

Rima: Training

The mornings begin early with my meditation session with Alana, and then I spend time with the volunteers learning physical skills. In the afternoon I work in the archives. Like the other girls I trade my skirts for slim black pants and fitted black tunics made from an unfamiliar soft fiber that stretches with movement. I need that freedom to move and stretch; by the end of the second day every muscle aches, even those I didn't know I had. I smooth the odd fabric with my fingers, grateful for it, though I'm reminded again of what we have here that the people lack.

I've spent my years walking the tunnels, carrying heavy loads, moving rock, tending plants, helping Father with his mechanical work, lifting, bending; but I'm not prepared for the physical skills I'm learning now. Survival skills, so volunteers are ready to address every unknown. Handling a bow, a blade, a spear, an axe, wrestling - these arts are foreign to me. Trapping game, skinning a rabbit. My only strength is in identifying edible plants. Ari was born for this; he loves it. I'm clumsy, as if my hands are made of raw dough, and I feel in constant danger of falling in the wrong direction. I spend time centering my body, balancing on a thin plank; I heft iron bars in order to strengthen my arms.

Ari's eyes follow me in the training rooms. Even though he insists that I won't go skyward, he marks my progress, his eyes glittering. When we meet in secret in the night time he snakes strong fingers around my wrists; after a week I can twist out of his grip and he can't hide his surprise.

Twenty-four volunteers train, ranging in age from seventeen to thirty. Twelve is a sacred number for the Mole People: there are twelve Mothers, volunteers have twelve weeks to train, and twelve will be picked to go skyward. The other twelve remain to become trainers, never to return to their cavehomes. The Mothers' secrets will remain secret.

My presence makes an odd number, which unsettles more than one volunteer. I'm given dark looks and cold shoulders.

My hours in the archives are as challenging as my time in training. The Prophecy and history are not what I expect.

I sit back in my creaky deep-padded chair and stare at the wall opposite. A cloth hanging woven in inexplicable scenes blankets the rock. What I picture from the stories of the early Underworld are images of the rat wars, of the floods that nearly swept the deeps clean until we found ways to keep the water contained, of the efforts to solve the effects of light deprivation. Woven on the cloth opposite are rich gardens brimming with unfamiliar flowering plants, people consorting with odd animals. The threads are burnished bronze and dark green; the animals dance hind-footed; ladies in fluid gowns tilt their heads; fountains spit water.

I ask Alana where the hanging comes from.

“I don’t know,” she says. “It was saved during the Expulsion.”

Saved along with the books of this library, the most important of which is the Book that records all that’s known of human history and which outlines the Prophecy.

I trace my fingers over the page I’m reading now. Only Mothers have access to these words. What I’m reading is a reproduction, hand-written, for the original would fall to dust in my fingers.

First were the good nanites, the ones meant to keep humans from starving. But they evolved and became hostile, invading all plants and increasing their natural defenses, and invading humans and turning toxic. Humans were exterminated. Near the end, isolated groups of humans took desperate last stands against the plague of hostile nanites and hostile plants. The Mole People were led underground by the first Mother, who also gave us Nan, a nanite that the first Mother invented, so that we could bring contaminated plants with us but live with them symbiotically.

“But why underground?” I ask Alana, lifting my eyes from the page. “Why not stay in Skyworld if we are one with the nanites, with Nan?”

Alana bites her lip. She’s hiding something.

“Then hostile nanites do remain in Skyworld.”

“Something like that,” Alana says, her eyes shaded.

Something like what? Are they hostile still, or not? “But why wait every fifty years to find out?” My frustration is increasing.

“There’s another enemy in Skyworld. Read on.”

I turn the page. The first Mother gave the Prophecy: the Mole People must prepare for another enemy, other than the nanites, an enemy that would come from the black sky beyond the blue sky, would come in flames from the black beyond the blue.

The chair creaks again as I shift. I've thought, like all the People, that the Rising was devoted to determining only whether hostile nanites remain in Skyworld. That if those hostile nanites are gone, we can go above again.

But now I read what's been hidden from the People: an enemy will come from the sky. Something or someone will come from the black beyond the blue intent upon the destruction of all life on Earth, good and bad, over and under. Every fifty years we send volunteers Skyward to meet this enemy and prevent our destruction.

I must assume that Ari and the other volunteers have not been told about this enemy. They're being equipped for a mission they don't understand. It doesn't matter what Alana says; I have to warn him. Now I'm beginning to understand why the volunteers have never returned to the Underworld. Multiple dangers wait in Skyworld.

* * *

Ari and I meet again at the evening supper, off on our own as before, in the room that hums with low, tired conversation. Ari is a natural leader, already first in the rankings. I watch the other girls glance our way and my chest tightens with pride. But he's ignorant of all that waits above and I have to warn him. I chew my lip, trying to decide where to begin.

He says, "You've a special skill with the atlatl. A strong arm and a good aim." When he looks up from his bowl of stew his eyes shine.

The atlatl is one of the few weapons I might be able to master. "But I ache all over. I can't throw the way I should. My arm wobbles so the shot doesn't fly true."

His quick smile brings warmth to my cheeks. "That's why you were chosen to be a Mother. You've got their spiritual nature." He bends back to his stew. "But you aren't without skill. With practice, you'll make the target every time. We need Mothers who are equipped to be leaders."

Our eyes meet again and his spark. *Now*, I think. Maybe he'll listen. I reach for his hand. "I wish you'd let me share what I'm learning."

He shakes his head. "Unlike you I have no need of book-learning. You can do all the thinking and dreaming for all of us."

I press on. “The Mothers don’t trust us, Ari. They treat us as if we’re children. They’re keeping secrets.”

He laughs. “You’re to become one of the Mothers, Rima. If you feel that way, argue with them, not me.”

“I don’t think the Mothers will listen.”

“Give it time,” he says, waving one hand.

“Ari. You should listen. I must warn you. There are multiple dangers...”

He places his hand palm out, to silence me.

I press forward, my fingers tightening on his arm. I need him to understand. “I’m not meant to be a Mother. I’m meant to go skyward.”

In the deeps not so long ago, he reached for me. In the deeps he told me he couldn’t help it, told me he loved me. Now he lifts ice eyes to meet mine, hard eyes that peer through black curls that have grown long over his forehead.

“I’m learning skills, you just said so,” I press. “I’m not meant to stay here.” My voice matches his eyes, cold and hard. “I will not sleep and dream gray. I will...”

“No,” he interrupts. “No. You won’t go skyward.” He looks away and for a moment, I think he might relent. “You have an iron core that I wish some of the others shared. But,” and when he swivels his head to me I see his distance, “you are not to go skyward.”

“Arianos Panthera, you do not command me,” I say, in the formal way. My voice is shaking.

“Rima Birde, you were chosen,” he responds, his voice like a hard slap across my face.

It’s all I need. The ice water of the deeps fills my veins. My Nan throbs. I don’t know why he’s being so stubborn, but something has changed. I withdraw from him and almost spit out the words. “I dreamed blue. Not gray, like the old women of the old circle.” I will not relent; my hands, retreated to my side of the table, curl into fists. “I dreamed of Skyworld. I was there.” I pause. “And you don’t know what waits for you, but I do, and I want to share.”

“You sound like your mother.” It comes out almost as a snarl. Then Ari’s head drops into his hands. I count long seconds while I wait for him to speak, while I measure my breaths. “Even if you had such a dream, I want you to stay here. Because I know very well what waits up there. I,” he hesitates but does not lift his head, “I would not see you die.”

“Death comes to everything, Ari,” I say. My chest is tight. “I’m free to choose the manner of my coming and going. I’m free to go skyward if I wish.”

“Really, Rima? Skyward?” The voice comes from over my shoulder. It’s Jacques Rowen who hovers there as if he materialized from a vid. “Do you agree, Ari?” Jacques - Jay - moves to the end of the table and leans between me and Ari, his hands flat on the table between us. His eyes meet mine. “Aren’t you a Mother, now?”

I purse my lips. Jay is an old friend, if an annoying one. “I’m not a Mother, yet, Jay, any more than you’re on your way skyward.”

“Ah!” Jay breaks into a grin. “Encouraging rebellion, then, Ari?” His grin vanishes. The air between Jay and Ari vibrates with tension. Both of their Nans begin to glow. “A challenge. The sword. Tomorrow at five.”

“Done.” Ari, whose eyes are fixed on a point across the room, doesn’t move.

Jacques slaps his hands on the table and moves off.

I lean over the table to Ari. “What are you doing? He’s already a master with the sword.” I can see it in the training. Jay was born to the blade. The challenge is part of the training, a way to winnow to the final twelve, but sometimes these contests result in accidents. I saw that only yesterday when two of the girls clashed and the stronger, not yet master of her skills, sliced open the leg of the weaker. I touch my forehead at the thought. “He’s talented.”

“So am I,” Ari says, fierce. “In eleven weeks we’ll be out there. Pray that any of us is a master.” He rises and moves off.

I won’t follow him tonight. I’m angry that he won’t listen. Angry that he doesn’t believe in me. Even if he says it’s because he wants me not to die, that he wants me to be safe.

What I’m learning in the archives is this: no one is safe.

* * *

I lie on my cot in the dark, listening to the other girls’ breathing, and for the first time in my exhaustion my eyes will not close. Ari’s words run through me: *You have an iron core that I wish some of the others shared.* But then, that snap: *You sound like your mother.*

Like my mother. I can see my mother, in our greenhouse, singing to the plants, singing until all the plants in the greenhouse have wound tendrils and roots, leaf and stem, around and around her arms and legs and still she sings, the green song lifting the plants into ecstasy and my mother is a living green thing, too.

I close my eyes and recite the evening prayer: *Nan is the one made of many. Nan is the many who make one.* I wrap my fist around my pulsing Nan.

I've inherited my mother's gift for plant-song. The Mothers have chosen me so that they can control me. So that I'll help them keep the Mole People safely tucked deep in the tunnels of the Underworld. So that I will not seek to talk with the nanites of Skyworld, not seek to understand this enemy coming from the black beyond the blue. So that I will not, if Alana is right, lead the People out of the tunnels and into the light. Lianne's sacrifice was not for my benefit. I am, in fact, a prisoner.

I don't yet understand the Mothers' purpose in this, but I will.

I doubt that the Mothers want to make me a part of their coven. I fear that if I remain in the Underworld my days will end in Exile. Or, I will burn.

I rub my eyes, making small stars dance behind my lids. I'll train harder, even if I ache and Ari isn't happy, because I believe my destiny is not to remain below with the Mothers but to follow my dream. My dream of Skyworld and my dream of blue.

Truman: Interloper

“You want me to help you do what?” Radar looks at me like I’ve sucked out all his oxygen.

“Train me. I’ve got to buff up. With my leg and all, I need everything else I can get. You can do it.”

Radar shakes his head. “Tru. It’s not the training. That’s no biggie. It’s the reason for the training.”

“There’s only a slim chance I’ll find a way in. But if I do, I want to be ready.”

Radar sits back against the the table. We’re in the white-on-white center waiting for Nibs, so we can check out the newest vid - a horror about bots except in this one they come to the Ark and take over. I’m ho-hum about it because it’s the third horror vid about bots in the Ark in the last couple of years. As far as I’m concerned, it’s gotten old.

Some kind of soft, almost tuneless music floats in the air, along with the smell of roses - an artificial scent designed to keep everyone calm. Maybe even loaded with a low-dose sedative. Sometimes when we’ve been sitting around waiting for a vid we joke about doing something outrageous: playing music real loud or running around yelling. But once or twice I’ve seen what happens when someone gets disruptive, and so it’s only a joke.

Radar’s eyes follow a passing family, the two little kids acting stiff, just like their parents. “You know, I thought about volunteering when the notice about the Return went up last year.”

I sit up staring. “You?” Radar’s an only, like me, and pretty tight with his folks.

“I even talked to my dad about it. He thought it was pretty cool. I don’t know why I wimped out.”

I get excited. “Maybe we could both find a seat.”

Radar’s eyes shine against his dark skin. “They’d probably say I’m too tall.”

“Too tall for what?” It’s Nibs, eating a wrap. Nibs is always eating. The only reason he isn’t a round ball is he has all this energy. He plunks down next to Radar.

“The Return,” Radar says. “I probably wouldn’t fit in the seats.”

“By all the gods.” Nibs shakes his head. “How I wish I could go.” His voice sounds like it does when he’s grounded.

“You do?” Now I’m stunned. My best friends both wanting to go on Return, the girl I’m crazy about is going, and I feel like I’ve been hiding in a darkened node, out of touch with the whole thing and the people I care about most.

“Yeah,” says Nibs. “Take those blasted nanorobots out.” He holds his hands up like he’s shooting a laser. “Take back our home planet. That would be so cool.”

“I’ve heard they’ve actually got a new weapon of some kind,” I say. “Some way to defeat them, if they’re still there.” Now I’ve got their attention. “That this’ll be the Return. The one to take us all home.”

We sit in silence while the regimented Ark moves around us, quiet and dull. Once again this mental picture of my careful, planned life stretches before me, like the careful planned life of everybody up here. Confined, white, and sedated. I think about Mia and that little blue-green marble hanging in the deep black of space, and I’m anything but sedated.

Same with my friends, that’s obvious.

“It’d be awesome,” says Radar, his eyes like day lamps. “Like being one of those ancient explorers.”

“Yeah,” says Nibs. “Like being Neil Armstrong.”

“Except for the whole will-we-make-it part,” I say. Nibs punches me in the arm. I have to focus my mind on the image of Mia’s face as I think about the prospects of dying.

“I think we should try,” says Nibs.

Radar nods.

“Wow.” It’s all I can say. If I’m going to die, I’d like to have friends around me at the end. “Okay, then.”

“We could all use a work-out,” says Radar. He checks his hand-held. “Holo two is open in ten minutes.”

“Work-out?” asks Nibs. “I thought we were seeing ‘Creeping Green’.”

I stand, shaking out my cramped leg. “Work-out’s a piece of cake for you, Nibs, buddy. The really hard part’ll be getting all three of us onto the Return at this late date.”

Which is what keeps my nerves in check. Buffing up is good no matter what. But I don't think there's any more chance of us joining the Return than of a daisy growing in the Mare Imbrium.

* * *

As it turns out, daises may grow in the Mare Imbrium after all.

About a week after Radar, Nibs, and I start our quest to find a way to join the Return, my dad brings home a dinner guest. The one and only Dr. Raynard Starke.

He greets me like we're old friends, so I explain to my folks how we met. Then, throughout the dinner I'm trying to figure out a way to broach the subject of the Return. I remain silent while Starke and my folks discuss some of the newer technologies, the latest Ark politics. It isn't until we've finished eating that I can start asking questions about the Return, and about this thing he's got that'll defeat the nanorobots.

"I'm still working out the kinks," he says, "but I have no doubt we'll be taking the Earth back from the enemy this time."

I'm ready to leap. "So, Mr. Starke..."

My dad clears his throat. "Dr. Starke, Truman. Ray is one of our superstars. He's likely to save us all, thank the gods."

"Sorry. Well, sir, I was wondering." I glance at Dad; Mom's in the kitchen. I try to keep Mia's elf eyes right in the front of my brain, which is otherwise shouting, *Don't go there!* I press past the resistance. "You wouldn't happen to have any more room on the Return ship, would you? Because I've been thinking about what an awesome opportunity it would be, a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and..."

"Tru!" Dad almost drops his coffee.

"Wally, your boy has nerve," Starke says, his grin spreading wide. "Truman, for obvious reasons, most of the time it's families. Although there are exceptions. Like when we need special skills. We do, in fact, have a decent handful of younger solo recruits on this Return, because this one will be different."

"Different how?" I ask. But Starke doesn't have a chance to answer.

"Truman," Dad says, choking a little. "You can't just up and go. It's not a pleasure trip. Or a vid." He laughs, a kind of fake little laugh, like he doesn't know what else to do.

I hear a movement from behind me, from the kitchen, and I know that Mom is listening. Starke said I had nerve; I'm not so sure. I have to shove my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking. A part of me wants my parents to say "no way." That would put an end to it, and I'm not sure I'd be truly sorry for long. In spite of Mia.

So I'm stunned when I hear Mom say, "I don't know, Wally. Think about it. Truman's ahead in school. He'll be graduating in a year anyway. I hope this may be the Return for us all, especially with the nodes, you know...Maybe we need to let him go." She clears her throat. "Ray already knows Truman's gifted with plants."

Starke's eyes do not leave my face. I have to assume he doesn't know everything about my so-called gift, but his look is probing. "You know," he says, "we're going to need people like you. I could use a really talented gardener."

Dad looks like someone hit him with a holobat. My mind is still spinning on what Mom said, and a bit of what she didn't say. What was it with 'the nodes, you know'?

I point. "So my leg and all, that wouldn't be a problem?"

Starke grins. "We need your brain, not your leg. Besides, we've got extensive training for all recruits. As a matter of fact, we've got a few seats open due to some late drop-outs. So you could join us." He stands up. "I have to be going. You all have a family chat and we'll see what we can do. Sound good?"

After Starke leaves our home node, you could have cut the air with a blade. I decide that my parents need to talk without me around so I limp to my room.

My hands shake a little, but now I'm determined. Mia. And that other thing, that feeling like, what if? And, what if not? I have a big choice here that may change everything forever.

I make a mental note: ask Mom what she meant about the nodes. What it was she was coding to Dad.

Then I move on, because I really believe I have to go on this Return, and for more than just Mia.

I heave over to the nearest netbook and type a message to Radar and Nibs.

Seats open on the ship. Don't know how many but I'm game for one of those seats. Hoping my parents will say okay. Maybe...you could try for seats, too?

* * *

We don't discuss the possibility of going for a full week. Dad isn't exactly jumping for joy, and clearly my parents have to stay on the Ark and meet their responsibilities. But Starke must have been persuasive about me because out of the blue I get a call to Eel for an interview. They pull me right out of chem lab, and I feel Radar and Nibs watching me pack up my gear.

Gil's at the entrance, and he doesn't even hesitate when I come into view.

"Turn right, buddy," he says, soft. "Room twelve. They're waiting."

I nod, not telling him I already know room twelve.

The dying *differnbachia* is gone, and the rest of the place is spiffed up with vid photos and new furniture, as if now that the Return is close they want to impress whoever drops by. The recruiter guy still looks like he could use a good night's sleep, and if he recognizes me he doesn't show it.

Dr. Starke sits in a big chair next to the desk.

"Hey, Dr. Starke."

He shakes my hand and motions to me to sit, and I do, stretching my bum leg.

The tired recruiter guy shuffles out of the room, the door sliding shut behind him. Then Starke leans toward me. "Tell me about this thing you have for plants."

"Um..." I'm not sure what to say. This is not what I expected to talk about. If I tell him I can read plant thoughts he'll think I'm crazy and that'll be the end of it.

"Your mother has told me a few things. I have a feeling you have a rather exceptional gift."

I squirm a little. "I just like plants, I guess."

"And they like you. Plants." It wasn't a question, and I wonder how much Mom has told him and why she didn't let me know.

I give a half-laugh. "I don't think plants like or dislike," I say. A really big lie, considering.

That's when Starke says, sharp, "Oh, but they do. Especially..." He stops himself. He stands and paws through a stack of netbooks on the desk, retrieving one near the middle, plus a wad of real paper. "Your parents have agreed to let you join the Return."

I'm stunned. Mia. Right now, I have to keep focused on Mia.

“There are some things you have to sign, and we’ll give you a few hours to say goodbye to your folks before you join the training camp. You won’t need to bring anything from home. We’ll supply you.”

“Oh.” Goodbye. I hadn’t thought about goodbye. I try to clear my brain, and remember Radar and Nibs, because all I can think right now is how much I want - need - my friends around me. I swallow hard. “You said you had a few seats. I’ve got these two friends who’d really like to make the trip, and their folks are on board with it...”

“They have the gift, too?” Starke watches my face, his eyebrows raised.

“No. I mean, they’re both really smart. Radar is at the top of our class. He’s a genius. A rocket scientist. Plus, he’s a martial arts expert, a black belt. And Nibs can make anything. I mean anything. I watched him build a working netbook out of spare parts in an afternoon.” I sit up straight. “They really want to be on the Return. Sir.”

Starke grins. “Hey. I understand about having friends around. Let me see what we can do. What’re their numbers?”

Like everything else on Ark, we’ve all got assigned numbers. I give them to Starke. Then he points out where I have to sign, and my brain and my hand are numb by the time we’ve finished with the pages that are loaded on the netbook and the real paper ones, too.

Starke stands. I stand, a little wobbly. He sticks out his hand. “Welcome to the last EarthReturn, Truman Forrester.”

* * *

Dad is in his engineering lab when I go to find him.

It's the first time I've been in here with priority clearance to the inner sanctum - usually Dad meets me in a bland outer office. So when the doors open I'm surprised. Okay, I'm shocked. Unlike the rest of the Ark this place is shining. As in squeaky. The floors are actually white-white. The walls are mostly glass that somebody must spend hours cleaning daily. I pass lab room after lab room filled with equipment I didn't know existed. I'm assuming it's all been stockpiled since back in the day, and some of it may be newly assembled from older parts, but any way you look at it, the EarthReturn people get the best.

Heck, it even looks like there's stuff stored here that the people could use: rations, med kits, clothing, all in labeled lockers. It kind of makes me sick, actually. Some lucky stiffs get lots of goodies and some don't and now, all of a sudden, I'm on the lucky side of the fence.

In fact, as I reflect on it, sometimes Dad would bring home stuff that no one else seemed to have. I just thought it was part of his job - test this new netbook, try out that new protective clothing - so I never really thought twice about it. Now I see that I've been one of a privileged few by way of connections.

There are even a couple of rooms - as we're passing them I can see inside, but I'm not allowed to stop and gawk - that appear to be storage for art. I mean, art? In Eel? What the heck are they doing with half-crated paintings and marble statues? Where is this stuff going? Why isn't it all in public places, so at least we can all enjoy them? When I ask, I'm told that the rooms hold treasures rescued during the Expulsion, and are an important part of Earth history. Well, great, except we're what's left of Earth history, so let's enjoy. Then I'm told that the rooms are sealed against the environment, against contaminants.

Sealed. Tell that to Dragonfly.

There's something wrong with this whole picture but I'm only seeing it in fragments so I can't yet really make it all out.

When I reach Dad he's working in a large sterile lab with a couple dozen others so our goodbye is pretty constrained. I have to suit up with gloves and goggles. I think he's in shock.

"You designed the ship," I say. "So it's got to be the best."

"Oh, the ship is the best," he says, fast. "I'm only worried about, you know, once you get there."

There are some new gray hairs at his temples, unless I just haven't noticed them before. "We'll be okay, Dad. This is the one. Starke himself is calling it the last."

He nods, his lips working but pinched together. We shake hands, gloves on, and he pumps mine hard before letting go. "This is the right thing," he says. "Your mother was right. It's the right thing to do." He repeats that at least three more times before I leave.

I find Mom at the greenhouse. She looks like she's been crying and she hugs me so hard I have to pry myself loose.

"When did you get so much taller than me?" she says, her voice all cracked, as she brushes my hair off my face.

I want to ask her what she told Starke about my gift with plants, but there are too many people around, and I figure that by this time it's a moot point. "Look," I say. "We'll be back, and when we are, it'll be huge, because then we'll all go back to Earth together."

“Okay,” she says, and sniffs, and give me a little smile.

“Um,” I say, “what did you mean when you said that to Dad about the nodes? Last week? You said something about the nodes.”

She bites her lip and shakes her head at the same time. “Just, you know, this place is getting old. That’s all. Time for a fresh start.” And she smiles big, trying hard. “I’m glad you’re getting out of here. Off this old moon. Toss a baseball around for me, okay?” She hugs me so hard again I can hardly breathe, and then I head out before she starts crying.

I make a pass through the greenhouse.

I shake hands with Frank, and then I stop to see Mac one last time. As I get to the center of the orchard, I can feel it. Something is wrong.

Mac is still there, still standing. But not.

“Mac?” I whisper out loud. I scootch under the branches and put my hand on the trunk, and then yank it away. It’s almost a physical burn, a cold burn, like dry ice. Mac is gone, and in its place is...nothing. Cold dark empty nothing. Like space. Like the moon outside this greenhouse. Cold and life-sucking.

What the heck?

The last time I was here, Mac was alive. Now, it’s...

I find Frank, who is pruning some saplings just down the row.

“Hey, before I go. Has anyone been around Mac lately?” I ask.

“Mac?” Frank looks puzzled. Then his face clears. “Oh, you mean that old apple tree. Sure. Dr. Starke took a core, diagnosed some problem, came back with what he called an antifungal. Told me the tree would be as good as new.”

I look back at the tree. It *looks* the same, just doesn’t *feel* the same. “So, you think it’s okay?”

Frank laughs. “Better than ever. Whatever Starke did was great. Look at all that fruit! I don’t think it’s put out that much in ages. You take care of yourself, now. We’ll all be together down on Earth soon. That Starke is a genius. All the gods go with you, Tru.” He ruffles my hair like he did when I was little, and walks away whistling.

There’s an apple on the ground and I pick it up and sniff it, and then I take a bite. There’s nothing sweet about it. It tastes like poison and I spit it out and throw it, hard, so hard it smacks

and splits open against Mac's trunk. Something has changed about this old tree, and my heart wants to break.

I have some things to pick up from my room. One of them is a small tray of seedlings each about an inch high, grown from the seeds I salvaged, after giving Milton the remains, the seeds that were left in the core of Mac's last good apple.