

## Rima: Defiant

“I’ve asked permission to train you.” Alana fills the doorway, framed against the dark tunnel entrance to our cavehome.

Father’s tools clink metal on metal as he shifts his hands. “Ham needs another few hours help installing that array. I’ll be back soon.” His voice wobbles, uneasy. “You’ll be here?”

I nod. His worry is understandable. When, yesterday at conclave, Lianne dropped my hands at last, I’d shaken Alana awake. “I will not join you,” I’d said. When I’d returned home, Father had wept.

I can’t tell him that my heart still aches for Ari and for my dream of blue.

Father places the tools in his bag and moves to the door; Alana must step aside to let him pass. His slow footsteps echo against the stone tunnel walls until they fade from hearing. I turn back to my breadboard.

Nell dusts the ball of dough with flour. Her eyes flit from me to Alana. It’s too bad the Mothers didn’t call Nell, whose growing religiosity widens the gap between us. We share these household chores mostly out of habit.

“I’ll come back later, then?” Nell asks. “It has to rise anyway.”

“Yes. Later.”

As Nell passes Alana, she bows her head, hand to forehead, and whispers, “Praise to Nan.” Alana touches Nell’s forehead and whispers a blessing. I turn away as Nell’s footsteps fade in the echoing hallway.

Alana coughs. “Rima, you’ve been called.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “No, Mother. I was called skyward if I was called at all.”

“Is this about Ari? Because at least you’ll be with him during the training. You’ll train with the volunteers. I’ve requested it, so that you can develop physical skills at the same time as you learn the Mother-knowledge.” She shrugs. “Or perhaps he’ll fail, and won’t be one of the twelve, and you’ll see him in the quarters.”

I’m tempted to laugh. First at the thought of Ari failing, and then at the absurdity of seeing him in the Mothers’ quarters, where the twelve who fail must spend their remaining years,

preparing to train the next group of volunteers. As if we could be together in any meaningful way. Alana had been married before she'd been called. She'd had a life of love before her husband died.

"It's not about Ari," I say, only half a lie.

She steps inside and the door *shushes* closed behind her. She says, her voice low, "We know you've dreamed. Dreaming is one of the signs."

"But my dream doesn't point toward the Mothers. I didn't dream gray."

Alana's eyes are a washed-out blue. Her hair is a gray blanket worn loose in the fashion of the Mothers. Shapeless gray pants, shapeless gray tunic; even her slippers are gray. Her Nan pendant is a sagging gray sack.

I'm wearing clothes I've dyed myself: a pea-green weskit, which I've laced with ribbons the color of a poppy, and a skirt in a sharp and humming yellow. I wish we had a way to make the color blue, for I'd wear it, too. More scarlet ribbon threads through my black hair, which I've tied up in unruly clumps. "I'm not meant to be a Mother."

Alana's wrinkled lips purse. "No one has ever denied the call."

"Then I'll be the first." I'm not meant for their gray prison. I speak my thoughts out loud. "The Mothers are hiding some truth about Skyworld, aren't they?"

Alana lifts her finger to her lips. She points to the greenhouse door behind me, indicating we should go inside. When we enter, the plants stir, restless in my presence.

"The nanites in the plants will shield our words," Alana says.

My forehead wrinkles. Shield our words from what?

"Do you know what the Mothers' dreaming is?" she asks.

I thought I did. I wait.

"It's telepathy," she says. "Do you understand?"

A pea tendril weaves into my hair. My skin prickles with revelation. "The Mothers can read minds." This explains a lot.

She nods.

"But I read plants. That's all," I say.

"Maybe for now. But those blessed with dreaming can cultivate it."

The uneasiness that stirs in me stirs the plants.

“I dreamed it, too,” Alana says. “Your dream. All the Mothers dreamt it but each saw something different. Most saw threat. I did not.”

My heart beats hard, now, and the plants move as if in a soft wind. “I’m threatening because I sense something I shouldn’t. What is it, Alana? What’s the lie?”

“If you come for training you may find out.”

“If I come for training I join the Mothers.” Who, now I see, want me under their control.

Alana squints her pale eyes. “Maybe. There are ways.” She waves her hand as her voice trails off.

I reach for the branch that has draped over my right shoulder. “Ways to...go skyward?”

Alana lifts her face to the light array and closes her eyes. We are risking Exile by talking like this, imprisonment in the confines of dark tunnels where even Nan is forbidden. That parting alone leads to madness and death.

I whisper, “What did you dream?”

“Blue. A bitter green, not sweet. And someone with you. A boy.”

A boy. “Ari,” I say.

“Someone,” says Alana. “I took your dream as a sign, because I didn’t dream it through your eyes but my own. You and this boy were leading all the people, emerging from the Underworld. Returning to the sky. Seeing Skyworld for the first time in five hundred years.”

I press more deeply into the comfort of my plants.

She went on. “You see? You make the link between the people and the world we left behind.”

The branch I clutch vibrates within my fingers. I suck in the damp air, the sweet damp of soil and growing things. My dream was for me and me alone. Not for some larger purpose.

Alana says, “In my dream, you made it possible for the people to go home, Rima. So you see, I have to train you. So that you can fulfill this vision.”

“But what about the others? The other Mothers didn’t share this dream. You said they see me as a threat.” As a freak.

“I think they see another possibility. Perhaps there’s a choice you’ll have to make that will lead you down a different path.”

A pea tendril wraps my arm like a bracelet. Another snakes around my throat. “They’ll read my thoughts.”

"I can teach you control." Alana pauses. "Lianne sacrificed herself so you could take her place."

"She sacrificed? She was old. It was her time." Alana's eyebrows lift. I shrink away, burdened by the responsibility and guilt Alana - and Lianne - have placed on me. "I didn't ask for sacrifice."

"No. But you will only discover your path by stepping into hers." Alana shrugs. "Of course, that's your first choice."

My first choice. My choice is to be with Ari. To go skyward. To see blue. To find my mother. But to lead the people? No. Alana is mistaken.

But, she offers me a possibility, a way to get what I want without following my mother's rebel lead. "And if I choose wrong?"

Alana smiles, a wry tilting of one corner of her mouth. "I'd better be a good teacher, hadn't I?" She sighs. "I've watched you for many, many years. I know that you and Ari have spent time together in the deeps. I know that you sometimes challenge yourself with your Nan. I know how you feel about Nell and how you feel shunned. I know many things about you, Rima Birde. This is why I volunteered. And there's another thing. Your mother went skyward because she also responded to a dream." Alana's eyes crease, a soft smile now full on her lips. "I seem to have an affinity for the dreams of the Birde women."

Vines wrap both of my arms, now, and the nanites inside me stir in response.

"Come with me," Alana says, pressing forward. "Let me teach you. I think your other choices will become clear."

I brush the vines gently away. "I must speak to my father."

"Of course. I'll wait for you at the center."

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I knew Mama dreamed, because she told me. Here, in this greenhouse, the one next to my cavehome, the one I now tend because she left.

"It's beautiful, Rima." She'd held my hands in hers, smoothing the backs of my hands with her thumbs. "The Skyworld of my dream. I want you to understand this." Her eyes were wide and bright and her voice rang with excitement. Her long hair had slipped its pins and rolled over her shoulders like a dark brown wave.

We sat on the small bench at the back corner. We'd finished the weeding and she pulled me with her, hiding from Father. He wouldn't understand, she said. Our secret, she said. Ours until we met again. Each stroke of her thumbs left a black smudge of earth on my hands. The smudges blurred as tears filled my eyes.

"Please don't go," I'd whispered. I already felt alone. If she left, the emptiness would expand like an echo in the center. Maybe she'd stay if I reminded her of her duty. "The Mothers..." I began.

"The Mothers." She spat the words. "The Mothers are tyrants. They control us with lies and fear. Freedom is not only a gift but our right. You'll see." She leaned toward me and dropped her voice to the barest whisper. "I'll be back for you. I must go skyward, but I'll come back for you."

The backs of my hands were painted with earth. "You have to promise."

She smiled, brilliant, her eyes lighting like fire. "You are my daughter, Rima. And," she added with a wry glance, "you're special. Of course I promise. You are my life. Dry your tears." Then she smiled again before she put her finger to her lips as if to say, *our secret*. "Remember, Rima. You are special." Her eyes flash with an emotion I don't recognize and which is then gone. "Yes," she said and sighed, "not me. You."

She disappeared only a few days later, leaving me alone with my freakish ways, missing her, hoping to see her again.

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Father arranges and rearranges the tools on his bench, as if some perfect order would restore what he has lost. My heart aches. Maybe I can bring Mama home to him. Maybe I will come back for him. Maybe...

"At least," he starts, then clears his throat, "at least I'll see you at conclave."

I nod; his hands stay busy arranging and rearranging.

When he looks up his eyes are dark like the deeps. "The Mothers chose well, Rima. You have the gift. You're right to accept. You can't worry about me. You," and he hesitates, "you're like your mother."

Words die in my throat.

"I've always known," he says, and then words fail him, too.

My heart pounds as I reach for my bundle, as we touch foreheads. He turns away before the door is closed.

At Nell's cavehome I shift the bundle so that we can touch foreheads.

"So you'll join them, then," she says, approving.

"I have a favor," I say. "Look after my father?"

She nods, casting her eyes away.

"Nell," I say, placing my hand on her arm. "Don't believe everything you hear. Don't believe everything the Mothers tell you. There are things..."

Nell yanks away and touches her forehead to ward off my evil words, her face open with fear. "Sacrilege," she whispers. "They called *you*?"

"Nan protect you, Nell," I say as the door slides shut between us. Sadness fills me like water in a bucket.

When I find Alana at the center, she's asleep, dreaming gray, no doubt. Her Nan casts a green glow upward toward the roof of the aging cave.

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As Alana said, I'm to train physically with the volunteers. She argued that it will be good to have a Mother with those skills. I hope her secret plan is to prepare me to survive in Skyworld.

So I'll see Ari during these weeks, and as soon as Alana begins her tour of the volunteers' quarters I look for him, my heart beating fast. The network of rooms devoted to the Rising volunteers is attached to the cavehome of the Mothers, and the entire structure is like nothing I've ever seen. There are separate rooms for eating, sleeping, bathing, and training. The luxury turns my stomach.

"Why don't the people have these?" I whisper to Alana, as she shows me bright white kitchens, with cooking stoves and shining tables. In the bathing rooms hang soft drying cloths, not our coarse linens.

The Mothers' quarters are particularly fine. The rooms have high ceilings with wood rafters and are brightly lit; the furnishings are large and comfortable, and I trail my fingers over the smooth, if aged fabrics that are nothing like the rough homespun threads we make from fibrous plants. There are soft mats underfoot to cushion and warm the hard stone. Painted murals adorn some of the walls, pictures of fantastic forests and animals I've never seen in the vids. One room houses musical instruments, and another more books than I can count. Alana tells me that

these rooms were built just after the Expulsion, with skills we've lost, and they hoard rescued treasures; their limited use has preserved things that would otherwise have long since been lost. I still wonder why the people know nothing about it.

The gray Mothers with their gray dreams live in a place of color and light and sound and comfort and share none of that with the people. My jaw is clenched as Alana gestures for me to sit.

We're in a small library where she explains the routine. Half of my day will be spent in physical training, half in this room of archives studying the history of the Mole People, beyond the bits and pieces I've been taught in school. Behind me is an entire wall of books.

"You'll learn the tenets of the Prophecy," Alana says, "which are only available to the Mothers. You are forbidden from discussing what you learn with any of the volunteers." She pauses. "Let's go to the greenhouse, where you'll work once your training is finished."

The Mothers' greenhouse is many times the size of the one I tend at home, and again I mark the difference. Alana closes the door, and we're alone. "They cannot hear our thoughts in here," she says. "Each morning we'll begin with a meditation designed to train your mind so that you can use telepathy but not be spied on. We'll meet here, agreed?"

"Yes." Alana is my ally, and I'm grateful.

When I finally see Ari my heart pounds. It feels as though years have passed in the hours we've been apart. He sees me from across the training room and freezes where he stands, and I try not to smile; but it's useless. His brow furrows with unspoken questions while I grin from ear to ear and stop myself from flying across the room into his arms.

It's not until the supper meal that we can finally talk.

"They didn't tell me," he says and guides me to a table apart from the others. "When you showed up, I thought I was seeing things." His hand covers mine and I lift my fingers and thread them through his.

"You're not angry?" I think about our conversation by the lake.

"Angry? No." His eyes trace my face. "I can't be angry at you."

"I don't understand why you avoided me at the Rising."

He looks away and chews the inside of his cheek. Then his fingers squeeze mine. "That's over now. You're to be a Mother. You've been chosen. I'm proud of you. And we're here together for a time."

He still doesn't see me going skyward. "For a time. Ari, about that. What if I told you I dreamed blue?"

He leans away, smiling now. "Well, that clinches it, doesn't it? Nan is powerful in you. You're a dreamer."

I pull my fingers from his and lean toward him and lay my hand on his arm. "Ari. I dreamed blue. Not gray. Blue."

He shrugs. "Blue. Gray. What's the difference?" He leans forward again, so close that our faces across the table are only inches apart. "What is different is this Rising. You're to be a Mother. You can dream for us, while we go and take back Skyworld. I can feel that this time we'll succeed."

If Ari leans only a little closer, just a tiny bit, our lips would touch. I ache for him. I whisper, "I'm meant to go skyward. Now. With you."

He pulls away, folding his arms across his chest. "No."

I feel like I've been slapped. Drenched in the cold waters of the lake.

"You've been called to be a Mother."

"I know for myself what I've been called to do."

A shadow crosses his face. "Only the Mothers know best what you've been called to do."

I press my lips together. This argument again. And again, he's hiding something. He has a secret. The Mothers, I'm coming to believe, specialize in secrets. I feel an ache as dark as the deepest tunnel.

"Look. We need you here," he says, ignoring my expression. "I need you here. Stay here and dream for me." He reaches up and touches my cheek.

And then, despite my worries and frustrations, I'm lost. It wouldn't matter if he was asking me to drown in the cold lake because I'm already drowning in his blue eyes. I let him lead me out of the dining hall and down the tunnel into one of the practice rooms where the lights are dimmed for the night. He releases his Nan to float beside him and I do the same and the green light grows around us.

"Rima Birde, I love you and will always love you. Once you join the circle of Mothers I can't tell you this, so I have to tell you now, as often as I can. I love you." He kisses me, his hands catching me in the small of my back so that my breath catches, too, and I press into him.



All the words that had been rising in my throat - words of protest and irritation, of dreaming and determination, of blue and bitter green - all my words fade as I kiss Ari in the semi-dark lit only by the soft light of Nan.

## Truman: Transition

Over and over I hear it in my mind: *she's making a mistake. She's making a terrible mistake.* And I can't shake what I saw in Mia's face, her expression as she turned away.

Disappointment in me.

Mom is in the kitchen making dinner. "Hey," she says.

I'm so ticked off that I'm already gimping past her and out of the room before I can return a grunt.

"Hey!" she repeats, then she calls after me, "Tru?"

"Not now!" I slam into my room and punch the code for the door, and then, because it closes with such a nice, soft *shush*, turn and ram my fist into the wall.

Which is such a bad idea. Such a bad, bad idea. Steel paneling does not give.

I sink to my bed as I swallow up my pain, and swallow the hot welling tears, and I cradle my fist and rock. Then I suck it up. Sit up, and suck up. Suck it all up, my leg, my damaged fist, my life on a cold gray rock floating in space. Mia, lost to me, just when I've realized how much she means.

My desk is littered with ebooks, and netbooks, the VR set, all the cool stuff any guy would want. Except I'd known what I really wanted for some little time, and I hadn't opened my mouth about it, and now Mia is on her way out of my life for good.

To Mom's credit, she stays in the kitchen, although when I get the courage to go back out I can tell that she's a tight fist now. Like my tight and aching fist, which I bring to her attention, and when I do, this melts her at once because under that tight fisted exterior she's all wuss.

"Oh, for the sake of all the gods." She takes my hand in hers. "What were you thinking?"

"Is it broken?"

She straightens out my fingers one by one. It hurts, but I've felt worse. She lifts her eyes, purses her lips. "No. But you won't be playing ball for a while."

That makes me smile. It's our inside joke, from when I was little and would ask if we could play ball outside. If you play ball on the moon, it's pretty much bye-bye ball.

"Okay, kiddo. What's up?" Mom is wrapping my hand in a freezing gel-pac.

I wince at the cold. “Why do we have the stupid Return?”

She stares at my hand, silent for a minute. Then, “Why do you ask?”

“I hate it. Everything about it. Everything. We’re living here for gods’ sakes, like we always have, so let’s try and make it right. Trying to go back to the past is dumb. We messed it up once, but maybe we can get the moon right if we just try. Not go chasing after stupid dreams.” I swallow, the tight set of my teeth making my jaw hurt.

She sinks against the counter, searching my face. “Tru, try and see it from the other side. The Return’s about more than dreams. It’s about hope. People have to hope for something bigger. They have to hope for something that speaks to the future.” She pauses. “It’s about not giving up.”

“Bigger! So then, let’s expand the Ark. I don’t see why that’s giving up. And I don’t see why going back to the past has anything to do with hope.” By this time the pain in my fist has expanded into the cold gel-pac and into my messed-up leg and into my messed-up heart. I can’t hold it together much longer.

One thing about Mom. She gets it, sometimes. “Listen. Take the ice to your room. Leave it on your hand for two minutes then off for four. Do that a few times. Okay?”

I go into my room and nurse my fist. As I do, I take my rat, Milton, out of his cage. I settle him on my shoulder; he likes to sit there and watch what I do. Right now he’s a mega-comfort, as I focus on him and close my eyes and try, hopelessly, to keep Mia’s face from crowding out every other image in my brain.

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The next morning when the lights ease on my fist is a dull ache - bruised, but okay. It’s the weekend, which means kids can gather in a controlled kind of way. Control is important in the confined space of the Ark and kids are always suspect.

I touch base with Radar and Nibs and we make a plan to check out a vid in the afternoon, so I have the morning to work on that paper. Except the words swim around in my brain like fish in a hologram sea.

I tell Mom I’m going to the greenhouse, and she gives me a look, then nods.

The greenhouse - we call it Eden - is one of the biggest nodes. It was also one of the first to be built, but gets more repairs than any other node. It’s so patched up my dad jokes it’s pretty much made of duct tape. Without Eden we’d all have died of starvation and oxygen deprivation.

When I say greenhouse, it's really more like an indoor farm: acres of different foods under lights that simulate sunlight and day-to-night, and a watering system using recycled water and waste. Some things are hydroponic. We even grow seaweed in big tanks, since seaweed has lots of nutrients. The tanks surround the edges of Eden and give it a mystical greenish cast and an underwater feeling, like the air is always moving, the greenish light moving in waves. When I was little I'd crawl underneath the benches or the branches and find a spot to curl up. I still like to get lost in there underneath the fruit trees and banana plants, whose roots are buried in a special soil mix that's topped by soft moss.

Mom works in the greenhouse. So will I when I'm out of school, because, like I said, I have this thing for plants.

My thing for plants is weird. It's something I don't talk about, because not only does it make me feel different, it's also dangerous, though I'm not sure why. Only Mom knows about it, and she cautioned me to keep quiet about it a long time ago.

I was about seven when it first happened. She'd brought me in to play while she worked. Next thing I know, this tomato plant is climbing me like I'm a trellis, and when Mom looks down at me she has to stifle a scream. I thought it was fun, especially since I could sort of talk to the tomato - make one of the fruits ripen so I could eat it. And it was delicious.

But Mom was not so thrilled. She took me into her lab, where she worked on developing new cultivars and made routine nanorobot checks. I remember she did this little blood test on me and then she kind of freaked. Next she brought in this plant and put it on the floor in front of me and before I knew it, branches had wrapped me up so I couldn't stop laughing.

After that she kept me away from the greenhouse for a while. And she kept me away from plants in every way possible. She told me later that even Dad didn't know what had happened. When I was about ten, she sat me down and explained that I had to learn to control this thing and not let on to anyone. She taught me concentration techniques that would keep it in check, so I could be around plants but not have a problem other people would discover.

"Some people will not understand this gift of yours, Truman. The Elders especially. I blame myself..." I could see she was worked up about it. I didn't know what she had to feel guilty about.

"I like it, Mom," I said. "It's kind of fun."

“You need to understand. It’s not safe for you to tell anyone about this. You have to promise me you’ll say nothing, and please don’t show anyone what happens between you and plants.”

So I don’t. Not even Mia knows. We don’t talk about it at home so I’m not even sure Dad knows. It’s why we don’t have houseplants. Mom has let me go back to Eden only now that I can control this whatever-it-is and keep it under wraps.

But it’s why I’m weird. Why I don’t fit in.

The greenhouse door opens before me and I inhale like it’ll save my life.

The day lights are on full now, and I can feel the plants around me pulse, pulse like a heartbeat. I move down the rows, extending my hand low so no one can see, doing a low-five, checking. Avocados, good. Pomegranates, awesome, nearly ready. Grapes - whoa. I stop. They’ve got a fungus brewing, and it needs to be dealt with. I tap my ear loop and send a short verb message to Mom so she can get on it when she arrives later.

I keep going. I wave to Frank, who is working in vegetables. I head for the fruit trees. This is my favorite place in the entire Ark.

Some of these trees are fifteen, twenty feet tall, and a few of them are really old, almost as old as the Ark. My favorite is an apple tree right near the center of the orchard, a tree that has propped-up knobby branches that stretch around it like spider legs, and the sweetest apples of a kind not found on any other tree. I crawl under the branches and lean my back against the trunk.

Behind my back I can feel the tree. Beneath me the roots stir as if they can move. Long ago the tree told me its name, which is an utter tongue twister. So I asked and the tree gave me a nickname. *Mac. Mac? Isn’t that a bit...obvious? Mac.*

*Hey, Mac, I think now. Got a ripe one?*

An apple thunks down on the soft earth next to my left knee.

*Thanks.*

I crunch into the apple - man, it’s good - and because I’m not distracted there’s Mia popping into my brain again, and that business about her going on Return.

Return. We’ve studied them in school. We’ve learned about the early Exiles and the Bot Wars and the Returns.

Scientists on Earth had worked out how to transport people and materials up to Ark long before the Bot Wars. It was a massive secret, the Ark. Our ancestors thought they were building the Ark because humans were destroying Earth's climate, and this was the way we'd survive.

But then came the world-wide plague of nanorobots that led to the Expulsion. The bots were submicroscopic machines injected into plants with the best intentions - feed the starving masses by making super-plants - but they evolved. Programmed to self-replicate and coordinate, they formed swarm intelligence and became aggressive.

The bots invaded humans and killed them. The bots inhabited all plants and sent natural plant defenses on overdrive, and plants killed humans. There was only one way out and that was escape.

I've pieced together a few other items about the Expulsion that aren't taught in school. The Arkians were specially chosen. They couldn't be infected with bots, for one thing. They also had to have special skills. Not everyone could be taken off the Earth. Whatever my great-grands had, it must have been special. I do think about the many left behind.

The early Arkians took all the cultures of the exiles and mashed them together, hence the varicolored gods and the Elders and the rules. The earliest Elders had some pact about returning to Earth after fifty years, so the Return is what we Arkians go through every fifty years in the hope that Earth has rid itself of the nanorobots and we can survive on Earth again.

Return. Mia. I don't want to go on the Return, and even if I did, there probably wouldn't be room for me. But I don't want to let Mia go, either. Why does this have to be so hard?

*Great apple, Mac.* I hear the tree limbs stretch and groan. And then stop. Silence from Mac, as if it's straining to hear.

Voices approach the orchard center. One of them I recognize.

"...the oldest living organism in the greenhouse," says Frank. "It's a cultivar from a tree that was alive during the Expulsion."

"And producing fruit," says the other I don't recognize.

"Yes, sir, lovely fruit."

I can see them now, through the branches, and Frank bends over and sees me, and nearly jumps out of his skin. "Truman! By the gods, you scared me, lurking under there."

"Sorry, Frank." I push up, give Mac's trunk a pat and crawl out from under, wiping my right hand on my pants, clutching the remaining apple in my left.

Standing next to Frank is a man with long hair tied in a ponytail and sporting a beard, both dark but streaked with gray. He stretches out his hand and I shake it, his long, thin fingers gripping my bruise, and I try not to wince.

“Truman Forrester, this is Dr. Starke,” says Frank. “The doc is doing some research to prepare for the Return. Truman’s mom is a gardener.”

Starke’s eyebrows lift. “Good apple?” he asks, pointing at the core.

“The best,” I say. Then, because I’m embarrassed about what might be considered stealing, I pocket the remains.

Frank says, “This Return’s gonna be different, Tru. Dr. Starke, here, he thinks he’s gonna make it so we can all go home. Home to Earth. He’s developed a new way to take out those nanorobots, gods curse ‘em.” His excitement is so palpable Frank’s voice trembles. “Dr. Starke says this Return’ll be the most important thing Arkians have ever done.”

Return. Mia. All go home. Earth. That’s what runs through my brain.

Starke turns to Frank. “This tree will do nicely.”

When he says that, all thoughts of Mia vanish and a chill runs through me. And I can feel something from Mac, stirring under the moss right up through its roots, trying to send me a message. “I hope,” I start, and then stop myself as Starke looks at me. His eyes are gray and have no depth, which is unsettling. I cough. “The fruit’s the best. I hope you enjoy it.”

Starke smiles. “Truman Forrester, eh? I think I know your father.”

Everyone who has something to do with the Return knows my father. “Yes, sir.”

“But you aren’t an engineer like he is.”

“No.” I couldn’t be an engineer to save my life.

“Are you a gardener, then, Truman?”

“Not yet. But someday.”

“Have the gift, eh?”

For a second, I think he knows, and now that chill raises goosebumps up and down my arms. But then I realize he’s talking about the usual gift, like my mom has, like Frank has, and Frank saves the day.

“Truman, here, he’s amazing. I can’t wait to bring him on full time. As soon as he finishes his education.”

And without warning, my life stretches before me, then, a life without Mia, a life that is fine, filled with greenhouse moments, but...dull. Not entirely lifeless; there are plants, and growing things. But a life that is Mia-less. And a life that, for the first time, sounds boring. A life that is without Earth, and, echoing my mom's words, without hope. I shift my shoulders and clench my fists.

“But education is most important, isn't it, Truman?” says Starke with a smile, intruding on my thoughts. “It unlocks the magic doors to who-knows-where.”

“Yes, sir.” I step back. Who-knows-where. “Speaking of education, I have a paper to write.” I nod to Starke, and then say, “See you, Frank,” and I leave the two of them standing next to Mac, happy to be off.

Home. Mia. Return. Earth. Mia. Maybe I was supposed to run into that weird guy, Starke. Maybe this is something to consider, that there are things out there other than the predictable.

\* \* \*

The good thing about having a bum leg is that people tend to get out of your way.

This can be handy when you're in a hurry. I move down D corridor - Dumbledore, from this ancient story we all like - about as fast as I can.

I keep telling myself that there's still time. Somebody always drops out, so they say. Since the last Return was fifty years ago, it's all in what they say.

The Return node is restricted, of course. It's where they train and where the head honchos work, the engineers like Dad who have spent decades on the latest designs for space flight. I'm lucky that way. I even know the guy on duty at the door.

“Truman,” he says. “Wassup?”

“Hey, Gil. Not much.”

“Here to see your dad? Got your pass?”

My pass would register my whereabouts, tell the world I'm in the Return node. I don't want that out just yet.

I pretend to rifle my pockets. Playact it pretty good, getting more frustrated as I turn out each empty pocket, although I don't reveal the apple core. “Oh, man. I must have left it at home. Mom's gonna kill me. She wanted me to take this to Dad.” I wave a crumpled envelope I've uncovered in the air before Gil's nose.

“I'll get it to him.”



“Uh, can’t. She said it was ‘eyes only’.”

Gil smirks. “Mothers. Only cause it’s you, Truman.” He opens the door with his code. “Tell no one.”

I make the zipper motion across my lips and step over the threshold as the door slides silently shut behind me.

I’ve never liked E node much. E for Earthreturn, the formal name. But I think it’s E for Exclusive. We’ve named it Eel, for the whole slimy slithery feeling. Dad works here, sure, but he isn’t the Eel type.

Eel gives me the creeps partly because it’s dead quiet in this nexus of Eel. Dim light; a small overhead viewport. I look up. I can see the black sky, the stars. It’s always night when you look up from the surface of the moon.

Unlike the white of other corridors and nodes here in Eel everything is shaded a dull gray, like the moon dust of the dark side. Low lighting. Padded walls to keep everything hush-hush.

Dad’s office is way off to the left. I turn right. That’s where the secondary recruiting offices are, the ones that are invitation only. I’m remembering the offices from a field trip Dad took my class on a while back, making me feel special. Now I’m feeling the nerves tangling in my gut and I have to keep Mia’s face in my mind like a spotlight.

Most of the time these offices are quiet. Empty, even. The engineers keep working to improve things, like making a shuttle that can escape Earth’s gravity, or shelters that can withstand high winds but pack light. The techno-engineering part of Eel is always humming. But in this part of E things go silent. Forty years of silence.

The Ark goes silent, waiting.

The last Return, according to my grandma, went something like this.

It took two days to get there. The Settlers orbited Earth for about a month. Sent down a couple of probes. The probes found fresh water. The atmosphere - good. Solar radiation - good. The Settlers sent down a shuttle. Two weeks, a month longer, the shuttle crew had found places to re-colonize. And the best news: they found no hostile plants. No deadly bots.

More Settlers went down, no attacks, no losses, everything looking good.

Up here in the Ark, things got exciting. There was talk of going back. Abandoning the Ark. Thoughts of fresh air, of running in the woods for real. Old timers who’d heard the legends shared stories about Earth before. How you could climb mountains under blue skies, and swim in

lakes with sandy bottoms. How there were whales and polar bears and elephants - animals that never made it to the Ark.

The Ark planned a big celebration in the central node, a huge party. Grandma said it was something to behold: her words, “something to behold.” They brought out stuff that had been saved, broke it open, ate and drank it all. They believed this was it. The waiting was over. Over four hundred years, and it was time to go home. Time to return to Earth for good.

Within a week of the party, it was finished. Not a sound from Earth, not a peep. A month went by, then a year. Then two years. No message, no warning, just one minute they were communicating and the next, static. Ark went static, too. People here went static. My grandma said it was like something died inside.

They waited, tried calling, tried sending signals. They even sent a couple of long-range probes but found nothing. After five years they declared that Return finished. Shut the offices in Eel for another forty-odd years until it was time to start preparing for this one.

Mia’s Return.

The Return I’m about to volunteer to join against my better judgement and fighting every molecule in my body.

I open the office door. I don’t know what I expect to see: a secretary, maybe, and an inner office. Holograms all over the walls with images of Old Earth. Stacks of e-readers like at the doctors’. But it’s just one guy at a desk, reading from a screen. An ordinary room, all blank except for one super-sad-looking *differbachia* in the corner.

The guy looks up at me like I’m an alien.

“How did you get in here?”

“Hi. I’m Truman Forrester. My dad works in engineering.”

He raises his eyebrows. “And?”

I swallow. Here goes. “I want to join the Return.”

He looks at me like I’d just said I want to eat moon rocks. “The recruiting stage is long over.”

I shrug. “But I figure there’ve got to be dropouts. Right?”

He darkens his screen. “Your folks know you’re here?”

“Sure,” I lie.

“I’ll need a letter, signed by each of them. On actual paper. Notarized. And don’t think I won’t walk down to engineering.”

On actual paper; no disappearing e-files. My leg begins to ache. “Can I sit?”

He extends his hand to the empty chair.

“So, no. They don’t know yet. I just made the decision. I want to go. I need to go. What else is there? There’s just this rock we live on, and for what?” And for what? Because I can’t add, the one thing most important to me in the world is leaving. I can’t say, I have to be with Mia or I might as well walk naked out onto the lunar surface and let the universe have me. And I’m not even sure I want to go on the Return. It’s all for her.

He wouldn’t buy it. Grownups don’t think kids can feel that much.

He rubs his eyes with his fingers like he hasn’t had much sleep. When he looks at me again his eyes are all watery. “Truman - that’s your name, right? - listen. If you were my son I wouldn’t let you go.”

“Right.” I push myself up, wincing a little. “It’s the leg, isn’t it.”

“No.”

“Sure. You don’t want a gimp around, clogging things up.”

“Hey.”

“What else? There’s no other reason to keep me here. Okay, so my mom and dad. But you know what? I’ve heard. This time is the last time. This is the one we’ve all been waiting for. The last Return. I’ll be back to pick up my folks and take them home. We’ll all be back on Earth this time.” Earth.

He looks at me and I look at him and we’re both thinking, where in the heck did that come from? Because I’m not sure I believed what Frank had said about Starke only minutes ago. But suddenly I am sure. This is the true EarthReturn, and I need to be there. There with Mia, yes, but there, because this is it. Because I need to be on Earth.

I’ve never been so sure of anything in my whole life.

I place my hands flat on his desktop. “You know, millions of years before humans were on Earth, it was uninhabitable. It was a stinking, steaming mess. Then along came the seed plants, the angiosperms, and they started the whole ball rolling. Then we came along and made it a stinking, steaming mess again. But those seed plants, they can endure a lot. They adapt. I’m

willing to bet they're ready to share again. Share Earth with us humans. With or without the bots."

The guy's eyes are wide.

I push away. "My mom works in the greenhouse. I've learned some stuff about plants." I point. "Your *differbachia*'s got spider mites. Amazing that those little buggers have hung on up here, right? In such a sterile world? Soapy water will fix them. And your plant will thank you."

I leave the recruiter goggling between me and his sick plant companion - I send it some good vibes, and realize that if it had the bots, it wouldn't have spider mites - and limp back to the nexus of Eel, where there's a bench so I can rest my aching leg before I slip out of this slimy node of secret-keepers.

I put my head in my hands. Mia. Her blue elf eyes float in my brain. I can't let her slip out of my life. She is everything. Even if it means doing something scary as all heck, I want to be with her on Return.

But there's something even bigger, now, singing to me from the void. I can hear it above my head, in that black space dotted with glittering stars, a humming thread of a song. I don't just want to be on that ship; I have to be on that ship when it leaves. I hadn't known it even a few hours ago. In fact, the thought of it makes my stomach do anti-gravity flops. But I'm meant to Return to Earth. I have to Return to Earth.

I have to. Even if it takes the kind of training that will make my leg scream with pain, I have to Return.