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# The Mother

Aurora Ruá



Illustrated by Laia Ferraté

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# The Mother

**Aurora Ruá**

Illustrated by **Laia Ferraté**

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# 1

Nebu would never forget the first time he visited the Academy. His mother accompanied him to the entrance, a great hollow in the rock wall, through which he could see a large, well-lit space, from whence came the chatter of many screeching voices. He felt intimidated and gripped his mother's hand tightly. He wasn't used to crowds. The Academy housed almost a hundred apprentices, from twelve to sixteen years old, hailing from every corner of the Colony. He had barely slept for the last few nights due to the excitement. At his primary school with Professor Croci, there had only been about twelve students, amongst whom were his friend Marduc and the latter's little sister, Ayelen, so the thought of having so many classmates gave him a kind of vertigo, a strange butterfly-like feeling in his insides.

The Academy, located in the centre of the Colony, was the common destination for all







children once they finished their primary education. Births were ever rarer, which had drastically reduced the number of students in recent generations, and only the oldest teachers could nostalgically recall the years when the Academy housed hundreds of children who ran to and fro and filled the classrooms and walkways with their shouts and laughter.

However, for Nebu, more than ten people in one place was already a terrifying crowd. He felt his heart beating fast and beads of sweat trickling down his spine.

‘You must be Nebu,’ said a teacher coming out to meet him.

‘Yes, sir. From Sector Four, a student of Professor Croci’s,’ replied his mother.

‘I’ve heard good things about you,’ added the teacher. ‘I’m Professor Samin and I’ll be your tutor for the first few years.’

Nebu looked up and examined Samin’s angular face, with its strong cheekbones and prominent nose. But what made his jaw drop was noticing, on top of his head, a full crop of brown hair.

‘You like it?’ laughed the teacher, ruffling his own hair.

‘Nebu!’ his mother scolded him, tugging him gently by the arm for his lack of discretion.

‘Don’t worry,’ continued Samin, downplaying the importance of Nebu’s stupefaction. ‘It’s normal. Have you ever seen someone like me, Nebu?’

Nebu shook his head.

‘Well, yes,’ he remembered quickly. ‘Once, a long time ago, at the market in Gran Caverna, I saw a man with dark hair on his head.’

‘You see, Nebu, remnants of days gone by. Thousands of years ago, it was totally normal to have dark hair on your head, your limbs and even on your face. And even red hair, too, like a golden mole. Can you imagine? White hair, like yours, like the majority of people’s, is the result of evolution, of adaptation to the environment. Soon we’ll study that in class.

‘Like the strong hands of the sappers, the ones who live in the northern colony?’

‘Exactly, like the powerful hands of the sappers, who have come to have that exceptional build after many generations of digging tunnels and passages with their own hands. Anyway, say goodbye to your mum. Today begins an exciting chapter for you: new friends and many

discoveries. You shouldn't be afraid; in no time we'll make a great wise man out of you,' joked the teacher, putting an arm around his shoulder and leading him into the Academy's entrance hall.

'I don't know if I want to be a wise man, sir. Professor Croci always said a wise man is more afraid than an ignorant one.'

Samin laughed hard and waved goodbye to Nebu's mother.

'Professor Croci is a wise man, indeed... Come on, let's find your friend Marduc who has already arrived. I'll introduce you to the rest of your first-year classmates.'

Samin led him to a classroom through various passageways, trying to calm down the endless curious faces who surrounded them asking who he was. Nebu was overwhelmed, he had never seen so many children in one place. Then, he noticed a girl with very pale, shiny white skin who, from a corner, was staring at him with enormous eyes. Nebu looked at her hands and noticed that a thin, translucent membrane connected her fingers. She was an Anura<sup>1</sup>! What

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1 Anura: Name of the group who populated the aquifers, a human race who evolved, thanks to inhabiting the

was an Anura doing here? He had seen Anuras sometimes in the market, but he didn't know that any lived in the Colony.

Professor Samin was right: it was going to be a chapter full of discoveries.

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water for centuries, to develop some amphibian features. They are characterised by their white skin due the lack of pigmentation (as most aquifers remain in darkness), their webbed fingers and toes, to facilitate their movement in the water, and by the breathing, both through lungs and gills. (Extract quoted from the *Encyclopaedia of the Colony*).

## 2

‘Thousands of years ago, explained Samin to a classroom full of first-years, ‘as you know, humans lived on the surface. They gathered in groups of thousands or even millions, in gigantic colonies called *cities* and they managed to develop some very advanced technology, which we still benefit from today: think, for example, of the energy generators in Sector One, without which we could not survive. We conserve some relics of their ancient civilisations in our museum, which, I’m sure, you will have visited at some point.

‘I’ve never been, sir,’ said Durga, the Anura with shiny white skin.

‘Me neither,’ added a small, thin boy called Isai.

‘Don’t worry,’ continued the teacher. We’ll organise a trip and I’ll show you its wonders: machines, clothes they covered their bodies with, furniture and utensils for their homes, lenses to

protect their eyes...an endless array of curious objects. But, as your primary teachers will have told you, then came the Great Devastation: the surface of the planet heated up until it reached a temperature incompatible with life, most species of animals and crops disappeared, lethal diseases spread and the water levels rose until they covered most of the Earth. The only alternative for the survivors were the underground colonies, and that's where our world began, dug and built below ground for hundreds of years.

'Professor Croci told us that it was humans themselves that caused the Great Devastation, because of their poor managing of natural resources,' said Marduc.

'That's right, Marduc. Man forgot that he was not but another element within a global ecosystem, of group of living beings intimately related and interdependent. They forgot that their own survival was dependent on a delicate natural balance between all the creatures on the planet. The actions of an overpopulated and out-of-control human community brought about climate change with irreversible effects.'

'Does *irreversible* mean 'forever and ever'?' asked Isai.

‘Irreversible, at least for hundreds, thousands of years. Some say the effects of solar radiation on the surface have lessened, and that the Jerboas’ excursions are becoming less dangerous. However, if you look closely at the Jerboas, at their skin covered in sores and ulcers, you will see that the damage remains.

Nebu shuddered thinking about the Jerboas, the inhabitants of the Limit, the part of the caves and passages just below the surface and, instinctively, he stroked the small wooden amulet in the shape of a mole which hung from his neck.

The Jerboas (named after the small rodents who lived in the passages closest to the surface) entered and left the Colony through corridors and tunnels unknown to the rest, during the night, to protect themselves from the sun. They carried out maintenance tasks on the external installations, such as cleaning the air vents and skylights, and stocking the Colony up on fruits, honey and wood from the exterior. They traded these products with merchants in the Colony for *Hydnellum caeruleum*, or blue truffle<sup>2</sup>, a fleshy

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2 *Hydnellum caeruleum* or blue truffle: A fleshy mushroom/fungus in the shape of a potato and with a strong

fungus in high-demand due to its scarcity and which, apparently, was very popular among the Jerboas. From time to time, they also brought back relics from the ancient civilisations that they found in the exterior, genuine treasures which they sold for a very good price.

Nebu had come across Jerboas on a couple of occasions. The first time, he remembered it well, he met one of them was on a morning, on his way to school. Focused on his usual journey, he had greeted them matter-of-factly, as he would anyone, and it was only when he had gone past them that he realised he'd just said hello to a Jerboa as if it were an everyday occurrence. They were easy to tell apart from the Colonists, who wore only thin, white, silk tunics, while the Jerboas dressed from head to toe in the hides of small surface-dwelling mammals and covered their heads with large hoods that barely let you

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smell, covered with a fine blue-coloured coating. It grows in the roots of some evergreen trees native to dry climates, such as the olive or the carob tree. It is a wild fungus, impossible to cultivate systematically, which means that its scarcity increases its market value... (Extract quoted from the *Encyclopaedia of the Colony*).



see their faces. The Jerboa seemed surprised by the greeting, accustomed as he must have been to people avoiding looking at his repulsive appearance or ignoring his very presence, as if he were invisible.

The second time he came across one of them was in the Gran Caverna market. While his mother haggled over the price of some clay plates, Nebu went behind, to the back of the potter's stall to browse the selection of crockery. Then, he saw him, sat resting against the rock wall, with his head uncovered, fiddling with something concentratedly. Nebu crouched down and, half-hidden behind some large pots, he watched what he was doing: he was whittling a small piece of wood with a knife. The Jerboa noticed his presence and stopped carving. He was just a boy, with long brown hair on his head. He couldn't say how long they were looking at each other for; probably just a few seconds. Nebu noticed his burnt face, his hands cracked by radiation. The Jerboa sat up, ready to go, and just as he passed by Nebu's side, before covering his head with his hood and disappearing among the crowd, he left behind a tiny piece of wood carved in the shape of a mole and smiled at him.



### 3

The Gran Caverna market was held on the last day of every month and was the meeting place for all the Colonists. Hundreds of years ago, when the Colony had many more inhabitants, several markets were set up at the same time in different places, in order to serve the vast population. Now, on the other hand, with its great decline due to the lack of births, they only put on this one in Gran Caverna, a central location in Sector One. It was a gathering place for merchants, sometimes even coming from other colonies, who imported their goods through long and dangerous routes in order to sell them or trade them for local products. At the Gran Caverna market, you could get anything: fine *Lycosa*<sup>3</sup>

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3 *Lycosa*: Arachnid arthropod that can reach up to four or five meters long with its legs outstretched. Native to the underground of the southern colonies, it has been reared by colonists since early times, in large livestock

silk tunics, utensils and copper wire, Caveworm<sup>4</sup> humus, pyrite for making fire and even small mammals which were sold as pets.

The latter, specifically, was the main attraction for children and the reason why they tended to go with their parents, to see what surprising animals the foreign colonists had brought that day. On their visits, Nebu had seen snakes of many colours, small bats, beetles which shone like emeralds, luminous frogs and beautiful moles with soft fur. Nebu often asked his parents to buy him one of those

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farms, in order to collect its silk and produce fabrics from it, which are characterised by their resistance and elasticity... (Extract quoted from the *Encyclopaedia of the Colony*).

- 4 Caveworm: giant species of worm native to the south. It lives deep down and feeds on decomposing organic material. It digs tunnels and produces humus, highly valued in agriculture as a nutrient for crops. It is hermaphrodite and reproduces by laying eggs. The average size of an fully-grown specimen is around twenty metres long. Its skin has countless uses, the foremost being in the manufacturing of clothes and as a writing support. The skin is put through a stretching process which eventually produces the sheets which books are made from. (Extract quoted from the *Encyclopaedia of the Colony*).

moles, but they refused. The sellers asked for extortionate prices for the animals and they frequently didn't survive more than a few days with the change of habitat, unable to adapt. His parents had suggested he look in Sector One, the closest to the surface, where the plantations and crops were. It wasn't unusual to find small lizards or insects there which had come down from the exterior. But Nebu didn't really like the cold lizards and trapping insects, small spiders or scorpions in a jar was even less appealing. He thought it was a cruel practice and there was little or no bond he could establish with those poor captive creatures.

The day that Isai told them in the Academy that he had a small bat as a pet, Nebu couldn't believe it and he thought that must have been the height of good fortune.

'Come to my house one day to meet it,' Isai insisted. 'He's called Titan.'

Isai lived in Sector One and came from a family of mycologists. Mycologists collect fungi which grow in the vaults of the caverns closest to the surface, at great altitudes, attached to the roots of the giant trees which grew in the forest

there, at surface level. Amongst all the crops in the Colony, mushrooms were the most valuable, being a food source of high nutritional value and rich in vitamins which the Colonists couldn't get into their bodies any other way. The mushrooms strengthened their immune systems and prevented diseases. Due to their importance, there were numerous mushroom plantations in Sector One, huge caverns with ceilings covered in roots which cut through the earth and rock and hung there, up high, like curtains of long fingers.

The mycologists passed down their skills from parents to children. Despite their frail appearance, they had extraordinary agility and strength. They climbed the rock wall until reaching the roots and, jumping onto them, they hung there and passed from one to another, collecting mushrooms on the way, with the ease of a spider.

The day Nebu and Marduc went to visit Isai in Sector One and he took them to the plantation and showed them, pointing upwards, how the mycologists worked, hundreds of metres above the ground, they were very impressed.

‘It must be done with a lot of caution,’ explained Isai. ‘You should only pick the ones which are ripe. The smaller ones still need the nutrients the tree gives them and it, in turn, takes in other substances, given to it by the mushroom.’

‘An exchange or symbiosis,’ whispered Nebu, looking up, jaw open.

‘That’s it: they are interdependent organisms. We mustn’t forget that unless we want to end up like our surface ancestors. See those big roots there? They’re from a mother tree that is sending nutrients to the offshoots all around it, so, for a few years, we can’t touch them.’

‘Incredible,’ said Marduc. ‘And have you never fallen or had any accidents? I don’t want to think about the drop from up there.’

‘A few,’ replied Isai. ‘That’s why our parents collect with us until we are skilled enough. The littlest ones are carried on their backs, so they lose their fear of heights and can be taught which fungi are good and which aren’t. Then, for a few years, our parents come with us and keep us tied to their waist with a rope, and, only when they can see we

are ready, do they let us go collecting by ourselves and they hand us our own knife,' he explained, taking out from his belt the small, curved knife he always carried with him. 'Anyway, look closely, Marduc: about ten metres above our heads there's a net made of *Lycosa* silk. Can you see it?'

'Wow, you're right, now I see it. It's almost transparent. Amazing...'

'And comforting,' added Nebu. 'But does that thin spiderweb really take a person's weight? Have you tested it?'

'I can assure you, it is incredibly strong. And sticky. I'd never want to be stuck in one of those, in a real *Lycosa* web. Right, let's go home. My mum wants to meet you. I think she's prepared something to eat.'

After the visit was over and on their way home, Nebu and Marduc commented that Isai was probably the luckiest kid in the Colony: Titan had turned out to be an adorable creature, a small albino bat who slept by day and became active at night, and who beat about the ceiling until they let him outside. Isai was sure that Titan visited the surface every night, that he knew tunnels and chimneys which took him







there: some mornings he came back with traces of mud on his tiny snout.

‘Did you see how he came over when Isai whistled?’ asked Marduc, impressed.

‘Yeah...how I wish I had my own pet.’

‘I’ve already got my sister Ayelen as a pet. Trust me, that’s enough, she’s such a pain...’ joked Marduc.

‘How’s she getting on in primary school?’

‘The usual, with old Croci, playing and singing all day...not much studying.’

‘I wish I was still in primary school.’

‘Why? Are you joking?’

‘I don’t know...seeing Isai so sure about what he’ll do in the future...and you, you’ve always known you want to be a geologist and constructor...me, on the other hand, I don’t know what I’m going to do in life... I don’t know what I’m good for, I don’t have any special abilities.’

‘You don’t have any special abilities? You’re the most brilliant person I know, the teachers’ favourite, the one who knows the most and has read the most books. So what if you don’t know what you want to do yet? What’s the rush? You can choose from countless paths! When the time comes, you’ll know which one to take.’

‘You think so?’

‘I’m sure, Nebu,’ replied Marduc, putting his arm around his friend’s shoulder. ‘Yep, you’re brilliant...but sometimes very stupid,’ he teased.

## 4

Professor Samin took them to see the Colony Library. Nebu was left gobsmacked. It was an enormous circular hall with a transparent covering, more than ten metres above their heads, which let light from the exterior filter through. It was full of tables and the hall opened out into other, smaller rooms, at various heights and organised by disciplines: geography, geology, botany, zoology, medicine, engineering... All the knowledge in the Colony gathered together in thousands of volumes on countless shelves carved into the rock.

‘Let’s go into this room, for example,’ said the teacher, ‘the engineering room. Here, in turn, everything is arranged by theme: construction, utilities, piping, agricultural engineering... Do you see? Any book you wish to consult has a reference on the spine. You note it down and you request it from the librarian, Professor Itati, who will lend it to you. The books cannot be



taken out of here, but you can consult them for as long as necessary at any of the study tables.’

Samin introduced them to Professor Itati, who turned out to be a tiny, elderly woman, shrivelled by the passing of time. From a distance, she looked like a girl who walked a bit clumsily. But close up, her face, furrowed with an infinity of thin wrinkles, and her sunken eyes, almost covered by her eyelids which hung down like half-drawn curtains, revealed her to be very old. She still had some strands of wispy hair scattered about her head, which she tied up in a bun at the back and through which you could practically see her skull. Even though she gave the impression that a gust of wind might take her away, the librarian had, perhaps in her voice, her way of talking or her expression, an authority which was hard to explain.

‘We’ll have to drag Nebu out of here, Professor Itati,’ joked Marduc.

‘For sure,’ Nebu replied. ‘There’s so much, I don’t know where to start.’

‘What do you like the most, Nebu?’ asked the librarian.

‘Everything!’

‘Then start anywhere,’ she said, taking out a

book at random from a shelf in front of her and handing it to Nebu.

‘Genetics and evolution,’ he read out loud, looking over the graphics and illustrations printed on the thin sheets of Caveworm skin. ‘Wow... yes, this is interesting. Can I request it already, miss?’

‘Of course. At the end of the class, it’s all yours.’

‘I’m telling you now, he’ll end up sleeping here...’ laughed Marduc.

‘Look,’ Durga pointed at one of the pages, ‘the Anuras. My people are an example of evolution and adaptation to the environment, right, miss?’

‘Of course, one of the most advanced ones.’

‘And why do you live here, in the Colony, so far from the aquifers?’ asked Eria, a chatty girl with a bit of a cheek, looking at Durga. ‘Where’s your family?’

‘Eria!’ scolded Samin. ‘That’s a question that Durga might not want to answer.’

‘It’s okay, sir. I’m used to that question, I’ve been asked it many times. My father is a colonist, like all of you,’ she explained, ‘but my mother was an Anura. She passed away when I was little.’



A brief silence fell over the class while the children tried to take in this information. They had never imagined that it might be possible for individuals from both communities to breed together.

‘And can you swim like a fish?’ asked Isai.

‘For me it’s as easy as walking. Maybe more so,’ replied Durga, smiling. ‘Let’s go to Osman lake one day for a swim and I’ll show you.’

‘Yes!’ everyone clapped enthusiastically. ‘Let’s go one day, sir!’

‘Okay, okay, we’ll organise a trip...’

Then the teacher stopped talking and looked down in surprise. They felt a slight tremor beneath their feet and a buzz vibrated all around them. Everything started to move, more and more powerfully. Books and scrolls began to fall off shelves and children cried out in fright. The floor appeared to have gone wild and they clung on to the first thing they could to try to stay standing. The buzz became louder and louder, until becoming a thunderous roar, then, suddenly, just when it seemed like everything was going to come crashing down on top of them, it stopped.

‘Is everyone alright?’ asked Samin, who was helping those who had fallen to their feet.

‘Anther earthquake, sir?’ Nebu asked, trembling.

‘Seems so. This one was stronger than the last ones. Come on, lets go back to the Academy. Let’s hope there’s been no damage.’

‘Could the Colony withstand a big earthquake like the one three-hundred years ago, sir?’

‘We have to trust in the work of our engineers, Nebu. It’s our only option.’

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

In the Colony, everyone is convinced that they are the only survivors after the Great Devastation. Young Nebu and her friends think so, too, until what was an ordinary trip turns into an exciting odyssey of discovery and adventure.

**In *The Mother*, Nebu and her friends will take on an inhospitable and dangerous world, and face challenges they could never have imagined. Will you join them on their journey into the unknown?**

**Aurora Ruá** began writing at a young age. She divides her professional activity between writing and illustrating children's books. Her work includes *The glass collectors*, *Drawings on the wall* and *Central Station*.

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