not just for the Drill Tank—what else didn't get loaded? Have we done a full inventory? Do we have enough food?"

"We're checking the inventory now," said Beverly. "So far, Drill Tank 10 is the only thing missing. As for food, we don't know. We can eat the petals, and we can probably even metabolize them—they're not a perfect match for our biology, but they're not going to hurt us. So we can survive on the local ecosystem if we have to."

"But we don't want to devastate that ecosystem if we can avoid it," said Mr. Huang. He shook his head. "How could they just forget to

load it?" He frowned, staring at the floor, and then after a moment he looked at Zero and Nyx. "When you were exploring the ship—or Nyx: when you and your family were taking stock of the cargo—did you happen to look at or play with the Drill Tanks at all?"

"Never," said Zero. "I sat in a little rover thing once, but I didn't move it. And I didn't even see the Drill Tanks." He totally would have played with the Drill Tanks if he'd gotten the chance.

"Big Mama was excited to have them," said Nyx. "We were going to take them back to Tacita for the mine there. We never took them out of the cargo hold, though. They wouldn't even have fit through the door—they were only ever designed to be offloaded from a landing barge, down here on the planet."

"That's true," said Mr. Huang, nodding. "Did you ... turn them on, maybe even just accidentally? Is it possible one could have been damaged or corroded?"

"We didn't hurt the cargo at all," said Nyx. "My family's whole plan was to take everything back to Tacita and use it. There wasn't any point screwing around with it until we got there."

"I told you," said Beverly, "it's not missing; it was never there." She tapped the screen of her computer. "I've got the loading files right here, and they never gave us a tenth Drill."

"Either way," said Mr. Huang. "After that dragon attack we're two Drills down, instead of just one, so we'll have to work even harder."

"Finally, we're talking about the dragon!" said Zero. "Did you see how big it was? The low gravity makes it easier for animals to get enormous!"

"The dragon was awesome," said Mr. Huang. "You're absolutely correct. But right now I'm a lot more worried about the windstorm. We're not ready for it."

"For them," said Beverly. She looked at her computer screen again, tapping to pull up a different report. "We've got three big windstorms coming in, and the first could hit us as early as tomorrow morning. Maybe even earlier."

"We'll send everyone underground," said Mr. Huang, "and we'll hope the surface buildings are okay."

Zero shook his head. "That dragon picked up a Tank—it could tear the surface buildings apart if it wanted to."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Mr. Huang. "The dragon

wasn't attracted to the buildings, only to the noise of the Tank. The buildings don't make noise, so they should be fine."

Zero frowned. "How do you know it was attracted to the noise?"

"Simple scientific deduction," said his father. "There were other Drill Tanks outside, but the dragon only attacked the one making noise—and it continued to attack it until it stopped making noise, even after it stopped moving." He leaned over Beverly's computer screen. "It's okay if you didn't notice, Su-Shu; you're not a scientist."

Zero felt like he'd been kicked in the gut.

"Run along," said his father. "Go find the rest of the family, and tell them I might be a while." He tapped the screen, staring intently at the reports it showed him. "We're going to have to change this entire engineering plan."

Zero didn't move. He wanted to help. He wanted his father to think he was smart.

"Absolutely!" said Nyx, and pulled on Zero's arm, dragging him toward the door. "We'll see you later!" Zero didn't want to go, but she had an iron grip on his arm, and was even more determined to leave than he was to stay. He let her drag him away, and when they reached the bottom of the stairs he turned to her with a scowl.

"I wanted to stay and help!"

"Keep your voice down," she whispered, and dragged him around a corner to a small space under the stairs. "We can help, but we have to be quiet about it."

Zero looked at her suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"That Drill Tank was stolen," said Nyx. "I'll bet you anything. And we're going to find it."

## Chapter Seven

# THICK AS THIEVES

ZERO WAS STUNNED. “Stolen? But ... the shipping records say it wasn’t even loaded.”

“A hacker like my mother could have faked those shipping records easy,” said Nyx. “I bet you anything that somebody took the Drill Tank and then just made it look like it was never there.” She looked up and down the hallway, saw no one, and then squatted down next to Zero and whispered: “If my family were going to steal a Drill Tank, this is exactly how we would have done it: step one, get a good hacker. This one hid the crime so well the colony doesn’t even believe it was a crime.”

Zero frowned. “But ... how do you know they’re wrong?”

“I can feel it,” said Nyx. “Trust a pirate: this Drill Tank was stolen. But if we find it, we’ll be heroes.”

Zero liked the sound of that. “So how do we find it?”

Nyx smiled, her eyes dancing with mischief. “We find it by thinking like the thieves do. If I know how my family would have stolen the Drill, I can figure out how these people did it.”

“Step one, they get a hacker,” said Zero. “That doesn’t help us a ton.”

“Step two,” said Nyx, “get someone on the inside. Someone who works with the Tanks every day would have the skills to move and hide one.”

“So one of the thieves is a miner or an engineer,” said Zero. “That’s good, but ... almost everyone on the surface so far is a miner or an engineer, so it doesn’t really narrow it down.”

“No,” said Nyx, “we start even earlier than that: the inside helper was one of the people who helped unload the Drill Tanks from the very first barge. That’s why nobody knows where it is—because everyone else was asleep when that first thief hid it.”

“Smart,” said Zero. “So all we have to do is find a list of who unloaded that barge.”

Nyx shook her head. “If the hacker can hide the Drill, they can hide

the thieves' names just as easily. The best we'd be able to do is just ... ask around, and hope someone remembers an extra worker who's not on the list."

"I don't know what it's like on a secret pirate planet," said Zero, "but where I come from, adults are never going to believe a couple of kids accusing someone of a crime with no evidence. Even if we know their names."

"Yeah," said Nyx with a sigh. "Same on the secret pirate planet. That's why we need real evidence. We need the Drill itself."

Zero nodded. "So how do we find that? If it was easy to find, the grownups would have found it already."

"They're looking in the wrong places," said Nyx, shaking her head. "They don't think it's stolen, so they're just checking the garages and whatever. But the thieves have it hidden somewhere very specific. Think about it: no matter what they're planning to do with that Drill, what do they have to do first?"

Zero thought about it, wracking his brain. What were they planning to do? It was a mining drill, so maybe they were planning to mine with it? But if they tried mining right here, under the base, everyone would know. He smiled, figuring it out. "They have to move it," he said. "They have to take it out of the base."

"Exactly," said Nyx. "And we know they haven't moved it yet, because those tank treads leave a really huge trail that's really easy to follow. Which means it's still in the base."

"And there are only two way to get it out secretly," said Zero. "Underground, which would set off all our sensors and leave a huge trail to follow, or ..." His eyes lit up. "In the air! My dad said the colony was planning to use the buoyant air to float the heavy equipment around. That wouldn't leave tracks at all!"

"So all we have to do," said Nyx, "is find the gear they use to float stuff, and we'll find the missing Drill."

"That's perfect," said Zero, and smiled at her. "You're really good at stealing stuff."

"Thanks," said Nyx. "There's one problem, though."

"What?"

"If your plan is to fly a giant Tank around, you have to do it when no one is looking. And the best time to do that is..."

"When everyone's underground," Zero finished. "Hiding from a windstorm, in a tunnel with no windows."

“Yup,” said Nyx. “That means they’re going to move the Drill tonight. And we have to find it first.”

## Chapter Eight

# SEARCHING

ZERO AND NYX found a map on the wall, and tapped through the various displays and searches until they'd found all three storage pods that claimed to contain flight gear—balloons, as it turned out. The thought of a heavy Drill Tank dangling from the end of a giant balloon made Zero laugh; he imagined them as novelty balloons, shaped like cats or apples or other goofy things, though he knew they were probably just gray like everything else in the base.

Once they'd found the storage rooms, they ran to check them, one by one: the good news was they were all unlocked; the bad news was none of them had a missing Drill Tank. Nyx and Zero sat down in the last one, resting on the deflated rubber balloons—gray, like he'd thought—and talked.

"I should have known we wouldn't find it on the map," said Nyx. "It's a digital map! Of course the hacker would have hidden their hiding place."

"Ha," said Zero. "Hiding their hiding place."

"This isn't funny."

"I mean, it's kind of funny," said Zero. "Like, what if there's a big hiding place somewhere, and all the other hiding places are inside of it."

"But it's not hidden in real life," said Nyx, "only in the computer."

"That's it!" Zero jumped up. "It's not hidden in real life, so we'll be able to see it!"

"We already know we can see it," said Nyx, "the problem is that we don't know where to look."

"We look out a window," said Zero, grabbing her hand and trying to drag her toward the door. "It's hidden in the maps, but not in the real world. So if we find a room that's there in the world, but not in the map, that's it!"

Nyx stared at him, then jumped to her feet. "That's brilliant! But we'll need a high window, so we can see the whole base from up above."

"They won't let us back in the command center," said Zero. He thought for just a half a second, then shouted: "The barge we landed in this morning!"

"Perfect!" said Nyx, and the two started running. Nyx grinned wildly as they careened through the hall, bouncing nearly ten feet per step in the low gravity. "You're pretty good at stealing stuff, too."

"Thanks."

They found the landing barge mostly empty; workers and engineers were unloading its equipment from the cargo bays, but the passenger cabin was empty—more importantly, so was the cockpit. They sneaked in the door, closed it carefully behind them, and bounced up toward the windows. It wasn't quite as high as the command center, but it still gave an impressive overview of the base. The barge's computer system was already linked to the network, and Nyx was able to find a copy of the map. They spent the next half hour comparing each walking tube, storage pod, and makeshift garage with its counterpart on the map.

When they found a storage pod that wasn't on the map, they had to stop themselves from cheering too loudly.

"There it is!" shouted Zero, and then covered his mouth and said it again in a whisper: "There it is."

"Should we get your mom?"

"She won't believe us until we have evidence," said Zero. "No one will."

Nyx nodded. "Agreed. We need to check it out, find the Drill, and then go to your parents. Or to Beverly or to a security officer or whoever's in charge of this stuff."

The two children memorized the location and the route to get there, and slipped back out of the landing barge without a sound.

A man and a woman were coming toward them down the hall, talking intently about something on a computer tablet they were holding between them. Nyx kept her head down, and Zero tried to look like he knew what he was doing, but the adults didn't pay any attention to them.

They wove their way through the maze of walkways and modular buildings. They could hear wind moaning through the walls of the walking tube, and Zero started to get worried. What if the windstorm came early?



Nyx stopped them at the final intersection, and almost spoke, but stopped herself abruptly. When Zero tried to say something, she hushed him as well. He frowned, and she pointed down the hall toward the mystery storage pod. The door was open.

And a light was on inside.

They moved closer, using steps so light their toes barely brushed the ground. Zero was getting used to the low gravity, and he could see that Nyx was becoming an expert in it as well. They bounced almost soundlessly to the edge of the doorway, and then froze when they heard voices.

"The storm's coming sooner than expected," said a woman. She sounded a little younger than Zero's mother, but Zero couldn't see her. Tall stacks of crates and equipment blocked the view from the door completely. A second later, the voice continued: "If we're going to move this thing, we need to move it tonight."

Nyx grabbed Zero's arm. Were these the thieves?

"Don't make that talk with the door open," said a gruff, older man. "Don't you know anything about keeping a secret? You go lock that thing before you say another word."

Footsteps started moving toward the door. Zero made a split-second decision, thinking so fast he couldn't remember thinking at all: he jumped. One light push against the floor, and he sailed in through the open door into the storage pod, landing just as lightly in the low gravity. The stacked gear inside the room kept him hidden, though the footsteps were getting closer. He turned, saw a dark corner behind a tall shelf, and jumped again to reach it. A second later Nyx joined him, barely half a heartbeat before a woman came around the corner. She was dressed in a dirt-stained hazard suit; she'd been working outside.

She didn't see them.

She walked to the door, closed it, and locked it with a key card.

## Chapter Nine

# BALLOONS

NYX STARED AT Zero, eyes wide and furious. When he didn't immediately react, she started gesturing angrily with her hands.

Zero stared back helplessly, and whispered as softly as he could. "What?"

"You bone-headed, vacuum-brained idiot!" she whispered. "We're trapped in here!"

"That's not my fault!"

"Why did you come in here?"

"Why did you follow me?"

Nyx rolled her eyes. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"Exactly!" hissed Zero. "That's why I jumped."

"Quiet," said Nyx. "They'll hear us."

The woman by the door walked back toward the center of the room.

"I'm excited to get this out there," said a different woman. She sounded oddly chipper, like she was at a party instead of a criminal hideout. "The latest readings from the control center say there's a huge silica deposit about two hundred kilometers from here—and no other silica deposits anywhere in the area. If we get there first, we could have the monopoly."

"What's silica?" Zero whispered.

"Glass," said Nyx. "People use it to make computer screens. If they found the only silica in the area, they could be zillionaires."

"That's bad," said Zero. "They might not hurt us over a stolen Drill, but they'll definitely kill us to be zillionaires."

"Then we can't get caught," whispered Nyx. "Shut up."

The woman in the mining clothes spoke again: "If we're going to go, we have to go now. We'll get the balloons prepped, and the Tank ready to go, and as soon as they call everyone down to the bunkers we'll open the doors and fly."

"They'll see us," said the man. His voice sounded gruff and

grumpy. "I can hide us from the sensors and cameras, but not from actual people looking at us. I can't hack eyeballs."

"There's an image," said the chipper woman, sounding like she'd seen a delicious piece of cake. "A bunch of eyeballs all hacked up!"

"What is wrong with her?" whispered Zero.

A third woman spoke, sounding for all the world like a bored, sarcastic teenager. "I don't know why you're even talking about this," she said. "You can't fly this anywhere: that dragon will eat it."

"We didn't know about the dragons when we hatched this plan," said the miner. "It's too late to back out now."

"We should name ourselves the Dragons!" said the woman brightly. "Everyone would be terrified of us!"

"Sure," said the teenager. "Real terrified."

"The dragons are gone," said the older man. "Spotters haven't seen either of them in hours. I think they've left the area, to keep away from the storm."

Nyx looked at Zero. "Dragonzzzz? Plural?"

"And I don't blame them," said the miner. "The storm is already getting—" She stopped suddenly, as a particularly strong gust of wind slammed into the side of the storage pod. Zero grabbed Nyx's arm, suddenly frightened by the thought of an untamed alien planet just on the other side of the thin pod wall, angry and active and ready to crush them. "You see?" said the miner. "The storm is getting bad, and this is just the outer edge of it. We have to go now, find a good spot, and use the Tank to burrow down for shelter before the real storm hits."

"We won't make it to the silica in time," said the gruff man.

"Then we go as far as we can, and wait it out," said the miner. "We have plenty of food, and hazard suits for the four of us, and the face masks can keep us breathing for days if they have to."

"I love this plan," said the deadpan teenager. "I'm so excited I left everything I ever knew and flew twenty light-years out here to be a part of it."

"Aura ..." said the old man with a grumble.

"It's the only way," said the miner. "The storm is the only time the control center will be evacuated, so no one will see us leave."

"The only time except for the other two times," said Aura. "Which we're obviously not counting, because ... counting sucks, I guess? Whatever, I don't actually care."

"Aura ..." said the old man, growing even more frustrated.

"Yes, there are two more windstorms coming," said the miner. "But what if the first one's not as bad as they're expecting? What if they decide they can keep people in the control center during the next two? This is the only time we're absolutely sure that they're evacuating everyone into bunkers. It's our only shot."

"I say we go for it!" said the cheerful woman. "How hard could it be? Worst case scenario we have to kill one of those dragons with our bare hands, right? Bring it on, Flappy!"

"Yeah," said Aura, sounding more bored than ever. "Screw reality; let's fight a dragon."

"Why did you even bring her?" the miner demanded.

"She's my daughter," said the old man sharply. "Speak with respect."

"She doesn't."

"She I can discipline nonviolently," said the older man. "You I just ... threaten with a crowbar 'til you stop mouthing off."

"You want to try it, old man?" asked the miner.

"I want to try it!" said the cheerful woman. "Where's the crowbar?"

"And speaking of which," said the miner, "why do we have her? She's a psychopath."

"She's a lawyer," said the older man. "Which is even better. You can mine the silica, and I can hide it from their computer system, but if we want any chance of selling it back to the colony without being immediately thrown in prison for non-approved mining, we need Debra."

"Call me Debbie!" said the woman. "No—wait! Call me Dragonrider. Dragonslayer? Dragon ... puncher! Because I don't want to slay them, just punch them until they accept me as their leader. So I can ride them."

"How did you ever pass your psychological evaluation to join this colony?" asked the miner.

"Hi," said Debbie, her voice sounding so abruptly calm and professional that Zero almost thought it was a different person. "I'm Debra Gage, of Gage & Whittaker Associates." And then she laughed, and went back to her bright, bubbly voice. "See? I can turn on the normal when I need it. Besides, you know how many psych evals I had when I was in prison? Once you get the first few under your belt they're so easy to fool."

"You were in prison?" asked the miner.

"I wiped her record clean to get her on this mission," said the old man. "Just like I wiped yours, Bailey: you wouldn't have gotten within three hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometers of that spaceship if they'd known you'd been fired from those other mines. Or why."

"Three hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometers is a very specific number," said Aura.

"That's the distance from Earth to the moon," said the miner. Bailey, apparently. "How do you not know that?"

"Sorry," said Aura, "I didn't realize that your main contribution to this mission was trivia."

Another burst of wind hammered at the outside of the storage pod, hard enough to shake the walls.

"Everybody shut up," said Bailey. "And that includes you, Morrison—just because you're the oldest doesn't make you the boss. Every one of us came on this mission for one purpose, and one purpose only: to steal this Drill Tank, start our own mine, and get rich. If you don't want to be a part of that, go hide in the bunkers and wait out the storm and spend the rest of your life doing whatever Emperor Hatendi tells you to do. Otherwise, shut up and help me get the balloons on this thing."

"You said shut up twice," said Aura.

"And it still didn't work," said Bailey.

"You want me to shut her up?" asked Debbie.

"No," growled Morrison.

The storage pod shook again, so hard that the shelves rattled.

"We might already be too late," said Bailey, softly.

The next gust of wind shifted the shelf Nyx and Zero were hiding behind.

"That was the floor," said Aura, suddenly taking an interest in the situation. "It's one thing for the walls to shake, but the floor?"

A shelf crashed down, somewhere on the far side of the storage pod. Debbie yelped in fright, then laughed hysterically. "This is great!"

"Help me with these balloons," said Bailey. "They're self-inflating, and we only need eight."

"Are they hurricane-proof?" asked Aura. "Because I'm starting to think we need weights on this thing, not balloons."

Another shelf crashed down, so close to Nyx and Zero they had to leap out of the way to avoid it. Zero grunted out loud when his jump slammed him into a wall.

"What was that?" asked Bailey.

"Somebody's here," said Morrison.

"Oh, goody!" said Debbie. "Can we torture them?"

## Chapter Ten

# WIND

ZERO LEAPED FOR the door, kicking off of a shelf as he went past it. The shelf teetered, then collapsed, crashing to the ground in a bouncy sort of low-gravity slow motion. Bailey the miner shouted in surprise, jumping back, and Zero wrenched at the door handle, hoping the crash had bought him enough time to get it open. It didn't do any good: the door was locked, and Zero couldn't budge it. Two pairs of hands grabbed him, one on each side.

"Gotcha," said Bailey.

"I like this one," said Debbie. "He fights!"

Zero struggled against them desperately, trying to get free, but their grip was like iron. Suddenly Nyx sailed in from the side, kicking at their heads and screaming a war cry. Bailey let go of Zero to swat at her, knocking her into another shelf, but Debbie clutched Zero's arm so tightly he thought his bones might snap in half. Nyx tumbled to the ground, and Bailey grabbed her before she could get away.

"Keep them quiet," snarled Morrison. "Someone's going to hear them."

Aura snorted. "Like anyone can hear anything in this wind."

"This is not the time!" Morrison snapped.

"Let us go!" said Zero. "My dad's an engineer! They'll come looking for—" and then he couldn't say anything else, because Debbie wrapped a cargo strap over his mouth like a gag. Bailey did the same to Nyx, and then the thieves tied their hands and legs as well. When they were completely incapacitated, Bailey propped them against the tank treads on the Drill Tank. The wind howled and shook the pod, and the six people looked at each other.

It was the first good look Zero had gotten at any of the robbers. All four were wearing the standard Pathfinder jumpsuit, though it was easy to tell who was who. Bailey the miner was wearing a hazard suit over the top of her jumpsuit, so she looked more baggy and dirty than the others; she'd clearly been working with machines all

day: her face was smudged with motor oil, and her brown hair was damp with sweat.

Next to her was Aura, who looked like the complete opposite: she was young, maybe seventeen, and didn't seem to have worked a day in her life. She had long, thin limbs and long, black hair, topped by a round, knit cap that she'd managed to smuggle from Earth. She stared at the two children with a mixture of confusion, wonder, and disgust.

Morrison was the oldest of the four, though still not super old—maybe sixty years at the most, with short gray hair cropped close to his head, and a stern, grizzled face that looked like it belonged on an army sergeant instead of a computer hacker. He was holding a tablet in one hand, probably connected to the central base network, though he too busy sneering at the interlopers to be using it at the moment.

Last of all was Debbie the Dragonpuncher: short and plump, middle-aged and rosy-cheeked. She looked for all the world like a schoolteacher—the kind who bakes cookies for her students, and calls them *sweetie* and loves to make everyone happy. Only a slight wideness to her eyes, far wider than normal eyes were supposed to open, gave any hint at the dangerous lunatic her comments had shown her to be.

"This is wonderful!" said Debbie. "We have hostages! Oh, I feel like a real criminal again!"

"This is not good," said Bailey. "What are we supposed to do with them? They know who we are, and they know what we're planning; if we leave them here they'll tell the Governor everything."

Zero and Nyx both started shaking their heads violently—no, they would not tell a single soul about anything—but the robbers ignored them.

"If we take them with us," said Bailey, "then it gets even worse. Morrison's hidden our signals from the computer, but what about these two? They'll have chips in their jumpsuits that the security people will track straight to us."

"The one with a jumpsuit, at least," said Aura.

"Plus it's a bigger crime," said Morrison. "Debra can talk us out of theft and treason—that's why we brought her—but kidnapping is a whole new level."

"Not really," said Debbie. "Once you've gone all the way to treason there's not much else you can add to make it worse. I mean, we



shouldn't kill them, but we can get away with a lot more than you probably think we can. Especially if they don't know we have them."

"Why is she wearing real clothes?" asked Aura, and the other thieves stopped arguing long enough to look at Nyx's leather jacket, look at Zero's jumpsuit, then look back at Nyx's jacket.

"That is a very good question," said Bailey.

"No, it's not," said Morrison. "Focus on the job." He rummaged in his pocket, pulled out a small rod, and aimed it at Zero like a gun. Zero flinched, but nothing happened—at least, nothing he could see or hear. Morrison seemed to think something soundless and invisible had happened, though, because he held the rod for a moment and then put it away. "There. That's an EMP wand; any locator chips they might have on them are good and dead now."

The storage pod shook in the wind, nearly buckling at the seams.

"I bet she's the hitchhiker," said Bailey. "Did you hear about that? Pirates tried to hijack the ship back by Earth, and one of them stayed on board." He looked at Nyx. "Are you the pirate kid?"

Nyx stared back, uncertain what to do. Eventually she nodded, but her eyes were sharp and wary.

"See?" said Bailey. "For all we know they're trying to steal something, just like we are."

"Well, don't say that right in front of them," growled Morrison.

"They were already listening to everything," said Debbie, beaming. "There's nothing we could say now that they didn't already hear, so just say whatever you like!" She leaned in close, speaking in a slow, loud voice, as if the children didn't speak the same language. "We're going to kidnap you. We're going to use you as hostages. Or maybe dragon-taming treats."

"No one is eating the children," said Bailey, and then raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Why do I even have to say that?"

"Hello, little pirate girl," said Debbie. "What were you doing in here?"

"Cool question," said Aura. "Is she going to blink you the answer in Morse code?"

Morrison stepped forward, hefting a broken piece of shelving like a club. He looked at Nyx sternly. "If I take that gag off, you're going to stay quiet, right? I won't have to use this metal bar to stop you from shouting for help?"

Nyx nodded as strongly as she could.

Morrison started to step closer, but Bailey stopped him.

"Wait," said Bailey. "Was she nodding 'yes, I'll be quiet,' or 'yes, you'll have to use the bar'?"

"Why would she look excited about someone hitting her with a bar?" asked Aura.

"I don't know," said Bailey, "stupid Dragonpuncher over here looks excited about everything. I'm just trying to remove the ambiguity." She looked at Nyx. "Do you promise to be quiet?"

Nyx nodded again.

"There," said Bailey. "I was just making sure."

Morrison untied the cargo strap from Nyx's face, and stepped back. "So tell us, pirate girl: what were you doing here?"

"Just ... exploring?" said Nyx. "Couple of bored kids? But we definitely aren't going to tell anyone what we saw or heard in here—definitely. I'm a pirate, right? Solidarity! Take the Drill Tank if you want it—take two, for all I care. Sell your silica! Get paid! We're all friends here!"

"Do you want to come with us?" asked Debbie with wide, eager eyes. "Think of all the new things you could try!"

"You said you were going to feed her to a dragon," said Aura.

"And she's never been fed to a dragon before," said Debbie. "Exciting!"

"That might not be how she sees it," said Bailey.

"I would love to go with you," said Nyx, "but the trouble is, everybody knows me, right? So if I go, they'll notice I'm gone. Same with Zero: he's got a mom and dad and stuff." Zero nodded eagerly, and Nyx continued. "So the best thing to do is just let us go, and we'll ... help you from here! We can make sure nobody figures out it was you that took the Drill!"

"It would be nice to have someone helping out from the inside," said Bailey.

Debbie laughed. "Let me go and I'll help you!" she shouted, mocking Nyx's voice. "Nobody ever actually does that. We have to take them or kill them."

"You're assuming we can go at all," said Morrison. "I wouldn't bet on it at this point. The wind is so bad now it feels like it's trying to rip this storage pod right off the ground."

"This storage pod is held down by three steel-cable anchors," said Bailey. "We're fine."

"Oh, three whole anchors?" said Aura. "Thank goodness; I was worried it wouldn't be very many."

Another gust of wind slammed into the wall, rattling the door in its frame.

"Maybe we should go," said Morrison.

"Maybe we should go outside," said Debbie. "Yee-haw!"

"I'm serious," said Morrison. "We're not floating that Drill Tank anywhere in this storm—the wind came early, and it's already too strong." He held up the tablet in his hand. "They've already sent out the emergency alert, calling everyone to the bunkers underground. Our best bet is to join them, lay low, and figure out another plan."

"What about the kids?" asked Bailey. "You can tell the computer that we're in the bunker, and the human beings waiting in there will believe it because nobody knows us. They won't physically notice our absence. These two, though—they've got people, like the girl said. They'll go looking, and they'll look everywhere. And eventually they'll find this room, with these kidnapped kids and this stolen Drill Tank, and we do not have any kind of contingency plan for that."

"So we use the kids!" said Debbie. "We ..." She racked her brain, and then her eyes lit up with a brilliant idea. "We put them outside! We tie them to something, so they don't blow away, but on the other side of the base. The search party and the rescue mission will occupy everyone's attention, and allow us to sneak out the back with the Drill."

"In a hurricane?" asked Aura. "Are you insane?"

"Technically, yes," said Debbie, her smile never faltering. "That doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"I'm done here," said Aura. She walked toward the door. "You can have your Drill and your kidnapping and your ... whatever else. You're all crazy. I won't rat on you but I'm done." She tried the door, but it was locked. "Open the door."

The floor bucked under them again, and the walls were shaking so hard Zero thought they might shatter any second.

"Nobody gets out of here without this ID card," said Bailey, holding it up.

"Unlock it," said Aura, "or I'll tear it off its hinges."

"That door is reinforced plasteel, connected to a titanium cable walkway," said Bailey. "Nothing can tear it off."

Barely half a heartbeat later, the wind tore it off.

Three things happened at once, so fast that Zero could barely keep track of them.

First, he looked out the open door and saw that the walkway was gone—the windstorm had ripped it away, probably long before it tore off the door. There was absolutely nothing between them and the untamed wilds of Kaguya.

Second, the storage pod filled with a burst of air so powerful it knocked the wind from Zero's lungs—from his and from everybody else's. Up until now they'd been breathing a normal human atmosphere, at a normal Earth pressure, but now the storage pod flooded with Kaguya's air: air they could breathe, but air that was so heavy it seemed to hit them like a truck.

Third, the storage pod lifted into the air. The wind filled it up like a parachute, trying to carry it away into the sky, only barely held back by the three steel cables still tethering the pod to the ground. Zero tried to scream, but the air was so dense he had to struggle just to inhale it, and he didn't have the strength to make a sound.

One of the cables snapped, tilting the storage pod dangerously to one side. Aura, standing in the door, had been blown back inside toward the others, and they all tumbled together in a crushing tangle of bodies and shelves and equipment. A second cable snapped, and they spun around like clothes in a dryer—or like rocks in a polisher, banging and slamming into each other.

Then the third cable snapped, and the storage pod, and the Drill, and the shelves and the thieves and Zero and Nyx, all flew away into the night.

## Chapter Eleven

# THE GIGGLES

ZERO COULD NEVER remember how long they'd flown through the air; he could only remember tumbling and rolling and crashing into the people and objects that filled the pod. Or ... not exactly into them. Shelves and equipment did definitely bang into him a few times, and he knew he'd have some pretty impressive bruises if he lived through this, but mostly what crashed into him was ... air. It was like being in a pool full of water—shake it up, like a wave pool at a waterpark, and you might bump into another person now and then, but most of what's going to hit you is water. The air on Kaguya felt the same: so heavy, and so dense, that Zero could feel the waves of it bumping into him, moving him back and forth, even in the tiny space of the storage pod. He wasn't floating, exactly—it wasn't as thick as water—but he was aware of the air, in a way that he'd never really been aware of air before.

That heightened awareness helped him to notice something else: moving through this air was slow. Falling was ... well, slow. Slow was really the only word for it. He'd thought things had fallen slowly inside the base, but that was just low gravity. Out here, in the wild, it was low gravity and heavy air: the planet didn't pull things down as strongly, and the air pushed them up a little. Again, it wasn't quite like being in water, but it was enough that you could notice it. Things fell slowly.

And good thing they did, too, because Zero and Nyx and all four robbers were high in the sky, in a storage pod, being carried by the storm. And when the storm finally stopped—Zero had no idea long it lasted—they started to sort of drift toward the ground. They weren't gliding, but they weren't plummeting, either. Just lazily floating toward the ground, as if a massive fall from hundreds of feet in the air were no big deal.

Zero thought this was kind of funny. He laughed once, the sound only barely escaping through the cargo strap still wrapped around

his mouth. The muffled *smmmf* of sound was even funnier, somehow, and he laughed again.

Debbie was laughing, too. "We're falling!" she said. "Wheeee!"

"This isn't funny," growled Morrison.

"Your voice is hilarious," said Nyx, laughing out loud. "I know I'm your prisoner, and you can kill me or whatever, but your voice is so funny I can't even stand it."

"It's because he's so growly," laughed Debbie.

"It's because we're falling to our deaths," said Bailey, with a giggle of her own. "Why am I laughing at that? That's not funny. I don't want to die." She tried to stop laughing, half-buried in a pile of mining equipment, tumbling out of the sky, but she couldn't help herself. She stifled the laugh, made a *smmmf* sound almost exactly like Zero's, and then burst into loud guffaws.

"Oh, man," said Debbie. "I am never stealing with anyone else again. You guys are the best!"

"And I'm never getting kidnapped by anyone else," said Nyx. "This is the happiest I have ever been!"

"I hate everything," said Aura, trying not to giggle, "but there's absolutely nothing bad about this situation. It's the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Zero laughed with them, but something about it felt wrong. Why were they laughing? And why were they laughing so hard? It was certainly funny—he'd been laughing, too, after all—but it was also strange. Weren't they falling to their death? Miles away from the base, in a hostile alien world? Nyx had managed to get free of her bonds, but she wasn't doing anything about it—she was laughing too hard to free him, or to try to escape. They could be eaten by a dragon, or chewed on by a bumblebeever, or poisoned or scalded or killed by any number of other alien things in the wilds of Kaguya. Hadn't his father said something about ... he couldn't remember. Maybe it was his mother. Someone had said that Kaguya was so dangerous even the air could hurt them. It was breathable, but ... something. Something was wrong. That's why they had to stay inside the base, and that's why they had to always carry rebreathers.

The rebreathers. They had to carry rebreathers, even inside of the base, so they could put them on if the walls were ever breached. And this storage pod was definitely breached. Zero looked over at the

open door, flapping in the breeze as the storage pod wafted toward the ground. Why was that so funny?

And then he remembered: the air was heavy because it was full of xenon. And xenon would make them loopy and then put them to sleep.

Zero tried to talk, but his mouth was still gagged; he tried to wave his hands or feet to get Nyx's attention, but he was still tied up. Instead he opened his eyes as wide as he could—anything to make them look at him—and started shaking his head wildly, back and forth and up and down.

"Look at this one!" shouted Debbie, giggling like a maniac. "He's like a bobblehead doll!" She started shaking her head along with him, laughing and ignoring everything.

"Oh, man," said Morrison, even his grim facade cracking up with laughter. "Look at them! It's a race! Who's going to finish first?"

"Finish shaking their heads?" asked Aura. "That doesn't make any sense! You're a goofy woofy little daddy waddy."

Zero was getting more and more nervous. Everyone in the pod was more loopy than he was; maybe the xenon hadn't affected him as much yet because of the strap over his mouth. But he was still tied up, and if they didn't untie him before the xenon knocked them all unconscious, he'd be stuck this way forever. Or until a dragon found the pod and ate them.

Zero looked at Nyx, trying to get her attention. She looked back, her eyes only barely focused on his face. The gas was affecting her too strongly; he didn't have much time. He stared at her intently, trying to keep her eyes on his, willing her to understand. After a moment of staring back, Nyx spoke in a slurred voice.

"He's not laughing as much," she said. "That strap's in the way." She moved toward him, crawling across the pile of shifting junk inside the drifting storage pod. The robbers were too far gone to care, assuming they even noticed; all four were locked in helpless fits of laughter. Nyx reached Zero, grabbed the cargo strap, and started to pry it off his face.

Zero knew he only had one shot. As soon as the strap was gone, Kaguya's air would rush into his lungs and he'd be just as helpless as everyone else. He'd have time to say one thing, but what? Should he ask her to untie him? No, it would take too long. Ask for a re-

breather? No, because what good would that do? He'd be conscious, but still tied up.

Nyx wrenched the cargo strap free from his head, and Zero said his one, last sentence:

"Put on your rebreather."

And that, he decided, was the funniest thing he'd ever heard in his life. He laughed and laughed and chuckled and giggled and guffawed, and then he passed out.



## Chapter Twelve

# STRANDED

ZERO WOKE UP feeling groggy, and oddly stationary. Hadn't he been falling? What had happened? He had something blocking his mouth, and he tried to reach for it, but someone pushed his hand away.

"I said stop it," said a voice. Zero was vaguely aware that it was Nyx. "If you reach for that rebreather one more time I'm going to tie you back up again, I swear."

Zero groaned, and tried to sit up.

"Oh," said Nyx. "You're finally waking up for real."

"What do you mean, for real?" asked Zero. His voice sounded unnaturally deep. "What's ... wrong with my voice?"

"I think it's the air pressure," said Nyx. She helped him sit up, on what felt like a pile of dirt, though Zero knew that couldn't be true. "When you breathe helium, your voice gets higher because it's lighter than normal air. Right now we're breathing xenon, which is heavier than normal air, so our voices are a little lower. Or at least your voice is—I've had the rebreather on long enough that mine's back to normal again."

"Wow," said Zero, marveling at the bass tone. "I sound like a blues singer. 'Ohhhh yeaaaaah.' No, how about this one: 'I ... am your father.'"

"Oh, for crying out loud," said Nyx. "Have the xenon giggles not worn off yet?"

"Oh, they have," said Zero, "this is just regular me, screwing around. 'Listen to that rich molasses.'"

"Thank goodness," said Nyx. "You've been unconscious forever."

"Pork chawwwwps and applesaaaaaaauce."

"Can you please focus?" snapped Nyx. "I need your help."

"Fine," said Zero. "Are we back at the base? Is that why the xenon is wearing off?"

"Open your eyes, you moron. We're in the middle of nowhere."

Zero tried to open his eyes, but he was still groggy and sleepy and

the light was incredibly bright, so it took him a few moments to really get a good look at anything. When he did, he gasped.

The thing he was sitting on, that felt like a pile of dirt, really was a pile of dirt. Deep, black Kaguya dirt. Alien dirt. Zero and Nyx were sitting outside, on alien dirt, surrounded by giant alien flowers. The petals littered the ground like leaves in autumn, hundreds and thousands of them; the iridescent stalks poked up like bare poles, reaching several stories into the sky. There were other kinds of exoflora as well—fat, gray mushroom-like things, with knobby peaks a little shorter than Zero's head, and wispy clouds of interconnected thread, like nets, that seemed to float in the air like tethered, yellow webs. Debris from the storage pod was scattered around them, and bright orange crystals poked up through the ground here and there. There were even some kind of butterflies, dog-sized and furry, about a hundred yards away, flitting between the flowers and nibbling on some kind of pink, silky strands that grew in patches on the stalks.

Zero looked at Nyx, and she looked back with wide, worried eyes.

"This is freaky," said Zero.

"You're telling me," said Nyx. "I've decided I don't like skies—it's just so open out here. I get vertigo every time I look up. I want a ceiling, and I want it now."

"You'll get used to it," said Zero.

"And I don't like animals, either," said Nyx. "That group of ... doggerflies is more animals than I've ever seen in one place in my life, and they are right there, and they are eating." She grabbed a handful of her hair. "Is my hair the same color as those strings?"

"You don't look like a string."

"What if one of those things gets curious for a nibble?"

"Nothing is going to eat you."

"You don't know that."

Zero stopped, thought, and then sighed. "You're right, I don't. But they're not eating you right now, so calm down and let's figure this out. What happened?"

"The storm threw us several miles away from the base." She held up a small, blinking device, about the size of a deck of cards. "I can't read this thing really well, but it looks like maybe twenty miles."

"We flew twenty miles?" asked Zero. "How did we survive?"

"The air's so dense, we landed pretty lightly. Some of the gear

broke, and I think one of the robbers broke a leg or something. Bailey, the miner lady."

Zero looked around suddenly. "The robbers! Where are they?"

"Still in the tent," said Nyx, standing up. "When you reminded me about the rebreather, one of them heard the same warning and put his on as well. Morrison, the old guy. He still passed out, but if you're waking up now he'll probably start waking up soon, too. I was going to try to pull his rebreather off, to keep them all asleep, but I guess I'd had enough of the xenon by then because I passed out, too."

"Where are they?"

"Right on the other side of this hill," said Nyx, pointing at a low rise of dirt behind him. "As soon as I woke up I pulled you out and hid us over here." She held up the little device. "Got the radio, too, but I think it's broken."

"That's a radio? Have you called for help?"

"No luck," said Nyx. "Just this transponder thing works—it'll tell me where the base is, but it's not telling the base where we are. And the voice and text functions are totally borked."

"Can I see?" asked Zero. Nyx handed him the small device, and he fiddled with it for a moment before shrugging and handing it back. "I don't actually know how this works."

"I used a similar radio on Tacita," said Nyx, "so I know enough to use it. Not enough to fix it, though."

"And they killed the locator chip in my jumpsuit," said Zero, "so there's no way for anyone to find us. We didn't even leave tracks, because we flew. Or maybe the Pathfinder can see us from orbit? They were using visual spotters to look for the dragon."

"Yeah," said Nyx, "mention the dragon again. That makes me feel sooooo much safer out here."

"I'm just saying they can see us," said Zero. "Hatendi or one of her people can spot us with an orbital telescope and send someone out to pick us up."

"First of all," said Nyx, "look up."

Zero looked up: the sky was filled end to end with bright green clouds. "Crap," he said.

"Yeah," said Nyx. "They're not going to find us visually, and we don't have a signal, so we're on our own. Second of all: even if the Pathfinder could see us, at that distance the only thing big enough

for them to notice is the storage pod, and whatever crater or smashed flowers it left when it landed. And I don't know how much longer we want to stay next to the storage pod."

Zero frowned. "Why not?"

Nyx pointed behind him. "Because they're waking up."

Zero turned, and heard voices: Morrison's low growl, and Debbie's manic laugh. He tried to stand, but his legs were wobbly, and he had to grab Nyx's arm for support. He stood still for a moment, regaining his balance, when Debbie suddenly lurched out from behind the hill, her mouth covered by a rebreather.

"They're here!" she cackled, and then fell on her side.

"I think she's still loopy from xenon," said Aura's voice, echoing over the hill.

"I think she's just like this," said Morrison's voice. He peeked out from behind the hill. "There they are. Get them!" He started sprinting forward, wearing a rebreather of his own.

"Run!" shouted Nyx, and they turned and bolted through the forest of flowers.

Zero was still feeling a little loopy himself, and his first two steps ignored everything he'd learned about how to move on Kaguya: he pushed too hard, and propelled himself almost straight up in the low gravity. Morrison ran closer and closer, and Zero had no forward momentum to carry him away from danger, so all he could do was watch helplessly as he slowly—so, so slowly—drifted back down toward the ground.

Nyx shouted, and doubled back to help, but it was too late. Morrison's grin of triumph was visible even behind the rebreather. He reached out his hand to grab Zero's foot—and then, at the last minute, his own foot slipped on one of the fallen flower petals, and he flew through the air, right past Zero. Morrison's arms pinwheeled wildly, trying to steady himself, but he had no control and slammed headfirst into a purple flower stalk. It squished slightly, like it was made of rubber, and he bounced off it with a groan.

Zero's feet finally touched the ground again, just as Nyx reached him and grabbed his hand. "Come on!" she shouted, and pulled him forward.

This time Zero remembered the tricks he'd learned about how to move in the low gravity, and instead of trying to run he did a long, controlled leap. His first jump took him past Morrison, groaning on

the ground, and he sailed between two thick flower stalks. His second jump took him even farther, flying away from the robbers now scrambling to pursue them. His third jump took him headfirst into a flower stalk of his own, and he reeled back with a grunt. The light purple stalk was smooth, like the skin of a dolphin, and it felt like hitting a floor mat in a gym.

"Careful," said Nyx, and then crashed into a flower stalk of her own. "*Oof*. We have got to get out of these flowers."

"Can we?" He looked behind himself, and saw the robbers closing the distance quickly with jumps of their own. "It looks like this whole planet is covered with them."

"You're asking me?" said Nyx. She leaped forward, and he followed as carefully as he could, trying to go as far as possible without crashing. "You're the one who knows how planets work, remember? How do you get out of a flower patch on Earth?"

"Earth flowers are tiny," said Zero, dodging around the side of another purple stalk. "The big ones are called trees."

"What's the difference?"

Zero thought about it for a moment, then grimaced. "Nothing, I guess: they're big, tall plants that grow in groups. Getting out of a tree-forest is probably about the same as getting out of a flower-forest."

"Great," said Nyx, her breath puffing with the exertion. "So how do we do it?"

"Just find the edge," said Zero. "Forests have edges, or ... meadows or whatever, in the middle. They can't go on forever."

Zero heard Debbie's voice, uncomfortably close behind him: "I've almost got him! Next jump for sure!"

Zero was already in the air, with no time to react. How close was she? How could he get away? He imagined any second now feeling her iron grip clamp down on his shoulder. He panicked, and tried the only thing he could think of: he reached out his right arm, grabbed at the closest flower stalk he could reach, and swung himself around it. The heavy air whooshed passed his head and face, but the trick worked: he turned himself almost 90 degrees to the side, and was now sailing in a new direction. He hit the ground with his toes, pushed off, and jumped again.

"Zero!" shouted Nyx. "Come back here!"

"Follow me!" Zero shouted back. He could see a break in the flow-

ers ahead of him. "I think I see the edge!"

Aura, the youngest of the robbers, was right on Nyx's heels, but then Nyx changed course even more deftly than Zero had, and dodged out of her reach. Debbie and Morrison had already turned, and were following Zero closely. Zero jumped for all he was worth, dodging between the flowers, until finally his last leap took him out of the flower forest—

—and out over a deep chasm, lined with jagged orange crystals.

"Aaaaah!" he screamed.

"Aaaaah!" Nyx screamed with him, jumping out after him.

They sailed through the air, and Zero eyed the opposite side of the chasm with desperation, hoping he had enough momentum to reach it. He watched as the ledge rose up: first past foot level, then past eye level. A massive orange crystal loomed in front of him like a spike, and he screamed again, but he missed it by inches—only his arm, flailing out to the side, caught the edge of it, slicing a razor-thin line on his forearm. He slammed into the wall—though not too hard, because the heavy air cushioned him—and slid down just a meter or so before coming to rest on another flat crystal. Nyx landed nearby, and slid down to a lower crystal before coming to a similar stop.

The cut burned Zero's arm, like the crystal was made of something caustic, like an acid or a cleanser. He hoped it wasn't poisonous. He turned and looked for the robbers, but none of them had made the leap. Morrison and Aura stood on the far edge of the chasm, and when Debbie came hurtling past they caught her and pulled her back.

"Oh, come on," said Debbie. "That looked like fun!"

"It's too far," said Morrison.

Debbie snorted. "They made it."

"And nearly cut themselves to ribbons on those crystals," said Morrison. "We're bigger—we'll never fit between the edges like they did; we'll get shredded."

"We should definitely let her try, then," said Aura.

Bailey hobbled up behind them, with one leg wrapped in a makeshift splint, using a piece of shelving as a crutch. "What are you waiting for?" she asked. "They're going to get away!"

"We just explained that," Morrison growled. "I'm not explaining it again."

Nyx stood up slowly on her crystal. "I think we can jump up," she

said. She crouched and jumped up, reaching high enough that she could just grab the ledge at the top of the chasm.

"See!" said Debbie. "They're getting away!"

Zero jumped up after Nyx, reaching the top but cutting himself again in the process. The crystals were sharp as knives, and stung like acid.

"No, he's right," said Bailey. "We'd tear ourselves to shreds trying to get through that wall of crystals." She looked along the length of the chasm, first one way and then another. "There," she pointed. "That's the end of it. We can cross there."

"Let's go!" shouted Debbie, but Morrison grabbed her again as she tried to jump away.

"We'll never catch them like this," said Morrison.

"We can use the Drill Tank," said Bailey. "Even as fast as you were jumping, those Tanks are faster once they get up to speed."

"How are we going to know where to go?" asked Debbie. "They're getting away now—we have to follow now, or we'll lose them in the flowers."

"The terrain over there is a lot more open," said Morrison. "We'll find them."

"Go team kidnapper," said Aura, in a flat, deadpan tone. "Rah rah, gotta catch 'em all."

"Come on," said Nyx. "We need to run."

Zero followed her, and they ran.

## Chapter Thirteen

# FIRE SAFETY

“HANG ON A MINUTE,” said Nyx, gasping for breath. They’d been jumping for what felt like miles. “I need to stop for a second.”

“Me, too,” said Zero. Even with the rebreathers, the air here was heavy. Zero felt like he was working for every breath, and he welcomed the chance to sit down, even if only for a moment. They leaped up onto the side of a hill, where a giant flower grew right next to a big orange crystal, making a small wall they could hide behind. He peered over it, watching the way behind them, looking for the Drill Tank. At least for now, no one was following them.

“I think we lost them,” said Nyx. They’d turned to the side for a while, jumping off in a new direction, trying to make it harder for the robbers to find them. It seemed to have worked. “I think we can rest for a minute or two.” She picked up one of the nearby flower petals—every petal in the area seemed to be on the ground—and held it over her head like an umbrella, blocking out the sun. “I’ve decided I don’t like planets,” she said with a scowl. “Everything here is trying to kill me—even the star! It’s burning me!”

“When we’re down on a planet we call the star a sun,” said Zero. “And yes, they can burn you, though this one’s almost setting, so it’s getting pretty weak. But I guess that doesn’t help much when you’ve spent your whole life on space stations and deep space mining colonies—your skin is probably super sensitive.”

“Ha ha,” she said, as deadpan as Aura. “Very funny, Earthling. All I’m saying is, I’ll be very happy to get back to the base again.”

“How close are we?”

Nyx looked at the half-broken radio in her hand. “Eighteen miles. We’ve only gone two.”

“I think we’ve gone more,” said Zero, “it was just parallel to the base instead of straight toward it.” He looked behind them, scanning every hill and crevice for the Drill Tank. “I think we’re going to have to admit it.”

“What?”



"That we're going to have to spend the night out here," said Zero. Nyx groaned.

Zero looked at the fallen flower petals around him, each as big as a pillow—or even bigger. "Maybe we can use these to keep us warm?" He picked one up, turning it over in his hands. It was like a stiff rubber mat. "Though who knows how cold it gets out here." He turned it over again. "Why do you think these petals all fell down?"

"I thought you were the planet expert," said Nyx.

"On Earth we have a thing where all the leaves fall off the trees," said Zero, "but that's different. This happened instantly, to every leaf in the area, just in the space of a couple of hours—oh, duh. It was the windstorm."

"The wind did this?" Nyx looked around at the fallen petals, like a slick, shiny carpet of iridescent purple. "I'm going to assume that this is normal, then—that this happens all the time, and one windstorm didn't kill the whole planet. Which means these petals are supposed to fall off. Maybe ..." She frowned, thinking, and then nodded. "Maybe that's how the flowers protect themselves from the storm. The storage pod was too big, and too wide, and it tried to resist the wind and got demolished. The flowers just break apart, so the wind slides right by them."

Zero nodded. "I bet you're right." He grinned. "You're getting pretty good at this planet stuff."

"Science is science."

"I bet that's why they're flowers in the first place," said Zero. "On Earth, the trees are really hard—they're rigid, enough that we actually build things out them. These flowers can just bend and move."

Nyx frowned again. "If being bendy is so great, why does Earth have trees at all?"

Zero paused. He'd never thought that before. Earth had flowers, too, just like these, but they never got so big. Why were all the big plants on Earth so rigid, instead of giant, soft flowers like Kaguya?

His father would know, he thought, and for just a moment he felt sad—a wave of sadness and hopelessness so powerful it almost knocked him over. They were trapped out here, in the middle of a hostile wilderness, so far away from his parents that he might never see them again. His eyes felt hot, like he was going to cry, and he glanced backward again, pretending to look for the robbers but real-

ly just to hide his tears. He rubbed his nose, and did his best not to let the tears come out at all.

I don't need my dad, he thought, and then he said it out loud. "I don't need my dad."

"Dude," said Nyx, "I think we definitely need your dad right now."

"I mean I don't need him to tell me why Earth has trees," he said, and rubbed his nose again. He hadn't cried, and he wasn't going to. He looked back at Nyx. "I'm a scientist, just like all of them. So are you. We can figure this out. What does Earth have that Kaguya doesn't have?"

"Trees," said Nyx.

"No, I mean other than that. What does Earth have that would create trees?"

Nyx shrugged. "How would I know? Earth has ..." and then she smiled wickedly. "Spoiled little brats who think that planets are normal and everyone gets one."

Zero pointed at her. "You get to be a pirate, I get to be an Earthling. Fair trade. No: I think I figured it out. What Earth has that Kaguya doesn't is gravity, or I guess I mean strong gravity. Flowers are soft and bendy, but maybe they're too soft and bendy: if they get too big, they can't support their own weight. The only plants capable of growing that tall are hard and solid, like trees. But here on Kaguya, where getting up into the sky is so easy, anything can grow that big. So we have giant flowers."

Nyx pointed at him. "That, my friend, is some quality science."

Zero beamed, but Nyx's smile only lasted a moment before growing dark. She looked down at the ground. "It's okay to miss your family, you know."

"What? I don't miss my family."

"And that's also okay, I guess," said Nyx, but her eyes stayed down, and Zero grew worried. Why was she so sad all of a sudden? The answer, once he thought about it, came as quickly to his mind as the flower answer had. "You miss yours," he said.

"What?" asked Nyx. "Of course not. You met my family, they're the worst."

"They weren't great," said Zero, "but they were yours. And now you're my friend, but we've only known each other for a week, and that's not going to replace everyone you've ever known for your whole entire life."

"Nobody misses awful family," said Nyx. "Do you miss Yan and Park?"

"Not really," said Zero. "Not yet, at least. But they're only twenty miles away, and we'll see them again. Your family is twenty light-years away, and probably dead by now. You'll never see them again even if you want to." He realized that this sounded harsh, and backed off a bit. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make it worse. I'm just saying ... it's okay to miss your family. You know?"

Nyx looked up at him, and smiled thinly. "Yeah," she said. "Thanks." She wiped a finger across her cheek, and then raised her eyebrow. "You know what, though? I think a friend is just as good—especially when we've known each other so long."

"A week?"

"Don't be so modest," said Nyx. "We've been friends for a hundred and five years."

"Here's to a hundred and five more," said Zero, and held out his fist. She bumped it with her own, and then stood up, looking behind them. "I don't think they're anywhere near us—Drill Tanks are super loud, and I can't hear a thing. It's almost dark, though, so ... let's find a safe place to spend the night."

Zero got up as well, and they walked down to the base of the hill. The flower forest was thinner here, but there were still a few stalks, and plenty of petals. There were some kind of low, blue vines that snaked across the ground, and several of those wispy, yellow, bush-like things, too, but the children steered clear of those, worried they might be toxic. Zero scanned the sky nervously, looking for the dragon, but all he saw was dark green clouds, growing darker by the minute.

"I think the dragon is staying away," said Zero. "He left for the first windstorm, but they said we're getting two more. He might not come back until all three have passed."

"We need to get back before the next one," said Nyx. "If something kills me I don't want it to be *air*."

"The last storm didn't kill us."

Nyx shook her head. "If the dragon's afraid of it, I'm afraid of it."

"Good point." Zero rubbed at the cuts on his arms, still sore from the crystals. They ached, but at least the burning sensation had stopped.

They spotted a craggy cliff rising up from the flower forest, and

made their way to it: across the open ground and toward another dense stand of flowers. Now that he had time to actually examine the ground instead of being chased through it, he could see more than just the vines—much of the open ground was covered with some kind of short, yellow grass. On earth, yellow grass meant it was dry or unhealthy, but this grass seemed lush and full. It was just a different color.

“There’s more grass out here, away from the flowers,” said Nyx. “Fewer petals, too. Maybe the grass can’t grow around the flowers, because too many petals fall and cover it?”

“That makes sense,” said Zero.

The cliff wall, as they drew closer, turned out to be studded with crystals—the large orange ones they’d seen everywhere else, with a bunch of smaller green ones scattered in as well. Zero decided he like the way Kaguya looked; the colors were different, but they were vibrant, and they fit together nicely: jet black dirt, bright orange crystals, deep green boulders, and here and there a dusting of rich, yellow grass. The flowers were a pale purple, almost lavender, and with an iridescent sheen that matched the gleaming crystals perfectly.

They found a small overhang at the base of the cliff, under an outcropping of sharp orange crystal. Zero wouldn’t want to try to climb up it, but sitting underneath it gave good shelter. It was nearly full dark now, and with the cloud cover there were no stars or moon to see by.

Zero wondered, suddenly, whether the moon would provide any light at all. Earth’s moon was made of rocks, called regolith, that reflected the sun’s light and seemed to glow in the night sky. Kaguya’s moon was made of gas, like Saturn or Jupiter, which would probably reflect a little light but maybe not as much. The thought that even the moon would fail to help him made Zero feel small, and lost, and more alone than ever.

He sat down close to Nyx, and she sat down close to him, and they pulled their knees up close to their chests and looked out at the alien world.

The moon stayed hidden behind the clouds, but before Zero had a chance to feel sad about it he saw a smaller light from the corner of his eye. He looked, but it flitted away too fast for him to see. He scanned the darkness, and another light, and then another, and soon

there were dozens of them—hundreds of them. Tiny blue lights, shooting back and forth through the air like electric shocks.

“What are those?” asked Nyx.

“Bugs, maybe?” Zero couldn’t see the bodies of whatever created the lights, only the glow of the lights themselves. “Birds? I don’t know.”

“They’re pretty,” said Nyx.

Zero nodded, and decided that maybe it was okay if the moon didn’t glow. Something did. Kaguya was still giving him light.

“I’m hungry,” said Nyx.

“Me, too.” Zero reached behind his head, to the tiny pocket on the strap of the rebreather, and pulled out the emergency kit. “Looks like we have a flashlight and a fire-starting kit, but no food.”

“Your mom said we could eat the flower petals,” said Nyx. She looked half-terrified and half-disgusted. “She said they didn’t have a lot of nutrients, but that they wouldn’t be poisonous. Like thick, purple lettuce.”

Zero eyed some fallen petals warily. “I wonder how it tastes?”

“Probably awful,” said Nyx, but stood up to get one. She hefted it, considered it for a moment, then picked up a second and brought them both back to the overhang. “Here you go.”

“These things are enormous,” said Zero, taking his petal. “You think we need one each?”

“Just try it,” said Nyx. She brought her petal to her face, stared for a moment, then took a big breath, lifted her rebreather away from her mouth, and took a bite. She winced immediately, and dropped the rebreather back into place. “Gack,” she said with her mouth full. “It tastes fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy?” asked Zero. He looked at the petal, but it was smooth as plastic. “It doesn’t have any fuzz.”

“Just try it,” said Nyx. She made a face, chewed, and swallowed. “*Yech.*”

Zero steeled his courage, lifted the alien flower petal, and took a bite. “Holy crap,” he said, grimacing. “It does taste fuzzy. How can something smooth taste fuzzy?”

“I have no idea,” said Nyx, taking another bite. “And it’s not the texture—it doesn’t feel fuzzy, it tastes fuzzy. Fuzzy should not be a flavor.”

“Alien food is weird,” said Zero. He chewed, swallowed, then

smacked his lips together a few times, trying to understand the flavor. It was wet and crunchy, like iceberg lettuce, with a flavor he could only describe using words that didn't apply to flavor at all: it was fuzzy, and kind of ... white. Like if white was a flavor instead of a color. It didn't make any sense to him, so eventually he just shrugged. "Whatever," he said, and took another bite. "It's not bad. Definitely the best exoflora I've ever tasted."

"Also technically the worst," said Nyx. She examined her petal for a moment. "Do you think we could cook it?"

"Probably," said Zero. He pulled out the fire-starting kit from the emergency pack. "We could make a campfire—though I guess the only thing we have to burn is more flower petals."

They gathered a pile of petals, and used the fire-starting kit to start them burning. It was basically just a tiny squeeze bottle of lighter fluid, and a little metal rod that made a flame; one kit made one fire, and they had one kit per rebreather. The petals seemed too wet to really catch on fire, so they found some dryer ones and tried those instead; the flames caught quickly, and leapt up into a respectable fire. Almost immediately they heard a strange slapping noise, like someone was snapping a curtain or a tablecloth through the air; they looked up and saw a bumblebeever floating straight toward them, flapping its wide, flat tail like mad.

"It's going to eat us!" yelled Nyx. "It thinks we stole its food!"

"There's plenty of petals for everyone!" yelled Zero. He waved his arms, trying to scare the thing away. "Get your own fuzzy purple lettuce!"

The bumblebeever didn't even swerve, just flew toward them in a straight, unerring line. Zero waved his arms again, but when another of the floating creatures started flapping toward them as well, he gave up and ran for the cover of the crystal overhang. He was barely clear of the fire when the bumblebeever reached it, hovered over it, and pooped on it. The poop came down in a giant, sloppy blob, like a cow patty, splashing onto the fire and smothering it completely. The second bumblebeever reached the same spot, pushed the first creature out of the way, and opened up with a poop bomb of its own. The fire was buried under a mound of sticky goop.

"That is disgusting," said Nyx.

"That is ... really interesting," said Zero. "Do they hate fire?"

"Probably," said Nyx. "They're blimps, right? They float around

with a giant barrel of gas on their backs—it's probably flammable." She frowned. "Does this mean they're ... intelligent?"

"Like ... sentient and self-aware?" asked Zero. "Like human intelligence? Probably not. Pretty smart, though. We used to have an animal on Earth that put out fires, called a rhino. They lived in really dry places, where fire could destroy everything, so they just had like an evolutionary instinct to put out every fire they saw."

"You used to have rhinos?" asked Nyx. "What happened to them?"

"Some problems you can't solve by putting out fires," said Zero. "They went extinct before I was born." He stared at the bumblebeavers, then stood up. "Can I use your fire kit?"

Nyx raised her eyebrow at him. "You're going to start another one? Are you crazy?"

Zero grinned. "No, I'm a scientist."

She sighed and gave him the fire kit. He found another dry petal several yards away from their shelter, soaked it with about half the lighter fluid, and lit it with the spark rod. He backed away to a safe distance as more bumblebeavers flapped toward the fire and pooped it into oblivion. Zero laughed so hard he could barely breathe. "It wasn't a coincidence! They do it every time!" He grinned. "That's so great—I could do this all night!"

"Knock yourself out," said Nyx. "I'm going to find another shelter that isn't surrounded by alien blimp poop."

"Yeah," said Zero. "That's probably smarter." He lit one more fire with the last of the fluid, and then ran after Nyx while the bumblebeavers swarmed toward the flame.

## Chapter Fourteen

# EXOFAUNA

THEY SLEPT UNDER another crystal, and even without a fire they didn't get very cold. Zero wondered if maybe heavy air didn't cool off as much as thin air, but he didn't know enough about physics to know for sure. That was a question he'd have to ask when they got back to the base.

If they got back to the base.

In the morning, Zero's cut arm ached even more than it had the night before. They listened closely for the loud mechanical racket of a Drill Tank, but didn't hear anything, so decided it was safe to leave their shelter. Nyx checked the broken radio: it still couldn't call anyone, but it showed them exactly where the base was, and how far away. They pointed themselves toward it and started walking.

Slender shapes skittered away from them as they walked, hiding in the shadows of the fat, blue vines. Zero managed to catch a glimpse of one—it was long and thin, slithering like a snake but also pulling itself along on two little limbs. Zero couldn't decide if it was a snake with extra legs, or a lizard with not enough.

There was no breeze, which Zero took as a good sign—the air was so heavy that any wind strong enough to move it was strong enough to start getting dangerous. They walked through the forest of light purple flowers, stretching five or six stories above their heads, and ran their hands along the smooth, rubbery stalks. Some of the deep green crystals from the cliff were out here among the flowers as well, some half-buried in the dirt, and others simply sitting on top of it. The yellow grass turned blue around the base of the crystals, as if the color were leeching in and staining the plants. The green crystals weren't sharp like the orange ones, but rounded and smooth, and Nyx and Zero posited a few theories about what each type was made of. They never came up with any solid answers.

After a while, when they were certain the Drill Tank and the robbers weren't anywhere nearby, they stopped walking and started jumping—bouncing forward in long, high leaps, the same way



they'd gotten around in the base. Inside of the base it had been fun, but outside, in the heavy air, it was amazing. They fell so slowly it was almost like floating. They hadn't been able to appreciate it the night before, running for their lives, but now Zero and Nyx started sailing through the air in giant arcs, trying to see how high and how far they could go.

Nyx picked up a fragment of orange crystal from the ground, being careful not to cut herself. "Watch this," she said, and positioned herself in front of a tall, straight flower stalk. She crouched down, braced herself, and jumped up as high as she could, reaching up and slashing a small cut in one of the flowers. She floated gently back to the ground, smiled, and handed the crystal to Zero. "Beat that."

"Easy," said Zero. The cut was maybe ten feet up. He took the crystal carefully, got into position, and leaped as high as he could; he slashed a new cut several inches above the first one. "Ha!" He laughed at her as he floated back down. "Give me a real challenge."

Nyx scowled, and snatched the crystal back from him when he landed. She stood in position, eyed the cut marks, took a deep breath, and jumped. At the top of her jump she stretched up high and slashed a new cut—a couple of inches higher than Zero's.

"Yes!" she shouted. "Victory is mine!"

"Get back down here and let me try again," said Zero, but suddenly he and Nyx both gasped in unison as she started to drift to the side. The two previous high jumps had both come straight back down again, but Nyx was falling in a long, diagonal line.

"Wind," she said, her eyes wide and frightened. "The storm."

"Run," said Zero, every bit as scared as she was. She dropped the crystal, and they checked the radio again and started leaping as fast as they could toward the base. They were still nearly twelve miles away—they'd gone farther today than yesterday, but they were still much too far away to be home before the windstorm. "We shouldn't have stopped to play around," said Zero.

"We were stopped for five minutes," said Nyx. "That wouldn't have made the difference." She glanced behind them as she jumped. "We need to find shelter—even the robbers would be good. They'll only probably kill us, but the storm definitely will."

"Look for a cave or something," said Zero. "There's got to be something we can hide in out here."

They leaped and soared and tried to keep the best pace they could,

pausing only briefly for breath when their lungs grew tired from the heavy air. The rebreather on Zero's face grew itchy as he started to sweat inside it, so he started to keep a hand on it in case it tried to slip off. They cleared another mile and a half before stopping abruptly, staring at a vast clearing ahead of them: a long, wide field with no flowers, and not a single fallen petal. The rest of the countryside was covered with them, but here there was nothing but short yellow grass.

And hundreds of dark, round holes.

"What's this?" asked Nyx.

"I don't know," said Zero. "Maybe a ... rock formation? A bunch of sink holes or erosion holes or ... maybe places where the flowers were ripped up out of the ground?"

"Maybe," said Nyx. "That would give us somewhere to hide. But ..." She swallowed, nervous and agitated. "It makes me nervous."

"Yeah," said Zero. It made him nervous as well. The holes might be rock formations, or flower holes, but they might just as easily be burrows.

A giant field full of new alien creatures.

"There's one," said Nyx, pointing. Zero saw the same thing—something low and fat, like a giant, fleshy boulder, sitting in the middle of the field. As he looked he saw more and more of them, all sitting so still he hadn't even noticed them at first. Nyx's voice sounded wary and tired. "Exofauna."

"These are different than the bumblebeeveres," said Zero. "They don't float, and they don't live near the flowers, so ..." He felt squeamish, and more than a little spooked. "What do they eat?"

"Probably not bumblebeeveres," said Nyx. "Being away from the flowers means they're away from those, too."

"Maybe they eat something underground," said Zero. "Worms or something—or those two-legged snakes."

"I bet they eat flower petals," said Nyx. "That's why the field doesn't have any—these things ate them all."

"That's good," said Zero. "I'd rather they be plant-eaters than ... everything-eaters."

"Omnivores," said Nyx.

"That's the word," said Zero. He stared at the field full of creatures. "Even plant-eaters can be scary, though. You want to try to cross?"

Another gust of wind blew past them, strong enough that they had

to brace themselves against it. Zero grabbed his rebreather to make sure it didn't fly away.

"I don't know if we have a choice," said Nyx, and started forward.

## Chapter Fifteen

# HOLES

ZERO AND NYX crept down a short, steep embankment and onto the field of holes. It looked the same as any other part of Kaguya, but uncomfortably empty—no flowers, no petals, and no giant crystals. Just holes, and the fat, lumpy exofauna that made them.

"We need to find a hole without a creature in it," said Zero, looking at the aliens warily.

"I don't like this plan," said Nyx. She was breathing in short, shallow breaths, obviously terrified, and though Zero didn't feel any braver, he grabbed her hand, trying to calm her down. They gripped each other's hands tightly, walking forward slowly, hoping that the creatures weren't aggressive.

"We just need to give them a name," said Zero. "Like bumblebeev-ers. You can't be afraid of something called a bumblebeever. We'll call these things ... Hole-y Poleys."

"Never say that name again," said Nyx immediately. "Nothing with *hole* in it, it's just ... wrong."

"Lump ... ers," said Zero, thinking out loud. "Lump-Os."

"Yans," said Nyx, and they both laughed. It was worse that Zero's brother deserved, but it broke the tension a little.

A little.

They were closer to the creatures now, and could see that they were slightly hairy, like shaggy gophers or groundhogs, but much, much larger. The lower gravity on Kaguya made it easier for things to grow large, and the creatures were each the size of a bear. They had four short, stubby legs that bent out to the side, like frog legs, and their paws were tipped with long, bright claws.

"Probably digging claws," said Zero softly, trying to calm himself as much as Nyx. "They're burrowers, so they need to dig with something."

"I don't like their mouths," said Nyx. Zero had to agree. Their bodies were fat blobs, like giant beanbags, and they had no discernible

neck or head—just a wide, way-too-wide, slit in the blob with feet underneath it and eyes up above. “Why do they need such big mouths? They shouldn’t have such big mouths.”

“It doesn’t look like they have sharp teeth,” said Zero. “That means they probably don’t eat meat.”

“You can’t even see their teeth,” said Nyx. “You’re making that up.”

“I know,” said Zero, “but it makes me feel a lot better when I say it.”

The children wanted to get closer to the burrows, to look inside, but they didn’t want to get too close to them, or to any of the creatures. They ended up weaving a weird zigzag pattern through the field, keeping as much distance from the creatures as they could. When this finally brought them close enough to a hole to peer into it, they did so fearfully, almost not wanting to know what was actually in there. What they saw was one of the beanbag creatures sitting on a huge pile of fallen flower petals. It looked at them, opened its mouth, and shot out its tongue like a whip—the tongue lashed out, stuck to one of the petals, and pulled it back into its mouth in barely a second. Nyx yelped and backed away, pulling Zero with her, but they couldn’t go too far because more holes loomed behind them.

“Nope,” said Nyx. “Nope nope nope, I am nope-ing right out of here.”

Another gust of wind blew past them, pushing them a few feet across the ground.

“We have to find a hole we can hide in,” said Zero. “When this storm starts for real, it’s going to kill us if we don’t have some kind of shelter.”

“I don’t want that shelter to be inside of an alien’s way-bigger-than-necessary mouth. Especially not with a gross, sticky tongue in there with me.”

“You know what they remind me of?” said Zero. He pulled her forward, talking to keep her distracted and calm. “Frogs. Or toads. Have you ever see one of those?”

“I’ve seen maybe six animals in my entire life,” said Nyx. “Or two hundred and six if you count these freaky things.”

“A frog is a fat little animal that eats insects,” said Zero. “Or I guess the toads are the fat ones. Both kinds have long, sticky tongues, just like this, and they catch bugs out of the air.”

"Which part of this is supposed to make me feel better?"

"You're not a bug."

"Are these things smart enough to know that?"

More wind blew through the field, and one by one the creatures started to move, dragging their bulk down into the holes.

"See?" said Zero. "The holes are safe—they're smart enough to know that, at least. So if we can find an empty hole, we'll be safe, too." The wind was getting stronger now, and more frequent, and the field became a flurry of activity as the creatures crawled down into the ground. In just a few moments the field was completely empty—just holes, and two humans holding hands like their lives depended on it.

"I don't like this plan," Nyx said again.

"I'm not in love with it either," said Zero, "but we don't have any other options."

"I know," said Nyx. She pointed in front of them. "There—one of those holes is bigger than the others. And I didn't see anything crawl into it."

Zero nodded, and together they walked across the field, peeking into every hole they passed. Each one was filled with an alien toad and a stockpile of flower petals; the toads looked up at them with beady, blinking eyes, watching them impassively. They reached the big hole—a good three or four times bigger around than the others—and looked in to find a large cave full of petals. One of the creatures sat in a far back corner, but there was enough room for Zero and Nyx to climb in with it, if they dared. There was so much room they wouldn't even have to touch it.

A burst of wind buffeted them, nearly knocking them down, and in a sudden show of courage Nyx pulled Zero down into the hole. They crouched low, and backed themselves into the opposite corner from the creature, never taking their eyes off of it.

"I'm not food," Nyx told it. "Neither is he."

The creature opened its mouth, but only in some sort of a yawn.

"No sharp teeth," said Zero. "No teeth at all. Still could be dangerous, though: maybe it's territorial? Maybe it's aggressive? What if it tries to charge us?"

"Shut up," said Nyx, "you're freaking me out."

"I'm freaking you out?" asked Zero. "Not the giant-mouthed toad monster?"

"I'm not letting myself be afraid of it," said Nyx. "We have to be in here or die, so: I'm going to be in here. Stop making it harder."

"Right," said Zero. He nodded, trying to be as brave as he could be. "A name: we have to give it a name. No one's afraid of a bumblebeever, and no one's afraid of a ... Toadmouth. A Burrowfrog. A Grub-Gulper."

"Let's stick with toadmouth," said Nyx. She gasped, and Zero flinched back, fearing the worst, but almost immediately her gasp turned into a coo of surprise. "It has babies! It's a mama toadmouth!"

Zero looked, and crowded together under the toadmouth's legs and body was a small pile of miniature toadmouths, their shaggy hair shorter, almost like fur. Whereas the parent was larger than Zero and Nyx put together, the babies were the size of footballs, with wide, toothless mouths and little bow legs that were almost ... cute.

"Do I like these things?" asked Nyx. "Or are they creepy?"

"Both?" suggested Zero. "They're kind of adorable but I don't want them to get any closer."

Wind roared past the opening of the cave, and the two humans looked at it warily.

"I think we're going to be safe in here," said Nyx.

"Look how fat they are," said Zero. "If we were in Earth gravity they wouldn't be able to move." He stared at them, fear giving way to fascination. "Why do you think they're so heavy? The bumblebeevers are so light they can float, but these things are the complete opposite."

"Because evolution made them that way," said Nyx. "Being big made something easier or better for them."

The mama toadmouth shot out its tongue, snagged a flower petal near Zero's feet, and yanked it up into its mouth. Zero yelped.

"Or maybe it just likes to eat a lot," said Nyx.

"I want to move a little farther away from it," said Zero.

"Good idea."

They shifted away from the toadmouth, closer to the surface and the edge of the hole. Zero felt the wind pushing on him, a vast, soft weight like a dry ocean, and then suddenly it caught him—some aspect of force or pull or suction grabbed hold of him and yanked him away from Nyx, up and out of the hole, flying into the sky. He screamed as the ground fell away below him, looking back at Nyx's

shocked face, when suddenly something shot out of the cave and hit him—something pink and wet and sticky. The toadmouth's tongue. It hit him square in the chest from fifty feet away, and yanked him back down toward the creature's giant mouth.

Zero screamed again.



## Chapter Sixteen

# WEIGHT

ZERO FLAILED HIS arms wildly, trying to grab anything he could reach, desperate to pull himself away from the toadmouth's humongous open maw, but there was nothing he could get a grip on, and the tongue retracted too quickly for him to react. One second he was up in the sky, about to be carried away by the storm, and the next he was back in the burrow again. He felt the moist, slimy mouth of the creature surround him, and screamed with every ounce of strength that he had, but the toadmouth didn't eat him: it spit him out, pulled him under itself with a paw, and sat on him.

Zero screamed again, more in surprise than anything else.

"What is happening?" shouted Nyx.

"Help me!"

"It's sitting on you!" said Nyx. "Is it crushing you?"

The weight wasn't enough to kill him, but it held him down so tightly he couldn't move. "Pull me out!"

Nyx nodded her head, set her jaw, and suddenly seemed to forget all her fear: she charged forward, grabbed him by his one free arm, and pulled with all her might. The toadmouth shifted, and all the little babies—most of them pressed up against Zero's side—shifted with her. Nyx adjusted her grip and pulled again, but the toadmouth simply reached out with another paw, scooped the girl toward itself, and sat on her, too.

"What is happening?" asked Nyx again.

"It thinks we're flower petals," said Zero. "It's saving us so it can eat us later."

"Then get out," said Nyx, but no matter how they struggled they couldn't get free.

Zero concentrated on his pinned left arm—if he could get that loose, he'd have both hands and could maybe find some way to do ... something. He wiggled it and worked at it until finally the arm popped free, dislodging in the process one of the furry little babies. It stood in one spot for a moment, as if surprised by its sudden free-

dom. It started to scamper around in the flower petals, playing and jumping, and then suddenly it got too close to the burrow's opening and the windstorm caught it, hurling it out into the sky. Nyx yelped, but the mama toadmouth shot out its long, sticky tongue with the casual accuracy of a military sniper, and caught the baby and pulled it back in. It dropped the little furball on the ground, pulled it close with a paw, and sat on it.

"It ... doesn't think we're flower petals," said Zero in awe. "It thinks we're its children. This is how it protects them from the wind."

"One of them keeps trying to ... rub me with its face," said Nyx. "I can't get it to—stop, freaky toadmouth baby, stop it!"

"It's nuzzling you," said Zero. He smiled as one of the fuzzy little things did the same thing to him, rubbing his shoulder and then settling down into the crook of his arm. It closed its eyes, looking warm and contented. "They're kind of cute."

Nyx took a long time responding. "I guess," she said.

"Once you get used to it, the weight's not that bad. It's like the mama is actively trying not to hurt us." Zero laughed as another baby nuzzled up against him. "It's like a living bedspread, with a bunch of alien puppies."

They passed the whole storm that way, sitting for hours in the cave, protected by an alien mother. It never moved, keeping them pinned, but it shifted now and then to let its children—both toadmouth and human—flex their muscles a bit, shaking out the aches and stiffness. It was clear that it did this a lot: a standard practice for keeping its babies safe during the wind. Zero wondered if that was why it was so big and heavy to begin with—some kind of evolutionary survival mechanism. The dragons flew away from the storms, the toadmouths burrowed below them, and ... what did the bumblebees do? Zero realized that he had no idea how they protected themselves during the wind. The scientist in him wanted desperately to know, and he spent most of the storm puzzling it out in his mind.

Every now and then the mama toadmouth shot out her tongue to snag another flower petal, pulling it into her mouth to munch on. The babies did the same, though their aim was poor, and they were just as likely to grab a sibling's petal, or an actual sibling, or even just a tongueful of dirt.

As the hours wore on, Zero felt his eyelids drooping, and the roar

of wind became a white noise buzz in the background, and eventually he fell asleep. He woke to the sensation of a baby toadmouth licking his face, and quickly realized that he was cold—the mama toadmouth had sat up and moved away, leaving him exposed. He looked at Nyx, and saw that she was waking up as well, and then he looked at the mouth of the cave just as the mama toadmouth heaved herself up to the surface. The babies followed, scampering around like stubby-legged cats, and Zero and Nyx crawled out after them.

The field of holes was filled with a vast carpet of big, purple flower petals, and a massive city of toadmouths was busily harvesting them all, pushing and scraping the succulent exoflora down into their caves. Sometimes they quarreled, when two toadmouths reached the same petal at the same time, but their fights seemed to consist mostly of slamming their heavy bodies into each other; Zero didn't see any of them using their claws to slash or stab.

"Probably still a good idea to stay away from the angry ones," said Nyx, watching one of the nearer fights.

"Definitely," said Zero. He turned to the creature that had protected them. "Thank you ... ma'am? I've never addressed an adult toadmouth directly before; I don't know the right title to use."

"Captain?" suggested Nyx.

"How about *Your Majesty*," said Zero.

Nyx laughed and bowed to the creature. "Thank you for your help, Your Highness. Or Your Lowness, I guess, because you live in a hole."

"Technically, so do we," said Zero. "Our colony's burrowing, just like they are."

She smiled. "We can ask your mom to sit on us next time there's a windstorm."

"Perfect," said Zero. "But we have to get there first." He waved at the toadmouth babies. "Goodbye, little guys! See you later!" Nyx checked the radio to make sure of the direction, and they jumped off toward the human base.

They didn't hear the Tank until it was nearly on top of them, and then it roared in their ears like a lion—the heavy atmosphere meant that the sounds traveled less distance, but seemed louder when they arrived. Zero and Nyx spun toward the noise in almost perfect unison, spotting the Tank about a hundred yards away through a clutter of orange crystal debris.

"How did they find us?" asked Zero.

"The Drill Tank probably has its own radio," said Nyx. "They're probably following the shortest path home, hoping they can find us along the way."

"Looks like they just did," said Zero. The rover turned toward them, and picked up speed; the tank treads in the back kicked up a giant rooster-tail of black and blue dirt, with bright green pebbles and shards of orange crystal mixed in with it and sparkling in the sun. It was beautiful, but it was terrifying. "Run!"

The children leaped as hard and as far as they could, flying nearly twenty feet with each jump, before lightly touching down with their toes and kicking off into another giant jump.

"They're going to kill us," said Zero, gasping for breath at the effort of running. "This isn't how I wanted to die."

"Murdered by bandits on an alien world?" asked Nyx. "Honestly, that kind of seems right up your alley."

"Well, sure," said Zero, "but not when I'm twelve." He gasped for air. "Wait 'til I'm an adult, at least, with a gun in one hand and some kind of ancient alien artifact in the other."

"No luck on the artifact," said Nyx. "None of these creatures have a civilization."

"An egg, then," said Zero, puffing for air. "I want to die saving a dragon egg from evil villains—no sooner than fifteen years from now." He looked over his shoulder at the Drill Tank, slowly gaining on them, and shouted at the thieves: "Is that too much to ask?"

"Better plan," said Nyx. "We're going to die of old age, in a giant mansion on the top of an alien mountain, surrounded by piles of money and the most delicious feast on Kaguya."

"Tell that to them," said Zero, gesturing at the thieves behind them. The Drill Tank couldn't jump like they could, but it moved fast enough to make up for it; Zero estimated they had five minutes at the most before it caught up to them. Less if they got tired first, and he was already feeling tired.

"We can do this," said Nyx. "They're thieves, right? And I know thieves. We can outsmart them."

Zero strained to breathe in the heavy air. Did Nyx have a plan, or was she just being positive? Could they really outsmart the thieves? All three of the adults were engineers and scientists—they were here in the first wave of colonists precisely because they were smarter

than everyone else. What could he and Nyx possibly know that the thieves didn't?

He looked forward, searching for cover—the Drill Tank could beat them on open ground, but if they could find some denser terrain they might be able to lose it. He saw another flower forest, with a swarm of bumblebees hovering above it, and he smiled.

“Poop.”

“Is that supposed to be a swear word?” asked Nyx. “Because if we’re about to be murdered, I think it’s probably okay to say the real swear word.”

“No,” said Zero, “I mean I have a plan. Do we have any emergency kits left?”

“None,” said Nyx. “One per rebreather, and we’ve used both of ours.”

“Then we need one of theirs,” said Zero, and pointed at the flower forest. “We’ll lead them in there.”

“Why?”

“Because we can beat them,” said Zero. “We know Kaguya better than they do—we’ve survived two days alone out here, and we know how it works.” He grinned. “We’re gonna beat them because we’re scientists.”

## Chapter Seventeen

# THE RISK

THEY REACHED THE flower forest just ahead of the thieves, and jumped through the middle of it while the Drill Tank drove to the side and tried to find a way around it.

"Stealing a rebreather is a good plan," said Nyx, jumping through the alien forest, "but we'll be lucky if we can get even one of them, let alone all four."

"We only need one," said Zero. "That'll put one robber to sleep, but the big prize is the fire kit."

"What can we do with a fire kit?" asked Nyx. "We can't light a whole Drill Tank on fire—not enough to destroy it."

"We're not trying to destroy it," said Zero, "just cover the windshield."

"With fire?"

Zero grinned. "For starters."

Nyx thought for a moment, then laughed out loud. "Ha ha! I love it. So all we need now is for one of them to get out and chase us."

"I'm coming for you, little dearies!" shouted Debbie.

Nyx smiled. "Perfect."

"Not perfect," said Zero. "She's the crazy one. Can't we get the old man instead?"

"Stop running!" shouted Morrison. "We'll catch you sooner or later, and you don't want us to be cranky when we do!"

"Crap," said Zero. "I didn't mean both of them at once."

Nyx grimaced. "We can't fight two adults."

"All I have to do is take their mask off. I can do that even if they grab me—it'll probably be easier if they grab me, because then I'll be close. I'll yank it off, they'll start laughing, and then they'll fall asleep before they have a chance to take me anywhere."

"Or they'll just grab it back."

"So I'll throw it."

Nyx shook her head. "Then they'll take yours."

Zero could hear the robbers getting closer through the flower for-

est. He had to do something, and there weren't a lot of somethings left. He took a deep breath, steeled his courage, and pulled off his mask. "They can't steal it if I don't have it."

"Are you crazy?"

"Lose him in the flowers," he said, and handed her the mask. "Come back and find me when he's gone."

"This is a terrible idea!" she shouted, but it was too late, and the robbers came crashing into the clearing.

"Gotcha!" said Debbie.

"Trust me," said Zero, and then giggled. "Go!"

Nyx stared at him for a moment, then turned to the side and jumped through the forest. Morrison growled in frustration, but Debbie kept her eyes locked on Zero. "Better get jumping, old man. This one's mine."

Morrison grumbled again, but set off through the flowers.

Debbie's face curled into a broad, toothy smile. "Now it's play time!"

Zero circled to the side, crouching slightly, ready to wrestle. He'd definitely lose, but he didn't have to beat her—just get close.

"Oh, you're going to make this fun," said Debbie. Her eyes shone, in that ill-fitting "just won a baking prize at the county fair" kind of way that didn't fit at all with her eager thirst for violence. She slowed, and started circling with him, like a cat sizing up her prey before pouncing. "Going to fight me, are you? I'm not a trained fighter, you know. No karate or taekwondo, just ... let's call it enthusiasm. I'm the Dragonpuncher, kiddo."

Zero didn't answer. He was trying to hold his breath, and breathe as little as possible. One of those giant mushrooms was nearby, and he circled behind it, using it as cover.

"You were there when Morrison told the others that I'd been in prison," said Debbie. She started circling closer. "Do you want to know why? The others didn't like it all—Bailey called me a psycho, and Aura looked sick. I can understand the sick thing: why bite a man's ear off if you can't make people sick when they hear about it?"

Zero couldn't help it; the statement shocked him so much he had to ask: "You bit a man's ear off?"

"It's not like I ate it," she said. "I'm not a cannibal—though I as-

sume I'll be the first one to break down and eat the others if we end up stranded in the wilderness for days."

"Days?"

"Weeks, whatever. I don't know the proper etiquette for frontier settlers resorting to cannibalism. My point is, I bit a guy's ear off, and I'll do it again if I have to. Or if I'm bored."

Zero waited, trying not to breathe, but when she didn't explain herself the tension got too high to ignore. "Why did you bite him?"

Debbie shrugged. "Stress. You know how it is: bad day at the office, air conditioner broken, too many people on the elevator. Sometimes you just gotta snap."

Zero stared at her in horror. "You bit a guy's ear off because the elevator was too crowded?"

And then, to his even greater horror, he laughed.

She stopped her circling, and watched him.

"Oh, man," he said, trying not to giggle. "Imagine the look on his face!" The heavy gas was making his voice deeper again, and that made him laugh even harder.

Debbie nodded sagely. "I see," she said. "You've lost your rebreather. This is the laughing gas talking."

"And everyone else in the elevator with you!" shouted Zero. "They're trapped with a psycho, and have nowhere to run to!" He laughed and laughed and laughed. "This isn't even funny, this is terrible!"

"Well, it's kind of funny," said Debbie. "Give me some credit."

"Now I'm going to dare you to come attack me," said Zero with a chuckle. "And I'm going to dare you to bite my ear off, too." He couldn't stop laughing. "This is one of the dumbest things I've ever done in my life!"

"You've got that right," said Debbie, and jumped toward him. Zero laughed and jumped back. The two of them collided in mid-air, and Zero found his momentum completely reversed by the greater weight and force that Debbie was able to exert. They flew backward into the flowers, bouncing off of the giant, rubbery stalks, and Debbie tried to grab him and pin him to the ground, but Zero wasn't trying to escape. He only needed one thing to win, and Debbie wasn't even defending it.

He reached up, grabbed her face, and tore off her rebreather.

She stared at him for just a half a second, and in that pause he



threw the rebreather as far as it would go, toward a cluster of the wispy yellow web. In the low gravity, that was very far, and the dense air held it aloft for even longer. It disappeared behind the webs—too far for Debbie to reach before the air put her to sleep, but still easy to find once Nyx came back and woke Zero up. He looked at Debbie and chuckled.

"Oh, man," he said. "You should see your face right now."

"You little brat," said Debbie. She loosened her grip, looking off into the forest where it had flown. "I need that to breathe!"

"You can breathe just fine," said Zero. He laughed. "It's what you're breathing that's the problem." He tried to break out of her hold, but she grabbed him tighter. He laughed even louder than before.

"I'll kill you!" she shouted. "You think eating an ear is bad? I'll make you wish it was only an ear!" She grappled him furiously, and he flailed his arms and kicked his legs and did his best to make it hard to control him—to make her exert herself. Make her breathe. The more she breathed, the more xenon she inhaled, and then—

She laughed.

There it was.

"You stupid little kid," said Debbie. She giggled insanely, while the air made her voice go deeper. "Now neither of us can breathe! What do you think's going to happen? What was your big plan?" She guffawed. "We can't just walk away from this!"

She could barely stand now, and the two of them fell softly to the ground, hooting and cackling and rolling back and forth at the sheer hilarity of their condition. Zero struggled to speak, trying to answer her question: "I have," he said, and laughed again. "I have. I have. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"You have what?" asked Debbie, gasping for air as she giggled.

"I have something," laughed Zero. "Plan. Have. Something you. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"What he's trying to say," said Nyx, jumping into the clearing, "is that he has a plan, and it only works because he has something you don't have." She landed near Debbie, but walked around her, staying out of reach.

"A rebreather?" Debbie managed to say between chuckles.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa," said Zero, too far gone to even form a word.

Nyx rolled her eyes. "A friend." She took Zero's rebreather from

her pocket, strapped it to his face, and dragged him away into the flowers. Behind them Debbie howled in angry laughter, giggling too hard to follow them.

"Not a bad plan," she told him. "Can you remember where you threw her mask?"

Zero made a long fart noise with his mouth, and then burst back into uncontrollable laughter.

"Great," said Nyx. "Next time, I get to giggle like a maniac while you carry out the plan."

Zero managed to raise his head long enough to get a good look at the forest. He spotted the yellow webs where he'd thrown the rebreather, and pointed at it.

"There?" she asked. Zero did his best to nod through the giggles. She shrugged, and hauled him through the flowers in short, heavy jumps. "How long does this take to get out of your system?" she asked. "Tell me when you can walk again."

He tried to nod again, but he was doubled over with laughter. Eventually he managed a weak thumbs up. Nyx reached the webs, searched the area carefully, and picked up the rebreather with a cheer.

As soon as he could function again, they were ready for the next phase of their plan.

## Chapter Eighteen

# THE MOST IMPORTANT NUMBER

ZERO WEIGHED ABOUT eighty-five pounds, give or take, and he knew that while Nyx might be able to drag him, she'd never be able to carry him. Eighty-five pounds is a lot. And yet Nyx put an arm under Zero's shoulders, and another under his knees, and leaped into the sky like a superhero. It took Zero's half-sedated brain a few moments to figure it out, but he got there eventually: he weighed eighty-five pounds on Earth, but they weren't on Earth. Kaguya's gravity was one-sixth of Earth's, which meant he weighed one-sixth as much. That was ... he tried to do the math in his head, but he was still feeling loopy from the xenon. Not as high as twenty pounds, but not as low as twelve. Fourteen: on Kaguya, he only weighed fourteen pounds. Nyx could lift that with one hand.

She stuck to the middle of the flower forest, far away from any open ground, so the robbers couldn't see them—and they couldn't see the robbers. After a while it became difficult even to hear the robbers, driving their loud, rattling Drill Tank. Zero started shaking his head wildly back and forth, struggling to speak.

"Close," he said, his voice still unnaturally deep. He tried again, and managed to string two words together: "Stay. Close."

"Close to the Drill Tank?" asked Nyx. "Are you crazy?"

"Just. Drugged," said Zero, and grinned.

"It's good to know this planet will never have drug dealers," said Nyx. "You can get high just by breathing."

"Wait," said Zero, and held out his hand as a sign to stop jumping. She took a few more short hops to slow down, and then stopped.

"What's up?"

Zero tried to stand, stumbling a few times before bracing himself against the giant stalk of a nearby flower. He bent over, pressing his hands against his stomach and pushing, almost doubling himself in half as he squeezed the air out of his lungs. The xenon was denser

than the oxygen; it sat at the bottom of his lungs like a weight, and it would stay there for hours if he waited for his body to exhale it naturally. That's why he slept for so long the last time. This time, he couldn't afford to wait. He took another deep breath, then bent in half and squeezed again, pushing all the xenon out.

"Are you okay?" asked Nyx.

"I think so," said Zero, and then frowned. "Oh, man, my voice is back to normal."

"Sounds like your brain is, too," said Nyx. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm still pretty light-headed," said Zero. "I couldn't push out the xenon that's already affected me. But yeah, I'm feeling pretty good."

"Are you ready to take out that Drill Tank?"

"That Tank is the only reason they keep catching us," said Zero. "We know the planet better, like I said—if they're on foot we can stay away from them no problem."

"I did lose that grumpy guy pretty easily," said Nyx.

Zero pulled the fire starter from the strap pocket on Debbie's rebreather. "One dose. That means one fire, if we make it big enough to matter. If we're going to take out the whole Tank, we need to do it right—we need to mess it up permanently. It can't just be something they wash off and start driving again."

"Getting it on there is easy," said Nyx. "We can practically fly, right? One of us jumps over the windshield and squirts on the lighter fluid, then the second jumps over and hits it with the lighter. Up go the flames, and they're too blind to drive."

"For as long as it takes to clean off the windshield," said Zero.

"That's why it all comes down to timing," said Nyx. "If we blind them at exactly the right moment, when being blind will make them crash or fall, we can leave them trapped and helpless. That's how we get away."

"That's perfect," said Zero. "I hadn't even thought of that."

Nyx shrugged. "This isn't my first time disabling a pursuing vehicle. Though usually it was the cops."

"Okay," said Zero. "What's the best move, then? How do we find the right moment?"

"We create it," said Nyx. "We make a trap and we lead them into it—or I guess we find a trap, since we don't have the time or the tools to make one."

"I think you're right about making them fall," said Zero. "As slowly as things fall here, they won't get hurt but they'll probably get trapped. We need another big ravine, like the one we jumped over before, to see if we can trick them into it."

"Then get up, Two-Shoe," said Nyx, hauling on his arm. "We've got to race ahead if we're going to make this work."

"Blerg," said Zero, and made a gagging noise. "Not you too, now."

Nyx laughed, helped him steady himself, and then pulled him into a bouncing run. "I think it's funny."

"Well, of course, you think it's funny," said Zero, "that's not really the problem, is it?"

"I'm just teasing you," said Nyx. "If you don't want to be called Two-Shoe, I won't call you Two-Shoe." They were moving quickly now, bouncing along at twenty feet per step. "And if you don't want to be called Su-Shu either, that's fine: I get it; I don't like my real name, either."

"Catherine," said Zero.

"Catherine," said Nyx in mocking voice. "It makes me want to punch myself in my own face. But what I don't understand is this: out of all the names you could have chosen for yourself, why did you pick Zero? That sounds like just another way for your brothers to tease you."

Zero shrugged, which was hard to do while leaping at high speed through a forest full of flowers. "It was, at first."

"So why'd you keep it?"

"They said I was nothing," said Zero. "That I didn't matter, and all that kind of stuff. I was a zero. But then my mom told me something: she said that zero was the most important number in the world. It's what makes math work. It's what makes computers work. Without zero we can't do physics or chemistry or science, or even accounting—we can't even really do multiplication without zero. Not to mention that zero breaks all the rules: it's not positive or negative; it's not prime or composite; it's a multiple of everything but a divisor of absolutely nothing. So that's me: I'm different, and I follow my own rules, and I'm super important. Once my mom told me that, my brothers' teasing didn't bother me anymore."

Nyx grinned at him, but after a moment she sighed, which was just as hard to do while jumping as shrugging was.

"I wish my mom had been nice like that," she said. "Your mom

seems wonderful. Mine was a pirate and a hacker and kind of an evil genius, which sounds awesome in a movie or something but sucks when she's your mom. She could hack anything, and build anything, and she invented most of the technology we used on Tacita, but ..."

"Yeah," said Zero. He didn't know exactly what it must have been like for Nyx as a kid, but he knew her mother, and he could imagine. She'd been a vicious pirate named Spider, and she'd tried to kill him more times than he could count. That's why Nyx had run away to join the Pathfinder mission. The two children jumped in silence for a moment, then Zero asked another question. "So you know where my name comes from. What about yours?"

"Nyx was the goddess of Night," said Nyx. "She was so mysterious that nobody even worshiped her, but so powerful even Zeus was afraid of her."

"That's golden," said Zero.

"I thought so, too," said Nyx. She skidded to a stop, pausing for a moment to check the broken radio; it pinged out the location of the base, now less than ten miles away. "We're making good progress," she said. "Now all we need is a ravine."

"For all we know we're right next to one," said Zero. He looked around at the flower forest and scowled. "These flowers are great to hide in, but we're just as blind as the people looking for us."

"We need to get above them," said Nyx, and tried to climb the nearest flower, but the sides were too smooth, with nothing to hold on to. A few of them had those soft pink strands, but they were too fragile to support any weight, and came away in wispy clumps whenever they tried to grab them. Zero tried jumping up the side of the flower, but he could only get about ten feet up, and the flower stalks were a hundred at least.

"I have an idea," he said, and hunted around on the ground for loose crystals. He took the largest ones he could find—green, with smooth sides and a sharp point—and held one in each hand. His arm was still sore where the orange crystals had cut it, but the green ones seemed safer. Armed with his makeshift tools he walked to the tallest flower, leaped as high as he could reach, and stabbed one crystal into the side of it like a climbing pick. It didn't go in far—the stalks were more solid than he'd expected—but it held his weight. He reached up with the other and stabbed it higher, and it held as well, and soon he was climbing up the side, hand over hand, using

the crystals to make his own handholds. Once he got high enough, he realized he could use the cuts as footholds as well. Nyx grabbed two crystals of her own, and started racing him to the top. They reached it at exactly the same moment.

"Tie," said Zero.

"Which means I was faster," said Nyx. "I started after you."

"That means you're slower, not faster."

"It means I'm a faster climber."

"It means I'm a smarter climber."

"I will push you right off the side of this flower," said Nyx, but yelped almost instantly as a bumblebeever floated past, less than an arm's reach from her head. "Go away," she whispered, almost singing, like she could placate the exofauna through song. "I'm not a flower petal, or any other kind of food. I'm probably poisonous to your biology, or at the very least indigestible to a flower-eater."

"Nice song," said Zero.

"Shut up," said Nyx, still singing. "You'd be freaked out, too, if your hair was the color of their food."

"Probably," said Zero. The bumblebeever looked at them for a moment, bobbing in the air like a buoy floating in the water. Up close he could see that its face was a little smaller than his own, and flat—no snout or muzzle, just a broad, flat face with two eyes and a mouth. It reminded him, more than anything, of the faces on the toadmouaths, and he assumed that they must be related somehow. The same exofauna kingdom, or genus or family. It blinked at them, its little hands rubbing together, then apparently decided that they weren't food and floated off to another flower stalk.

"And don't come back!" shouted Nyx, sounding much tougher now that it was leaving. "And tell all your friends! I've got better things to do than kill your entire species in self-defense, but don't think I won't do it if I have to!"

Zero looked around. They'd chosen their flower well—it was a meter or so taller than most of the others, a long, thin stalk with a bulb at the top, and no petals left after the windstorm. From it they could see for miles in every direction, which let Zero identify three key things.

Thing One: he could see a trail of dust flung up from the passage of the Drill Tank. It snaked across the landscape, just beyond the edges of the flower forest, a plume of black dirt and crystals kicked up by

the tank treads and settling very, very softly to the ground. From the looks of it, the Tank was headed straight to—

Thing Two: a ravine, cut into the countryside like a knife gash. It was closer to them than to the Drill Tank, because of the diagonal path it took across the terrain, but reaching it before the Tank did would be difficult. Zero studied the landscape in his mind, plotting out a course for exactly where he wanted to go and how he wanted to get there. And then he looked at Thing Three, and felt a painful mix of hope and sadness.

Thing three was another cloud of dust, bigger and rounder than the first, like a circle of activity instead of a path of travel. He couldn't see what was making it, for it was behind a hill, but he could see the dust, and he knew what it meant: the base. Right over there, so close he could see it, was the Pathfinder colony, and his parents, and his family. Right over there. He wondered if they'd be able to make it there before the robbers caught them; a part of him wanted to abandon their plan of attack and just run instead, sprinting and bouncing and jumping the last ten miles toward home. He wanted desperately to do it, but he didn't dare; he wanted to signal them, too, starting a huge fire or another massive plume of dust to get their attention, but he didn't dare to do that, either. The robbers were too close, far closer than any help from the base, and if Zero and Nyx wanted to get home in one piece they had to strike when they could and hide when they couldn't. The Drill Tank made the robbers more mobile, more speedy, and more dangerous. Taking it out was their only chance.

"I see where we can do it," said Nyx. "See that hill with the giant green boulder?"

"Yep," said Zero. "With the grove of flowers at the bottom? That's the same place I was looking at."

"We're brilliant," said Nyx. She looked at Zero with bright, open eyes. "Want to jump down?"

"I'm glad it's you," said Zero.

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Out here, I mean. With me. If I had to get stranded in the middle of a hostile alien planet with somebody, I'm glad it's with you."

"Really?" asked Nyx. "I would have chosen a trained soldier, with full survival gear and a working distress beacon."

"You can't—" He shook his head. "You can't choose the gear, just



the person."

"You can't just make up rules."

"It's not rules, it's ... reality."

"Reality's a dumb game."

"It's not a game!"

"Whatever," said Nyx, but she smiled at him. "Race you down." She let go, and fell backward, spreading her arms to the sides and catching so much air she practically floated, like someone had dropped a piece of paper and it was wafting gently on the breeze. Zero jumped, but kept his feet together and his body vertical, dropping through the air like a knife. "No fair!" shouted Nyx, but Zero only laughed and started bouncing through the forest. She landed, and caught up to him, and together they jumped toward the distant hill with a green crystal boulder.

## Chapter Nineteen

# STRATEGIC BOMBING

"I SEE THEM," whispered Nyx. She was crouched behind the large green boulder, peeking out from behind it at the open ground below the hill. "They went east, trying to go around the ravine, but now they're headed back toward us again."

"They know we couldn't have gotten that far before they did," said Zero. He was a few meters away, hiding behind a different boulder. "They're going to go west now, and try to find us in the forest."

"They think they are," said Nyx, and held up the squeeze bottle of lighter fluid. "Ready?"

Zero held up the lighter. "Ready."

"Stay down until I give the signal," said Nyx, and paused, watching. "Wait," she whispered. "Waaaaait." Zero realized he was holding his breath, and forced himself to take slow, deep breaths. Breathing was hard enough out here when all you were doing was walking; jumping across a moving vehicle and running away from thieves and killers was going to be a little more strenuous.

Nyx fell totally silent now, relying only on hand signals. They didn't want to shout to each other and risk being overheard. He watched her closely, waiting for her signal, trying to keep their timing perfect—because it had to be perfect.

A small gust of wind blew past them, and Zero looked at the sky. "That's not good," he whispered.

Nyx held up her hand, hidden behind the boulder where the robbers couldn't see, and counted with her fingers.

Three.

Two.

One.

Zero jumped up from his hiding place and sprinted down the side of the hill, weaving between a few sparse flower stalks and some kind of scruffy orange bush that looked like it was made of straws. The Drill Tank turned toward him after barely a second—they'd seen him, and they were coming for him. He jumped as high and as far as

he could with each step, bounding across the low valley, heading straight for the ravine.

The Drill Tank sped up, expecting him to try to jump the gap like before, and trying to catch him before he got there. It was exactly what Zero wanted. He angled toward a grove of flowers at the base of the hill, their tops buzzing with bumblebees, and took another deep breath. This was it: do or die. He took one last leap, reaching a flower stalk, and then kicked off of it and turned, facing the Drill Tank head on and jumping straight toward it. He could see that Bailey the miner was driving, her face grim—for just a few heartbeats she looked surprised, probably wondering why Zero was charging an armored construction vehicle, but then she simply gunned the engine and came on even faster, determined to run Zero over. The other three miners were beside her—they'd recovered Debbie, it seemed—and they were shouting something that Zero couldn't hear over the noise of the machine.

Zero counted in his head, trying to time his jump, but he was too terrified to remember any numbers and just counted one, one, one, over and over. On the last one he jumped again, not forward but straight up, and the Drill Tank passed directly underneath him. Zero sprayed the tiny bottle of lighter fluid, hitting the windshield like a bullseye, covering it with a thin layer of flammable goo. It stuck to the glass, but it didn't really obscure their vision; that came later.

Bailey turned the Tank hard, but she was going so fast that all she could do was curve around the outside of the grove of flowers. The Tank skirted the edge of the ravine, just barely not going in, and then came back around only to find Nyx, appearing out of nowhere, jumping straight toward them. Bailey swerved to miss her, probably not wanting any more goop on her windshield, but Nyx had timed it too well: she pointed the fire starter, hit the button, and a spray of sparks shot out and lit the lighter fluid on fire. The windshield erupted in roaring flame, but there were still clear patches, and Bailey could still see out—not easily, by the look of it, but she could do it. So it still didn't obscure their vision, but that was okay. Zero looked up at the top of the grove, and a wild smile crept over his face. Time for the final piece of the puzzle.

"Run!" he shouted to Nyx, and ran toward the ravine again. She followed him, and they curved around the side of the grove of flowers, and the flaming Drill Tank curved after them ...

... and the bumblebeeverers descended from the sky.

The first load of beever poop hit the windshield with a splat. Zero and Nyx couldn't see it, running as hard as they could to stay ahead of the Drill Tank, but they heard it hit, and they heard the engine rev, sudden and short, as Bailey reacted to the impact. Zero glanced over his shoulder; saw the Drill Tank jerk to the side and straighten out again. He looked forward, straining to stay ahead of it, and heard another load of flying beever poop hit the glass. Then another. Then more and more. The fire was large, and a single load of beever poop couldn't possibly cover it all, and that meant the poop kept coming. Bumblebeever after bumblebeever swooped over the Tank, unleashing payloads of poop like military bombers, until the windshield was so covered with icky brown muck that Zero could barely even see the vehicle behind it.

"Jump!" shouted Nyx, and Zero looked ahead just in time to see the ravine. He took one final step, and launched himself into the sky, Nyx right beside him. Behind them, with a mechanical roar and a low, yucky squelch, the Drill Tank powered forward off the edge, tipped nose-first into the ravine, and plummeted—gently—to the depths below.

Zero watched it fall, then looked at the far side of the ravine and realized that he and Nyx might not make it. He put out his arms, flapping wildly, hoping desperately that it might provide even a tiny bit of lift, when suddenly another gust of wind came by and picked them up. It didn't lift them very high, but it was enough, and they landed in an awkward sprawl on the far side of the pit.

"We're alive!" shouted Zero.

"So is he," said Nyx, and pointed back to the other side of the ravine. Morrison had jumped out of the Tank before it went over, and was standing on the edge of the crystal-studded cliff.

"Aura!" he shouted down into the hole. "Aura, are you alright?"

"We landed fine," said Aura's voice, drifting back up from the bottom of the gap. "I mean, Bailey broke her other leg, but whatever. Debbie and I are fine."

"Do you need help?"

"I think this thing will still drive—it's pretty rugged. Do you have the kids?"

Morrison looked over at them, staring at Zero and Nyx so coldly

that Zero shrank back—even with a giant ravine in between them, he looked grim and terrifying.

“Not yet,” said Morrison, “but I can see them.”

“I don’t ask you for a lot,” said Aura, her usual deadpan slowly giving way to a hot, sizzling emotion, “but they covered me with poop and dropped me down a hole. I want you to hunt them down and skin them!”

“Anything for my little girl,” said Morrison, and narrowed his eyes at Zero and Nyx. “They don’t have anywhere else to run.”

“There’s no way he can make that jump,” said Zero.

Morrison waited, like he was listening to something. He stuck his finger under his rebreather, licked it, and then held it up, feeling the wind.

“Oh, crap,” said Nyx.

Morrison took a few steps backward, held up his finger again, and then sprinted toward the ravine and jumped. He sailed about half-way across, started to fall, and then a massive gust of wind blew through the ravine, picked him up, and threw him forward.

Straight at Zero and Nyx.

## Chapter Twenty

# THE THIRD STORM

ZERO AND NYX ran for their lives.

"He made the jump!" shouted Zero. "I can't believe he made the jump!"

"It was the wind," said Nyx. "And the wind is going to hurt us a lot worse than that before it's finished; the third storm is starting."

"Then we need to get shelter," said Zero, panting with exertion. "We need to get away, and get shelter. But we're still too far from the base!"

"He'd catch us before we made it even a quarter of the way," said Nyx. She was panting just as much as he was.

"But you can lose him, right?" asked Zero. "You did it before."

Nyx shook her head. "Now he knows all my tricks. There's nothing left I can—wait." Even gasping for breath, running at top speed, she gave a slow, wicked grin. "I think I have one trick left. Follow me!"

She pointed to the right, and leaped down the side of a hill. Zero followed her, looked ahead, and realized where she was going: another wide field, empty of everything but holes.

"A toadmouth city!" he shouted. "That'll hide us from the storm, but not from Morrison."

"Just follow me," insisted Nyx, "and don't jump."

They reached the edge of the open field in a few more leaps, and then stopped abruptly. "Now walk," said Nyx, "like this," and started stepping through the field, between the holes, fighting against the low gravity to avoid leaving the ground. It was harder than Zero expected. He found himself sliding his feet across the ground instead of taking normal steps, because even a tiny fraction of upward lift made him feel like he was going to sail up into the sky. Walking or sliding, though, they had to move fast; Morrison was close behind them. They were only about forty feet into the field when the grizzled old thief reached the edge of it. He could clear that in two short jumps if he wanted to.

The wind blew hard, and Zero and Nyx grabbed each other by the

arms for balance.

"I am not a violent man," Morrison called after them. "I won't let them kill you, and I won't let them hurt you. But I have put a lot on the line for this, and I will not spend the rest of my life in a makeshift prison twenty light-years from Earth. I planned everything, down to the smallest detail: we can get rich with this Drill, and we can get away with it. But only if nobody knows we have it, and you know we have it."

"Just keep going," said Nyx. They moved a few more feet, stepped around a hole, and then moved a few more.

"He's two and a half jumps away from us," whispered Zero.

"Don't walk away when I'm talking to you!" shouted Morrison. "Kids these days—you're as bad as Aura." He jumped, narrowing the distance.

"One and a half jumps," whispered Zero. "He can get us in seconds."

"Just stay on the ground," said Nyx. "Trust me." They inched forward, sliding their feet across the patchy yellow grass, carefully avoiding the holes. Zero looked down and saw a fat, furry toad-mouth staring up at him.

They'd gained a little distance from the robber. "A jump and three-quarters," said Zero.

"Come back here!" shouted Morrison. "I'm trying to explain this to you!" He jumped again, closing the distance; he was now only one short jump away.

Zero couldn't stand it anymore. He stopped, turned, and faced the man: "Stay away!"

"We'll let you work with us!" said Morrison. "You can join the mining operation—we'll make you rich. But you can't tell anyone you've seen us with the Drill, and that means you can't go home again. I want to trust you, but I can't."

"We can't trust you, either," said Nyx. "But we don't want to, so it's different."

"Make this easy on yourselves," Morrison snarled. "Come with me, we'll set up a mine, and then we'll get you ... I don't know, dental insurance? What do kids want?"

"Dental insurance?" asked Zero. "You think we'll let you kidnap us for dental insurance?"

"No wonder Aura's such a mess," said Nyx.

"Don't you talk about my daughter!"

"We're not going with you," said Nyx. "And you can't make us."

"Fine," said Morrison, and jumped. One final leap to cover all the distance between them in a heartbeat; he would land, he would grab them, and that would be it. They'd spend the rest of their lives in an illegal mine on an alien planet.

Except Morrison's leap only took him halfway. He pushed off the ground, sailed up through the air, crossed over the toadmouth hole—and then a long, sticky tongue shot out, grabbed him, and pulled him down with loud, surprised yelp.

"Aaaah!"

"I take back everything I said about them," said Nyx. "Toadmouaths are my new favorite animal."

"Did you plan that?" asked Zero.

"Not the hilarious comic timing," said Nyx, "but everything else, yeah."

"You're awesome."

"Thanks. Let's go say goodbye." She climbed carefully down into the hole, doing her best to avoid leaving the ground—just like before, the toadmouaths only seemed to grab things that were airborne, so as long as the two kids stuck to the dirt it ignored them. They found Morrison pinned to the floor, wriggling like a fish, with thick flower petals all around him and a big fat toadmouth sitting on his chest and arms. Adorable little toadmouth babies crowded around him, trying to snuggle.

"Get off of me!" shouted Morrison. "I don't snuggle!"

"That also explains a lot about Aura," said Zero.

"Help me out of here," said Morrison, his voice tinged with desperation and fear. "They're unpredictable alien menaces. You don't know what they'll do to me!"

"We know exactly what they'll do to you," said Nyx. "How do you think we trapped you here in the first place?"

"Help me!"

"What you need is to calm down," said Zero. "I recommend a little nap." He reached down, grabbed Morrison's rebreather, and pulled it off. "With this big fuzzy blanket, you'll be asleep in no time."

"No!" howled Morrison. "Don't leave me here!"

"Don't worry," said Nyx. "The colony's security people will be



back to pick you up in no time. We'll tell them right where to find you."

"Aaaaaah!" Morrison roared at them in anger, but Zero and Nyx simply pocketed his rebreather, waved to the toadmouaths, and crawled back out of the burrow.

"The wind is getting worse," said Zero. The wind blew Nyx's bright pink hair into a tangle of whips and snarls around her face. "We need to get into a burrow of our own."

"Let's get as far across the field as we can first," said Nyx. She checked the radio beacon. "Eight miles left."

"We'll sit out the storm, pop back up, and run," said Zero. Nyx nodded, and they inched their way across the field until the wind nearly carried them away. They were almost at the edge when they finally crawled down into a toadmouth burrow and pressed themselves to the back. Toadmouaths crowded around them, breathing softly and munching on iridescent flower petals. Zero picked up a petal. "Do you mind if we help ourselves?"

The toadmouaths didn't react, so Zero took a bite.

"It tastes like drawing," he said.

Nyx frowned. "Like, *a* drawing?"

"Like, the act of drawing," said Zero.

Nyx shook her head. "That's impossible," she said. She took a bite of her own petal, swallowed, and spoke again. "Mine tastes like ... like the texture of fire-resistant clothing."

"Wow," said Zero. "Alien flavors are weird."

## Chapter Twenty-One

# WINGS

ZERO CROUCHED IN the burrow, listening to the wind howl past the mouth of the cave. Nyx sat beside him, slowly stroking the fur on a baby toadmouth. The mother toadmouth squatted impassively in the center of the burrow, covering her children and shielding Nyx and Zero from the worst of the storm. Every now and then Zero felt a tug of air, as the furious wind formed a vacuum that threatened to pull him outside, but it never did. They were unsettled, but they were safe.

As they waited, Zero watched the flower petals blowing back and forth on the floor of the cave. They were big—nearly as long as his arm, and an inch or so thicker. What amazed him the most about them is how boring they were: here he was, on an alien planet, looking at an alien life form—one of the first exoflora any human being had ever seen, let alone this close and personal—and he was bored by it. Anyone back on Earth, probably anyone back in the base, would give their left eye to be this close to an exoflora, but Zero just wanted to leave. He wanted to go home, to his family, but he didn't want to think about that. It only made him sad and anxious. So he thought about flower petals, and he thought about wind, and the heavy breeze blew the petals back and forth across the floor.

Back and forth, back and forth.

"It's not the same as being in space," said Nyx softly, "but it's not worse. Just different."

"Not every planet is as bad as Tacita," said Zero. "All things considered, this one's pretty great."

"It is," said Nyx. "I miss ceilings, though—coming outside is fun, once in a while. Maybe. But I miss ceilings."

Zero didn't want to say what he missed, because he didn't want to start crying, so he thought of the Pathfinder spaceship instead. "I miss ... flying," he said, and smiled. "Jumping ten feet in the air is fun and all, but ... in space we could fly. We could soar from one end

of the ship to the other, or float forever in the middle of a room. We never had to come down at all if we didn't want to."

"We'll do that here, too," said Nyx. "Maybe not on our own, but with planes and blimps and airships. It's so easy to fly I don't think we'll be able to avoid it—they'll probably start building cities in the sky." She grinned. "With big propellers, so they can float away when the storms come close."

Zero smiled at that, but shook his head. "The dragons would attack them."

"Then we'll have to invent some dragon repellent," said Nyx, shrugging off the concern like it didn't matter. "They attacked the loudest thing in the base, which means they have special ears, right? So maybe we can find a sound frequency that they hate, and use that to drive them away."

"Maybe," said Zero. "That or something else." He looked at the narrow oval of sky that was visible through the mouth of the cave. "I'd rather live up there than underground."

All he really wanted to do was fly again.

It felt like hours had passed when the storm finally began to die down. Zero and Nyx looked at the toadmouth warily—could they leave yet, or would it pull them back in with its tongue, trying to protect them? Zero picked up a flower petal and threw it toward the mouth of the cave. The petal spun in the opening, catching the air like a wing; before it could fly away completely, the toadmouth snatched it back with its tongue, tucked it under its body, and sat on it.

"Maybe not a great idea to leave just yet—" said Zero, but before he could finish Nyx hushed him with her finger.

*"Shhh."*

She was listening to something. Zero closed his mouth, cocked his head, and listened with her.

He heard a rumble, and a sharp, mechanical clank.

"The Drill Tank," Nyx whispered.

"How did they find us?"

"They found Morrison," said Nyx. "They disabled the colony's tracker chips, but they probably have their own so they don't lose each other."

"But how did they get the Drill out of that ravine?" asked Zero. "We went to all that work to trap it there!"

"The wind probably didn't get down there," said Nyx, "just like it didn't get down here. The whole time we were sitting here, they were getting the Drill unstuck."

Zero listened again; he could hear the robbers talking, but he couldn't make out any words. They were probably wondering how to get Morrison out from underneath the toadmouth.

"If they're talking," he said, "that means it's safe to go outside. The wind's died down."

Nyx raised her eyebrow. "How safe can it really be if the robbers and their giant, drill-tipped Tank are out there waiting for us? We can't outrun them, and there's nowhere to hide—we're too far away from the nearest flower forest, or the nearest mushroom shrubs, or the nearest crystal grove, or the nearest ... anything. Maybe it's smarter to just stay in here, and let them pass over us, and try to sneak out behind them."

The toadmouth started waddling toward the opening of the burrow, and its babies followed behind it; Zero and Nyx tried to get out of the way, but the creature was so wide, and the mouth of the burrow so narrow, that they had to squeeze tight against the walls to keep from being shoved out. The large, hairy creature squished them against the dirt, flattening them with its bulk, but eventually it got past them, and the children collapsed on the floor behind it, gasping for breath. The toadmouths climbed up and out of the burrow, and Zero laid down on the floor, shaking his head.

"We'll just live here now," he said, staring at the ceiling. "We'll join the toadmouths, and learn their ways, and become one with their people."

"Stop being so melodramatic," said Nyx, and threw a massive flower petal at his face. It spun through the cave like a frisbee, catching the air and gliding away without even hitting him. Zero watched it go, watched it bump into the wall, and watched it waft gently to the floor.

He sat up, and he stared at it.

A moment later he spoke. "Birds don't float."

Nyx looked at him like he was crazy. "What?"

"I mean, I guess they float in the water, but not the air. They're buoyant, but not, like, all by themselves. Not like the bumblebees are. Birds have to increase their buoyancy—they adapt their bodies to use the air more efficiently."

“Is there a hole in your rebreather?” asked Nyx. “Because you’re talking like a crazy person.”

Zero held up a pair of the giant, rubbery flower petals. “Birds use wings.”

Nyx stared at him a moment longer, then shook her head. “Now I know you’re going crazy.”

“Look at these,” said Zero. “They’re the perfect shape.” He gripped one petal tightly in each hand, holding them out like wings.

Would it work?

It couldn’t work.

It had to work.

He took a breath, and then swept the petals down.

He flew a few inches into the air.

Nyx stared at him, wide-eyed. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Zero stared as well. Had that really worked? He started falling back down again, so slowly in the thick Kaguya air. He raised the petals again, flapped them down a second time, and surged upward, so fast this time he bonked his head on the ceiling of the cave.

“Ha haaaaaaaaaaaaa!” he shouted. He was so elated he couldn’t even form words—couldn’t even think of words. “Ha haaaaaaaaaaaaa!” He was flying—he was really flying!

His sore arm ached, and his fingers felt stiff, and he lost his grip on one of the petals. Without one of his wings, his slow drift back to the floor became an awkward, sideways tumble.

“We can really do this,” said Nyx. “Can we? Of course we can.” She grabbed two petals of her own. “This is awesome. This is crazy. Are we really going to do this?”

“Not like that,” said Zero, pointing at her fingers. “We don’t want to lose our grip. Try this.” He took the petal in his hand, and started trying to shove his arm inside of it. It was thick and juicy, filled with a stiff, watery pulp, but he was able to dig into it easily enough. After a moment or two of struggling, he had his arm inside of it half-way past the elbow. The other arm was harder, because he only had one hand to work with, but by bracing the petal between his teeth and his armpits and the wall he was eventually able to get his arm inside. He now had two broad wings; he looked at them, waved them around, and practiced angling them front and back.

“Ready,” said Nyx. He looked up and saw that she had done the same.

Zero walked toward the mouth of the burrow, and partway up the slope to the surface. "If this doesn't work," he said, "they're going to catch us."

"It'll work," said Nyx. She spread her makeshift wings, and he did the same. "One, two, three." They swept their arms downward, as powerfully as they could.

And they flew.

Zero's first jump took him about fifteen feet up; he raised his wings, falling slowly, and flapped again and flew another fifteen or twenty feet into the air. He hooted for joy, flapping and flapping, until finally he looked down and found himself more than a hundred feet over the ground. On the far side of the toadmouth field he could see the Drill Tank and the robbers; they stared up at him in absolute shock.

"Are you kidding me?" shouted Nyx. "Are you kidding me?!"

"We're flying," said Zero.

"We're flying!"

Zero looked down at the robbers again. Debbie was out of the Drill now, holding two petals and flapping like crazy, but she couldn't maintain any altitude.

"She's too heavy," said Zero. "Or I guess too weak. She doesn't have the right balance of strength and size to lift herself on muscle power." He grinned at Nyx, so giddy he could barely contain himself. "In this gravity, with this air, we do."

Nyx grinned back. "When I said I didn't like skies," she said, "I didn't know we could do this."

"Neither did I."

"I take it all back," she said. "I love the sky."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# GIANT SHADOWS

NYX LOOKED TO the side, to where the radio beacon told them the Kaguya base was waiting. "Do you think we can go sideways, instead of just up?"

"Let's try it." Zero's arms were already getting tired, especially the one with the cuts from the crystals, but he wasn't going to give up flying until he absolutely had to—until he collapsed from exhaustion. Now that he was up in the sky, he wanted to stay there forever. He started experimenting with different wing positions, and managed to maneuver a little bit. Nyx did the same, and swooped forward a few feet.

"We can fly the whole way home," she said.

Zero looked down at Debbie and Aura below, watching him like snakes watching a gerbil being dangled over their cage. "I hope so," he said.

He wasn't suddenly an eagle or anything, but as he practiced he found he could control himself better than before, swooping back and forth and even turning in a wide circle. Soon they were both soaring through the air, as buoyant as birds in Kaguya's thick atmosphere. They pointed themselves toward the Pathfinder colony, and started flapping their way home.

Down below them, the robbers followed closely in the Drill Tank.

"At least they don't have guns," said Zero.

"They won't follow us all the way back," said Nyx. "Right? The colony security people will find them."

"Debbie's driving now," said Zero. "She might not care."

Nyx nodded. "As long as we can stay up in the air, we can still avoid them. We can land on top of the freaking control center if we have to, and make sure that we can talk to the colony leaders before Debbie gets close to us."

Zero thought about it, and looked down at the Drill Tank, and frowned. Debbie was just visible in the driver's seat, her face twisted in rage. "Maybe," he said. "But what if ..." He stopped. He'd

thought of something terrible, and he didn't want to think, but he had, and now he had to say it. "What if leading them back is the wrong thing to do?"

It was Nyx's turn to frown. "What do you mean?"

"I mean ... well, you've seen Debbie. She's out for blood, and she doesn't seem to care who or what she destroys in the process. She might turn around when we get too close to the base, or she might ... drive the Drill right through the side of the command center. She could hurt who knows how many people—maybe even kill them. She could mess up the colony so bad it takes us years to recover. We're twenty thousand people, completely on our own, with no help and no backup and no way to replace our people or our supplies or anything. If we get everything set up, we have the tools to make more stuff and build a civilization, but if a psycho with a giant Drill Tank destroys all of that before we get set up ... I don't even know what we'll do. We could be back in the dark ages—maybe even the stone ages. Maybe the best thing for us to do is keep her away from the colony, not lead her straight back to it."

Nyx was silent for a moment, thinking. At last she nodded. "You're right. This colony will only work if the people in it are good—if they do what they're supposed to do, and try to help everyone else. I suppose every society is like that. A criminal like Debbie could ruin everything." She sighed. "So I guess we have to be the good ones this time, and do what's right for everyone else instead of just for us."

Zero sighed as well. "Yeah."

"I hate being good," said Nyx, and smirked. "Sometimes I think I was happier as a pirate."

"The worst part is, Yan and Park aren't going to see me flying."

Nyx laughed. "They would be so jealous."

Zero laughed with her, but he wasn't thinking about Yan and Park. He was thinking about his mom and dad. They're the ones he wanted to show his wings to. They're the ones he wanted to prove himself to. He'd been dumped in the middle of an alien wilderness, and he hadn't just survived, he'd learned how to fly.

"Oh, well," he said sadly. "Where should we try to lead the—" and then he stopped.

He'd seen something so terrifying that he froze completely. He had to remind himself to move his arms and fly.



It took him a moment longer to remember how to speak.

"D—did you see that?" he asked.

"What?" said Nyx.

And then it came it again, and she saw it this time—Zero could tell by the way she, too, froze up in fear, forgetting to flap or think or do anything more than babble.

A giant shadow had passed over them, racing across the ground like a dark gray phantom.

A shadow with a long neck, a long tail, and two utterly massive wings.

Zero whispered: "The dragon is back."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

“CRAP,” SAID ZERO. And then, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say, he said it again. “Crap.”

“Is it going to eat us?” asked Nyx.

Zero didn’t know. “Maybe only if we’re loud?”

“How loud is too loud?”

“Who knows?” he said. “Is it worse to be in the sky? Should we land and try to hide? But Debbie’s down there!”

“Our wings aren’t exactly quiet,” she said. “But I guess they’re not as loud as”—she paused, listening—“as that guy shouting. Listen.”

Zero stopped flapping for a moment, holding out his arms and trying to glide silently. He heard the rumble of the Drill Tank behind them, and something else. Nyx was right, it was a man shouting. But what was he saying?

“... eeeeeeeeeeeeeeroooooooooooo ...”

Zero’s eyes went wide. “That’s my name! Somebody’s calling my name!”

“Morrison’s asleep,” said Nyx. “Maybe Bailey?”

“No, it’s coming from up ahead.” He angled himself forward, moving his arms to gain speed, and heard it again.

“Zeeeroooo!”

“I think it’s my dad,” he said, and then got so excited he shouted it at the top of his lungs. “I think that’s my dad!”

The dragon’s dark shadow passed over them again, and Zero’s jubilant shout died in his throat. He needed to be quiet.

“Zeeeroooo!”

“He’s making too much noise!” Zero hissed. He looked back at the Drill Tank, then forward to his father. He knew exactly what to do.

“We’ve got to stop him!”

“Come on!” said Nyx, and propelled herself forward. Zero followed, and they darted through the sky like birds—odd, ungainly

birds, but a bird is a bird. They swooped over another grove of giant flowers, and around a flock of those flying, ten-eared rabbits, and there he was—Zero's father, wearing an environmental suit, holding a beacon and a communicator. A pair of other people were with him—Park and Beverly, the woman from the colony admin team. They'd formed a search party, trying to find them.

"Nyxyxyx!" shouted Mr. Huang. "Helloooooo? Zeeerooooo!"

"Dad!" shouted Zero. "Dad, be quiet!"

The three figures looked up, stared for a moment in shock, and then pointed at the two flying children.

"Zero!" shouted Mr. Huang. "Is that you!"

"Stop shouting!" said Zero. He pulled his arms in close to his sides, and dove down toward the ground. When he neared his father he swept his arms out, catching the air and landing with only a small stumble. "Dad, be quiet, you're attracting too much attention."

"Zero, are you okay? What's that on your arms? Were you flying?"

Nyx came in for a landing beside them—slightly neater than Zero's. "Mr. Huang," she said, "you have to stop shouting. Stop talking!"

"What's going on?"

"The dragon is back," said Zero, "and it hunts by sound."

Mr. Huang's eyes went wide behind his suit's plasteel faceplate. He looked up in the sky, and gathered the two children close to him.

"Something's coming over the hill," Beverly whispered.

"A dragon?" asked Park.

"It's a Drill Tank," said Zero. "Hold completely still, and don't make a sound."

The robbers' Drill Tank came screaming over the top of a nearby rise, tank treads whirling, mining drill spinning like mad. Zero watched the cockpit, watched as Debbie's crazed face came into view.

"We have to move," said Mr. Huang, but Zero shook his head.

"Stay completely silent," Zero whispered. "Not a movement, not a sound."

Debbie snarled in triumph, and the Drill went even faster, and it was barely ten meters away from them when out of nowhere the dragon dove, streaking from the sky like a bolt of dark lightning. Zero had never been this close to it before—he saw that it wasn't scaled or reptilian, like the dragon stories from earth; instead it had a smooth, thick look to its skin, like a whale or a dolphin—or, Zero re-

alized, like the rubbery stalks of Kaguya's giant flowers. Its skin was dark purple, like a bruise, and it was covered here and there with shaped armor plates like the pads on a football player. Its head and mouth were smaller than he expected, with teeth the same shape and color as the bright orange crystals that covered the landscape. Most striking of all, it seemed to have no eyes—just smooth patches on either side of its head, like the pressure-sensing membranes on a lizard or a frog. It dove toward the Drill Tank like a living missile, and at the last second it unfurled its wings, slowing just enough to open its wicked orange claws and dig them into the machine like fangs. The metal crumpled, and the windshield shattered with a spray of glass shrapnel.

Through this gap Zero saw the robbers scream in panic. Aura opened the door, grabbed the unconscious Morrison, and leaped clear of the vehicle. Bailey followed, crawling with her arms because her legs were still injured. Debbie, though, had no interest in running; she climbed through the open windshield, screamed in joyful defiance at the dragon, and stomped on one of its claws. The thing curled its long, sinuous neck, bringing its head close to her, snapping its crystalline jaws, and Debbie punched it square in the face.

"Yes!" shouted Nyx.

Zero looked at her, eyes wide, but Nyx only shrugged.

"What? She's wanted to do that this whole time. Go, Debbie!"

The woman spread her arms to the sides, though Zero couldn't tell if she was daring the dragon to attack again or offering it a hug. And he would never find out—the beast swept its massive wings down again, flattening Zero and Nyx and the search party with a sudden burst of wind, and then launched itself into the air—dragon, Drill, and Debbie, all together. It sailed into the sky, Debbie's whoop of frenzied joy fading into the distance, and then they were gone.

Mr. Huang stared into the sky with wide, startled eyes. After a moment he turned to look at Zero and Nyx. "What just happened?"

A few meters away, Aura climbed to her feet and pointed at the children. "Anything they told you is a lie."

Mr. Huang turned to her, still utterly confused. "What?"

"I don't care anymore!" shouted Bailey. "Both my legs are broken, and the Drill's gone, and you can throw me in jail if you want but just get me to a hospital!"

Aura paused, like she was trying to think of another deception, but

then simply rolled her eyes. "Fine, whatever."

Mr. Huang looked at them for a moment, then turned back to Zero again. He blinked, and offered a final: "What?"

Zero opened his mouth to answer, but Nyx beat him to it.

"They're robbers," she said. "They tried to steal that Drill but then we found them and the windstorm threw us twenty miles away."

"I was just about to say that," said Zero, though it didn't bother him nearly as much as it used to.

"They're telling the truth!" shouted Bailey. "I confess everything, just find me a doctor!"

Mr. Huang stared at the children in surprise. "Okay ... wow. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"We're fine," said Zero. "And we learned a lot about this planet."

"I can see that," said Mr. Huang. "But ... how were you flying?"

"Buoyancy!" said Zero. "The low gravity and the dense atmosphere mean that humans can fly on muscle power!"

"Wow," said Park. "I didn't realize you were such an action hero, Zero."

"He's more than an action hero," said Mr. Huang with a smile. "He's a scientist."

Zero beamed.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# UNLOCKED

GOVERNOR HATENDI LANDED with the very last group of colonists from the Pathfinder, coming down not in a barge, but in a shuttle. It was arguably the single most important piece of technology they had, because it was the only ship in the colony capable of launching itself back up into orbit. If they ever needed to go back to the Pathfinder for any reason, that was the ship they'd use to do it.

Zero and Nyx were sitting in Hatendi's office when she arrived. Zero's parents were with them.

"Hello, Yaozu," said Hatendi, greeting Mr. Huang warmly, and then moved on to Mrs. Huang, Nyx, and at last to Zero, shaking their hands and calling them by name.

"Welcome to Kaguya," said Mr. Huang. "Everything seems to be in good shape down here: we've repaired the damage from the windstorms, we've moved all vital equipment underground, and we've even established contact with the Torchbearer colony on Genji. Their planet's very different from ours, but they're doing well."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Hatendi. "And the thieves?"

"Three of the four are accounted for and in a temporary holding cell," said Zero's mother. "The fourth, an administrator named Debra Gage, was taken by the dragon."

Hatendi nodded and stood before them for a moment, as if she were preparing to speak, but then turned instead and walked to the window. Hatendi's office was a part of the command center, so it rose up above the other buildings in the base, and boasted an impressive view of the alien valley. The Governor stared out at the landscape for a moment, then said in a reverential whisper: "It really is amazing, isn't it?"

"It is," said Mrs. Huang. "A whole new world."

"With a whole new sky," said Hatendi. She kept her eyes on the window, but gestured behind her. "Zero, Nyx, come here for a second."

The children stood and joined her at the window. She pointed at

one of the wispy yellow bushes, its weblike strands floating serenely in the air. "Did you ever get close to one of those?"

"Not those," said Zero. "We were worried they might be poisonous."

"It's the color," said Hatendi, nodding. "So many of Earth's yellow creatures are toxic, we tend to make the same assumptions here."

"There's a bunch of yellow grass," said Nyx, "and that wasn't toxic. We walked all over it."

"I hope the yellow webs aren't either," said Hatendi. "They're beautiful." She pointed at a grove of giant flowers. "And the floating creatures? I believe you call them bumblebeever?"

Zero felt embarrassed. "It's just a name we used; it's kind of silly —"

"I like it," said Hatendi with a smile. "You saw them up close?"

"We did," said Nyx. "They're not as scary as they look."

"They're like floating dogs," said Zero. "Floating firefighter dogs."

"You mean dalmatians?" asked Hatendi.

"We mean they literally put out fires," said Nyx.

"We think they use a flammable gas to float," said Zero. "Like hydrogen. When they see fire they put it out as fast as they can—it's like an instinct."

"How do they put it out?"

Nyx smirked. "I don't want to spoil the surprise."

Hatendi looked at her, then at Zero. After a moment she glanced at Zero's parents, then looked back at the children. "It seems that once again I'm in a position to thank you for stopping a theft."

"We didn't really stop anything," said Zero. "We just tried to get home."

"Home," said Hatendi. "I'm glad you think of this place that way."

"It's a cool place," said Nyx. "It's my first planet, really. I like it a lot."

"I just wish ... ," said Zero, and then stopped. He knew all the reasons for keeping people inside of the buildings—he knew that the planet had dangers, and he knew it was safer in the base and underground. But it still made him sad to think, after everything they'd done and seen and discovered, that they might never go outside again.

Hatendi seemed to read his mind. "You wish that you could go outside again."

Zero nodded, wondering if he was about to get in trouble. "I'm not going to sneak out or anything, but ... yeah. It's too wonderful of a world to stay locked away from it the whole time."

Hatendi stared at him for a moment, peering into his eyes, then turned back to the window. "I agree with you."

"What?" Zero was stunned. "You do?"

"I do," said Hatendi. "There's so much we can learn from this world, so much we can explore, I think it's a shame to keep ourselves sealed off from it." She smiled. "Give me a couple of days to work out the details—safety and conservation and all of that—and we'll get you outside again. We'll get everyone outside, exploring and discovering and just ... getting to know it. It's our planet now; it's our home, like you said. We need to love it, and we can't do that through a window." She touched the window in front of her. "Though it is beautiful."

"That's golden," said Nyx. "We can tell you everything we've learned—the exoflora and the exofauna and everything else."

"Will you tell us what you know, too?" asked Zero. "You used the same word for the web-bush-thingies that you used for the bumblebees: you called them both *creatures*. Are the bush things animals, too?"

"Technically neither of them are animals," said Hatendi, "but we do believe they are both creatures. Our biologists have been studying everything they can find, and it looks like the standard categories we used on Earth don't apply here. Some of the *animals*, so to speak, are a lot more plant-like than they look, and some of the plants are a lot more animal. We have a lot to learn, but you've made a good start. Thank you."

"You're welcome, I guess," said Zero, suddenly shy and self-conscious. He hadn't really done that much, had he? He'd only tried to stay alive.

"That's his shy face," said Nyx, and bumped him in the shoulder. "Come on, Zero, admit it—we rocked this place." She grinned. "We're amazing."

Zero smiled back. "I guess."

"I have to go," said Governor Hatendi. "I have meetings to attend, work to oversee, and a colony to name—I'm thinking *Achebe* could be a good one."

"I like it," said Zero.



“After that, though, I wonder if you might do me a favor.”

Zero looked at Nyx. “Us?”

“Yes,” said Hatendi. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to do, and it seems like this is the perfect place for it, and I understand you are the experts.” She smiled, and her eyes twinkled with delight—and just a hint of mischief. “When I’m done with my meetings and my plans and all of my dull, boring adult stuff, will you teach me how to fly?”

A wide smile spread across Zero’s face. “Absolutely.”



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dan Wells writes horror, science fiction, and fantasy. He is the author of the bestselling Partials Sequence, the bestselling Zero Chronicles, and the I Am Not A Serial Killer series, now adapted into an award-winning movie. Dan is the Vice President of Narrative at Dragonsteel and lives in Utah with his wife, 6 children, 2 dogs, and almost 500 board games.

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DRAGON PLANET

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