

For Kevin, who believes

“In 30 or 40 years, we'll have microscopic machines traveling through our bodies, repairing damaged cells and organs, effectively wiping out diseases. The nanotechnology will also be used to back up our memories and personalities.”

From an interview with visionary Ray
Kurzweil, 2009

“Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended.”

The Coming Technological
Singularity by Vernor Vinge, 1993

Rima: The Mole People

I wake the instant my skin sizzles. I want to cry out, but not from the pain. The dream from which I've been wrenched was so dazzling I'm sure I've seen the real Skyworld.

I lie in the underground dark and cradle my hand, nursing the fingers that accidentally brushed the tip of the electrode, the harsh energy source that still snaps and frizzes at me in angry violation. I wish I could put some cool water on the burn, some of the drips that streak the rough walls of the winding tunnel deeps, or bathe it in the icy water of the lake. We are forbidden from leaving our cavehomes before the lights hum with day spark, and the deeps are forbidden in any case, but the rules are not what hold me on my pallet.

I should sleep, should rest, to be ready for what's coming.

My quick smile at this thought turns to a grimace as the pain sears, a piercing throb.

I'll cure this in the usual way. "Nan," I whisper, soft.

Nan hums and spins to life by my left ear.

"My hand, Nan," I breathe, and reach toward the noise, the comforting sweet noise, toward Nan.

Nan's touch isn't cool like the drips, but it is, after the initial sharp stab, fast and painless. I feel the healing nanites as they go to work, see in my mind's eye the healing take place as the nanites swarm through my bloodstream, can picture how my skin would seem to rise and fall in waves, can sense how the billions of impossibly small nanites work on the cells of my skin, repairing, replacing. I can feel how my skin now softens and smooths and the burn is cured and I can fall back asleep, and maybe back into that dream.

Nan returns to its place beside my left ear and morphs to my favorite globe-like shape, whirring down to a slow, low hum. Such power in such a small thing. Where would we be without Nan?

In the Underworld, here in the underground, we are all part of Nan, the one made of many.

The pain is gone. But now, I toss and turn. Sleep and the dream elude me. I sigh and press my fingers to my eyes. "Time?" I whisper, turning my head to the left.

As Nan forms an assemblage of microscopic green dots that form a number, I know already that it isn't time to meet Ari. It's too early. My heart begins to pound like the drum call as I think of him, and I toss, restless, longing for his touch. And then I think about what else will come soon after, with the day spark, and my heart pounds all the harder.

To calm my heart and since I can't return to it through sleep, I give my mind over to reliving the dream because the memory of it is so sweet.

I've seen that kind of blue only once - in a vid, when we were all watching together and the Mothers forgot to edit. Most of the people pretended not to see it, fearful; but I held onto it in my mind, that overarching, incandescent blue, and I wanted more.

I want it now. In the black hollow of my underground cavehome, I want that blue. This is not my first dream of blue, but it feels more powerful this time. Something has shifted for me. It may be a portent of the change that is coming, for now I'm sure it's the blue of Skyworld.

Skyworld. My dreams of the world above reinforces what I already know. I'm not like the others. I'm a freak. Different. No normal person in the Underworld dreams. No normal person wants to go above.

And then there is my gift, the one I shared with Mama: in my mind, I talk to the plants that I tend in the greenhouse. Since I was little I've watched the fingers of those around me touch foreheads to ward off evil, even sensed in Nell lately some hesitation. The shunning has gathered force now that I'm of age at seventeen and especially since Mama's disappearance.

They'd burn me for a witch if they didn't need me. Except for Ari, and when I think about him my heart begins to pound again.

I sigh. I'm done with sleeping and I don't care now whether it's too early. I throw back my quilt and take up my Nan, securing it inside the pendant that hangs around my neck. I bind up my loose hair and dress quickly, and slip through the common room so as not to wake my father sleeping in his own chamber. I enter the numbers on the keypad and the door opens with a soft *shush*; I give thanks to Nan that my father replaced the bearing wheels not long ago, as last time their squeal threatened to give me away.

I step into the cool dark and open the pendant so that Nan's green glow lights my path.

I slip down the familiar stretch of my home tunnel, past the cavehome of Nell, past half a dozen other silent doors, and at the end I turn not right, in the well-worn path, but left. I use the code to shift the door open and enter the code again to close it behind. It's so dark in here that the

darkness has mass, and even Nan pales to a dim green. Still, I know the way down to the deeps as well as I know the layout of my own sleeping chamber.

More than halfway down, now, and I pass the shackled door that leads to the Exile. I touch my forehead and say a quick prayer to Nan, imagining I can hear the moans of the souls who have spent their final days alone in the Exile's black. I push on, faster, down and down, and the damp grows around me, the pungent biologic-acrid smell that I know only here in the deeps, as the green glow of my Nan reflects the drips sliding down the rock walls that narrow to almost a slit, when I feel the sudden blast of deeper cold and hear the sound of water lapping and the walls disappear to either side.

I've reached the margin of the lake. Here, I'll wait for Ari.

I plunk down and remove my sandals and stretch my legs over the stone curbing so that my feet disappear into the black water. Then I dip my hand into the lake just to feel the icy chill on the now-healed burn. I touch my tongue to my skin, taking in the salt, and with that bitter tang I'm reminded of my dream.

With the blue of the sky I also dreamt green. Green, the color of life. Green is a color I know well, the green of the plants I tend. But this green of my dream also had a taste, and it was sharp and alien, bitter, like the salt, and I want to taste it again.

The people are right. My lips twist in a smile and I lick my hand clean. I am a freak.

And then because - why not? - I play the game. I hold up Nan, round on my palm, and send out my thoughts. Nan, my green ball of light, shimmers and trembles and then pulls apart, until it is a million, billion minuscule green balls, so small they are tinier than pinpricks - and even the pinpricks are made of millions and billions. They shape-shift and form a swarm, connected invisibly to me and to each other, and I send them out over the vast underground lake in a river of green, reflecting faintly in the water as they float away into almost vanishing.

I feel the separation but only when I can't stand it one more second do I call them back, and they return to my hand, faster than light, one with each other and one with me. I don't know if any of the other Mole People has ever dared to do this, since it may mean death.

Nan is the one made of many, I think, and I shiver.

Then I see it, the light of Ari's Nan glowing green and faint as he comes down the tunnel to meet me, and I shiver again but for a different reason.

He's here, and I'm in his arms, and he's kissing me.

When we pull apart he takes my face between his palms and we touch foreheads. His skin feels warm, and his hands are so large and strong. He could crush my cheekbones. His dark hair falls in soft curls over his forehead and his cheeks. He whispers, “How long have you been waiting?”

“All my life,” I answer, and smile at our old joke. But my smile fades when I can see by the green light of Nan some trouble in his pale blue-gray eyes. “What is it?”

He drops his hands and pulls away, twisting his head as if he’s searching for words. “The Rising.”

My pulse quickens. “Have you decided not to volunteer?”

“No,” he says, fast. “No. Just the opposite.”

“Then, what?”

“I want you to stay here, Rima. I don’t want you to come.” He doesn’t look at me now.

I take a step back. The breach between us feels sharp. “What are you talking about? We’ve been planning this for…”

“I don’t want you to go skyward after all,” he interrupts. He glances up at me and then away again, fixing his eyes on the still, dark water.

I swallow to calm myself. “What I do is not for you to decide.” The silence is deep. “I’m meant to go.”

“No, Rima.” Now his voice smacks of grief, with anger creeping in.

This isn’t right. This has been our intent for years. Something is wrong. I speak softly, measuring my words. “What’s happened?”

He turns away. His head has dropped but his shoulders are rigid. I know Ari. Since our mothers placed us side by side in infant play, I’ve known him. Whatever is wrong, he doesn’t want to tell me. He purses his lips; I grow defiant.

I fold my arms across my chest. “I’m going. You may not like it, but I’m going.”

He turns to me, his jaw muscles working. “Please, Rima. I’m asking you to stay. Please stay here. I have no choice, I have to go, but you don’t. You can stay, keep tending the plants, feed the people, do what you do best here. But,” and his eyes grow bright, “by the Mater, I’m sure of this, that this is the final Rising. That I’ll come back for you.”

“Is it something the Mothers said?” I ask. “Because if it is…”

“No,” he interrupts, his voice hard again. “No. It’s me. I’m asking you not to go.”

Something is so, so wrong. Ari is lying. I can feel it, through my Nan, through my fingertips. It's the Mothers, I'm sure of it. They know I'm different, and I scare them. I haven't even mentioned my dream to Ari, and I don't want to now. "You can ask," I say. I drop my voice. "But I'll do as I want. And I want to go skyward. The Mothers may rule the Underworld but they do not rule my decision. My decision. Not yours."

Ari's jaw works, the stubble of his young beard shadowing his cheeks, and as he looks at me his eyes are like the rock walls of the tunnels, glistening and hard.

Then, he shakes his head. His eyes soften.

And he reaches for me. He pulls the ribbons from my hair so that it tumbles down my back and he grips fistfuls of it in his strong hands and pulls me close. "Rima, Rima," he whispers. "What can I say? I love you. By the Mater, I love you. I can't help it."

And as he whispers - almost with regret - he presses his mouth against mine, and I can't help it either, as I melt into the kiss, melt into his arms and we remain there by the lake until our Nans blink warning of the time.

As I change out of my damp clothes in my cavehome, the day spark comes on, slow and easy as always, with a humming that grows to a tune that forms a command. I bind my hair back up. I tie the ribbons of my weskit and touch my forehead with my fingertips and say the thanks to Nan for bringing on the light, and I begin my day like all days, with the established patterns set by the Mothers since the Expulsion.

Except that it's the day of the Rising. And I've dreamed blue, a blue so pure and sharp that I'll never be the same.

* * *

Father places the bowls for me to fill, and we touch foreheads and say the thanks and begin to eat.

"We need to move the generator farther away from my pallet," I say.

"I'm sorry. I meant to move it back last night. It took me longer than I thought to rewire, and then Ham needed help with his light array."

I arrange my bowl and spoon. "I touched the electrode in my sleep."

He looks at me, at my hands. "You all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks to Nan."

"Thanks to Nan," he repeats in the prayerful way.

“I must have been flailing,” I say, “because I was dreaming.” Now I watch his response carefully.

He looks at me, eyes sharp and bright.

“Blue. I dreamed blue.”

I can see the thought flick across his face: *Oh, no. Not again.*

But I want him to understand because today is the day of the Rising. I need him to know why I will volunteer to go. “Can I explain?”

He sucks in a breath before answering, “No, Rima,” and he bends over his bowl in a way that means ‘silence.’

He doesn’t want to lose me like he lost Mama. He thinks not talking about it will make it go away. But he knows that I take after her. That I talk to plants and dream. That I’m different.

A freak.

The rock walls behind him are shiny with damp and illumined by the soft glow of the early day spark. “I need to check the peas,” I say to the top of Father’s head. “I think they’ll be ready today.”

He nods, the top of his head up, down.

I wish I could make him listen.

* * *

The door yields and I slip into the warm moist air as it shuts behind me. The greenhouse is carved out of the rock. A bank of lights hangs overhead, lights powered by the ancient generators that Father and the others nurse with care. The walls in here are coated with a whitewash fading to gray. I walk up and down the rows as the plants - peas and pole beans climbing trellis ladders, potato vines trailing over mounds, the stiff spikes of onion tops, the hairy leaves of tomatoes - lift toward me, rising and falling as I pass, greeting me in salutation, and I raise my arms in the sun sign and the soft light overhead rises accordingly, the nanites going to work in me and signaling the light array, until the room is bathed in the warm yellow glow of mid day. I can sense the plants inhale in their pleasure, feel their opening joy.

All the Mole People carry the nanites but only a few have the gift. Without us few the people would starve; but because of history, we are suspect. Mama’s gift had been exceptionally strong. And mine is stronger still.

I miss Mama, as I stand under the false lights of my greenhouse picking out yellowed leaves, checking the moisture levels. She must have felt like I do now: craving the blue and bitter green. And real light, not the light made by ancient generators always on the verge of failing. Craving the blue and missing Mama fills me at this moment, like a lift of wings, a fluttering in my chest.

I want Mama. I will follow her. I may find her. A flutter of wings, beating, and I cannot think more about her now.

I add small bits of lime to one bed, and prune the suckers from the tomatoes in another. I pinch out the excess lettuce seedlings, recycling them into the compost.

The peas will be ready by afternoon. I pick one firm pod and break it open, and say the thanks as I slide the crunchy seeds into my mouth, and the vines trail out and over me and wrap me in soft thin tendrils, weaving through my hair and over my face and arms so that I begin to giggle with the tickle of them, until I have to say out loud, laughing, “Stop!”

They do, removing themselves in haste.

“But you are good, my peas. Very good. Sweet and firm.” One single tendril stretches across the space and caresses my cheek, and I smile. “Yes, I thank you, too.”

I walk back down the row, the sweetness of the peas fading on my tongue. Fading into the bitter green, the green of my dream, that alien taste that wasn't the sweet pea taste nor the taste of any of the plants in the greenhouse. I long for it and for that blue that calls to me through the rock and earth that bury the Mole People and hide the sky.

* * *

The Mothers call conclave shortly after the breaking of fast, as I'm leaving the greenhouse. I hear the drum call and Father glances my way and then drops his eyes. My heart breaks for him. But I've dreamed blue.

We wind down the dark tunnels side by side, joined by others in ones and twos and groups, until we reach the center. I strain to find Ari, who has not joined us, and now I think about what he said and my mouth goes dry.

The center is a large domed amphitheater made by the first people not long after the Expulsion. Conclave gathers us there for any important purpose. The twelve Mothers sit in an outward-facing circle at the bottom. The Mothers, who guide us (and rule us), range in age from

the eldest, Lianne, whose gray hair brushes the ground, to the youngest, Vivash, some six years older than me.

Light arrays hang overhead from patched and rusting framework, and benches of rock and rubble and old wood form concentric circles. The people, and there are several thousands of us, fill the benches like water filling a bowl. A mechanical hammer that swings between two drums rocks to a slow stop as the drum call falls silent. One long wide ramp leads up from the bottom to a pair of doors - doors that only the Mothers and those called for a sacred reason are allowed to pass through - behind which lies the cavehome quarters of the Mothers.

Mama stole through those doors and, from what I was told, through the quarters and out the far exit that leads to Skyworld, and she has not come back.

Mother Alana stands and spreads her arms in the sun sign. We all bow our heads and mimic her, silent, and the light above grows warm and yellow as we reach upward. We know it's generators that make the light grow, but that doesn't stop the sigh of pleasure that escapes me to join the other sighs that whisper through the people.

Alana reaches her arms toward us now and we lower our arms and wait. Alana's voice ripples like water. "The years have passed, my friends. You all know why we are here. It is the time of the Rising."

The Rising. The Mole People send volunteers skyward every fifty years. The names of each group of twelve are carved into the rock wall behind my left shoulder. None have ever returned to the Underworld.

But that doesn't stop the next twelve from going. It's said that one day the volunteers will return, and give the sign that it's safe above, and then they'll lead us home.

Home, to Skyworld.

Alana holds up her hand to stop the murmuring and silence settles over the crowd again. "Twenty-four volunteers are needed, and from those the twelve will be chosen."

A stir of excitement swells from those who are called to volunteer. But excitement is not the feeling of most of the people, including my father.

Fear washes most. Most make excuses: please, oh, not my son, not my daughter, my brother, my sister. He's needed for the generators. She's needed to tend the spring. He's so good with the little ones, she's good with the cooking. Ah, thanks to Nan, he's too old. She's unwell, a blessing in disguise. And, rarely, that one is needed for the greenhouse.

I touch my father's hand.

Mother Alana stands still, her hands at her sides. All the Mothers drop their heads as if sleeping. Little by little, group by group, most of the people drift away, drift back to their cavehomes, slip into the silent tunnels and the steady drip, drip. They clutch one another and breathe again, grateful.

But others part with soft cries or the silent touch of foreheads, and these move down the incline toward the Mothers.

Including Ari, who I see at last on the far side of the conclave. He turns to meet my eyes before he presses on, too far away for me to read his thoughts.

The tunnel to my cavehome is just behind. Father stirs. "Come," he whispers. "Now. Come."

I'm like a vine wrapped around Ari and Father as each pulls me in a different direction.

"Rima?" Father's voice breaks.

I'll lose Father, but I will have Ari and the sky. Or I'll lose Ari and my dream of blue, but stay with Father. Maybe if I go I'll find Mama. If I stay I will feed the people. The vine stretches and tightens.

"Rima?" Father whispers.

Ari stands below with the other volunteers. "Father." I've dreamed blue, I want to say. I've been chosen, like it or not. I love you. I miss her. I need Ari. I need the sky. But the words can't escape my burning throat.

This is a burn that Nan cannot fix.

Father takes my cheeks between his palms. "Daughter, I love you." He breathes a kiss on my forehead, touches my forehead with his own.

I step away from him as he turns and heads back up to the tunnel, his pace a slow shuffle, his head bowed, his shoulders bowed as if the weight of all the earth and rock above bears down only on him.

I slip to the center. To Ari. To Skyworld.

By the time I reach the bottom, Ari and the other volunteers are already moving up the ramp, following Mother Beate, who shuts the door behind.

The remaining Mothers still sit with bowed heads. I stop before Alana to ask for help.

"Rima Birde." It's not Alana, but Lianne. "You are not to go Skyward."

“What?” I stride to Lianne, who lifts her face so that our eyes meet. Her eyes are gray, like the tunnel walls. Her voice is like velvet.

“You cannot go Skyward.”

“But I must.” My hands shake. “Others will take my place in the greenhouse. There are others. Simon. Portia.” Not as gifted, maybe, but...

“No. You have another calling. You’ve been chosen for a different purpose. You must take my place.”

“No, Mother, I can’t.” I won’t. I want to run. I’ve dreamed blue. Not gray. “No one can take your place.”

“No one but you.” Lianne lifts her hands, wrinkled and shaking. I take them, and she clasps me hard. She pulls me down so that her cracked lips meet my earlobe, and she says a thing that makes no sense: “Ark.”

“I have to go Skyward.” I’m choking, for her breath is cold, like the water of the lake, and reeks of death. I must see blue. Find Mama. Be with Ari.

“Ark,” Lianne whispers again, and her fingers draw tight, so tight, and tighter still until I think I might scream with the pain. She lets go at last, but not until she has pressed her Nan into my palm, and when she lets go I know that she is gone altogether, that her soul has passed.

Dead. Lianne is dead, and I drop her cold fingers, and I tremble out of grief, a grief that pushes into me like a fist and is not only over the loss of Lianne but also for myself.

I’m left within a gray circle of the women who rule the Underworld, women who have forgotten love, who have never dreamed blue and will not ever see it, women whose heads are bent in dreaming gray, and my heart screams for Ari and for bitter green and for blue.

Truman: The Exiles

It doesn't look anything like a boat. That's what an ark is - or was - right? A boat. I've only seen boats in the vids but I'm pretty sure nobody had a boat in mind when they designed the Ark.

Here's what I do know. It's an old story from way, way back. The Earth was totally messed up so one of the early gods caused a great flood. Some of the people were chosen to survive and they built a giant boat, an ark. It makes sense to have called our place Ark because it's the only way we chosen humans could have survived the mess we made on Earth before the Expulsion.

But like I said, our Ark is no boat.

If you look down at the moon's surface from oh, say, a mile up, our Ark would look like a bunch of blobs. Or warts. Faintly glowing green warts that pimple the Mare Serenitatis. Of course, to get a mile up from the moon would mean you'd have to have stolen a jet-pack - unless you're an Elder, since only the Elders get the go-ahead on the jet-packs.

And I'm no Elder. I'm just a guy who most of the time feels like he doesn't fit in.

The blobs that hang off the core of what I call home, that hang off that core like clusters of grapes, those blobs are the nodes. Some are small: view nodes, dream nodes, home nodes. Some are middling: neighborhood nodes, town center nodes. And some, like the greenhouse and engineering, and the launch node, well, those nodes are the heart of survival and so they're big. There are almost ten thousand of us up here, huddled in these nodes, surviving.

I'm standing at the entrance to one of the smallest of the nodes when, as planned, Mia shows up.

Shows up? Right: she screams past me, diving into the tunnel leading into the node like she's on fire, and by the time I shake myself loose and chase her down she's already perched on the lookout and settling back for the view.

Node 17 is small. Just a platform and an arching window. Plus a few plants - *schefflera*, *adiantum*, *citrus* - to add oxygen and make it look less dead. Seventeen is one of the view nodes. My friends and I, we have names for everything. We like names that mean something, especially

since the Elders prefer numbers and letters, the same way they like rules. We'd named the view nodes a long time ago and we call number 17 Dragonfly.

"Look!" Mia calls. "Hurry, Truman!"

"I'm coming. There in a sec." Because of my leg and all, it's not easy climbing up next to her on the perch.

"Come *on*, Tru! You'll miss it!" Mia stretches both arms down to help me up the last bit. Honestly, it pisses me off that a girl has to help me up. That Mia, especially, has to help me up.

"Mia, okay, already," I grouse. "What the eff is it?"

"There." She points and I follow her finger as I settle back against the hard perch, settle back and let my eyes run up her skinny arm and her pointer to the heavens, where it looks like her finger has scraped the edge of that green, brown, blue, and white marble we call Earth.

"Well. So, okay, then." But I am impressed. Yes, I am. It's an eclipse, us between the Earth and the sun, so that there is a line, an edge, a clip like a fingernail bite taken right out of our old home planet. "How come there was no announcement about it? How did you find out?"

"Gods, Tru." She looks at me like I'm thick. "Nobody wants us looking at Earth. That's why I look all the time."

I have to smile. That's what Mia pulls out of me. Even when she makes me feel like an idiot, she's one of the few who also makes me feel like I might be okay. Like I'm not a freak.

Although I've known Mia forever, I've only lately realized what this means.

I turn my head to look at her in profile as she goes back to watching the heavenly bodies. Her lips are slightly parted; she focuses way past the dome and into space. Glittering stars frame her head like a halo. I'm sure that right now she doesn't know I exist. Her face has that bluey cast from the dim light that bounces up from the floor of the node and off the surface of the moon outside. If there are elves anywhere in this wide universe I'm convinced that Mia is what they look like.

She twists her head and her eyes meet mine. Her faint blue eyes.

"I want to go there." She points again.

"Why?" I whisper, though I know the answer already.

"Because it looks beautiful to me. Because just about no one else wants to. Because."

Yeah. Mia likes what no one else likes, wants what no one else wants. And me? Heck. I want a replacement for my bum leg, that's all.

Okay, not. What I want more than anything I've only recently figured out.

I stare into Mia's blue eyes. "Okay," I say, and in all honesty, add, "I get it."

"Listen." She turns her body toward me. I can feel her urgency, and an electric charge runs through me, like I've touched a wire. "Things are happening. I need to tell you what's happening."

But now I don't want to hear, whatever it is. A weird sixth sense about what she has to say is working overtime, and the electricity fizzles away. "Maybe later, okay? I should get home. That paper we've got due Monday, I haven't even started."

"Tru, please."

"Mia, enough with the crazy dreams, okay? I just want..." I was about to say, "things to be normal" but, heck. Normal is what I'm not.

"What do you want?" she whispers.

I reach my hand toward her, and then, like a *deus ex machina*, there it is. First the quick *pop-pop-pop* as the seal begins to fail, then the warning, the high, piercing klaxon: *blep, blep, blep*.

I can hear more now, the straining metal, the smallest hiss - this time, the warning is late. I grab Mia's arm. "Now. We have to go. Now."

She doesn't argue; she knows what this means and she knows I can't move fast. She's down first, hitting the floor of the node with a soft *whump*. The klaxon reverberates and the light flashes and I lower my body as fast as I can, shimmying over the side, trying to protect myself, trying not to fall...

"Tru! It's closing!" Panic in Mia is not a good thing. I let go.

The pain shoots through me like a thousand lightning bolts but I'm down, and I see Mia, and she's shouting my name, her voice barely clearing the klaxon, and I see the door, the door that leads from the node into the tunnel, sliding down like a guillotine, and the heck with the pain, I run. Gimpy, one-legged, but I run. Mia rolls under and turns toward me, goggle-eyed, one arm outstretched toward me, and I slide into her like in the vids the old-style baseball guys slid, feet first, the door closing right behind my head and the seals locking down on a few strands of my hair.

Partly because of the pain in my leg (and my head, when I sit up), partly because we are in a reinforced tunnel and breathing hard, we don't move. So we can hear it through the sealed

door, faint, like raindrops would sound, because the seals on the door between us and the failing node are, thank the varicolored gods, good and tight.

It's been happening lately, but especially in the view nodes with their vulnerable windows. They're great - we all would have long since gone stark raving without them. But whatever the exiles put up on this cold lump of white rock can't last forever. The universe is too wild and crazy a place.

I feel bad about the plants. I have a thing for plants, can feel what they feel. This is something I don't share, not even with Mia, because it gets back to one reason why I'm weird. I ignore that wrenching feeling right now and focus on the fact that Mia and I are safe. And together.

I touch a bit of her hair that has fallen across her forehead. "You were saying?"

A smile lifts one corner of her mouth. "Listen. I'm not looking for danger. Just life, you know? Something more than this." She spreads her hands out sideways, nearly touching the walls of the tunnel. "We're no better than lab rats up here. Waiting to get blasted out into the life-sucking void by a meteor shower or floating debris or just the place falling apart. I want more."

There's only one way off this rock, and it's not happening for me. "Good luck with that." I stand, bracing myself against the tunnel wall, my leg burning with pain.

She stops me and takes my arm in one hand and my chin in the other, so that I have no choice but to look at her. Her voice is low and throbbing like it comes from inside my gut. "Truman." As she says my name, in that voice, I have to slump back against the wall. "Don't you want to know what it feels like to walk out in the open, the wind in your face, and smell the sea? Don't you want to stand in a forest and listen to the night-sounds?"

"We can do that in a holo, Mia. Cripes. Earth's been a mess-up planet for almost five hundred years. Even if we go back, all we'll find are a ton of bots waiting to infect us like they've infected every other living thing on the planet. Or a bunch of infected plants that'll poison us or worse. Go someplace else but not back there." I shake my head. "Earth's hopeless."

Mia pulls herself right up against me so that the pain that shoots stars through my brain is mixed with other feelings and I can't tell which is making me crazier. Her small breasts press against my chest. Her lips brush my ear as she whispers, "Hopeless? That's not what I heard."

* * *

“Yo!” Radar and Nibs are hanging at the intersection of B wing (we call it Boomer) and C wing (California). Radar - Eli to his parents and teachers - raises his hand in greeting. “What’s up?”

I almost give Radar a flip answer, since I have to crane my neck back to catch his face. In the past couple of years he’s shot up past all of us; pretty soon he’ll need his own node. But I still quake with the last few minutes’ emotions, so flip answers are tough to pull off with any degree of slick. I glance sideways at Mia as I answer. “Dragonfly just got bombed.”

“Shoot!” Nibs (Nathaniel, but no one ever calls him that) begins to jump around like water in a fry pan. “Dragonfly was one of the last.”

“Yeah, don’t think they don’t know that,” Radar mutters. “So Dragonfly is toast?”

“Until they fix it, it is.”

“Which’ll be like, never,” says Radar. “Or at least not until the Return’s launched and gone. They want us knowing nothing. Seeing nothing.”

“And it’s not like they’ve even tried fixing the others,” I add.

The curving arcs of Boomer and California are tunnels of white, no windows, just a stretch of white walls and floors, lit by led lights. I say white but if you look close you can see the dirty skid marks and dust, and we all joke about how the whole place is an eggshell about to crack open. And we’re the yoke.

“The Return.” Nibs cracks his knuckles. “Soon, huh. Once in a lifetime thing.”

“Fourteen weeks,” says Mia.

“Shoot. That means we’ll miss it for sure.” Nibs shuffles back to lean against the wall. “Man. And once in a lifetime. Come on. They could at least give us a show.”

I’m watching Mia. How come she knows exactly how long?

“Speaking of show,” says Radar. He points to the VR goggles hanging around his neck. They’re always hanging around his neck. He says, “This latest game is the best. Beats the light show outside hands down.”

Nibs nods. “He’s right, man.”

“Maybe later,” I say.

“It’s pretty Bosch” - our word for amazing - “because it imagines that there are people living on Earth underground,” Radar says. “Like rats, scurrying around in the dark, people left

behind during the Expulsion. People who are symbiants with evolved bots. You can choose to be an Arkian or an underground bot-carrying rat-human..."

"Wait," Mia interrupts. "People living on Earth who carry bots?"

"It's a game," I say, not understanding my own impatience. "It's not real."

Radar looks at me. "Hey. You know anyone who's going? I mean, your old man, he's clued in, right?"

I shake my head. "He can't talk about it. Top secret till a couple of weeks out. I'm just glad he isn't going."

Radar nods. "Way I hear it, it can get pretty emotional. That's why they don't like to separate families. So, you guys want to check this out?" He points to the goggles again.

"Nah. I've got to get working on that paper," I say. Mia studies the floor as if it's a dirty work of art. "You coming?" Her head lifts and her eyes meet mine, and there's something in them I can't read but it makes my gut twist.

Nibs looks past us, down the California corridor. "Shoot."

Elders, three of them, turn the arc and glide in our direction, white pantsuits shining. Two women and a man, their short cropped hair as white as their snowy jackets. They're deep in conversation, all talking at once, until the middle one, the eldest, glances up and sees us. He stops and raises his hand for silence from the others.

"You!" He strides towards us as his voice echoes up and down both Boomer and California. I'm thinking the robo-janitor can hear that echo as it cleans our classrooms way down at B-end.

"Shoot." Nibs' whisper comes out cracked. The rest of us stand straight and quiet.

"You need to be home. It's almost curfew." He narrows his eyes.

"Yes, sir," I say. I can hardly look at the Elders, those suits are so white.

He waits. Then, "Well? Go on, then."

We bow and scatter. Nibs and Radar go one way, Mia and I go the other. Our way takes us past the other Elders. They step aside as if we might contaminate them.

We're almost through the gantlet when one of the Elder women touches Mia's arm and we stop. "Wait. I know you. You're the Cantor girl."

Mia nods, her eyes studying the floor again.

“You should be training, not loitering with these...” The Elder’s gaze moves to me, then back to Mia. “All gods go with you,” she says, soft, and places her fists together, bowing a little.

Mia whispers, “And with you.”

We bow and move on.

“What was that about?” I whisper. The fall in Dragonfly has caught up with me and I’m limping badly now; I’ll need to ice my hip when I get home.

Mia shrugs. “You didn’t want to hear about it earlier.”

“Hear about what?” Something sticks in my throat. The word “training” has caught my attention.

“My dad and me. You know, since it’s just the two of us. We made the decision a long, long time ago.” Mia looks at me then, and her blue eyes are crazy-like, like she isn’t there any more. Like she’s already gone. “When we talked about it, it was so long ago, it was before you and I became...friends. I didn’t even think you’d notice.”

The lump that’s stuck in my throat grows to the size of a small moon. “Not notice?”

“And it’s what I’ve always wanted. You know that. It’s about finding something more, Tru, and my dad, he’s been preparing all his life, it’s his dream, too, and they’re saying that this time...”

“Wait. Wait.” I hold up my hand. “Please tell me you are not going.”

Mia lifts her eyes to mine again and we lock on for what seems like forever.

“Right,” I say, and I’m cranked now. “Fine. You’re going on Return? Returning to that messed-up blue rock down there? Great. It’s not like anyone on this white rock up here will miss you or anything. Great. Just great.” I swallow hard to keep the tears from pushing up into my eyes.

“Maybe you can go on the next...” Her voice trails off and she shrugs. We both know that this Return has been assigned, quota completed, for a while.

“That’s fifty years, Mia. Fifty effing years before the next one. Know how old we’ll be in fifty years? If you’re still alive, that is. No one’s ever come back. They’ve all died. Contaminated by the bots. Or messed up by the plants. Turned bad. Like that entire planet.”

“Tru, if I’d known you a year ago like I do now...”

“What? You’d what? You wouldn’t have gone? Sure. And what about your dad? Think he’d leave you? And what about your something more? That planet you’re so fixated on...” and

here my voice goes up a decibel or two, "...that is dead, dead, Mia, and why you would want to go to a dead planet, where you and your dad will die, when you can stay here with..." and I'm so pissed off I can't finish.

"What if," she says, and she moves closer to me, and I can't help looking into her blue eyes, "what if that game is right? What if there are people down there, living down there, perfectly fine, symbiotic, and we don't know? What if they escaped, like our great-great-grandsonthings did, only they're still on Earth, their descendants, all these centuries later?"

I measure out my words. "It's. A. Game."

"But what if?"

What if. "Sure. And what if nanorobots suddenly turn all friendly? That's a dream, Mia. That's what got us started down this road in the first place."

She lifts her shoulders so carefully it's like she's in slo-mo. "I've got to go."

"Fine. Right. Fine." My head is pounding now, a match for my leg. I'm rooted here, trying not to think about the possibility of people left behind on Earth. I'm trying not to think about what Mia is training for: death by nanorobot.

Mia leaves me in Boomer, sweeping around the white curve of space before I can blink and clear the fog.