

# IN HER ORBIT

BY KATE MACCARTHY

“Do you braid each other’s hair, too?” Was all Sarah’d said. Definitely part of her master plan. Utterly diabolical. Things had been going so smoothly before that, too. The whole pajama party was ... well, it wasn’t the craziest party I’ve ever been to, which is probably a good thing, but it definitely got wild.

Lux invited us, of course. Lulu had been the one to *actually* text us about it, but I’m sure that Lux was just using her as a cover. To invite me, I mean.

I believed that right up until Lux slammed the door in our faces. Then I wasn’t really sure of anything except for how cute the startled expression on Lux’s face had been when she saw us. We stood on the porch for a moment while I pondered her adorable oven mitts. Very cute. Eventually, Lux let us in, and soon I was heroically vanquishing the void creature that’d snuck through my ‘arcane shortcut to another dimension’. I was waiting for the thunderous acclaim when Lux rushed into the kitchen with the weirdest expression on her face. Sarah followed a moment later while Jinx just stared through the doorway, probably waiting for something to explode. Smoke billowed out of the kitchen, and the rest of us began opening windows as Janna summoned up a breeze to clear the air. I wondered what the place looked like from the outside with plumes of smoke billowing from it, then decided it was probably a bit like when I cook back home.

“Ez.” Soraka’s ever-gentle voice interrupted my attempts to open a particularly stubborn window next to a framed picture of Lux and Jinx. In the photo, Jinx had her arm around Lux’s shoulders, both of them with brilliant smiles, and the sight made my stomach twist with an emotion I don’t like to admit to. Jealousy. Well,

maybe not jealousy. Probably just sick from the smoke. Totally.

“*Ez.*”

“Ah!” She startled me again. “Uh, yeah?” I glanced self-consciously towards the kitchen, but the only person who’d heard me was Jinx, who did a very rude impression of my outburst, stuck out her tongue, and turned around to peer into the kitchen again. Rude, much?

Soraka’s face filled my vision and she grinned excitedly at me. “You know how to order pizzas, right?” Wait. Pizzas, plural? “You have one of those app things?” *App things?* Every so often I’m reminded that most of my team was born not only before cell phones were a thing, but before electricity and, like, time, probably. I wish I could say I hesitated, but my phone was in my hand before I realised it. “Don’t you think it’d be a nice thing to do after ... you know?” She gestured to the burn mark on the floor left by the void monster in a way that made me feel like I did something wrong, when really, I was just playing truth or dare. She *has* to know you can never back out of a dare.

I kept my protests quiet, just between us. “But I bought last time!” I quickly scanned the room to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. Don’t want anyone knowing how generous I am—it ruins my cool, aloof image.

Raka glanced over at the kitchen door too. Jinx had moved on, but quiet voices emanated from within, along the smell of burning, despite Janna’s zephyr. I caught Janna’s eyes before Raka turned back to me, and something about the second our gazes met made me feel ... watched. Janna is no Syndra, but she has that same I-have-more-power-than-I’ll-ever-let-on aura that just makes me nervous. “I just think,” Soraka continued, her voice barely a whisper, only for me, “That Lux could really use the support right now. I bet she’d really appreciate it.” And, stars damn it, even though my wallet couldn’t be any lighter without floating away, I got that little

pull in my chest, like Raka'd hooked my wallet and was trying to pull it out from between my ribs. Like something was tugging me towards the kitchen, towards Lux. I mean, *that's* nothing new—the planets we soar past have nothing on Lux's gravity. Again, I glanced over to where she must have been, and I heard Lux's soft, sweet voice say, "Wait, you guys seriously want to stay?" And I knew I had to do it. I don't really believe in fate, but I know the First Star chose us all for a reason, and I think my reason is tied to her. The First Star whispered in my ear to order pizza—really, she practically screamed it. Actually, it might have been Soraka, not sure! In any case, a minute and most of my life savings later, pizza was on its way, and I was the hero once again. Seriously, when are we going to start getting paid for this Star Guardian hero stuff?



Pizza softened everyone up a bit. Sarah gets cranky when she's hungry, for sure, but even Soraka, for all her healing magey-ness and motherly mumbo-jumbo, can get a bit testy. That was probably what the emotionally-beat-Ezreal-out-of-his-life-savings thing was about. Eating made things less awkward—being able to take refuge in bites of olive, tomato, and spinach pizza made us all breathe a little easier.

"This pizza is *soo* good!" Lux said, helping herself to her third (yes, I counted) slice of pizza.

Lulu was holding her slice up to the light, examining it. "It's not quite purple, but I still like it." She noted enigmatically.

Lux must have seen the perplexed look on our faces, because she explained that, "Purple is the ultimate standard of taste for Lulu. The closer something is to purple, the closer it is to ambrosia."

I stared at the pizza. It was droopy and glistened faintly, like it had just come from hot yoga for pizza, so I couldn't help wondering what about it could possibly be purple. Next to me on the couch, Sarah popped her lips and absently tapped her phone on her leg, waiting (as always) for a text from Ahri. Soraka was the only one brave enough to ask, "What are your favourite purple foods then, Lulu?"

Lulu was busy rearranging all the olives on her slice into something that looked oddly familiar, but she answered evenly, "Carrots, ice cream sandwiches, fish and chips, raw pasta, and crunchy autumn leaves, but only on Thursdays." Then, she looked up at Soraka with those huge eyes of hers and smiled an even bigger smile, squishy and soft around the edges. Melty, almost, in its sweetness. "Oh! And Soraka's cinnamon buns!"

Ladies and gentlemen, forget the sleepover. We were gathered here today to witness the birth of a lifelong friendship. The look on Soraka's face was priceless, and before I could reach for my fourth slice, Soraka was next to Lulu, helping to arrange the olives in a pattern that will bring the flavour closer to the desired purple Nirvana.

"By the way," Poppy lifted up her slice of pizza so that it hung limply in her grasp, examining the way Lulu had examined her olives. "What's with the cheese? And *where* is it?"

I could practically *hear* Sarah's grin cut across her face. "Little Ezreal has to order special cheese because dairy hurts his tummy." She reached over to pat my stomach like she always does when she makes fun of my lactose intolerance, like it's *my* fault! Honestly, Cheese is kinda nasty anyway, even without the side effects. I batted her arms away, to which she responded by wrapping her arms around my neck and dragging me into a very uncomfortable half-hug-half-noogie embrace. In front of Lux!

“Gah! Sarah!” I yelped, prying myself away just in time to hear Lux laughing. Sarah arched a brow at me, as if to say *you’re welcome*, and I had to resist the urge to say *for what?* I stuck my tongue out at her instead.

“You guys are really close, huh?” Lux said, and all three of us looked over at her. She looked uneasy in the sudden spotlight. “I mean, when we met before, you guys seemed really...”

“Aloof,” Janna offered diplomatically when Lux hesitates.

“Rude,” Poppy added.

“Borrrrr-ring!” That could only be Jinx.

“Like tomatoes?” Lulu suggested, and we all paused, perplexed, before Lux continued, apparently very accustomed to Lulu’s nonsensical interjections.

“You seemed like co-workers more than friends. A really efficient team, I mean. We’re always arguing, and Jinx is never here, and—...” She stopped, taking a breath a breath and visibly collecting herself. “But you guys work really well together. Like it’s...”

“A job,” Sarah cut in, and her voice has that odd coldness that it gets sometimes. That hard edge of a cliff and a drop so deep that if you fell, you could check your watch before you hit the bottom. Not for the first time, I wonder what’s down there and what made such a chasm in her. “But now that you know us, you think we’re...?”

“Lame,” Soraka said, and I’m suddenly way too aware of how we look—Soraka and Lulu have begun tiling a pattern on the table in olives, and Sarah still had both arms around me. *Stars*, my hair must have been a nightmare to after that stellar noogie. I was hurrying to run my fingers through it as Sarah started to laugh, struck by the same realisation as me, and soon we were all laughing. Well, all of us except for Lulu, who was still very busy. Finally, Sarah stopped and said, “So, if this is a

pajama party, shouldn't we add the pajama part? Do you braid each other's hair, too?"

Honestly, I should have seen this coming after the cheese-related teasing, but being around Lux makes me lower my guard. I felt safe around her.

Soraka clapped her hands together. "Oh! That's right! Lulu's handiwork!" And I tried very hard not to think too hard about Lux in something cute and soft, nestled into a pile of pillows. Sadly, in the end procured the same onesie for herself as the ones Lulu gave the rest of us. Cute, but not *quite* what I had in mind. The girls dispersed to different bedrooms to put theirs on, but I got shoved in one of the most cramped bathrooms I've ever experienced to try and change. I almost knocked over their collection of toothbrushes and a hairdryer absolutely plastered with stickers, but I managed to only get a *bit* twisted up in my onesie. The gymnastics I had to do to accomplish it don't bear repeating, but they *did* mean that I was the last one changed, and that I emerged to a completely silent house. There were seven star guardians out there somewhere, so there really should have been more noise. The back of my neck prickled in the ominous silence of the still house. Sarah has a penchant for pranks (not as good as my own, but admirable), but this had a different feeling of foreboding. Something sinister was afoot—my starry senses told me so. I stared down the plush hallway, marked all the way down with tokens of their lives. Their house was so cozy, so full of love. Ours felt like an IKEA showroom in comparison. What could make everyone so quiet...?

Yuuto's ears perked up, sensing my anxiety, and he zipped down the hallway to the doors at the end, pressing his ear flat to the wood. He listened for a few seconds before moving to do the same with the next door. And that's we heard the scream.

Lux's scream. It made my blood run cold.

Did another void creature break through? Something worse? In an instant, my mind went in a million directions, but Ahri had trained me well. Yuuto zoomed past me, quick as a comet, and stopped at one of the doors on the other end of the hall. My feet lifted off the ground and I zipped after him through the air, quicker than I could sprint the distance. He'd already got his tiny paws on the door, scratching it desperately. I had no idea know what was going to find on the other end there, but I knew I couldn't hesitate in the face of danger. I screwed up all my courage as I turned the knob, then kicked the door open with one *very* fuzzy slipper. Not as dramatic as I'd hoped.

Inside, the seven star guardians in question were lounging on plush pillows spread out on the floor, except for two. Sarah and Lux were sat together on the pinkest bed I have ever seen (including Ahri's), and one of Sarah's arms was wrapped around Lux in a headlock. In one hand, Sarah held her phone. The other was clamped over Lux's mouth. Everyone turned to look at me when I burst in.

"Um," I offered eloquently. Why was Soraka smiling?

Poppy, of all people, was the first to speak. "Aw, you ruined our fun."

I looked at Poppy, then at Lux. Lux's face was almost as pink as her sheets beneath Sarah's hand, and her eyes were all crinkly, like she was in pain. I've never seen that expression, and I consider myself something of a connoisseur of Lux's range of beautiful expressions. "Um," I looked at Sarah and asked myself *What would Ahri do?* "Let her go?"

"You don't want that," Poppy said matter-of-factly.

"You really don't." Janna didn't even look up from filing her nails.

"You're gonna regret it. Bigtime." Like Jinx has ever felt regret in her life. She was filing her nails.

Lulu used two olives to peer through at me like binoculars. Seriously, is she going to eat them, or what?

“Um,” I tried again. Is this a test? “Do it anyway?”

Sarah grinned. Definitely evil. “If you say so, Ez.” And she let go just as stars-to-goodness tears started rolling down Lux’s cheeks. Just in time ... ?

Before I could even make my hero speech, the most appalling shriek I have *ever* heard cut through the room like a blade, and it was only when it morphed into words that I could pinpoint where it was coming from. “Oh, Ez!” Lux was *howling*. I was rooted to the spot. What have they done to her? “Your expression! You look so good!”

“I mean...yes?” Obviously, but why were we talking about that now? Was there a hole in my onesie? Lux clutched at her middle and folded at the waist, stomping her foot as she cackled, and only then did I realise she was *laughing*. And then I really zeroed in on Sarah’s phone.

She was still grinning.

Oh no.

“What did you show her?!” No, my voice did *not* crack, thanks for asking. There are more embarrassing photos of me on Sarah’s phone than in my parents’ photo albums—prank results, unflattering couch potato candid, that one time she caught me signing karaoke into Ahri’s lipstick tube... There’s just a lot of damage that phone can do to me. So when Sarah turned her phone towards me, I was braced for the worst.

What I’m greeted with? Not terrible. A photo of me in my Star Guardian uniform, except that the slick white pants that the First Star gave me were replaced with a frilly skirt that I *know* Soraka made, or helped make, but won’t admit to. In it, I’m posing for the camera, looking pretty hot even if one hand *might* be tugging the



hem of that skirt down a little. The First Star really makes them too short for walking, let alone fighting void monsters in. Not my best look, but my legs look *amazing*.

Yuuto, who had his ears pinned back since Sarah unleashed Lux's laughter upon us, now floated tentatively forward to bump Lux's cheek. He nudged her until she *had* to acknowledge him, and that calmed her down enough to scratch between his ears. When she straightened up, Yuuto spiraled gracefully down to curl up on Lux's lap. "Traitor," I whispered, and Yuuto perked his ears up and looked directly at me—he knows what he did—but my voice was inaudible among the rolling low-level giggles in the room.

"You actually look quite good," Poppy said in that straightforward way of hers.

"Skirt coulda been shorter." I whirled on Jinx to retort, but before I could get a word out —

"Best-used fabric of my sewing career," Soraka agreed, and I immediately levelled an accusing finger at her.

"It *was* you! I knew it!" But my shout only seemed to make everyone laugh all the more. The back of my neck was getting hot, so I pressed my palm to it before anyone can see. "You promised you wouldn't show anyone!" This time I was yelling at Sarah. I felt like a pinwheel in the wind, trying to defend myself on all sides.

"You said sisters only, right? All Star Guardians are kinda your sisters, if the First Star is like our mom and all. Sorry, kid." She didn't look sorry at all. "Shoulda been more specific." Everyone was looking at me now and I couldn't bear, somehow, to look in Lulu's olive-ringed eyes and tell her she wasn't like a sister to me.

"Sure," I said quietly, and tried not to look at Lux. I don't want to be a brother to her.

Perhaps sensing my hurt, Sarah's tone softened. "C'mon. We all agree you look good! Take the compliment already."

"You should definitely wear that more often," Janna said, voice genuine, and the rest nodded eagerly. Slowly, I lowered myself onto the cushions on the floor and pulled one tight against my chest. When I next raised my eyes to Sarah, she gave me a small smile and tilted her head towards Lux who was, stars help me, looking right at me with pink cheeks and a silly little grin on her face.

I'm going to die. Or faint. Or something. Oh, *stars*. She's so cute.

"Yeah, maybe," I offered lamely. I guess I'm glad that Lux thinks I looked good and that everyone was getting along, even if it might have cost all my cool points all at once.

For once, it was Sarah to the rescue. "Shouldn't we be braiding hair right now?"

"Oh!" I was so ready to show off the skills Ahri taught (read: beat into) me. I'm definitely the best hair braider on my team, and I'm ready to showcase one of my *many* talents. Plus, I'd finally get to touch Lux's cotton candy tresses. Not like I've been thinking about it since forever.

Everyone was talking at once, and I heard Jinx say, "I call blondie!" Nuh-uh. Absolutely not.

"Ezreal goes first." Soraka's voice broke through the clamour with such authority that even Sarah stopped talking. So much for the hero.

"Oh, definitely." Poppy said.

"Indubitably!" Who taught Lulu that word?

"C'mon, Ez." Sarah patted the spot between her and Lux on the bed. "Put those beautiful blond locks here and let's see what we can do with 'em." And I looked at the spot between them, and up at Lux's encouraging, hopeful smile, and I knew

that she really wanted peace and friendship between our teams. I knew that. So really, this was for all of us. Yeah.

And so it was for all of us that I scooted over and leaned back against the mattress, crossing my legs on the floor. Lux grabbed a pillow to tuck underneath my head, and everyone crowded around me when I closed my eyes.

“Your hair is so soft, Ezreal.” Janna’s voice, paired with a touch lighter than a spring breeze. “What do you use?”

Jinx yanks on a lock of my hair and I yelp. “Yeah, I thought it’d be like straw!”

“Jinx!” Lux’s gentle tone is scolding. “Be nice! You’re making him frown.”

Sarah’s laughter, and a gentle touch between my eyebrows. “He always gets this when he’s stressed.” Lulu *definitely* put an olive on the spot in question, like it’d work like cucumbers over my eyes at a spa, but Poppy clicked her tongue and took it off. This was turning out to be even more stressful than I anticipated, but nothing can quite override seven sets off hands playing with your hair at once.

“Look, see? All better!” And Lulu makes a whooshing sound, so I assume she’s casting a magic spell or flying the olive through the hair like a superhero. *Stars*, this was comfy.

Their hands were surprisingly gentle, and they seemed to talk easier than before. In the end, even though I rather suspected that Lulu was using olives instead of elastics, I was okay to stay like that as long as it took. They talked and sometimes I would join in, but mostly I didn’t. I think I was turning to jelly.

I remember thinking that it’s nice, having seen the vastness of the universe and how small we are in comparison, to have a place to belong to, even if that place isn’t so much a *place* as a group of people who fit together better than anyone ever thought they would.

“Hey, Ez?”

“Did he seriously *fall asleep?* Nerd!”

“Oh, yes. Usually if we want him to be quiet, we’ll just stroke his hair and he’s out like a light.”

“Should we wake him...?”

“I’ll get the markers!”

“No! Get back here! *Jinx!*”