

# BEGIN AGAIN

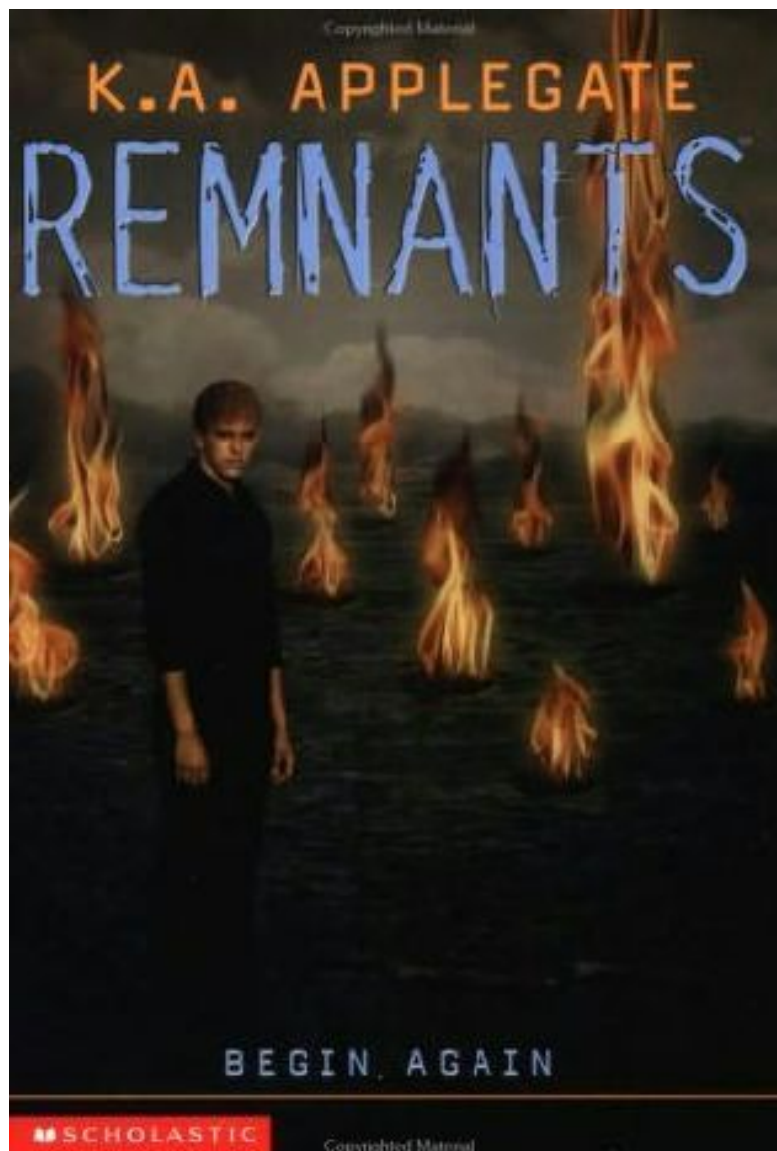
REMNANTS #14

K.A. Applegate

MADE BY RAFIANS

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Epilogue](#)



## CHAPTER 1

### "THERE'S NO REASONING WITH THEM."

Mo'Steel rubbed the ugly pink scar on his throat and winced. It was always itchy and still really tender. Mo'Steel knew he'd probably be sporting the hideous memento of his run-in with Hawk, the last Marauder leader, for the rest of his life.

*Yeah, Mo'Steel thought now, glancing around at his tattered, scarred, and exhausted band. And Hawk will be dead for a long time. How's that for a memento?* "Hey, nice work!" Violet called. Mo'Steel raised a hand in acknowledgment. So much had changed. Not long ago, Violet had been a Jane, a fairly prim and sophisticated girl with sleek blond hair and soulful blue eyes. Now her hair was dark with dirt and matted into thick ropes. And the expression in her eyes ... *well, Mo'Steel thought, Violet had toughened up. She was a survivor.*

They all were — the Remnants and the Marauders. It's why in a crisis they'd done the smart thing and banded together against the Savagers' surprise attack.

It had been a successful battle. Mo'Steel's people had sustained nothing more than a few minor injuries. More, they'd routed the enemy, sending the small pack of Savagers running, destroying the two surviving Riders first. Mo'Steel felt a bit bad about that. The Riders — like the Remnants — hadn't asked to be stranded here on what was left of planet Earth. But, all was fair in war. Right? *Right*, he told himself.

Mo'Steel shivered in the unrelenting cold of the Dark Zone. Violet had changed. He had changed. There were times when Mo'Steel hardly recognized himself. Hanging with the Marauders had changed him more than anything else that had happened since waking up on the *Mayflower* aboard Mother.

*My life is a science-fiction fan's dream*, Mo'Steel thought now, surveying the grim landscape dotted with flaring torches and troubled faces. And it had all started in the year 2011. A huge honkin' asteroid was hurtling toward Earth. Worldwide death and destruction were imminent. But not for approximately eighty lucky U.S. citizens. No, for those special few something else was reserved. The chance to be shot into space aboard a rickety old tin can of a rocket, sunk deep into a state of hibernation. The chance to rattle around space for five hundred years until a super-large ship created by a super-advanced race of aliens decided the rickety old tin can looked like a cool toy and scooped it up.

And from there it had only gotten weirder. The ship, called Mother, was somehow a sentient piece of technology. A computer with a consciousness. Mother had engaged the "fortunate" few who hadn't died during the five-century ride in a series of games and adventures Mo'Steel bet even Jobs, with his unique combination of technical skill and poetic sensibility, could never have imagined.

Shipwrights. Riders. Blue Meanies. Squids. Tamara and her freakish, eyeless kid, the half-alien thing that controlled her like a ventriloquist controls his wooden buddy. The Troika, three so-called advanced versions of humans. Some of their own band of human Remnants who developed mutations that no Hollywood horror movie maven could have imagined. And finally, there was Billy.

Billy was a whole other story. A genius? A madman? Or something in-between? Mo'Steel couldn't even begin to guess.

Wherever Billy was, Mo'Steel hoped he was well. But there wasn't a lot of time to wonder or worry about the missing kid. Mo'Steel had the here and now to manage. Meaning, the Marauders.

A wild shriek assaulted Mo'Steel's ears. He spotted a big Marauder woman thrusting her fists in the air and grimaced. It was Nesia — no big surprise there. Nesia was the epitome of trouble, a party girl without a shred of conscience or an ounce of compassion.

And she was only one of the Marauders Mo'Steel didn't trust was on his side.

Mo'Steel might be the nominal leader of the nomadic band, but he still had a long way to go if he was going to earn — and keep — their complete respect.

*Here comes another of my less-than-loyal fans*, Mo'Steel thought, as a big, ratty-looking guy limped through the gloom in his direction. Newton. Mo'Steel's self-appointed nemesis. The guy who'd ambushed him after he'd gotten rid of the Beast leader, an act that had officially earned Mo'Steel the role of leader. With a little help from Jobs's younger brother, Edward, and a Marauder girl named Grost, Mo'Steel had gotten the best of Newton.

And, though he was well within all sorts of rights to destroy Newton right there and then, he'd let the guy live. Mo'Steel believed in being the bigger man.

"You fought well," Mo'Steel called out. Newton grunted and limped on.

Newton was still a wild card. Mo'Steel knew he couldn't trust the guy as far as he could throw him. Which, right now, in his state of advanced exhaustion, would be about an inch.

First, the up-close-and-personal fight with the Beasts. Then Newton's surprise attack. And then the short but fierce battle with the Savagers. It was enough to make a guy regret having gotten up in the morning.

*Morning?* Mo'Steel laughed. He'd never see a real morning again. Never see a sun rising and hear birds chirping. Not in this place.

Mo'Steel strode on toward Badger, a Marauder about his own age, maybe a few years older. "What's up with those Savagers, anyway?" Mo'Steel asked, shoving his matted hair off his forehead.

Badger explained. "They were once with us. Sometime before I was born, there was a big fight. I don't know about what. Maybe Aga knows. Anyway, some went off and called themselves Savagers."

"Ah, a splinter group."

"There's no reasoning with them," Badger said with a smile. "They're not civilized, like us."

Mo'Steel laughed. Badger was one of the few Marauders he could relate to on a somewhat personal level. Him and Sanchez.

Jobs shook his dirty blond hair out of his eyes and slipped his spade back into the belt that kept his tunic closed around him. He'd fought well against the Savagers, spurred on by a renewed sense of loyalty to Mo'Steel.

Maybe it was the seriously weird environment, but since they'd started out on this journey with the Marauders, Jobs had felt his mind slip inexorably into paranoia. Suddenly, his best friend had become his feared adversary. That is, until Newton ambushed Mo'Steel. At that moment, the paranoia lifted and Jobs was his old self.

Jobs strode over to Mo'Steel. His friend was standing with the Marauder called Sanchez, who was leaning heavily on a staff. Sanchez was sort of like a storyteller or a holy man or a shaman. The Marauders seemed to listen to and respect him. He alone of the group had his head shaved. Around his neck, on a piece of leather, hung a chunk of metal. Jobs figured it was a talisman of some sort, though he had no idea in what, exactly, the Marauders believed.

Mo'Steel nodded at Jobs. "Duck? Sanchez has something to tell us," he said.

"I heard another call," Sanchez told them. "From the Source. We are being summoned now."

"Why?" Mo'Steel asked. "I mean, why do we have to go to this — Source?"

"That I don't know," Sanchez admitted. "I have tried to understand...."

Mo'Steel glanced at Jobs. Jobs nodded. "It's okay, 'migo." Mo'Steel said to Sanchez. "I believe you. At least, I don't think you're fooling about hearing — whatever I'm down with spiritual stuff."

"What do we do now?" Jobs asked.

"We must tell the Alpha colony to join us," Sanchez explained.

"Wouldn't they have heard the summons already? Don't they have a holy man or whatever?" Mo'Steel asked, frowning. "A guy like you?"

Sanchez looked vaguely troubled. "No," he said slowly. "No one like me. Unless he keeps himself from the Marauders. But — the Alphas believe in what is right before their eyes. The Marauders, we

believe the same. But we also believe in what we cannot see with our eyes or hear with our ears or touch with our hands."

"Science versus religion," Jobs muttered. "It's never really a hard-and-fast split, but I see what you're saying."

"Okay, so how do we get in touch with the Alphas?" Mo'Steel asked. "We're a long way from their colony. I think."

"Cocker will go," Sanchez said.

Mo'Steel nodded. "Fine. Though I hate to lose him."

"If anyone can make this journey alone and survive, it is Cocker," Sanchez assured him. "He will join us at the Source. With or without the Alphas."

"So, you think there's a possibility the Alphas won't come?" Jobs said, his mind turning to the girl named Echo. The girl with the brown eyes and the gentle manner

"I think," Sanchez replied, "that they will not come."

Jobs nodded brusquely, pushing away his sentimental thoughts.

"What about the Savagers?" he asked, hoping his voice sounded nonchalant. "Shouldn't we tell them?"

Sanchez drew his cloak closer around him and looked off in the direction in which the wild band had fled.

"It is my duty to share the visions with all who inhabit this place. And yet, I said nothing before Sczuka commanded his people to run."

Mo'Steel squinted at the guy. "You're saying you don't think we should send someone after them? Give them the chance to say yes or no to the invitation?"

Sanchez looked squarely at Mo'Steel. "J'ou are the leader of the Marauders," he said. "Command it and another will set off after them."

Jobs waited while his friend considered.

"Never mind," Mo'Steel said, finally. "We'll take our chances without them."

## CHAPTER 2

### "WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN."

The colony was in an uproar. They had an unexpected visitor. A sole Marauder, calling himself Cocker, had appeared at the bunker's main entrance, requesting to meet with the colony's elders. He said he had a message to deliver.

Lyric sat on the edge of her cot, alone in the women's dormitory. Her body was alive with tension. The Marauders were wild. Unpredictable. This Marauder's presence made Lyric feel afraid. But it wasn't the only source of her fear.

Since Echo's baby had been "born" at the lab, Lyric had felt — uneasy. Like something was going on behind her back. Behind Echo's back, too. Something — wrong.

She'd told no one of her worries, not even Echo. She was still recovering from the shock of her child's unexpected — deformity. The baby was weak. And had a film over its eyes. Either it was blind. Or something more.

*Poor Echo ... poor me*, Lyric thought. The friends hadn't been allowed to see each other alone. Whenever Lyric attended Echo in the small private room she'd been allowed for her recovery, she was watched by an elder, most often Trinny. It gave Lyric a bad feeling, like she was under suspicion of doing something wrong.

Or like Echo was a prisoner. Lyric had learned about penal systems, about prisons and torture, about crime and punishment from some of the information the founders of the Alpha colony had collected before the Rock crashed into planet Earth.

What had Echo done wrong?

Lyric shivered. Now, this wild man was here. And Lyric was determined to hear what he had to say. She had to learn as much as she could about what was going on in the colony, behind closed doors. For her friend's sake, as well as for her own.

Lyric crept out of the women's dormitory and glanced up and down the narrow, low-ceilinged hall. She was alone. Good. Lyric's secret weighed more heavily upon her now than ever before. Truth be told, there had been times when she'd forgotten about her webbed toes. Almost. Times when she'd been happy or simply content, times when the consciousness of being — different — wasn't so *real*.

But now...

Lyric hurried to hide herself in the tiny crawl space that opened off the colony's meeting room. She was in luck — no one was in the room yet. Carefully removing the fine-mesh metal covering, Lyric slipped inside and secured the panel.

She'd discovered the abandoned crawl space a while back when she and Echo and Mattock were playing hide-and-seek. They'd left their work posts without permission and when their absence was noted, some of the adults set out to find them. Lyric winced, remembering the scolding she and her friends had endured, all for a little bit of freedom.

Lyric tensed as the elders of the colony began to file into the room. One by one, they took their places in a semicircle facing the door. Lyric tried to make herself as small and silent as possible. With distaste she noted how dusty her hiding place was. In spite of being underground and tightly sealed, the bunker was impossible to keep clean.

Suddenly, the man called Cocker appeared just inside the door of the meeting room. Lyric couldn't see his eyes clearly from her hiding place but she could see that his general bearing was one of enormous self-control. His hair was gray but Lyric wasn't sure if the gray was real or a

thick covering of ash. One side of his face was covered with small gouges; on the other side, a straggly beard grew in patches. He appeared robust, unlike any of the Alpha colony men. His back was straight, shoulders broad; his step was firm as now he strode farther into the meeting room, accompanied by two Alpha guards.

"I bring an urgent message from my people," he said, without preamble. "Sanchez had a vision. We all must go to the Source. Together."

Cocker's words stunned Lyric. Carefully, she crawled an inch or two forward to better hear and see the action.

"What?" an elder named Shipper cried. Since Woody's death, Shipper had been acting as the colony's unofficial leader. "This is ridiculous. He wants the entire colony to just pick up and —"

"All Alphas or a few," Cocker interrupted. "It don't matter how many."

"What else does this — Sanchez — say?" Borlaug asked, his disdain obvious. Lyric was proud of his bravery.

"Sanchez knows no more than I tell j'ou now," the man said simply. "He cannot control the visions."

"It would be suicide to go! Supreme folly!" Kosh burst out. "The Marauders know we have few weapons and are untrained in combat."

Cocker nodded at the speaker. "Marauders promise there will be no fighting."

Westie's harsh bark of laughter made Lyric flinch.

"J'ou insult us by thinking we will trust Marauders after all we have suffered at j'our hands!" she spat. "Look around. Do j'ou see what j'our leader did to us when he stole more than his fair share of the food we so painstakingly harvested?"

"Hawk is not our leader no longer," Cocker said.

"It doesn't matter!" Shipper stated loudly. "The effect of his actions linger. People have died. We all are hungry. And we are angry."

Lyric watched the expression on Cocker's face harden. She had no doubt that if attacked he would fight back viciously. But that self-control was still in place.

"Why do j'ou want us at the Source?" Shipper continued. "Tell us that!"

Cocker looked hard at the white-haired Alpha. "I don't know nothing more than what I say. That we have been summoned. All of us. Alpha and Marauder alike."

Lyric looked at the faces of the elders. Even through the screen covering her hiding place she could see that not one seemed to be considering Cocker's request. In the least. Didn't they trust that boy from the ship, Mo'Steel? He was the Marauder leader now, right?

"No." Shipper's voice brooked no argument. "This time, the Alphas refuse to meet j'our outrageous demands. J'ou tell j'our leader we will not come."

Lyric felt a tickle at her nose and pressed a finger to her top lip. *It's almost over*, she told herself, just *hold on*.

The silence following Shipper's statement was broken, finally.

"I must accept j'our answer, no matter," Cocker said. Then he turned and strode from the meeting room.

"Follow him!" Shipper ordered the two bewildered guards, still standing at the center of the room. "Make sure he leaves peacefully."

Kosh's face was a mask of fury. "We should capture him! Let the Marauders know we are not helpless."

Lyric wiggled in her cramped hiding space and willed herself not to sneeze. Were the elders going to go on forever? Cocker had gone ...

"No!" said Lyric's mother, Nile, a woman known in the colony for her quiet wisdom. *But she doesn't sound so quiet now*, Lyric thought. Her mother's face was flushed and her voice high with strain. "The fact is, we *are* helpless. Still, we are better than the Marauders. We are above brute behavior and violence."

Dead silence followed Nile's impassioned speech. Lyric felt a twinge of fear for her mother. Finally, there was murmuring and several elders shifted uncomfortably.

"There is another matter we must discuss without further delay," Shipper said darkly. "Echo's defective child seems a sign of what I fear will be foul times. Already it has started with the visit of that — that Marauder."

A creepy silence followed Shipper's words, as if they had conjured an ugly image no one wanted to contemplate. Finally, with a loud clearing of his throat, Borlaug spoke.

"Perhaps it is time again to consider genetic testing. The colony is like a body, and each member is a part of that body. If there is an infection in even one small part of the body, the foot, for example, the entire body is at risk. The infection must be cleared out. Or the foot must be removed."

Lyric clapped a hand to her mouth. Borlaug. A wave of fury at the bulbous-headed, beak-nosed man she'd always thought so wise flooded her

As if reading her daughter's thoughts, Nile spoke forcefully. "Don't j'ou remember what happened?" she said, looking from face to face. "Those who survived the last — testing — likened it to the witch-hunts of the seventeenth-century United States. Reason quickly gave way to madness. Science succumbed to superstition."

Lyric felt sick with fear. She didn't know about the witch hunts. Or much about the United States. But given her mother's tone, she knew the hunts had to have been something horrid.

Hunt. In the old days, before the Rock, people used to hunt animals, like lions and deer and turkeys. Hunting meant killing. Lyric wasn't sure but she didn't think witches were animals. But if they were human...

Lyric's stomach roiled. Intuition leaped into action and told her that the elders were talking about destroying humans. Defective humans. Like Echo's baby. Like her.

Lyric scrunched her feet in her moccasinlike shoes. Only her mother, Nile, and Echo knew the dangerous truth about her. Even Borlaug, brilliant technician and Lyric's guide, was ignorant of that significant piece of personal data.

A terribly skinny woman named Deena spoke for the first time. Her voice was raspy. "No. We can't let that happen again!"

Westie shook her gray head. "We have not forgotten. But this is a matter of survival. The good of the colony outweighs the good of its individuals. If j'ou recall, I was against bringing another mouth to feed into the colony in the first place. What with the yield being so poor —"

"Yes, Westie," Shipper interrupted, "we all recall quite clearly." "Listen to —"

Lyric tuned out the angry, desperate voices. The dust in the cramped hiding space was getting the better of her. With two fingers she squeezed her nose shut and tried to breathe through her mouth. But particles of dust swarmed down her throat with every breath until — "*Chooo!*"

Oh, no! Had they heard her muffled sneeze? Lyric's heart began to race. Like a child thinking that by the force of her will she would become invisible, Lyric curled into herself, squeezed her eyes shut, and clasped her hands to her chest. Maybe now ...

"J'ou!"

The wire screen wedged across the crawl space was torn off. Rough hands dragged Lyric out and yanked her to her feet. Her eyes popped open to see Borlaug's furious face only inches from her own. Without another word he pulled her into the center of the meeting room. Lyric stumbled along, almost numb with fear. With great effort she avoided looking at her mother.

"J'ou were spying, eh?" Shipper roared. "J'ou were listening to matters that should not concern a young girl. But now that j'ou are here — what do j'ou say should be done with Echo?"

Lyric swallowed hard. Never had she felt so alone. If she betrayed her friend, Echo might retaliate by telling the elders about Lyric's webbed toes. She might, but knowing Echo, she probably wouldn't. *And if I don't pretend to agree with the elders.* Lyric thought, feeling the weight of their stares, *if I say genetic testing is wrong, I just know I'll be the first to be tested!*

*And the first to be thrown out of the colony.*

And then: What would happen to her mother?

Lyric pressed her hands against her stomach in a futile attempt to calm the riot inside. "Yes," she said in a voice so low she herself could hardly hear it.

"What did j'ou say?" Westie demanded. "Speak up, girl!"

Lyric cleared her throat and licked dry lips. "I said yes. Yes, Echo should undergo genetic testing."

## CHAPTER 3

### THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.

Orange daylilies swayed in a breeze on which rode a hint of salt air. Lush green grass tickled his feet as he walked. An elegant little grasshopper leaped from the stem of a daffodil. Billy smiled.

He was on his way.

And there was Tate. She saw him and started but he smiled at her and she smiled back. With one pale hand he beckoned her closer. She came, her feet hidden in the long swaying grasses. He handed her the card.

Billy watched Tate lower her eyes to the card and the warm golden aura around him intensified pleasantly.

Three elements, he read along with her. The Source, the Five embodied in me, and —

And then Billy opened his eyes and Tate and the grasshopper and the flowers were gone.

Billy stared into the semidarkness. What was dream and what was waking? He straddled the two worlds or maybe several.

Billy rose and began to walk. He felt no hunger or thirst. Maybe he was beyond those merely human needs now. It didn't much matter.

What mattered was the goal.

One foot in front of the other. Eyes fixed straight ahead.

Billy walked.

Then — whoosh!

A geyser of flaming gas erupted from the ash at his feet.

Billy walked right through it, unharmed, unscathed.

Whole.

Once again, Billy had become something other than what he had been.

Something greater.

Still, enough normal human nature remained for Billy's brain to access certain memories from — before. Or maybe it was the Missing Five inside him who were doing the remembering.

I have a message that has to be delivered, Billy thought. They're all waiting for me. Tote. Jobs. The future.

He walked on, feet shuffling through the ash, leaving no prints, no trail.

He doubted nothing and asked no questions. He was beyond fear.

This can't be happening, Echo thought, standing mutely in the center of the Alpha colony's medical and research laboratory.

But it was.

"Sit," Park commanded. He was the head medical technician and since Rainier's death, his duties had fairly doubled.

Echo remained in place, unwilling if not unable to take a step. Irritably, Park pointed at a reclining medical chair circa 2009 or so. His scowl finally penetrated Echo's stupor and she walked slowly to the rusted metal and ripped leather chair.

As soon as she'd carefully lowered herself into the seat, a guy not much older than Echo secured a strap around her waist. Where do they think I could run to? Echo cried silently, wincing as the lab assistant unnecessarily tightened the straps around her wrists.

"Sorry," Hidge murmured.

Echo scanned the lab again, hoping to see something — anything that might help her. But there were only blue metal tables and centuries-old machines and a few cabinets spilling over with bandages worn thin from use. Park and Hidge were occupied. And Westie, who'd brought her here ...

Even Westie would not meet her pleading eyes. Oh, Westie, she asked silently, what is happening? Why are j'ou letting them do this to me?

Echo fought back tears of self-pity. Was there no one at all to stand up for her?

Briefly, she wondered if Lyric knew what was happening to her. Lyric, with her webbed toes, would be in deep trouble if the Alpha elders decided to test everyone in the colony. Right there. Echo vowed not only to keep Lyric's secret no matter what, but to help her friend escape if her life was in danger.

Again: Escape to where?

To the deadly surface of the planet? To — the Marauders?

A sneeze. Park, the head medical technician, wiped his nose on his sleeve. He was bent over a microscope. Echo noted the tendons stretching the skin of his scrawny neck.

A sudden and incongruous flicker of hope rose within Echo's chest. Life with the Marauders might not be so bad now that Jobs and the others from the massive spaceship were with them.

But almost as quickly as the flicker of hope had come to life, it went out. The rational part of Echo's mind reminded her of the Marauders' habitual brutality. A brutality she had witnessed on more than one occasion. Could Jobs and Mo'Steel stand up to men of such rough spirit?

"Now," Park said blandly, interrupting Echo's thoughts, "we are almost prepared to extract from the specimen what samples we need to run our tests."

The specimen.

As she watched Park and Hidge move around the laboratory like well-programmed robots. Echo wondered. Was the Marauders' barely checked violence really any worse than what her own people were doing to her right then?

For the moment. Echo had no answer.

The Marauders had been journeying away from the Dark Zone. The Source grew ever closer. But while Sanchez was eager to reach their destination, he was also frustrated.

There had been no further message — no vision — since the one he'd experienced just after the victorious battle with the Savagers.

Sanchez fingered the relic around his neck. He knew visions could not be forced. He knew that the Source would give him what She would in her own time. And yet, Sanchez was impatient to know what fate awaited them all.

Besides, he thought, casting a dark eye on Nesia, scowling and dragging little Walbert behind her, the others were constantly hounding him for information he did not have. Only a few — Violet among them — let him be. Only a few seemed to understand the enormous responsibility Sanchez bore.

A responsibility he had not asked for but to which he had been born.

Sanchez plodded on. Thirst made him reach for his water. But his hand stopped midway there.

Of course. There was one way in which he might bring about a vision. If he undertook a fast, then went off alone for a while, he might be able to coax a message . . .

Or die in the process. Of dehydration. Or, while in a trance, in the terrible jaws of a Slizzer. Or . . .

A gruff voice interrupted his thoughts. "J'ou got anything yet?" Balder asked, bumping shoulders with Sanchez and almost knocking him to the ground.

Sanchez just glared at the bigger man. Balder grimaced and hurried ahead.

Sanchez was decided. He would go to Mo'Steel and tell his plan. Perhaps nothing would come of it. But maybe, just maybe, something would.

It came with the force of a gale wind.

First, strange lumps pushing violently up through the ash, one after the other, as far as his eye could see.

Sanchez felt one rise under his feet and leaped to flatter ground, only to find himself teetering atop another, larger lump, growing, pulsing.

And then Sanchez saw that the lumps were no longer gray ash — but darker and softer seeming — and flattening out to make one giant new ground of —

The smell was new. It was overpowering and Sanchez had no word for it. It made him gag at first, until it made him inhale deeply, greedily. A word came to his head: soil, then another: fertile — words both familiar and unfamiliar.

But Sanchez had no time to ponder this wonder as he screamed and rolled to one side to escape the spiky, spiny green — things — shooting up through the dark stuff — all around him — ahh! — between his very fingers!

Trembling with horror, Sanchez wiped his hands hard against his tunic — but he was safe, the skinny blades remained in the ground and none had pierced his flesh....

Carefully, slowly, Sanchez reached down and poked at one of the little blades — and it bent under his light touch. Another word in his head — grass — another term both familiar and unfamiliar.

Suddenly — Sanchez jerked his head back to find the source of the warming on his shoulders — and was horrified to see — He clapped his hands over his burnt eyes, blinded, and fell again to the grass-covered ground, weeping against the white circles dancing in his eyes. But then they were gone and Sanchez again felt a very pleasant warmth on his back, neck. Finally, he lifted his head and stood and looked around — not straight up — and saw — and saw —

## CHAPTER 4

### THERE IS NO KINDNESS HERE.

Everyone was there. Every member of the Alpha colony except Echo and her blind baby and the smallest children were gathered in the meeting room.

Lyric sat between Mattock and Marina. She made it a point to sit very, very still. It was the strangest meeting she had ever attended.

It seemed to have a life of its own. Its progress was inevitable. It seemed nothing would halt the flow of disaster, no dissenting voice would drown out the roar of condemnation.

Echo's DNA had been found wanting.

"Genetic purity is essential!" loud voices cried.

Weaker voices argued. "But historically, genetic diversity has been the key to a species' survival!"

"Mutants are a danger to our world and must be eliminated!"

Those last voices were the strongest.

Lyric sat rigid with fear and loathing.

Finally, Shipper stood and looked at each member of the colony. "The decision is unanimous," he said.

No, Lyric cried silently. It's not!

Shipper paused before going on. Before stating the awful sentence. "Echo and the child will be sent away to live what is left of their lives with the Marauders."

"Agreed," Kosh said quickly. "And yet, there is a problem. We don't know where the Marauders are at this point in time. Yes, we know they are on their way to the Source. But their current, exact location is unknown."

A murmur ran through the Alpha colony members.

"The last time the Marauders visited us," Marine said, her tone bitter, "they destroyed Woody and stole our food. Since then we have been weakened. Rainier has died. And now are we to support the lives of two defectives until the Marauders return to steal more of our food? No. I say we eject them from the colony immediately!"

The sad news about Rainier made Lyric wonder. Had malnutrition contributed to Echo's baby being blind? But she didn't voice her thoughts. She didn't think anyone would listen, not now.

Not when they were talking about sending Echo away.

Beside Lyric, Mattock sucked in his breath. Subtly, she poked his leg, urging him to keep still.

Silence hung heavy in the air. Finally, it was broken by Lyric's mother.

"No," Nile declared, but her voice was weary, defeated.

Lyric clasped her hands tightly.

Again, she said nothing. She was sick and paralyzed with fear. Who were these people she'd grown up among?

Mattock's face was pale. Nile's face was carefully blank. Almost everyone else's face, including Westie's, was set in a harsh and unyielding mask.

Still standing. Shipper cleared his throat. "Then it is final. Echo and the child will be locked away."

Echo lay on her narrow bed, eyes open, staring into the middle distance. In a small crib by the wall, her baby slept fitfully.

The room was reserved for the very ill. There was nothing personal about it. Echo's thoughts momentarily turned to the blond-haired boy from the ship. Jobs. The one who'd given her a few crumbly crackers. It was the first and only gift Echo had ever received other than her life on this Earth. She wondered if he'd thought of her since leaving the Alpha colony with the Marauders. She wondered if he had any idea of how much his small kindness had meant to her.

There is no kindness here. Echo reminded herself, sadly. She wanted to run away, right then, from the place that was no longer home. From the place that she'd once found simply boring but certainly never threatening. She could grab her child and go, slip up to the surface, take her chances on —

Echo turned her head to the crib where her baby lay sleeping and knew she could never run away. Echo was petrified of leaving the colony. No matter that it recently had become a scary place, it was the only home she'd ever known.

Besides, how would she find the Marauders? And if she did happen to stumble across them, who was to say they'd welcome two more mouths to feed?

Anyway, the journey would be horrible. And the baby was weak. Echo would have to be strong for them both, but how could she be with absolutely no experience of life on the surface of the planet?

A faint sound made Echo frown in concentration. What was that? Where had it come from? Echo listened hard but heard nothing more. After a moment, her thoughts wandered back to her dilemma.

So, what were her choices? Did she really have any options? Or was she simply doomed to be a victim to the people who were supposed to protect her? Never love her. No, Echo had never known much about love, not before the baby, anyway.

Echo bolted to a sitting position. The noise — it was louder now — from the hall? Footsteps? A shuffling ... Coming closer?

And then — nothing. Silence for at least twenty beats. Slowly, Echo lowered herself again and sighed. She was becoming a nervous wreck. Why would anyone be sneaking around the bunker? There was nothing to hide, nothing to steal....

Echo's eyes closed as a wave of exhaustion slammed her. The baby's faint but now steady breathing lured her further into the abyss of sleep....

She barely realized it when the hand clapped over her mouth.

"Ahhh!"

Sanchez was flung back into consciousness with all the gentleness of a man being flung aside by a Beast. He shot to his feet — and crumpled, dizzy and frightened and thirsty.

He lay still for a moment until his head stopped spinning. Then, he rolled over onto his stomach, then up onto his knees.

Frantically, he clawed at the ashy ground, searching, hoping to find — hoping not to find — the spiny green things he'd seen ... but, no. Sanchez laid his hands flat. That ground, in the vision, it was — brown. Impossible! And moist, and when he'd taken a clump in his hand and

squeezed, it had formed a lump. Sanchez grabbed up a handful of the gray ash. When he opened his hand the ash sifted through his fingers.

Dry.

He squinted up at the sky, afraid he'd be blinded by the sudden appearance of that too-bright ball. He didn't think he'd ever really seen "yellow" before, though he'd heard that the sun, back before the Rock, was called "yellow." In the vision it had hurt his eyes and frightened him — and yet, for some reason he couldn't articulate, more than anything Sanchez wanted to find that bright yellow ball screaming down at him now.

That and — water. Could those blue expanses have been ... Blue? Sanchez didn't really understand that word, either, and yet it came to him to describe the vast areas he'd seen in his vision....

Sanchez grasped the small chunk of metal that hung by an old strip of leather around his neck. It had been given to him by his predecessor, Rexer, the one who had recognized and nurtured Sanchez's spiritual gifts. It was very ancient, a piece of the Source. Now, Sanchez desperately hoped it would give him strength, help him to understand the wild things he had seen in his vision.

Thirsty, hunger clawing at his belly, his mind riddled with fears, and pursued by the image of the bright yellow ball, Sanchez hurried on after his people.

## CHAPTER 5

### "J'OU ARE NO LONGER THEIR PROBLEM."

Echo was too frightened to protest. Her throat felt squeezed shut, unable to let out a cry even if she wanted to. Which she didn't. She didn't want to resist, she didn't want to stop stumbling along, blindfolded, gagged by a dirty cloth, gripped by whoever it was with the strong fingers.

Fear could do that, she'd heard. It could make you just sit there and take it.

But for how long?

A tiny mew from the baby reached Echo's ears. If the baby is hurt... The thought seared through her mind and an amazing protectiveness exploded into a fierce anger. She stumbled and the big toe on her right foot jammed into the floor. The minor accident added fuel to the fire of Echo's anger and with a violent motion she tried to jerk away from her captor.

But it was no use. The grip hardened and the captor stepped up their pace.

Suddenly, her captor stopped cold. Echo bumped into him — or her — and heard the faint creak of what she thought must be a door opening. She knew intuitively that someone was there, waiting for them.

Her captor pushed her ahead of him — her? — and once again Echo heard the faint creak. The door had closed behind her.

A whisper reached her ears now.

"Don't shout. No one will hear j'ou, anyway. But don't shout."

Hands from behind untied the blindfold and released the gag. Echo blinked and worked her jaw. She felt suddenly dizzy and must have swayed because another set of hands were now supporting her ...

And then, she could see.

Westie. Mattock. Lyric.

"Oh. Oh. J'ou ..." Echo's mind raced. "What's going on?" she whispered harshly, reaching for her baby. Lyric handed the tiny, murmuring bundle to Echo without hesitation. Oddly, it was only now that Echo noticed Lyric, too, was clothed in the long, hooded garment Mattock wore.

"Why are j'ou dressed like that?" she asked.

It was Westie who answered. Her face was grimmer than Echo had ever seen it. "We're getting j'ou out of here," she said. "They were going to let j'ou die. J'ou and the baby."

"What?" Echo's mind refused to absorb this information.

"The elders' decision was unanimous," Mattock said with a bright flush of shame. "It's true. Echo. The colony voted to starve j'ou and the baby to death, rather than feed j'ou until the Marauders could take j'ou with them."

*Oh*, Echo thought. *Oh*.

"My life wasn't worth sparing," she said then, a crazy giggle escaping her lips. "Not even until I could be cast out."

Lyric sobbed and clapped a hand to her mouth.

Echo turned to Westie and fought back a sneer of contempt. Anger bubbled up in her brain. "Lyric and Mattock have always been my friends," she said. "But j'ou! Why are j'ou helping me? J'ou've always seemed so —"

Westie grimaced. "Harsh? Yes. No one would ever expect Westie, the stern one, of being a traitor to the cause of genetic purity."

Echo looked deep into Westie's eyes. "Tell me," she said. "All of it."

Westie opened her mouth, closed it again.

"Go ahead," Echo said. "I need to know."

"I was a child at the time." Westie sighed before going on. "J'our mother was — my friend. Neither of us really understood what was happening. But — there was a scare. A man named Tap developed symptoms of a terrible, debilitating disease. I suppose he had been born with it. The disease must have lain dormant for years...." Westie rubbed at her eyes before going on. "The result was that other people were tested for — impurities. Suddenly, everyone was afraid. Even we children were afraid though we didn't really know why. The fear grew. The yield was poor that year and that made people panic. And then ..."

"Then?" Echo urged.

Westie's eyes were dull with an emotion Echo had never seen her display. Grief.

"And then, j'our grandmother — my friend's mother — was — eliminated. She wasn't the only one. But — she had always been so kind to me. Eventually, the yield increased and the panic died down. By then, j'our mother and I had learned the truth about the — hunt. We didn't know what good it would do but we set out to find and destroy j'our grandmother's file. We succeeded."

"And no one ever knew?" Echo challenged, her heart pumping madly.

Westie laughed bitterly. "I don't know. Afterward, everyone was embarrassed by what had happened. No one even talked about it until j'our baby came. They thought silence would erase the sins of the past. But it never does. Echo."

Echo nodded. "And the baby came when the Marauders cheated us out of an already poor yield...."

"I argued against them developing this baby," Westie said fiercely. "I said it wasn't fair to bring another person into the world at a time when the yield was so poor. But that was not the real reason for my not wanting j'ou to have this baby. My Echo. I knew there was a strong chance the baby would be — not perfect. I did not want to see this suffering come to pass."

"And j'ou couldn't tell the truth to anyone," Echo said woodenly. "Not even to me."

Westie nodded.

"Why are j'ou helping me now?" Echo knew her voice was cold but didn't she still have a right to be angry? To be suspicious?

"Because I have to," the older woman answered simply. "Because I have to atone."

"But what if the others find out j'ou helped me to escape?" Echo asked, all the time knowing the grim answer to her own question.

Westie looked at her steadily. For the first time Echo noticed the tiny lines around the woman's eyes and at the corners of her lips. Life was harsh in the colony, in spite of its relative safety.

Finally, Westie spoke. "Then they find out," she said.

Echo fought back tears. Westie had no time for tears, none of them did. Echo turned to her friends. "And j'ou?" she asked, suddenly feeling terribly sick. How could she leave them behind?

Mattock managed a halfhearted smile. "I'm going with j'ou. Lyric, too."

"Aren't j'ou afraid?" Echo asked, sudden violent visions of life in Marauder territory slamming through her brain.

Lyric nodded. Even in the gloom Echo could see that her friend's face was terror-stricken.

"Yes," Lyric said, her voice breaking, her eyes holding Echo's. "But I can't stay here. Not anymore. J'ou know that."

"Here," Westie said, bending to retrieve a bundle at her feet. "Put this on," She held Echo's baby while Echo pulled her own hooded garment over her head. It felt heavy on her shoulders and smelled faintly of sweat. It would be a memory of home. Of what had been home.

"Go as carefully as j'ou can," Westie directed. "There are dangers —" Her voice broke.

"Will they follow us?" Lyric whispered fearfully.

Echo saw a quick play of emotions scatter across the older woman's face. Concern. Determination. And finally, disgust.

"They won't know j'ou're gone for a while," she said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "But it wouldn't matter if they did. No one will go after j'ou. J'ou are no longer the colony's responsibility. J'ou are no longer their problem."

"We need to go," Mattock said, touching Echo's arm, bringing her out of a growing sense of unreality.

Echo nodded and with Mattock's help hoisted a pack onto her back. The baby she secured to her chest with a long scarf Lyric provided.

Westie nodded brusquely and without another word, the three young companions turned away.

When they reached the door that opened to the outside world. Echo looked over her shoulder. She needed to catch one last glimpse of the woman who had been so much to her, in spite of her stern, unforgiving personality.

But Westie had already gone.

## CHAPTER 6

### "WHAT CHOICE DO WE HAVE?"

Echo squinted into the unwavering gloom. They'd been on the move for some time now. Unbelievably, they'd encountered no pillars of flaming gas. No strange and violent beasts.

Still, the threat of danger hung around Echo's shoulders like a mantle. And along with the fear — the smallest bit of excitement. Of freedom. The surface was ugly and dangerous. But it was open.

"Mattock?" Lyric's voice was horribly raspy. "May I have some water now?"

As the strongest of the three. Mattock had volunteered to carry their food and water. He had also appointed himself their boss. *Boys*, Echo thought, *they are so silly*.

"Can't j'ou hold on?" he said to Lyric. "We have to conserve —"

"Oh, let her have a sip," Echo said irritably. "One sip won't hurt anything."

Mattock scowled but he unstrapped a small, very old canteen from his belt and handed it to Lyric. "Careful," he warned unnecessarily. "Don't j'ou let any spill."

"I'll have a sip, too," Echo said, watching Lyric lick her lips greedily. "And don't j'ou bother to grumble. Mattock."

Mattock's grim face collapsed into a smile. "Who am I kidding?" he said. "I've been dying for a drink since we left —"

Echo saw a sudden look of horror on Mattock's face and turned to see what had caused it. In the distance was what looked almost like a solid wall of swirling eddies. Colors — gray, pewter, black — churned, combined, separated.

"What is it?" Lyric screamed as the wall grew closer.

Just then, a streak of light flashed, followed closely by a ferocious *boom!* It was unlike anything the Alphas had ever heard.

"It's a dream storm," Echo cried, instinctively holding her baby more tightly.

Jobs had told her about the psychotropic storm. The dream storm. It had led Jobs and his friend underground, where they'd encountered the Marauders. Where Mo'Steel, caught in the grips of hallucination, had managed somehow to kill the brutal Hawk.

Echo was scared. Would the storm affect her baby? Would the poor helpless child go insane? At least Echo would know, through the madness, that it would all pass. But the baby would know nothing....

"What do we do?" Lyric shouted, hands pressed to her ears.

Mattock whirled around — as if looking for a solution in the bleak landscape — and then turned back to the girls. "I don't know!" he cried.

The storm was fast upon them. The wind — Echo had never experienced a gentle breeze, let alone a violent gale. The sound alone was excruciating. It seemed as if the entire planet were moaning in agony.

Through the roar of the storm Echo could hear choking, gagging. Her own and Mattock's and Lyric's. She brought her face right down against her baby's and listened — and heard nothing. No coughing in her ears. No breath on her cheek.

Before Echo could react, rough hands snatched the baby from Echo's arms. Echo squinted through the thick, scurrying dust. A Marauder! In a second, the infant disappeared into the voluminous folds of the creature's clothing.

"No!" Echo shouted, reaching madly toward the man.

"Come!" he said, stepping away and beckoning Echo and the others to follow.

Lyric grabbed Echo's arm and put her mouth close to her ear. "It's okay!" she cried. "He was the one who came to the Alphas."

"An enemy..." Echo mumbled.

"No, no..."

Echo's brain fought to get the message right. Not an enemy. How could Lyric be sure?

The hulking bundle of rags corralled the three ahead of him toward the cavelike base of a bizarre, towering structure made of concrete and rebar.

"In here," he directed, and Echo followed, stumbling over her garments, blinded by swirling grit, buffeted by wind.

And then — relief. Now, out of the direct intensity of the storm. Echo began to feel — odd. She slumped against one ragged wall of the shelter and watched as suddenly the other walls began to waver and buckle and bend.

Vaguely, Echo was aware of Mattock — it was Mattock, wasn't it? — lurching forward. And a girl screaming. And Mattock falling. But no, being knocked down by the other man —

And then a woman — Echo's mother rose from where Mattock had fallen. *After all this time.* Echo thought, *j'ou've come back to me.* But when the woman took a step toward her, Echo saw that her face was all bone and mold. Through nonexistent lips the woman said, "My child, my child," but Echo hid her face in her hands and screamed, "Go away! J'ou frighten me!" And then Echo felt cold, bony fingers on her own, prying them from her face. And she fell in a heap.

Echo came awake with a start. She raised her head and listened. The quiet was palpable. For a moment it seemed as loud and as present as had the noise of the storm.

Suddenly, an image of a grotesque woman — her own mother — roared into Echo's memory and she jumped to her feet, madly searching the room.

But there was no grotesque woman. Only Mattock. And Lyric. And the Marauder who had saved their lives. The man who was now cradling her baby in the crook of his arm.

"Here." The man stood and brought the baby to Echo. "She is okay. My name is Cocker."

Echo tried to speak but her throat felt raw. Instead, she nodded her thanks and gladly accepted the Infant, who cooed and seemed, miraculously, none the worse for wear.

*Which is more than could be said for the rest of us,* Echo thought, noting Mattock's swollen face.

"J'ou hit me," he said to the Marauder Gingerly, Mattock felt his jaw, where Echo could see a colorful bruise blooming. His voice was low, matter-of-fact.

Cocker nodded. "Had to happen," he said, just as reasonably. "Storm made j'ou crazy. J'ou tried to hurt this one." Cocker pointed at Lyric, who wiped at her red eyes.

"I don't believe it!" Mattock protested. "Lyric —"

Lyric gave him a trembling smile. "It's okay," she whispered. "I know it wasn't really j'ou. It was the storm."

Finally, Echo said, "Is it safe to go outside now?"

Cocker shrugged. "Never safe. But yeah, the storm is over. Where j'ou be going? Those Alphas, they wanted no part in me taking them to the Source. What j'ou doing out here?"

Echo shared a quick but meaningful look with her friends. There was no point in getting into details now. She'd tell Cocker the simple truth.

"The Alphas want no part of us, either," she said, looking steadily at the big man. "We are going to the Marauders."

Cocker eyed her closely for a moment, as if trying to determine something about the three friends. Echo felt her heart race. Would they be rejected again ... ?

"Well, Marauders be at the Source," Cocker said finally. "I will guide j'ou there," Cocker said. "If j'ou want this."

"What choice do we have?" Mattock said, and Echo could plainly hear the bravado in his voice. Mattock was scared, he had to be, but he was fast becoming a man.

Cocker's expression remained bland. "J'ou have the choice to die," he said.

Mattock looked to Echo and Lyric in turn before answering.

"We'll go with j'ou," Mattock said. He seemed then to be struggling with himself. Finally, he added, "Thanks to j'ou."

Cocker shrugged. "It's time to move."

The band shared a brief meal and climbed back out onto the endlessly bland surface of the planet.

Cocker and Mattock walked slightly ahead, one on either side of Echo, Lyric, and the baby, a sort of guard.

"We still could die out here," Lyric said, her voice trembling.

Echo kept her eyes straight ahead, pinned on Cocker's back. "I know," she said.

"Do j'ou trust him? Cocker?"

"Yes. I think I do. Why?"

Lyric briefly touched Echo's arm. "I have a confession to make. Something to tell j'ou."

"Will I be mad?" Echo asked, almost jokingly.

"I would be if I were j'ou. But I'm not j'ou, am I? If I were j'ou I never would have done to a friend what..."

Echo shifted her baby and sighed. "Lyric, please ..."

"I betrayed j'ou to the elders," Lyric blurted. "They caught me listening to their discussion, and they dragged me into the center of their circle. And they asked if I agreed with their decision to make j'ou be tested. And I said yes. Echo, I'm sorry! I was afraid —"

"For me or for j'ourself?" Echo demanded. "No, don't answer that. It's clear."

Lyric sobbed. "It was a test!" she cried. "They were testing me and I — I passed. In their eyes. But in my own eyes, Echo — and j'ours — I failed. I'm sorry,"

Echo tried to calm her mind. If she'd been pinned down like Lyric had, would she really have had the courage to stand up for her friend? Maybe. But maybe not. Who could judge a person when the world as they knew it was crumbling?

"It's okay," Echo said finally "I forgive j'ou. Really."

## CHAPTER 7

### "YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS MINE."

Mo'Steel winced as he came down on his bad leg. *Okay, ouch, he thought, and we'd better get to this place soon. I am in serious need of a rest. Like for maybe about a year.*

As if reading his thoughts, Sanchez hurried to Mo'Steel's side.

"Look," he said, pointing ahead and to the right.

Mo'Steel squinted but saw nothing. Not even a glimmer in the dull gray light.

"Uh," he said, "I don't — whoa. I see something now. That it?"

A tiny bump in the distance. And, hey, even a tiny glimmer!

"The Source," Sanchez confirmed. "We will be there before long."

The man slipped back into the band and Mo'Steel soon heard murmurs of excitement and of... fear.

Mo'Steel actually felt beyond fear these days. Well, almost. Too much weirdness had gone down for him to waste his time being afraid.

Now, curiosity. That he still had.

"Jobs!" he called and in a moment his best buddy was at his side, panting from his short run.

"What do you think it is, really?" Jobs said.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Mo'Steel admitted. "Probably better."

"Definitely a holy place. Like a cathedral, maybe. Or like where Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation."

"Or like Target."

"What?"

"My mom's favorite store. Back when."

Jobs grinned. "Yeah. Right. Just like that. Seriously, though," he said. "I'm a bit — worried — about it all. What are we supposed to do when we get there? What if it's like an Aztec temple or pyramid and some freakish priests are waiting to cut out our hearts?"

Mo'Steel laughed. "Man, it's a good thing I'm here to keep that imagination of yours in check, 'migo. Personally, I'm more concerned with what's right in front of me. Or, behind me, at the moment."

"You mean Newton?"

"For one."

They were joined by Sanchez again, whose gaze was intent upon the goal.

The three walked on in silence. Gradually, as they got closer to the Source, those walking behind caught up and the entire band seemed to move as one entity.

And then, when they were within fairly close range, the Marauders began to hum deep in their throats. The Remnants drew in an involuntary breath. And held it for a few seconds before all trying to speak at once.

"Uh, Jobs?" Mo'Steel said, his voice cracking. "Do you ... ?"

"... see what you see? Yes. Yes, I do. I don't believe it, but I see it."

"Oh, my—" That was Olga, reaching for Mo'Steel's arm.

"I don't —" That was Noyze, clutching his other arm.

Suddenly, D-Caf, Roger Dodger, and Edward were pushing their way past "Billy!" 2Face hissed.

"Tate?" Violet said hopefully.

Jobs sighed nervously. "Yago."

"Just as long as it's not the Troika," Olga added.

When they were approximately thirty yards from the Source, the Marauders dropped to their knees, their humming louder and more rhythmic. Sanchez remained standing, head bowed in a reverent gesture.

The Remnants came to a stop just behind the worshipers.

"Who's going to say it?" Noyze whispered.

"Mo," Jobs said. "It should be Mo'Steel."

Mo'Steel took a deep breath. "Okay, kids, here goes. Howdy, Mother."

The shock had worn off. Sort of. At least, the Marauders had gotten to their feet and were busy setting up camp. And the Remnants were helping — when they weren't staring slack-jawed over their shoulders.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind, least of all in Jobs's. Impossible as it seemed that the old wreck before him was the same ship on which he'd lived so short a time ago, and been in hibernation for five hundred years. Jobs had absolutely no doubt.

Mother — at least her physical manifestation — was a graceless bulk. There had been nothing sleek and streamlined about her.

Jobs moved away from his friends and peered more closely at the ruin. A gaping hole revealed what he guessed once had been the bridge. He thought he recognized the odd design of a Shipwright's chair in a pile of ruined metal.

The enormous engines of the ship were entirely buried beneath massive drifts of ash. The ship's metallic skin was dull and riddled with signs of age. What few windows remained had been sandblasted opaque.

Suddenly, Jobs was overcome with sadness, sadness so deep it threatened to crush his spirit. Poor Mother, he cried silently. To die, all alone, on this already dead planet.

*Come on*, he told himself firmly. Mother was not a person. Not entirely. A consciousness, maybe. But — a person? A self-sustaining identity, a sentient being? Jobs heard a shout, turned, and shook away the philosophical debate brewing in his head.

They had visitors.

They'd been traveling for what seemed a long, long time. Still, much to Echo's relief. Cocker had not taken them near the dreaded Dark Zone, about which Alphas had heard so many horrific tales.

Now, according to their guide, the Source was only a short distance away. Almost within sight...

"J'ou see?" Cocker said, pointing to a tiny mass in the distance.

Echo nodded and felt excitement war with anxiety.

"Do j'ou think the Marauders will allow us to stay with them?" Lyric mused for what seemed the millionth time.

Echo thought of the light-haired boy and said, as she always did, "I think they will welcome us."

She heard a shout from the group ahead, and then saw arms waving.

"I think it's okay," Mattock said tentatively.

Cocker waved in return and coaxed them to step up the pace.

"What, j'ou believe everything j'ou hear?" he teased. "J'ou will see, Marauders are not all bad."

And then, they were within yards of the sight. Echo scanned the gathering group for the one called Jobs and finally spotted him near the back of the group. She smiled and thought she saw him smile shyly back.

In spite of an obviously injured leg, the one called Mo'Steel strode up to them and clapped Cocker on the back. "Good job, 'migo," he said.

Cocker nodded and indicated Echo's baby.

As if from nowhere, a Marauder woman Echo knew as Aga, as well as the younger woman who claimed Mo'Steel as her son, appeared at Echo's side with smiles and words of comfort. Echo felt tears flood her eyes.

A shaved-head Marauder she knew to be called Sanchez appeared as if from nowhere.

"The Alphas send these to the Source?" he asked Cocker. His expression was dubious.

Mattock answered. "No. We came on our own. We are no longer of the Alpha colony."

A knowing look spread across Sanchez's face. With a glance at Mo'Steel, he nodded. "J'ou are welcome."

"Yeah, the more the merrier," the boy leader said with a grin.

Echo wiped her tears and smiled back.

## CHAPTER 8

### "WE'LL KNOW WHEN WE FIND IT."

Sanchez was torn. Mo'Steel had decided that representatives of the group should enter the ruined ship to see what they could find. That's what the leader and his friends called it. A ship.

And they claimed to have traveled to Earth on it. The Alphas who'd just arrived with Cocker, they, too, said the ruin looked a lot like the big ship they'd seen from the colony's observation point.

Sanchez knew that was impossible. The ship — the Source — had been here, in this same spot, since ... well, since forever.

And Sanchez hesitated to enter the sacred precincts. Yes, he'd made pilgrimages to the Source before, but never had he passed beyond its ancient walls.

But now... *If I don't go along*, he thought, *who will assure that She will be shown the proper respect?*

It was decided that Mo'Steel and Sanchez, leaders of the expedition, would be accompanied by Jobs, Violet, 2Face, the Alpha named Mattock, the Marauder boy named Badger, and Newton.

Sanchez was uneasy about including 2Face. There was an energy about her that was — dark. Unhappy. Wrong.

Just before they were to cross the threshold, Mo'Steel beckoned Sanchez aside.

"So, this is like a holy place for you, huh?" the boy leader said. "A shrine? The inner sanctum?"

Sanchez was unfamiliar with the exact meanings of the words, but he sensed that Mo'Steel spoke with an understanding of— reverence.

"Yes," Sanchez said.

Mo'Steel nodded.

"Cool. I'm Catholic, you know. Well, I guess you don't know. Maybe someday I'll tell you about my — Source. If you want to hear about it."

Sanchez wasn't sure how to answer.

Sanchez was the first inside. Mo'Steel held the others back for a full sixty seconds before allowing them to follow, one by one. Jobs hung back and brought up the rear.

Once inside he scanned the dime scene. It was a fantasy in gray. Here and there the metal floor peeked through the accumulated ash and debris. Ash drifted several feet up the vertical surfaces and had collected in depressions to make mini-sandboxes.

"Be careful," Jobs warned. "Things might be pretty unstable. Don't lean against any beams."

"I am really done with ruins," Violet murmured beside him, brushing aside a veritable curtain of what Jobs thought might have been a cobweb. But you can't have a cobweb without a spider. And he had yet to see any spiders.

"What are we looking for?" Mattock asked nobody in particular

"We'll know when we find it," Mo'Steel answered. "Or not," he whispered to Jobs.

Sanchez had wandered farther into the depths of the ship. Jobs realized now they'd lost sight of him.

Until they heard him scream.

Jobs launched himself after Mo'Steel and within seconds they found Sanchez in an alcove created by partially collapsed walls. The others piled into the space behind them.

Jobs stared, mouth open, hands clenched at his sides.

A slight, dark-haired, very pale boy hung suspended just above their heads in a faintly humming golden glow.

"Holy postapocalyptic fantasy." Mo'Steel laughed weakly. "We got ourselves a Billy."

"What is it?" Mattock asked, his voice hoarse with fear

"Who," Jobs said. He could hardly speak past the emotion exploding in his chest. *"who* is it. His name is Billy. We lost track of him in the dream storm. The one that lead us to the Alpha colony."

"He looks — peaceful," Mo'Steel said. "Which is more than I can say about how he looked — before."

*It's true*, Jobs thought. *He does look — serene. Almost — happy. Billy's back with Mother. But how...?*

Jobs shook off the questions. They didn't matter. What mattered was that they had found Billy and he hadn't died a horrible death out there. He was safe.

Jobs shot a glance at Newton. The big man's mouth was tight and he held his arms awkwardly at his sides. The guy was seriously freaked, no doubt, but trying hard to keep his terror under wraps.

*Hopefully*, Jobs thought, *Newton is too terrified to harm Billy.*

Sanchez, on the other hand, seemed unafraid but confused. Not suspicious, exactly. But like he was looking at something he in no way had expected to find. Like he was trying to get a reading on it.

Jobs glanced at Violet and recognized her usual look of wary intelligence. And 2Face? Well, the ruined side of her face was hidden from his view. But on the undamaged side, Jobs saw nothing. No emotion. Blank stare. He thought that odd, given 2Face's complicated history with Billy.

Jobs turned his attention back to the small, dark-haired boy suspended in the golden glow. And he smiled.

While Sanchez and the others continued to watch Billy, Violet turned from the group and walked toward the back of the ruin. The desire to explore was irresistible.

Carefully she picked her way around a toppled beam. She was out of sight of the others, but not out of earshot.

The light was dim and the footing was rough. Stuff crunched under Violet's feet. Shards of brittle glass. Torn pieces of metal. Ash.

Bone.

Violet sucked in her breath.

This, she was not expecting.

In what Violet recognized as a ruined Shipwright's chair sat a skeleton. The body — what was left of it — looked so ... vulnerable. The head had broken away from the spine and lay wedged between the rib cage and the side of the chain. The feet, though still attached to the ankles, dangled like those of a child sitting in his mommy's lap.

Sadness threatened to overwhelm Violet. She took a deep breath and called to the others. They were by her side in a moment.

"Everyone?" Violet said, voice breaking. "I think you need to see something."

It was a moment before anyone spoke. Then:

"Oh, gross," 2Face spat.

Sanchez breathed. "It is She."

"It's Tate," Jobs whispered.

"Who?" Mattock's voice was tight.

"She was one of us," Mo'Steel said. He stretched out his hand as if to touch the body but Sanchez restrained him.

"J'ou know Her, too?" Sanchez said. "Maybe not as I know Her."

Out of the corner of her eye Violet saw Newton shudder.

"How can you tell it's Tate?" 2Face argued. "It's just a skeleton...."

"Who else would it be? Jobs shot back. I just know it's her."

"I'm with Jobs." Mo'Steel said. "But — *how*... ?"

Violet pointed at a rectangular object that lay close to the remains of Tate's left hand. Gingerly, Violet reached for it, shaking off what she guessed were centuries of dust. "I'm betting there's some kind of recording device in here. And I'm hoping it will explain everything," she said. "Well, at least what Tate could understand."

Violet stepped back and looked at Sanchez. He had withdrawn several feet and stood silently. His serene expression told Violet that Tate was somehow an essential part of his beliefs, part of whatever legend he had inherited from his ancestors.

Unlike Billy.

Sanchez had seemed seriously surprised to find Billy. Truth be told, so had Violet.

Violet sighed. Life just kept getting weirder.

## CHAPTER 9

### "WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN."

"This is a job for you, my friend." Mo'Steel handed the box Violet had found to Jobs. "I have no idea how this thing works."

Jobs took the box and felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Tate had held this.

With the tip of his spade. Jobs pried the box open. Inside was, indeed, a recording device. It was simple enough. Tate hadn't been a big techie. Jobs guessed she had asked the ship's computer to produce a machine pretty much anyone could operate.

Jobs pressed a button labeled *START*, and said, "Here goes." There was a half moment of screechy noise and then a familiar voice spoke into the gloom.

*"Hey. Tate here. I hope you're hearing this — Mo'Steel, Jobs, all of you.*

*I miss you all. Even now — I miss you. Talking like this, it's almost like you're here with me. . . . Okay, before I start bawling — I need to tell you some stuff. About where I've been and what I've been doing.*

*Quick review: Yago and the Troika were working together. But I'm sure you figured that out yourselves. They stole Mother and left you all on Earth. I was a kink in the plan. I wasn't supposed to be on the ship.*

*Well, it wasn't long before Yago realized he had no power and that the Troika were in total control. They were evolving into — into beings neither Yago nor I could figure out*

*There was a big fight. A big complicated fight. And in the end...*

*Well, please try not to be disgusted. Please. Let's just say that Yago and Amelia and Charlie all became a part of me. It was my — mutation. Duncan died. He was spared, if you want to look at it that way.*

*Of course, then there was another big, ugly fight. Who was going to control Tate's body? Eventually, that got resolved, too.*

*As much as it freaked me out to have Charlie and Yago and Amelia in my — head — in the end, I came to need them, rely on them. And they, of course, needed and relied on me. Being alone is not good. No person is an island and all that one. Then three, then two. Now, it's just me and Amelia.*

*Together, with the help of Daughter, who's a sort of dumbed-down version of Mother — it's a long story but you can blame it all on Duncan — we figured out how to travel through not only space but time.*

*Okay. I know it seems impossible. But it's true, folks. And I'm — here — to prove it Past Present Future. It's all one. It's all happening simultaneously.*

*How? I have no idea. I'll leave explanations to the scientists. Or to the holy folks. I never did do religion.*

*Point is, I died an old woman approximately five hundred years before I was born.*

*Why did I do this? Another long story. Let's just say I saw and heard things in my dreams. I knew that in some way you needed me to be here. Needed the ship — Mother, not Daughter — and Billy — to be here. Now.*

*Really, it was Billy who showed me the way. And if I can believe what I saw in sixty years of dreams, his love brought Mother back to life. I'm betting she still holds him close.*

*Sort of like a parent and child.*

*Boy — what am I saying? That all you need is love?*

*Huh. Maybe.*

*Another thing.*

*I learned something very important during the years I wandered through space, searching for life on every planet I could find. I learned a lesson I believe I'm supposed to tell you.*

*So, here it is. The universe is a big empty place, my friends. What we had back before the Rock — human civilization — well, it was more precious than we ever knew. Sure, it was messy, and it could be stupidly self-destructive and all. But it was one of a kind.*

*It was the best*

*I'd better end this. I don't know how much more time I have. So, my wish for you — for all the Remnants — for anyone who hears this — is to do what has to be done to make it all better again.*

*Oh, and listen to Billy."*

The recording ended. Jobs closed up the box and didn't bother to wipe away the tears filling his eyes. Mo'Steel grinned a shaky grin.

"What a long strange trip it's been," he said. "Huh, Duck?"

The group wandered back to the alcove where Billy hung suspended in the humming golden glow. Sanchez felt his breathing slow to the rhythm of its song.

"He's here for a reason," Jobs said solemnly.

"Yes," Sanchez said, placing a palm over the relic that lay against his chest. Silently he added, *And it will be my work to discover that reason...*

"Is he alive or dead?" Mattock asked nervously.

"I don't know," Jobs admitted. "Maybe neither. Doesn't matter."

*That one is wise,* Sanchez thought.

"Okay," Violet said, glancing back to where Tate's remains lay huddled. "But, what about Tate? Should we, I don't know, bury her? I feel bad just leaving her here —"

"No!" Sanchez stated emphatically. "This is where She belongs." Violet flinched at his harsh tone. Sanchez felt bad for having upset her — he knew she had meant no disrespect — but it was essential that no one defile the Source.

"Agreed," Mo'Steel said, his hand on the knife in his belt. "Hear me? Nobody touches Tate."

Vaguely Sanchez was aware of voices murmuring agreement. But suddenly his ears didn't seem to be working the way they should. They seemed stuffed — aware only of the blood pulsing through his body. Sanchez pressed his palms to his ears and rubbed, in a futile effort to clear them. By now his vision had begun to blur, too. It was as if he was being smothered....

Suddenly, the golden aura around Billy began to undulate and Sanchez dropped heavily to the floor.

The golden boy reached for Sanchez's hand. "Please don't be afraid," he said.

Sanchez slowly extended his own hand and let the boy clasp it.

The boy smiled. "Good," he said. "I am here to help you."

"And me? Why am I here?"

"You are here to help me. Sanchez, you must be my voice. You must listen and then explain to the others."

"Must I?" Sanchez asked.

"It is your destiny."

"The one they call Tate. From long ago and yet from the future. The one I call the Source. She told us to listen to j'ou."

"Yes. Listen to me."

"Who are j'ou?"

The boy laughed. "Me? I don't really matter Except as Mother's voice to you. As you are my voice to the others."

"What do I tell them?" Sanchez asked.

"Tell them that all will be as it was. But different."

"What is old will be new. What is dead will be brought to a better life. What is barren will be made to bear fruit."

"I — Do j'ou mean —"

"Palms will sway in the wind and waves will lap at the shore. Fruit will ripen and nourish."

"I don't know what that means."

"Rivers will swell and the sun will warm."

"How? How?"

The boy's clasp had begun to weaken. Sanchez clung to the slim, cool fingers but they slipped from his grasp. When the boy spoke again, his voice trembled.

"There are things you need to do."

"What?" Sanchez begged. "Tell me. Tell me!"

"There are things that must — that must —"

Sanchez opened his eyes and yelped. Mo'Steel's dirty, sweat-stained face was inches from his.

"Thank god," Violet said. Sanchez turned his head slowly and saw that she was kneeling at his right. "I thought..."

"He spoke to me," Sanchez told her.

"What?" Jobs now was leaning over him, eyes feverish with excitement. "Billy talked to you! What did he say?"

"Let's give the guy some air, okay?" Mo'Steel and Mattock helped Sanchez sit up, then stand.

"What he do to j'ou?" Newton growled.

Sanchez looked hard at Newton before turning to the rest of the group.

"The boy says he can help us."

"How?" Mattock blurted.

Sanchez closed his eyes. He remembered what he had seen in his latest vision. He remembered what Billy had just told him. Sanchez reached for the place where the vision and Billy's words connected.

"Things will be as they were, but different," he said finally.

"What is that supposed to mean?" 2Face's tone was angry.

"I hope to learn more in time," Sanchez answered, feeling his strength return with each word he spoke. "The boy speaks for the Source. He referred to Her as Mother. I — I believe the boy — She — is speaking of a rebirth. Of a new world. He spoke of wind and water. Of fruit and — and of the heavens. I must learn more."

Mo'Steel laughed. "Uh, yeah," he said simply.

Sanchez sensed the boy leader's excitement at war with his skepticism.

Violet met Sanchez's eyes. "Remember Tate's message," she said urgently. "She told us to listen to Billy. She talked about how wonderful life was before the Rock. I think — I think Billy is talking about restoring Earth to a — to a fully living planet."

"Look at him," Jobs said excitedly. "He could do it! He looks like some — some —"

"Looks *can* be deceiving, Duck," Mo'Steel said firmly. "Okay, maybe Billy's got some regreening plan up his sleeve. Maybe not. We're just going to have to sit tight and hope Sanchez can figure it all out."

## CHAPTER 10

### "I WAS AFRAID OF WHAT I SAW."

So.

Billy was alive.

Just when 2Face thought she was rid of him forever, he shows up, all spooky, glowing, superhero guy, speaking in freakin' tongues or whatever, sending messages to the masses.

Superhero! What Billy looked like was a dead bug stuck in amber.

And Jobs looked like he was about to burst with happiness. Sanchez was acting all serious and devout, especially after his little fainting drama. Even Mo'Steel seemed in awe of the freak that was Billy.

2Face was furious. No, she was enraged.

She was definitely about to explode. If she didn't get out of this stinking ship —

"I'll be outside," she murmured to no one, then turned and strode from the ship.

Once outside, she breathed deep, trying but failing to calm herself.

Something cheesy was going on.

First off, why should she trust this Sanchez guy? For all anyone knew he was a total quack. Spiritual seer her butt. He was probably making up the "message" he heard Billy speak for his own motives. What those motives could be, 2Face wasn't sure, but that didn't matter.

Anyway, if Sanchez wasn't lying about having received a message from Billy, if Billy really had told him something, then Billy was the one with some thing devious up his sleeve. Stranding them all — accidentally or not — on this stinking chunk of a planet wasn't enough. No! Not for Billy the Weird. He probably had some additional torture in mind....

2Face looked back at the ruined ship and imagined the freak inside.

Newton followed 2Face out into the dusky light and tried to calm his breathing. If he'd stayed inside a minute longer he was sure he'd have gone crazy.

Everyone who had waited outside stopped what they were doing and looked at him. Balder took a step toward Newton, but Newton was in no mood to talk about what he'd seen, scowling at his crew, he stalked off alone.

The skeleton had been terrible. Newton had heard of Her, the Source, all his life. Seeing Her so up close and personal, though, that was tough.

But far worse was that one hanging in midair. That kid and all that stuff about a new world! It was all probably a trick, like that little kid who could blend into the dust.

All a trick meant to fool the Marauders.

Newton was used to the dim, consistent light. The ashy ground. The kill-or-be-killed code.

Newton knew his world. He did not want to be thrown into a new one unprepared. So right then and there, looking back at the motley band preparing their nomadic camp — Aga and the other women unpacking food, Croce bullying the younger children. Cocker on guard against danger — Newton decided that he would stop the new world from coming.

The resolution gave him heart. Already Newton felt better, more confident, less — scared.

Life was already nasty and unfair! Look at what had happened with Mo'Steel! By rights, Newton should be leader of the Marauders, not that stranger.

But he could deal with that - he *would* deal with it. For now. Another opportunity would come and Newton would seize it. He would destroy the glowing one and life would be fine again.

But only if everything else stayed the same.

Newton began to walk back toward the makeshift camp. Along the way, he plotted. He was sure he still had Claw, Snipe, and Balder on his side. That was a place to start. He'd talk to them right away, tell them of his intent to stop that disgusting - thing — hanging inside the old ship from regreening the planet.

Whatever that meant.

Violet found herself seated next to Sanchez for the meal. Since leaving the ship he'd spoken to no one and had kept to himself. Violet was surprised he'd joined the group now.

"The visions," he said suddenly, handing her a small plate of food.

"What?" Violet blurted. "I'm sorry. You scared me."

Sanchez lowered his head but Violet saw that he was scanning the circle of hungry people. She guessed he didn't want anyone to overhear their conversation.

"Yes?" she whispered. "What about the visions?"

Sanchez hesitated a moment before going on. Finally he said, "I was afraid of what I saw."

"Tell me," she urged.

Sanchez did.

When he was finished, Violet touched his hand. "But there's nothing to be afraid of!" she whispered reassuringly. "You saw my world. What used to be my world, back before the Rock. Maybe ... Sanchez, I think you saw what this world will be like someday. Someday soon, if we can believe Billy."

*If we can understand Billy*, she thought, experiencing a moment of anxiety. *So much is up to Sanchez ... Could he handle it? Would he handle it?*

"There is more about the vision," Sanchez said now, poking idly at the food on his plate. "There was a yellow ball. And then it became — darker — yet still — intense. Many colors I have seen only in the pillars of flame spread out from it. I didn't know what was happening. The fiery ball began to drop and I thought it would crush the Earth but — it just slipped away. Almost immediately, I saw in its place a bright orb.... It started to ascend, so slowly.... In it, I saw shadows, but they did not dim the brilliance. ..."

Violet felt her heart swell. She could hardly keep from shouting with joy.

"Sanchez, you saw the setting sun and the rising moon! Wasn't it beautiful?"

Sanchez put his plate on the ground. Suddenly he looked terribly weary.

"I don't know," he said softly. "I don't know."

"Hey, Sanchez!"

Newton was sitting at the far side of the circle, directly opposite Sanchez. Jobs averted his eyes as Newton dug into his mouth with a grimy finger.

"J'ou tell us a story, something we can laugh at," the big man went on.

Before Sanchez could answer, Mo'Steel got to his feet and said, "I've got another idea. We heard something pretty wild not long ago. The Source spoke to Sanchez and he told us all about it. I don't know about you," he went on, looking at each face in turn, "but I've got some questions about this new world."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the group. Newton, though, was silent and scowling. Jobs guessed he wanted to forget about what had gone down in the old ship.

Like that was possible. Mo'Steel was smart to get people talking. To get them comfortable with a seriously mind-blowing notion.

Aga spoke. "I don't know what to think. But I want to know."

"Me, too," Olga added helpfully. "But where to begin?"

"With what we know of Earth before the Rock," Violet suggested. "We start with the big picture and work down to details."

Mo'Steel looked at Jobs. "How about a lesson?" he said. "Explain — simply — some basic science. Basic astronomy. Basic, Duck."

Jobs rolled his eyes at his best friend. "Yeah, I get it," he said. He gestured for everyone to move back several feet. Then, with the back of his spade, Jobs smoothed and patted down a section of ash.

"I'm going to draw some pictures," he said, looking around at the group of wary Marauders. His gaze flickered to Echo, Lyric, and Mattock, then to a few of the *Mayflower* people. "Some of you might be familiar with what I'm going to show."

*Stupid thing to say*, he realized too late. Half of the Marauders shot dirty looks at the Alphas and Remnants. He'd just reminded the Marauders that he knew more than they did.

"I need a lesson," Noyze said with a laugh. "I was terrible in science class. Maybe I can finally learn something."

Jobs gave Noyze a quick, thankful smile. With the tip of his spade he drew the solar system as it had been known before the Rock. He pointed out Earth and the other planets. He showed them Earth's moon and sun. Next to the crude diagram he drew another one to show what it meant for a planet to spin on its axis. Then he illustrated a planet's path of rotation.

"So, if Billy is talking about a newly green planet, Earth might begin to spin again," he said, becoming lost in the thrill of his work. "To rotate around the sun, too. Which means night and day, and phases of the moon and high and low tides, and —"

"Spin!" Curia cried. "Earth will fall out of the sky!" Jobs looked up, startled, to see the young Marauder woman climbing to her feet. "We will fall off Earth!"

A murmur of horror swept through the group.

"No, no!" Jobs said. "You don't understand. That's not the way it works. There's gravity and ... Look, I know it sounds scary but — trust me. I —"

"Why should we trust j'ou? Nesia shouted. "J'ou talk crazy."

Jobs looked pleadingly at Mo'Steel. His friend walked into the center of the rough circle and with his foot wiped away Jobs's drawings.

"That's enough for now," he said loudly, firmly. "Newton? You had a good idea. Now, who's got a story to tell? And make it funny."

## CHAPTER 11

### "WE WILL MAKE A NEW HOME."

Later, the Marauders gathered of their own accord, one by one drifting away from camp until all but the smallest children — and Sanchez — were present. Behind them, Mo'Steel and his group still sat in a circle. The three Alpha refugees had withdrawn on their own.

Through the gloom, Newton could see Mo'Steel watching them, waiting, wary. The kid was probably scared, Newton told himself. Well, he should be.

Newton assumed leadership of the impromptu meeting. Tension was high — and he was just the one to bring them higher.

"I say talk of this — regreening — this new world, it bad news!" he whispered fiercely.

There were nods and murmurs of agreement. From almost all of the Marauders.

"How will we survive on this new planet?" Curia wondered, her eyes wide. "What will we eat? Where will we live? How will we — who will we be?"

"Where will Beasts go?" Claw asked. "Or Slizzers?"

Snipe laughed inanely. "What, j'ou saying j'ou will miss them killers?"

Claw shrugged. "I wonder, is all."

*Good*, Newton thought. They will all go my way and say no to Sanchez and that thing hanging in the light.

"We will know nothing in this new place!" Newton said now, looking from grim face to grim face. "What good will that be to us? We will be like little children. Worse! Children have adults to tell them what is what. Who will tell us?"

"Them Alphas," Nesia said darkly. "Or Mo'Steel and them. They will tell us what to do. Marauders will be nothing!"

"Don't be foolish!" Aga said. "How will Alphas know any better than Marauders? J'ou think they be better than us?"

*That Aga*, Newton thought, scowling at the old woman. *She nothing but trouble. I'll get rid of her soon. Get rid of that troublemaker, Sanchez, too.*

"There will be no home," Grost said, stumbling slightly into Badger

"We will make a new home," Badger answered, catching the girl's arm. He looked from Marauder to Marauder "Think about what Violet say. Plenty of food. Plenty of water! Yes, that thought is — I can hardly think it. But — I will take a chance. And — beauty. There will be beauty as far as the eye will see."

Yorka looked at Badger with shining eyes, but Newton scoffed. "What beauty? What do they mean by that word? Marauders have no use for beauty. Nor for ugly."

"But we will! In the new world," Badger argued, "Marauders won't have to struggle all the time. We will have time. Time to sit and think and —"

Newton snorted and waved his arm in the air dismissively. "Nothing but trouble come from that, sitting and thinking."

*Badger*, Newton thought. *He will go, too. And Yorka.*

Now Cocker stepped forward. Newton tensed. Cocker was the idiot who had saved the lives of those Alphas. If it were Newton, he'd have killed and robbed them, no question.

"I was told about the past," Cocker said. "What it was like here, before. I was told about what we were like then. We — human beings — were magnificent."

Balder laughed. "J'ou been drinking that stuff again!" he said, but Newton noticed that he was eyeing Cocker keenly.

Cocker went on but Newton called him out.

Soon — very soon — he would confirm Balder, Claw, and Snipe on his side. And together, they would put an end to this new world horror.

While the Marauders held their private meeting, the Remnants held theirs. Mo'Steel refrained from adding his comments. His entire attention was focused on the distant gathering.

For which Jobs was very glad.

"You know, we won't be able to rebuild an advanced civilization in our lifetime," Olga pointed out "Not in many lifetimes. For countless generations there'll be no masterpieces and museums to put them in. There'll be no research hospitals. There'll be no construction companies to build the hospitals and museums. No architects to design them, no —"

"No books," D-Caf blurted. "Okay, we could write some — but with what? First, we'd have to make paper of some sort. Then writing instruments. No printing presses! But what does that matter when there's no population waiting for the latest installment of the series!"

Jobs groaned. "Okay, I got it," he said. "Life won't suddenly be all cozy, like it was when we were shot into space. No links, no computers, no home entertainment centers. Okay, no hospitals or laser surgery or morphine. But so what? It'll definitely be better than — than this!" Jobs said, sweeping his arm to indicate the gray, ashy surroundings.

D-Caf grunted. "Until another Rock comes along, at least."

"Aren't you upbeat today," Violet noted. "Look, I've got my doubts, too. But I keep thinking of Tate. All the chances she took. For the future. For us. I just don't see how we cannot try to make Billy's scheme work."

"Yeah. Violet's right," Noyze said. "We've come so far. How can we give up now?"

"No one's talking about giving up," D-Caf argued. "Some of us are just trying to be reasonable. Realistic. I just don't think we should expect too much."

*And I think we should expect everything,* Jobs countered silently.

"Your opinion. Jobs," Violet said. "Honestly. Do you think it will ever come to pass? Will Earth ever be reborn?"

Jobs felt all eyes upon him. *Yes*, he thought, *I do*. Aloud, he said, "That's the second question none of us can answer. We still have to deal with the first question. What exactly is Billy trying to tell us? If we can't answer that, then, no, Earth will never be reborn."

Mo'Steel got to his feet, and Jobs felt an adrenaline rush.

"What's up?" he whispered, darting a look at the Marauders. "Trouble?"

"Leg cramp," Mo'Steel replied.

Olga giggled with relief.

D-Caf leaned in. "Here's something else," he said. "Even if we discover what it is Billy wants us to do, there's still the matter of doing it. What if the Marauders just won't go along with the plan? Can we force them to? Do we even have the right to make them take a chance with us? With Billy?"

Silence followed D-Caf's words. Out of the corner of his eye. Jobs saw the Marauders returning.

Quickly, he got to his feet. "Too many questions," he said softly. "There are always too many questions."

Mattock dropped down next to Echo and Lyric.

"Tell us again what j'ou saw in there," Lyric said eagerly.

Mattock looked over his shoulder, though the four exiled Alphas were clearly alone.

"Yes," Echo prodded, rocking the baby gently. "Tell us again."

It was strange, he began. He recounted the experience in detail, though the girls had heard it all twice before.

Echo frowned. "What j'ou think of this new world Sanchez says will come?"

"Might come," Mattock corrected.

"I think it sounds very nice," Lyric said.

"First the Alpha colony," Echo murmured. "Now, this is our home. And already, we are talking about yet another place. I'm so tired...."

"Are j'ou saying j'ou don't want to live with plenty of water and food?" Mattock challenged.

"Of course not. It's just that..." Echo thought about how to express what she was feeling. "It's just that I want my baby to be safe. To be happy. And already she has suffered so much."

Lyric leaned over and kissed the baby's forehead. "A world with lots of food will be good for her," she said.

"Good for j'ou, j'ou mean," Mattock laughed. Lyric smacked his arm but a grin spread across her face.

"What if it's all a lie," Echo blurted. "I'm tired of being lied to. I don't want to be made a fool of again. I don't."

Echo struggled to her feet and looked down at her two companions, who'd suddenly stopped goofing around.

"I'm going to the sleeping circle now," she told them.

She could feel their eyes on her as she walked away.

## CHAPTER 12

### "WE WANT THE NEW WORLD."

The rest of the camp was asleep. Only Newton remained awake, the official guard, prowling the perimeters. But while his eyes were watching for predators, his mind was focused on what had happened earlier.

After the Marauders' impromptu meeting, several of the group had rejoined some of Mo'Steel's gang. Among them were Cocker and Badger. More disturbing. Claw, Snipe, and Balder had gone along with them. There'd been a lot of talk. Some loud voices. More laughter.

Newton didn't like laughter. Not now. Not ever.

When he was sure everyone was deeply asleep, Newton woke each member of his crew with a kick to the side.

Without too much of a racket, the four Marauders were gathered a few yards from the others. Newton had some business that needed to be taken care of now.

"This new world thing," he said, watching closely for signs of lying. "That what j'ou talking about with them others?"

Readily — too readily — Claw, Snipe, and Balder nodded.

"Yeah," Snipe said. "We heard a lot."

Claw and Balder stayed silent but their demeanor showed no fear.

*This is no good*, Newton thought.

"J'ou with me or j'ou against me," he hissed, grabbing Claw's rotting fur vest and yanking him close. Claw's facial tic grew more pronounced and his eyes bulged.

"All I saying is it sound good," he said pleadingly. "All that food."

With a curse, Newton threw Claw away from him. "J'ou make me sick. J'ou some kind of stupid person, trusting that kid!"

Snipe licked his cracked lips and opened his mouth to speak. "Sanchez, he say it a good thing. We always go with Sanchez."

Newton sneered. "Sanchez is only telling us to listen to that — thing — 'cause he like the girl. Violet, the one with the stories. She got him all turned around...."

Balder hitched his baggy pants and shook his head. "Me, I want what they call — um ... yeah, a life of leisure. I hear j'ou lay around, food come right to j'our mouth. Water all around, and it be warm and —"

Beside him, Claw and Snipe nodded vigorously.

"And a man, he be his own boss," Balder added with a drawl. "That sound good to me."

"Who told j'ou that stuff?" Newton demanded.

"All of them," Claw replied.

"That one, D-Caf," Snipe added eagerly.

"A kid!" Newton roared. "What he know? We let Sanchez and that — thing — do this — this re-greening, I tell j'ou what happen. Earth go spinning around and we all fall off and die. That, or Marauders be slaves to the others. Be sure, something bad happen. Something very bad."

A slow, knowing smile spread across Balder's face. "J'ou scared," he said, the grin growing ever more broad. "Big Newton scared, ha-ha!"

Claw and Snipe joined in the laughter. Newton felt almost weak with frustration.

"J'ou saying j'ou not scared, too?" he cried, and immediately regretted his words.

Snipe and Claw proceeded to fall all over each other, guffawing, slapping thighs and backs. Balder, on the other hand, sobered up and looked Newton straight in the eye.

"It don't matter what we are," he said calmly, and Newton knew he'd lost his crew for good. "We want the new world."

Jobs was repairing a tear in one of the bladders. Already a few drops of water had leaked through and that was a few drops too many. While he worked, he hummed a song that had been popular just before the Rock destroyed all singers and musicians and instruments and recording studios with their multimillion-dollar equipment. The tune had just popped into his head, startling him. He'd totally forgotten about it. He hadn't even liked the song. So why was it still hanging around in his brain, taking up valuable space?

"I want to tell j'ou why I left the Alpha colony."

Jobs jumped and dropped the half-repaired bladder Echo and the baby had appeared out of nowhere. "Whoa," he said. "Sorry. I didn't hear you come up."

Echo smiled and reached down to pick up the bladder at the same time Jobs reached down —

"Ow!"

"Ow!"

They both stood, grinning sheepishly.

"Are you hurt?" Jobs asked.

"No. Are j'ou?"

"I bruised my pride, but my head is pretty hard. I'm fine. So, uh, you were going —"

"Yes. I want to tell j'ou why I left the Alpha colony."

Jobs had wondered about that. Olga and Noyze had told him some disturbing stuff about how the Alpha colony worked. So when Jobs had seen Echo's baby, he'd made a guess....

But he hadn't expected the real story to be so awful.

Echo talked, and Jobs listened.

"So," she said, "in the end they were going to let me starve. Me and my baby. Because we are imperfect."

"Excuse me?" Jobs said. "I mean — what?"

"J'ou heard right."

Jobs nodded. "Okay. So, Mattock and Lyric came with you because —"

"Because they are my friends," Echo said.

Jobs wanted to know if Mattock liked Echo the way he was beginning to like her. But he didn't have the nerve to ask Mattock and he certainly didn't have the guts to ask Echo —

And he definitely didn't want to question her about her friends' genetic "purity." Maybe there was more motivation than just friendship behind Mattock and Lyric's escape.

*Whatever,* Jobs thought. *Echo has no idea how "flawed" we all are.*

"You'll be happy in a green world," he said abruptly. "We all will."

Echo placed a tiny kiss on her baby's forehead before asking, "What does it mean, 'a green world'?"

Jobs looked at the delicate wisps of hair on the baby's tiny head. "I don't know exactly how it will be," he admitted. "But I can tell you about how it was before the Rock. Some things

will be the same — I hope. I believe. Like trees and flowers and rivers and lakes. We'll be able to grow food pretty easily. There might even be animals, I don't know —"

"Animals? I've seen pictures of some animals. Elephants. And cows."

Another unknown, Jobs realized. What would they find in this new world? Would animals need to be domesticated? Or would there suddenly be tame house cats and curly-haired poodles roaming the green hills?

Jobs felt slightly dizzy. The possibilities were overwhelming. How could he possibly paint a picture of a place beyond his feeble imagination? A place that currently existed only in Billy's dreams? In his communion with — the Source. Mother.

If the place existed at all.

"Look," Jobs said. "I really don't know how it will be. But I believe in Billy. I wish you would trust in him, too."

Echo frowned. "I will try. But it's hard. All I can promise is that I will do what's best for my child. That's all I know for sure."

"Okay," Jobs conceded. But it was hard to let it go. In his heart, Jobs knew that a gentler, green environment would be far better for Echo's baby than this harsh, sterile world. But Echo would have to come to that belief herself.

"So, does your baby have a name yet?" Jobs asked, needing to change the subject.

Echo shook her head. "We fled the colony before the Namer could perform the ritual. But even before, Marina never came to me. I think now that no one cared to waste any time on us. We were worthless to them."

"You don't need them anyway," Jobs said.

Echo winced. "Don't I?" she said. "They were my — family."

Jobs wanted to kick himself for being so insensitive. "What I mean is... Why don't you pick a name? Right now. Go on."

The baby cooed and Echo smiled. "I have an idea," she said suddenly. "Will j'ou be the Namer for my baby?"

"Lumina," he blurted.

"Lumina?" Echo made a considering face — which Jobs found adorable — and then smiled. "I like that. It's pretty."

Jobs laughed. "Whew, I'm glad. It just came rushing out of my mouth!"

"What does it mean?" Echo asked, gently smoothing her baby's fine pale hair. "Lumina," she crooned.

"It means light." Suddenly, Jobs felt all choked up. What was there to cry about? Echo's baby was blind, but... "Illumination. It sounds right for her," he added, surreptitiously wiping a hand across his eyes.

"Yes," Echo said. "It sounds right."

## CHAPTER 13

### THE RESPONSIBILITY WAS ALL HIS OWN.

Sanchez was alone. Alone with the Source and his own troubled thoughts.

Since their initial foray, only Sanchez had been allowed inside the ship. Those were Mo'Steel's orders. The boy was a good leader. He was always on guard against trouble.

And he was concerned that Sanchez not be interrupted during his sessions with Billy.

Not everyone was as supportive of Sanchez's efforts.

Sanchez was no fool. He knew that Newton, at least, eyed him with suspicion, even hatred. That he — and possibly other Marauders — saw Sanchez as a traitor to their people. As a troublemaker. Someone who was going to destroy the only way of life they had ever known.

And for what?

For a dream.

But Sanchez had no choice. He was what he was. He was the holy man. The storyteller. The voice of wisdom. The shaman. That was a term Violet had explained to him just recently.

Such men — or women — were either revered or despised. Sometimes simultaneously.

Sanchez knew this. He also was acutely aware that the burden of interpreting the message from Billy/Mother/the Source rested entirely on his shoulders.

True, Jobs and a few others had offered to help puzzle out the mystery of what the band needed to do — to provide? — in order to make the regreening ritual a success.

Sanchez appreciated their efforts, but he didn't allow them one shred of responsibility.

The responsibility was all his own.

It was the way it should be.

But so much could go wrong. What if his spiritual gifts failed him and he couldn't interpret the all-important message? What if Newton killed him? In either case, the regreening ritual would never be performed.

So much could go wrong.

As if reflecting Sanchez's dark thoughts, a low moan suddenly seemed to seep up through the ruined floor of the ship. It was both a sound and a feeling of intense sadness. Of suffering. Sanchez put his hands to his ears but the moaning grew too loud to be kept out. The Source wanted Her pain to be known.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the sorrow was gone, and in its place was a spirit of... Sanchez didn't know the exact term for what he felt emanating so powerfully from the Source. It reminded him, though, of what he felt radiating from the Alpha girl, Echo, when she cuddled her child to her breast.

Pride. A fierce protectiveness. Power

"Love."

"Billy?" Sanchez stepped closer to the boy, vaguely surprised that he hadn't lost consciousness this time.

"What else?" Sanchez whispered. "What do j'ou need from us? What do j'ou want us to do? We want to be reborn. Billy, why won't j'ou talk to me?"

"Three elements."

"Yes?"

"Three elements are needed for Earth to be reborn."

"Tell me, Billy."

"The Source. The Five embodied in me. And —"

"Yes? And what?"

"And—"

Sanchez waited, hoping, but Billy said nothing more. After a while, he sensed that Billy was — dormant. That whatever energy he'd had was gone.

Sanchez left the ship, fervently hoping Billy's energy would return. Soon.

The Source. The Five embodied in me.

What kind of mumbo jumbo was Billy spouting, anyway?

2Face crept through the shadow. Claw was on guard, the idiot. Everyone else was asleep. She had no trouble sneaking away from camp and toward the ship.

Sanchez and his stupid messages. Couldn't he see that the whole thing was a big farce? That Billy was just yanking his chain — everybody's chain? Was she the only sane person left on Earth?

*Don't answer that, 2Face told herself. The truth is too depressing.*

With a quick glance over her shoulder, 2Face stepped into the ruined ship. The interior was only slightly darker than the perpetual gloom outside. In a moment, her eyes had adjusted to the dimmer light.

Good. Because she needed to find something. Some damning evidence against Billy. If only she had a camera! Then she could catch the jerk in the act of climbing out of whatever invisible contraption he'd erected to make it look like he was suspended in midair. *No strings, my foot*, 2Face thought angrily. At best, Billy was a magician. At worst, a complete and total fraud.

*Hey*, she thought, *maybe I'll even find a weapon, something I can use to destroy Billy right on the spot*. The freak seemed indestructible, but 2Face had no doubt she could find a way to eliminate him. Once and for all.

A shudder ran through her then. Unexpected but... Okay, she was scared. She'd admit it. A teeny bit. Actually, more creeped-out than scared. Tate — or what was left of her — was lumped only twenty or so feet away. Back before the Rock, 2Face hadn't been one for those stupid Halloween movies about teenagers too moronic to stay away from haunted houses and psycho killers. She was not at all down with the notion of ghosts and such. Even after being stranded on this freakish dead planet, what Violet called "home to seven billion ghosts." Please. 2Face had never sensed any dead person's presence.

Still, 2Face couldn't help but make sure Tate's skeleton was still where they'd found it, falling out of that old Shipwright's chair. Yeah. It was there. Gross as ever.

With one final sneer at Tate, 2Face headed toward the alcove and was genuinely surprised to find Billy still suspended in the humming golden glow. His eyes were open and unblinking; his chin rested on his chest; his hands and feet hung limp.

The sight of him made 2Face sick.

"Come on, you freak, say something!" she taunted. Images of when she and Billy had been close stabbed at her mind's eye and made her wince.

In the next second, full of revulsion, 2Face lunged at Billy, fists flying — but her flesh never touched his. The golden aura was alive with power and repelled her assault. 2Face was thrown back several feet and came to a crash landing, flat out on her back.

It took a few minutes for her head to clear. Finally 2Face struggled up onto her elbows and tried to quell the whirring of her stomach. And then she saw it. The smirk on Billy's face. Yeah, no doubt about it. He was laughing at her.

"It's not over between us," she swore, climbing awkwardly to her feet.

But even as she swore final vengeance, 2Face's spirit sagged. She slunk from the ship, determined to destroy Billy — and despairing of ever being able to do so.

Violet looked closely at the group gathered around her behind the ruined ship. Her adrenaline was high.

"Sanchez is making progress," she said. "We're getting closer to knowing what Billy needs from us. The stakes are higher now than ever."

"We should be on constant alert," Olga said.

Noyze nodded. "We can't afford to let anyone screw up Billy's plan. Or to hurt Sanchez."

Violet felt a rush of anger at the thought of anyone harming the storyteller. "We need to enlist you, Edward," she said, nodding at the little boy.

"I'm on it," he answered solemnly. "I'm the Chameleon."

"I'll help, too," Roger Dodger said eagerly.

Violet nodded. "Good. You boys keep an eye on the main suspects and report back."

"Right." Noyze frowned. "And the main suspects are? Newton, for sure."

"Yeah," Olga said. "He's prime. But that doesn't mean we should let anyone off the hook. I don't mean to sound so suspicious, but... I think there's a possibility of any one of the Alphas or Marauders panicking and ruining our future."

"I agree," Violet said. "Okay, from this moment on. Operation Look Alert is in effect."

## CHAPTER 14

### "IT MAKES NO SENSE UNLESS YOU BELIEVE IT DOES."

"Edward and Roger Dodger are out scouting," Violet reported to the group gathered at the base of a petrified staircase to nowhere. "Edward's gone Chameleon and Roger Dodger's hanging with the Marauder children. One of them might have overheard an adult say something incriminating. And you know how kids talk."

"And the Alphas?" D-Caf asked.

"Echo and Lumina are with Aga," Olga said, "With Aga's care, the baby is really beginning to grow strong."

"I put Mattock and Badger on guard outside the ship." Mo'Steel winced and shifted his bad leg into a more comfortable position. "I'd bet my last ounce of water we can trust both of them completely."

"Maybe," Violet said. "I saw Lyric with Yorka. And Sanchez is with Billy, of course. Have we accounted for everyone else?"

Jobs sighed. "Let's stop roll call and get down to business. We've got to figure out the final element of the regreening ritual! We're supposed to be smart, right?"

Mo'Steel laughed. "Well, at least our parents were. We were just along for the ride on the *Mayflower*."

Violet smirked. "Speak for yourself. Come on, everyone. We can solve this mystery. We have to!"

"Yes, Nancy Drew," Noyze said primly.

"First question," Olga said. "What does Billy mean by the Five embodied in him? Maybe if we understood that..."

Jobs's brain began to fire. What ever happened to the Missing Five? The five people from the *Mayflower* who were never accounted for in the end. Chances were they were long dead. Dead and buried in the ruins of Mother somewhere. Where else could they be?

Unless...

Tate's recorded message. She said that she'd incorporated — literally — Yago, Amelia, and Charlie. That made Tate an "aggregate person," of sorts.

"The Troika," Jobs mumbled, thinking aloud.

Mo'Steel nodded. "The Trinity. Three people in one. It makes no sense unless you believe it does."

"I think," Jobs said slowly, "that the Missing Five from the *Mayflower* were incorporated in Billy."

"How?" Noyze wondered.

"Maybe Mother did it," Jobs said. "We'll never know. Remember how Billy was sort of in everybody's head during the five hundred years on the *Mayflower*. It was part of what drove him crazy. Maybe the five — got in then — somehow. And never got out."

"Having only five strangers in his head can't be as bad as having eighty," D-Caf quipped. "I hope."

"Maybe they're not even separate people anymore. Maybe they've all merged and Billy is one in many, and many in one."

"This is all very philosophical, but what's the point?" Violet said suddenly. "We already assumed Billy was an essential element of the regreening ritual, right? So now it's Billy and friends, big deal. And he told us straight out that the Source — whatever that is, exactly — is another essential part. What we still haven't figured out is the third element."

The depressing silence that followed Violet's words was broken by the sudden appearance of Sanchez. His eyes shone and his breathing was heavy.

"What's wrong?" Violet cried, reaching for his arm.

Sanchez shook his head. "Nothing. At least —"

"Sit down," Olga urged. "Catch your breath."

Sanchez sank to the ground. After a moment, he looked up and spoke. "Billy said the word 'love,' again, just as I felt —"

"What?" Jobs urged.

"I have no word for it," Sanchez admitted. "But I have felt it before, from the Source. It reminds me of what I sense between Echo and the child. Between the other mothers and their children. Between j'ou, Olga, and Mo'Steel. Something very powerful. Something — inviolable."

"Go on," Mo'Steel said, kneeling awkwardly by Sanchez.

The storyteller's voice trembled. "So I asked Billy a simple question. And he gave me a simple answer. So simple I am ashamed I didn't understand before now."

"What? Don't keep us in suspense," D-Caf cried.

Sanchez closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "The third element essential for the regreening ritual is the baby. Lumina."

Violet grabbed Olga's arm. Mo'Steel sucked in his breath, and D-Caf slapped his forehead.

"Then it's solved!" Noyze cried.

Jobs looked at Sanchez's bowed head and knew there was more.

"Not quite," the storyteller admitted. "We must bring the baby to Billy. What I don't understand is when. Billy spoke of a critical moment. When I asked him to tell me when that is, he said. The moment from which the voice was heard."

"Oh, great, another riddle!" Violet moaned. "What now, Billy?"

Olga rubbed her eyes. "Okay. We'll figure it out. We can't lose heart."

"And we can't miss Billy's critical moment, either!"

Jobs looked at his companions and hesitated to speak. But he had to. "There's something else," he said calmly. "We have to ask Echo's permission."

Mo'Steel had called a general meeting. He said they had something critical to discuss. Something about his tone made Echo concerned. She didn't want to go to the meeting but there wasn't exactly a way out of it Echo walked toward the gathering group. She held Lumina against her shoulder. The baby was still weak but with the advice and ministrations of the older women in the group, she was growing healthier. Echo smiled as Lumina lifted her head ever so slightly from her mother's shoulder and gurgled. Lumina would never see her mother's face and that broke Echo's heart. But Lumina would know unending love.

Echo mingled with some of the women — Curia, the silent Yorka, dark-skinned Noyze — and watched as the men and boys joined them.

A loud voice silenced the small talk around her. Mo'Steel and Sanchez stepped to the center of the rough circle.

"Sanchez has heard again from the Source," Mo'Steel announced. Echo thought his expression was troubled, and her stomach went all funny.

Mo'Steel stepped away, and Sanchez looked slowly around the group. His head looked freshly shaved and his cheekbones were more prominent than usual, as if he'd been fasting,

"The Source has revealed to me," he said with a hoarse voice, "the final element necessary for the regreening ritual. For the rebirth of our world."

The holy man paused and Echo felt the combined anxiety of every Marauder, Alpha, and Remnant. She looked to Jobs and found that his eyes were downcast. She willed him to look up at her but —

"The three elements," Sanchez went on. "The Source. The Five embodied in Billy. And — the child called Lumina."

There was dead silence for a second and then Echo sensed voices, movement, saw faces....

"No," she said to no one. "No."

Suddenly Echo realized she stood at the center of the group. She didn't know how she happened to have gotten there.

Alone, at the center, with all eyes trained upon her and Lumina, expectant. Alphas, Marauders, Remnants.

Echo was afraid. Once again, she was the special one chosen for an important task. She hadn't asked for this distinction. Nor had she asked to be chosen by the Alphas to bear a child for the colony. But she had accepted their decision and when, in their estimation, she had failed to do the job right, she'd been marked for murder.

Enforced starvation was murder.

And now?

"I... I don't understand," she blurted.

"None of us do," Jobs admitted, finally looking at her "Not really."

"What will happen to my baby?" she demanded of him.

There was more silence for her answer.

Involuntarily, Echo glanced at Newton. His eyes were dark with — with what? Hate?

Echo's stomach clenched.

Olga took a step into the circle, smiling, one hand held out as if in peace. But Echo wanted nothing from any of them.

"J'ou stay back!" she cried, dashing to her right. D-Caf stepped back, startled, opening the circle, and Echo ran through.

"Echo! Please! Where are you going?"

It was Jobs, his tone concerned, pleading.

Echo halted. Breathing heavily, she turned to face the group. Alpha, Marauder, Remnant.

But her eyes held Jobs's and his alone.

"I need time to think," she called out. Her voice was surprisingly strong.

*No*, Echo thought, *not surprisingly*. *Have I come this far to protect my child, only to hand her over to these — strangers — now? No.*

Jobs's frustration was clear but finally, he nodded. Echo turned and walked off.

## CHAPTER 15

### "YOU'VE JUST MADE ME AN ACCESSORY TO YOUR CRIME."

There was something he hadn't told them.

Something Billy had communicated that last time, something Sanchez had kept to himself.

It was killing him to keep it a secret any longer. Even though the message had been enigmatic — Billy's energy had been draining badly — Sanchez knew he had to unburden himself or go insane.

He sought out Violet. He found her sitting alone, staring off into nothing.

"What are j'ou doing?" he asked.

"Don't you even say hello?" Violet looked up at him and smiled. "If you must know, I'm thinking about when I was little. I pick a year of my childhood and I try to remember as much as I can about it. Good and bad. Memories are all I have of — before. All any of us have."

Sanchez hesitated. Maybe now was not the time ...

"We must talk," he blurted.

"About what?"

Violet got to her feet. Sanchez noted how thin the girl had gotten.

"About something I know."

Violet rolled her eyes. "You know, it's like pulling teeth with you, Sanchez. Don't you ever just get to the point?"

Sanchez frowned. "Pulling teeth?"

"Forget it. It's an expression. Just tell me what you have to tell me."

Sanchez closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked steadily at Violet.

"When Billy told me that Lumina was the third essential element for the regreening ritual, he also told me something else. Something — disturbing."

Violet's blue eyes grew dark. "What?"

"Billy told me there is a possibility the ritual won't work."

Violet smiled and looked massively relieved. "Is that all?" she said. "I've always considered that possibility. So, what happens? We live out the rest of our lives in the desert?"

Suddenly, Sanchez wished he could hold Violet's hands as he told her the ugly truth. But he resisted the temptation. "We don't live at all," he said. "Earth is destroyed. As are we."

Violet took a step away from him and folded her arms across her chest. "Okay, now you're scaring me."

"I have kept this information to myself for a reason," Sanchez explained calmly, though inside, he was flooded again with self-doubt. "What if I am wrong? What if I misunderstood Billy's warning? What if there is no possibility of failure? If I tell, I might be creating panic for no reason. I will be adding a terrible complication to an already confusing situation. My words might frighten the people into refusing to trust and act with Billy."

"Then why tell me now?" Violet cried. "Sanchez..."

The strength of Violet's reaction did not bother Sanchez as much as it once might have. He was learning. He was changing all the time.

"I don't know," he admitted.

Violet sighed and ran her hands over her wild hair. "You've just made me an accessory to your crime. Do you realize that? Even if it was a crime of omission. Now I share your burden. Thanks."

She shared his burden .... Yes, Sanchez thought. *That's why I told her. I wanted — needed? — her to share my burden.*

"We have to tell Mo'Steel NOW," Violet said, grabbing Sanchez's arm, Sanchez felt the strength of Violet's fingers through his dirty clothing. They were slim but powerful. "Does he need to know?" he said.

Sanchez watched as several emotions registered in Violet's blue eyes.

Finally her grip lessened and she stepped back from him again. "Are you going to try to stop me from telling?" she asked, her tone challenging.

"No," Sanchez admitted. "I'm asking j'ou a question for which I have no answer."

Violet was silent for a moment. Then, she began to pace. To talk to herself, not to him.

"How realistic is it," she said, "to expect uneducated, barely civilized people ..."

Sanchez winced. Violet meant the Marauders, of course. Maybe not Sanchez specifically, but still, hearing her opinion of his people stung.

"How can they make a rational decision about their future?" Violet went on. "Isn't it really up to us, to me and Jobs and the others, isn't it really up to us to make that decision for them? Maybe it's for the best that we don't tell anyone else about the possibility of failure...."

Violet came to an abrupt halt and looked back at Sanchez. Did she see the pain in his eyes, he wondered.

Her voice now was strained. "Sanchez, do you hear what I'm saying? It's horrible! I don't want to play. I can't! Who am I that I should even be considering shouldering the responsibility of..."

Violet clutched her head.

"I'm sorry I told j'ou," Sanchez said.

Violet laughed. "No you're not. But it's okay It's okay. If it were the other way around, I wouldn't have been able to keep it to myself," she admitted. "Just — what now?"

Sanchez hesitated. He hoped he was doing the right thing but he had no way of knowing.

"I think we should continue to keep this to ourselves."

"You do?"

"Yes."

Sanchez waited for Violet's opinion. His heart slammed in his chest.

Finally she sighed and said, "Okay. We're agreed. We keep this information to ourselves. At least for now."

Sanchez nodded, knowing all too well that nothing had been solved. That he — and now Violet — was still guilty in some way. "Yes," he said. "At least for now."

Jobs looked around at his companions and wondered why they didn't just all shut up. What was the use of talking anyway? Okay, maybe he was just in a bad mood, but it looked pretty likely that the re-greening ritual wasn't going to happen.

Still, he listened as he chewed a tasteless leaf of some sort. What else did he have to do?

"Billy must tell Echo nothing bad will happen to the child," Aga was insisting.

"I don't think he can do that," Olga replied. "I don't think he knows exactly what will happen during the ritual."

"That's right. He only tells us what he knows for certain. I think." Noyze groaned. "It's so frustrating that he communicates only through Sanchez! And even Sanchez isn't sure he's getting the messages right."

"Revelation isn't supposed to be as easy as reading the back of a cereal box," Violet said, sarcasm heavy in her tone.

*Hey, Jobs thought, shooting her an amused glance. Violet sounds just like I feel.*

Noyze frowned at them both.

"Sorry," Violet said. "I didn't mean to make light of this...."

Jobs tuned out and pretended to contemplate his ratty shoes. What he was really thinking about was his extreme unwillingness to let Echo's innocent baby be harmed or die in the service of others. Sure, he wanted a green world, but who was he to ask a mother to risk her child's life? Was he any better than Lumina? Was his life —or the life of anyone else on this stinking planet — more valuable than any other?

"So — we've solved nothing, right?" Olga said, her voice loud enough with frustration to bring Jobs around. "Just in case I'm missing something here ..."

"It's not up to us to solve anything," Jobs said suddenly. "It's up to Echo to say yes."

An uneasy silence followed, broken finally by Violet.

"Let's say Echo does agree. If we don't identify the critical moment for the ritual soon ..."

Jobs smiled grimly. "It's sticks and berries forever."

## CHAPTER 16

### "J'OU WILL REGRET THIS NEW WORLD!"

It was almost too easy. The Alpha girl got up to do her business away from the sleeping area. And she left her baby behind! Wedged In between an old woman — Aga — and a little kid — Walbert.

Newton was big but he was stealthy. As soon as Snipe turned away from the sleeping area to check on the Source, he made his move.

He slipped in among the women and children and snatched up the tiny bundle that was Echo's baby.

And without Echo's baby, Mo'Steel and Sanchez and all the others would have no chance of getting their stupid green world.

Nimbly, Newton leaped over the sleepers and ran full speed until he got out of easy sight. Then, he slowed his pace to a walk.

But something was wrong.

The baby was silent. Newton panicked and wondered if it was okay — and then wondered why he should even care. Because, he reminded himself, the plan — such as it was — was to give it to the Savagers, not to kill it.

Newton didn't pretend to be a good man but he refused to believe himself a monster.

He held the baby's face close to his ear and felt slight puffs of air. Good.

His plan was going to work after all.

He was strong. Well-fed. He'd been taking part of Grost's and Yorka's food portions for years. He knew he stood a good chance of finding the Savagers before long. And when he did, he'd make his presence known — from a safe distance — drop the baby, and hightail it back to the Source.

What the Savagers did with the baby was their own call. At least Newton wouldn't have blood on his hands. At least he'd have given the kid a chance. More important, he'd have stopped the regreening ritual.

An unsettling thought reared its ugly head again, and this time Newton couldn't beat it down. How would he explain his absence from the Marauder camp? How would he explain the baby's absence without incriminating himself?

Newton set his lips firmly. There seemed only one way. Newton would tell a story better than any that Violet girl had ever told! He'd say that a sound had woken him from sleep. That he'd gotten up to investigate and found Snipe nowhere in sight. That he'd seen some evidence of Savagers and that he'd followed their trail out of the camp. That after a while he'd heard the sound of a baby crying and continued his pursuit.

And then, he'd tell the Marauders and Mo'Steel and the rest that there'd been a fight. A brutal fight to the finish. That he'd killed the kidnapping Savager. But that he'd been too late to save the baby.

That story would make him a hero, all right. It would earn him back some of the respect he'd lost since the kid Mo'Steel had come along. It —

"Just where do you think you're going?"

Newton whirled and almost lost his balance. Mo'Steel stood not two yards away, knife drawn, eyes boring into him.

"I'll drop it!" Newton raised the baby over his head — and felt a brutal pain behind his knees as someone or something slammed into them, causing them to buckle. Involuntarily, he released the baby but other hands were there to catch it.

No ... This couldn't be happening....

Nice work, Edward, Mo Steel said. You didn't know you've been trailed since we got to the Source, did you?" he asked Newton. "No. Of course you didn't. Or you wouldn't have been so stupid."

Newton caught a glimmer of a small boy waving at him and walking backward toward the camp. Slowly he rose to his feet, knees wobbly. Badger — a Marauder! — stood a few feet away gripping a thick piece of metal in both hands. Jobs stood just to Badger's left, holding the baby. And now Newton saw Cocker and Mattock emerge from the gloom behind Mo'Steel.

Everybody was staring at him....

"It's over, Newton," Mo'Steel said calmly. Almost casually.

His tone enraged Newton, "J'ou will regret this new world!" he spat.

"Nah. I don't think so."

In a split second it came to Newton that he had no choice but to run. To stay with these people would mean being a prisoner. With a wild look to his left, Newton dashed into the semi-gloom.

"Hey! Come back!" Mattock shouted.

Cocker took a step after Newton but Mo'Steel grabbed his arm. "Let him go, 'migo. Running away is what Newton does best."

"Do you think he'll survive?" Jobs said.

Mo'Steel shrugged. "For a while. He probably had some food and water with him. And he's been in this desert all his life. He knows the ropes. But I doubt anyone, no matter how skilled, could last here alone. Besides, Newton's stupid. And he's a coward. I'm betting he won't live to see his next birthday."

"Yeah," Jobs said absentmindedly. He shifted the now sleeping infant. *She's only about two or three weeks old, isn't she*, he thought. *So little. So frail. Just like her mother. Who cares about Newton? I wonder if Lumina will make it to her first birthday....*

*The moment from which the voice was heard....*

Billy's enigmatic words tickled through Jobs's brain. They sounded and echoed and ...

Echo.

*That's it, isn't it*, he thought. What Billy meant. *The moment from which...* A point of origin. A birthday...

"I'm so stupid!" Jobs cried. "Why didn't I see it before?"

Mo'Steel grinned. "Well, I wouldn't say stupid, exactly.... See what. Duck?"

The other men and boys eyed Jobs curiously.

"I think I know what Billy meant when he said. The moment from which the voice was heard."

"Spill." Mo'Steel ordered.

"Okay. There's an ancient legend, a Greek legend, about a nymph named Echo. She was in love with a guy named Narcissus but he was totally involved with himself."

Mo'Steel frowned. "There is a point here, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. See, eventually Echo just pined away for love until all that was left of her was her voice. Get it? The voice. Echo. 'The moment from which the voice was heard.' I think Billy is talking about Echo's birthday as the critical moment for the regreening ritual!"

Jobs looked from dubious face to dubious face.

"Uh, Duck? How do you even know that old story?"

"Violet told me," he admitted. "A long time ago, back when she had that villa on board Mother. What does it matter?"

"This Billy," Mattock said. "He would know the story, too?"

"There are worlds in Billy's head," Mo'Steel said. "And who knows how his head works. Maybe he doesn't even know. Besides, the *Mayflower* — and then Mother — the Source — the ship's computer — had stored tons of files about human culture."

"This could be the answer, then," Cocker said. "But we will talk to Sanchez."

"Mattock?" Badger asked. "Do you know Echo's birthday?"

The Alpha shrugged. "Maybe ask Lyric. But I don't think she'll know."

Jobs grinned. "Okay. We have some investigating to do. But first, I'd better get Lumina back to her mother I, er, think her diaper needs to be changed."

## CHAPTER 17

### "YOU'RE STILL WILLING TO TAKE THIS CHANCE?"

The camp was abuzz. The story of Newton's attempted kidnapping had spread quickly. 2Face had always known the big lug was good for nothing. He couldn't even sneak off with a mewling infant!

Now that the kid was safe and sound, the re-greening ritual might still go forward. If Sanchez could figure out the final part of the puzzle. Which meant that Billy might still have his way with them.

And that meant that it was up to 2Face — again — to put things right. To stop Billy.

Without anyone knowing what she'd done.

Everyone was gathered just outside the old ship. *It was like a freakin' jamboree*, 2Face thought. *Woo. Hoo.*

Mo'Steel was still bragging about the big save. 2Face pretended to listen with interest.

"And the icing on the cake," he said now, grinning, "is that Jobs got some divine inspiration or something and figured out what Billy meant by 'the critical moment' Sanchez is with Billy now, hoping to confirm our guess."

*Rats!* 2Face felt her stomach tighten.

"Tell us!" Noyze cried.

Jobs grinned. "Well, we owe a lot of thanks to Lyric. Luckily, she's been keeping a journal since leaving the Alpha colony."

*Big deal*, 2Face thought.

"That's right," the Alpha girl said. "And, before we left I — borrowed — Borlaug's watch. It's very, very old, but it works. And I've been very careful to wind it just enough so it never stops."

*Blah, blah. Get on with it!* 2Face screamed silently.

"Lyric's watch also has a calendar," Jobs said now. "So she's been keeping track of passing time in the Alpha tradition. It's not so different," he added, "from what we Remnants knew, back before the Rock."

*Is there a point to all this blathering?* 2Face wondered, shifting from one foot to the other.

"And?" Violet prodded. "The suspense is killing me!"

"And," Jobs said, "it suddenly came to me what Billy meant by the critical moment for the ritual. He said to Sanchez that it was 'the moment from which the voice was heard.' I did some thinking and, well, came up with — Echo's birthday. The exact time of her birth. But I had no way to know that information. And I couldn't be sure Echo even knew it."

"So, he came to me." Lyric was beaming now, and it made 2Face even angrier.

"It was a long shot but... I lucked out. We all did."

"In my journal," Lyric said, "I keep all sorts of information. Like important occasions. Like when Rainier died. And when Mattock passed his first round of medical training. And when Cocker came to the colony. I also marked down the exact time and date of Lumina's birth. And a long time ago my mother told me the exact time and date of my own birth. And of Echo's."

Olga shook her head. "Lyric, as of this moment you are our official record keeper."

"Yeah. J'ou are smarter than j'ou look," Mattock teased.

Lyric tried to scowl but it didn't hold. "There's a lot about me j'ou don't know," she said with mock haughtiness.

Echo stepped toward Lyric. "I almost forgot," she said softly. "About my birthday. With so much to worry about..."

"Well," Lyric replied, taking a round, brass-cased watch from a pocket of her tunic, "I didn't forget. J'ou are my friend."

"And in exactly twenty-two hours and twelve minutes my time," Jobs said, "you will be —"  
"17/365S," Echo said.

Just then, Sanchez emerged from the ruin. He surveyed the group and his eyes came to rest on Echo.

"Jobs was right," she said. "Wasn't he?"

Sanchez nodded. "I believe so."

There was a strangely expectant hush.

Finally Echo spoke. "How can I thank j'ou all for saving my child?"

2Face bit her cheek to keep from screaming. *Here we go again.... That idiot, Jobs, actually blushed. He opened his mouth but no words came out. Dork. Badger, Mattock, and Cocker just stood there, mouths shut, looking stupid.*

"Don't worry about it," Mo'Steel said lightly. "It makes my day to play hero. I might even get myself a cape."

Echo looked puzzled but Mo'Steel didn't seem to mind. *How full of himself is this guy getting,* 2Face wondered. But still, she kept her mouth shut.

"I am afraid," Echo said then, rubbing the baby's back. "I don't want to lose my child. But... I'm ready to trust j'ou all. And Billy."

Olga put her arm around the girl's shoulders and looked all goopy.

"We figured out the critical moment," Mo'Steel said to Echo now. "All the pieces are in place. But you understand that none of us knows for sure if the regreening will go down okay."

Echo nodded.

"You're still willing to take this chance?"

Again, the Alpha girl nodded.

And 2Face's stomach fell. Crap. Now that everything was in place for the regreening ritual, she didn't have much time.... She could destroy Lyric's watch, throw off their timing. But that wasn't definitive enough. No, 2Face would stick to her original plan to eliminate the cause of all their troubles: Billy.

And she would be very sure to throw suspicion off herself.

"Wait a minute," Noyze was saying. "Where's Newton now?"

Mo'Steel smiled oddly. "Well, he decided not to stick around for the consequences of his actions. In short, he ran away."

"You let him go?" 2Face blurted.

Mo'Steel shrugged. "Why not? My guess is that he won't get far before something big and ugly takes him down."

A downright jolly laugh burst from the hideous girl named Grost. Yeah, well, 2Face admitted silently, I'd be laughing, too, if I were her. Until Mo'Steel killed that Beast and put Newton in his place, Newton had made Grost his personal punching bag.

"Too bad about that Newton," Aga said, shaking her head. "He could have been a good —"

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," 2Face shot back vehemently.

Olga chuckled. "Now there's an expression I haven't heard in a long time!"

"Yeah. Mom, remember Grandpa used to say that?"

"He had a cliché for every occasion. I —"

"Could we stick to the subject, please!" 2Face cried. God, she thought she would explode.

"The important thing is that Billy is safe and that his plan can proceed without obstruction."

"And just in the nick of time!" Noyze said.

Most everyone moved off then to check on the freak or whatever.

Violet stayed behind. 2Face didn't like the look in her eyes.

"So, you seem to have done a turnaround as far as Billy's concerned," she said.

2Face forced a tone of innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do," Violet said blandly. "It wasn't too long ago that you were blaming Billy for our being stuck on this ratty planet. You thought he was in cahoots with Yago and the Troika. You said so."

2Face kept her mouth shut. She was giving her nothing.

But that didn't stop Miss Goody-Two-shoes.

"It's just that now you're all pro-Billy," she said. "You act like you trust him."

"I do trust him," 2Face said simply, forcing a tone of truth.

*Buy it, you moron,* she urged silently.

Violet hesitated. And then something shifted in her eyes and she shrugged.

"Okay," she said. "So, see you around."

It was all 2Face could do not to grin triumphantly.

"Yeah," she said sweetly. "See you around."

## CHAPTER 18

### *"I CARED ABOUT YOU."*

It was okay that he was going to die. There were far worse things. Like being awake and alone for five hundred years.

Besides, Mother wouldn't let anything hurt him. Not anymore.

Death would be different, though maybe not better or worse than where he was now. In a place between waking and sleeping, life and death.

A place in which Billy still needed — or maybe just enjoyed — companionship. He liked the voices of humans. Humans like Jobs and Mo'Steel. And Sanchez.

Billy sighed and felt his body unfurl ever so slightly.

When he was dead, he wouldn't need companionship. Maybe he wouldn't even remember it.

\* \* \*

It was easy to overpower D-Caf. He was down and out before he knew what had hit him.

Harder had been to steal Claw's tin-can-lid knife. The jagged, ultrathin blade was just the weapon 2Face needed to accomplish her goal.

Get rid of Billy.

And, as a consequence, stop the charade he'd concocted. A green world! 2Face hadn't believed it possible for a moment.

She stepped over the unconscious twitch and slunk inside the ruined ship. This time, she totally ignored the pile of bones and headed straight for the alcove in which she'd find her prey.

There was no sound but for the shush of ash under her feet and her own steady breathing. 2Face held the makeshift knife loosely in her hand and —

*"You never did learn, did you? It's like that old, old song. All you need is love. And all you had to do was listen."*

2Face whipped around to face the person who'd just spoken. But no one was there.

"Where are you?" she demanded. "Who's there?"

The response came readily.

*"It's me, 2Face. It's Tate."*

2Face darted toward the crumpled bones. They were still. No dancing skeleton like in a cheesy cartoon.

"Where are you?" 2Face demanded again, backing into the center of the ship.

The voice laughed, but not nastily. *"Oh, I'm here. And there. But I think the more important question is —"*

*"2Face!"*

2Face whipped around again, eyes darting through the gloom.

This voice was a man's. 2Face didn't recognize it at all.

"Stop playing tricks on me!" she shouted.

*"You came here to finish some business, didn't you?"* the voice boomed. *"Well, then, come on! Get it over with."*

Angrily 2Face rushed back toward Billy. He was still doing his magic act, hanging from invisible wires. With a cry of rage, 2Face thrust the knife through the golden humming glow —

And it was whipped from her hand, tossed away. And 2Face herself was lifted up and into the circle of light with Billy.

She felt her body recede from consciousness, her mind open, her heart bleed....

A face smiled....

*"Mommy? Is that..."*

*"Yes, Essence. It's me. Oh, my daughter, all you needed was to forgive. How did I fail that you so easily hardened your heart against me? Against the world?"*

*"I was angry. I was hurt I hated you."*

*"I cared about you."*

*"Really?"*

*"Really."*

*"I wanted to punish you."*

*"You only punished yourself."*

*"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."*

Tate's voice now, in her mind. From long, long ago. From now. From the future.

*"It's over,"* the voice said sadly.

2Face crumpled to the floor, an expression of rest spread evenly across both the beautiful and ugly sides of her face.

Violet noticed 2Face was missing. She went directly to Mo'Steel. Mo'Steel gathered Jobs, Sanchez, and Cocker. They entered the ruined ship. And found 2Face's body.

Worse, they found Billy, still in the golden glow, but now the glow was dull and Billy was lying on the floor in a fetal position. Sanchez determined that Billy was still alive, though weak, and stayed with him while the others removed 2Face from the ship.

Once outside, they placed her gently on the ashy ground, and Jobs told the gathering crowd about Billy.

"How do you think she died?" Noyze asked, her voice hushed.

Olga knelt and quickly examined the body. Finally, she stood and wiped her hands on her thighs. "No visible wounds. No signs of struggle on her, though there must have been some kind of — violence — in light of Billy's state." She shrugged. "I don't know. A heart attack, maybe."

"Maybe something frightened her," D-Caf suggested. "Maybe she died of shock?"

Noyze frowned. "But she looks so — peaceful. I never saw 2Face look like that when she was — here."

"Ain't that the truth," Jobs murmured.

"Could she have died of—of a broken heart?" D-Caf ventured now.

Violet laughed. "She had no heart to break."

"Now, come on," Olga admonished. "She wasn't all bad...."

"I didn't like her, you know," Violet said, matter-of-factly. "I didn't at first. I thought she was obnoxious, but I also admired her. She was tough and knew how to take care of herself. She knew how to be strong, and I wanted to learn that from her. But over time ... I came to hate her."

"2Face changed," Jobs said. "We all did."

"But not everybody changed for the worse, like 2Face did," Noyze said.

Violet laughed. It sounded bitter. "I wouldn't be too sure about that," she said.

Jobs frowned. Now didn't seem the time for acrimony.

"Look, I'm sorry," Violet apologized. "I'm in a bad mood. This isn't helping."

And what also wasn't helping. Jobs thought, was the very disturbing fact of Billy's having been — hurt, diminished — in whatever happened between him and 2Face.

Billy was supposed to be infallible. Perfect. Beyond damage or despair. Invulnerable.

But he wasn't. He'd survived 2Face's supposed attack but it had made him weak. Weaker than he needed to be to perform the regreening ritual? Jobs sincerely hoped not.

As painful as it was to admit, Jobs's ironclad faith in Billy's ability to save them all had been shaken. *It was the poet in me*, he told himself now, looking down at 2Face's lifeless body. *The poet I thought was long gone. The poet who believed in a weird little orphan from Chechnya via Texas.*

Who believed that a kid could save the world?

*Interesting*, Jobs thought, as he walked away from the others. *After all I've been through these past five hundred years, I'm still a romantic at heart.*

## CHAPTER 15

### "THE END OF THE WORLD IS SOMETHING BEYOND OUR CONTROL."

Mo'Steel just wanted to hang with his best bud, Jobs, just for a while, but it looked like that wasn't going to happen. Because Sanchez and Violet were striding toward them looking all grim and purposeful.

"I have something to tell j'ou," Sanchez said when they'd come to a stop.

Violet took a step closer to Sanchez. "We have something to tell you," she amended. "Something we should have told you before. But we had our reasons for keeping silent. But now, with what's happened to Billy ..."

Mo'Steel shot a glance at Jobs, who just shrugged. He did not like the sound of this. Couldn't one moment go by without some sort of crisis exploding in his face?

"What is it?" he said tensely.

Sanchez told them. He told them that if the regreening ritual didn't work, they'd all be dead, instantaneously.

"At least," Violet added hastily, when Sanchez had finished talking, "that's what Sanchez thinks Billy told him. Lately, Billy's not been so clear."

Mo'Steel waited thirty full seconds before losing it.

"Are you freakin' insane?" he shouted. He wasn't a guy who easily lost his temper, but this ... this was a damn good reason to blow. "There's only five hours left until Echo's birthday...."

Mo'Steel put his hands in the air as if in surrender. "Okay. All right. Let's just take it easy and figure this thing out."

"Could we stop Billy even if we tried?" Jobs wondered. "I'm not so sure. What if he's committed beyond our fears. Everything's in place.... Why should he stop now?"

"Maybe he can't stop, even if he wanted to," Violet suggested. "What if he's, I don't know, answering to a higher power or something?"

"The Source," Sanchez said softly.

"Billy is not the point here," Mo'Steel argued. "The point is the big picture. Do we withhold this information from the others? Do we have the right to withhold it? Man, I can't even begin to get around all the moral twists and turns in this scenario."

"We could put it to a vote," Jobs said, almost to himself. "Tell everyone what we know. Or think we know. Ask everyone to vote — go ahead with the ritual or call it off."

Violet shook her head. "It would only create panic. Maybe violence. And what if the vote is to call off the ritual and Billy goes along with that, and our lives continue to be awful? Then what? A month down the road people are furious that they missed the chance for a better life and they take it out on us. For giving them a choice."

"Sanchez, what do you think?" Mo'Steel asked.

"I would rather not answer," he said.

"I'm ordering you to."

"Then I say we say nothing. But j'ou are the leader We must do as j'ou say."

"Thanks for reminding me." Mo'Steel sighed. "Personally, I've never been one to bunny out. But I don't like the idea of dragging people along with me. Especially when they don't have all the info I do."

"If we all just die — so what?" Violet said fiercely. "No one will be to blame. The end of the world is something beyond our control. We should know that by now! We'll all just be — gone. No one will be around to blame us. There'll be no *us* to blame."

Mo'Steel looked up at the endless gray sky.

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

Echo walked purposely to the ruined entrance of the Source. Lumina lay gurgling happily in her arms. Then Sanchez appeared ahead of her, his eyes solemn but bright. Gently she placed the baby in his arms.

"Thanks to j'ou," he said softly and stepped inside, out of sight.

Echo stood and waited.

## EPILOGUE

"Tate! Come on, it's time for lunch!"

"In a minute. Daddy!" the little girl calls. "I found a whole lot of tadpoles!"

"Now!" Jobs turns from the open window and grins at his other daughter, the one born to Echo back in the Alpha colony's underground bunker Back In that other world. "Your sister is impossible," he says fondly.

Lumina, already taller than her mother, laughs. Her gray eyes are bright and clear Jobs thinks he sees the heavens in them.

"I'll go and get her," she says. "I might have to bribe her by offering a peach."

"Whatever it takes," Jobs says and suddenly he is his father, pretending to be exasperated by the demands of domestic life yet failing to hide his joy in his children. His own beloved father, dead now for so long.

"Jobs?"

He turns, smiling again.

It's Echo, standing by the rough-hewn table around which the family will eat their meal. In old-world reckoning, she and Jobs met for the first time almost ten years ago, just before Lumina's birth. Six years before Tate came along.

The sound of girlish laughter reaches their ears.

"J'ou knew to call her Lumina," Echo says, walking over to Jobs and slipping her hand into his. "J'ou knew she would know the light."

Jobs smiles and shakes his head. "If I did know," he laughs, "I didn't know that I knew. Make sense?"

"Nothing makes sense," Echo teases. She gives his hand a squeeze and goes back to setting the table.

Listening to his younger daughter's shouts of glee. Jobs remembers the first Tate with gratitude. Not for the first time he wishes that she was here to share with them all the newly born planet Earth. And on rare occasions, he even misses snotty ole Yago. And poor Kubrick. And ...

But there's still Mo'Steel and Noyze, and their son, Boyd. Another child is on the way.

Olga lives on her own in a tidy little home. She and Aga were inseparable until Aga passed away, the first to move on after the birth of the new world.

Violet and Sanchez are going to have their first child. Not surprisingly, Sanchez is viewed as the wise man in their community.

Edward, now sixteen or so in old-world reckoning, is no longer the Chameleon. The mutations some of their group had acquired have vanished. Now, everybody's just — human. Rarely does anyone refer to him- or herself as a Remnant or a Marauder or an Alpha. Jobs knows, of course, that the distinctions are there, but for the most part, people don't dwell on those distinctions.

Edward's been spending a lot of time with Grost, who seems to have blossomed under the influence of kindness. On the other hand, Nesia, once 2Face's nemesis, hasn't changed at all.

Newton's long gone. No one's seen him since the night he tried to kidnap Lumina.

Lyric and Mattock share a home with their three small children. Mattock and Olga share what work there is tending to physical ills and complaints. Lyric is the community's historian.

Badger and Yorka are inseparable. Noyze has taught them both sign language and they spend hours talking about the wonders of their world.

Occasionally, Mo'Steel and Cocker strike out to explore beyond their small community. They still hope to find those Alphas who refused the call to the Source. Or the Savagers. So far, they've found no one.

On the whole, it's a contented group.

On the whole.

Jobs knows that nothing lasts forever. That's a lesson he'll never forget. So while life is good, he enjoys it. Every single moment of it.

And he tries not to let memories overwhelm the here and now.

Especially memories about Billy.

Billy didn't survive the regreening ritual. Jobs wasn't surprised, but still, he misses Billy in a way he knows no one else does.

So — what's the value of this new world? There are no great works of art and no fast-food joints, and there's virtually no technology and nobody has an SUV. But there is food and water and day and night and the warmth of the sun and the cool of the breeze.

What there isn't, is war. Yet. Squabbles, sure. Big abusive government? No. Normal human weaknesses like jealousy and greed? Of course.

The world as Jobs knew it from the great scientists hasn't started over. Evolution? Jobs has no idea how this place works, or why. Where did the cows come from? The ants that eat his lettuce? Sometimes, in his more whimsical moments, Jobs wonders if it's all a dream. Or if this is a form of heaven he'd never considered. Which means that maybe he's really dead....

*Which is okay.* Jobs thinks, watching his daughters run toward him, laughing. *Because wherever they all really are and however it all really works, it's all good.*