

# Nothing to

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Father traded his life savings for this hole in the waste-recycling compartment. Of course there's not much space. Anela, Soulness, and I are getting cramped arms and stiff necks, we're steeping in each other's hot breath. But we couldn't have asked for more from our old man. Trembling, he placed the two mega-credits in the spaceport attendant's gloved hands. He trembled because he feared our trip would be thwarted and we'd have no chance at a second escape; he trembled because his dream of sending us away from that hellhole and back to the origin was finally coming true; he trembled because his mining fever was consuming his peripheral nerves.

He couldn't even say good-bye to us. The day before the freighter left, they shipped him off with his team to the new mines some seven miles north of the old mining homestead, where earthquakes had ripped open fresh veins of tin. Fortunately, no one will ever make us "lick" them again. We no longer have to fear the eruptions on Io's mining farms that scorched our skin, or the plumes of sulfur that burned our eyes and soured our lungs.

Now Io is below us, behind us, like the spherical prison of a thousand famished dragons locked in a never-ending battle. This freighter is wrenching us from its jaws forever . . . and away from Father's never-failing goodnight kisses. We're bound for Earth to see for ourselves that

it's not just some fairy tale we've heard since our eyes opened to Io's red sky. As descendants of settlers turned slaves, of slaves turned "automats," cheaper and more vulnerable than the cyborgs, we have no way out of this flaming nightmare other than in the waste compartments of freighters that transport minerals and prime materials from the outer colonies to Earth.

Earth, the object of our great-grandfather's delirious nostalgia after he abandoned it for his pipe dream of prosperity. His sole legacy to us was the constant struggle to survive in a world forever collapsing beneath our feet. And the same nostalgia. Over and over, Anela draws a city with white towers and streaming flags set on a green lake, she fills the sky with birds as if they were snowflakes. She says that's how our great-grandfather described it to Grandfather, and how Grandfather described it to Father, and how Father described it to her; it's just like where our ancestors lived, the place we've been longing for.

Anela is sleeping now, nestled against my shoulder, and from time to time she murmurs, repeating the word she can't forget, even in her dreams: snow. The snow on Earth, white like the commander's teeth, cold like methane crystals. Now Soulness is telling me that Anela is very hot, hotter than lava, and that instead of talking in her sleep, she might be delirious. She's hungry, I say. We have just enough food for one ration a day. My belly is rumbling, too. I try to distract Soulness and Anela by talking about that thing Father heard about from his grandfather, a kind of snow that you eat—I think it's called ice cream. We'll buy some for Anela with our first paychecks, I say. The Production Ring encircling Earth has people from every colony, including Io. I know someone will help us out, just like Father promised. But Soulness seems restless, and starts to complain that he feels sick, like he's about to throw up. He's only a child, after all—the two years between us make a big difference. He asks if we can find a place with more air. He thinks that if we can find other "slick fish" they might be able to give us some medicine. I say it's more likely that they'll rob us blind and kill us, simply out of fear of being discovered. But Soulness whines and whines and my temples are about to explode.

We leave the recycling compartment and carefully follow the path the commander showed us before sneaking us into our hiding place. We're scared the freighter is infested with cyber-guards controlling the corridors, that they'll detect us and alert the helm. Up there, the clean,

well-fed voyagers are enjoying a view of our slow approach to Earth. One day I'll be the commander of a freighter—or even better, a civil cruiser. And I'll always be the first to see her, robed in blue and white like the bride of the heavens. But for now, we're stowaways, and no slick fish ever travels in first class. The freighter is carrying iron, tin, and sulfur to the Production Ring. It's a regular shipment, so there won't be any customs checks. Nothing to declare. Just the goods and us, holding fast to the moving containers. I hope our old oxygen masks will hold up for the one-hundred-and-thirty feet of void during ejection to the warehouses.

I look at Soulness again. He's sweating buckets and his labored breath is hot against my ears. Anela squirms in my arms and whimpers. I can feel the weight of her four years, even if she's mostly bone; her little brown face is drenched in sweat. I, on the other hand, feel a deep chill and a weariness that keeps my feet pegged to the floor. Soulness squeezes my arm and says he gives up; he's too weak to go on. I say we can rest, but I won't open another food packet. I'm the oldest, and I have to enforce our schedule. Speaking of enforcement, I'm surprised by the low lighting in the corridors, by the lack of cyber-guards, and by the fact that we haven't come across any other slick fish after nearly an hour of wandering this labyrinth. Soulness seizes up, doubles over, and vomits. We know nothing about the effects of this journey, but they say it's normal for first-timers to get sick. Anela is still limp in my arms and doesn't even try to join in when I sing one of her favorite songs: *Mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow* . . . Or was it a little calf? Same thing. Anela sleeps and whimpers. Soulness, white as a sulfur plume but feeling relieved, wants to try his luck with the door at the end of the corridor. He thinks it might lead to the bodegas where we can find provisions. He goes off to investigate, led by his little blinking flashlight, while I cover Anela with my jacket. Blue circles are forming under my sister's eyes. My heart is seized by something frigid, and I recognize the cold fingers of fear.

After a while Soulness staggers back, his eyes like the double full moons of Jupiter in Io's sky. His dirty and trembling body seems twice as old as its eight years. I barely manage to pry the words from his lips, which are rigid with terror. They're all dead in there . . . the four slick fish kids who were traveling in the hygiene compartment. They're decomposing, and their bones look like they're melting, and their skin—Shut up, I whisper through my teeth. Don't scare Anela. But he knows I believe him and that our sister isn't listening. Her little face with its absent expression is

fading into the darkness.

I thrust Anela into my brother's arms. I'm going to find someone from the crew. Let them send me back to Io or some other extraction colony. I just want to save my sister. To save us all. Soulness lets out a moan and I snarl back at him. I grab him by his collar still wet with his own bile, and my fingers get caught in his long hair. A chunk of it falls out in my hand like a strand of shadow. I have to go find help.

I race through corridors barely lit by the reflection of some hidden source against the synth-metal that converts the darkness to shadows. At the helm there's no navigator—just a cyber-console—and all the seats are empty. There's not a single human on the ship besides us. There aren't even automats, or food, or medicine, because there's no crew that would use them.

I go back for Anela and Soulness. Just as I'm passing what looks like the doors to the bodega, a reflective red sign painted on the synth-metal catches my eye. I don't know how to read—none of us do—but I recognize the shape of old propeller blades inside a triangle, the foreboding barred circle with a black skull. Now I understand: this isn't a freighter loaded with metal and byproducts bound for Earth. We're traveling with toxic waste from the other colonies to another planet . . . probably Venus, the solar landfill. I suddenly remember all those times I saw freighters dock at Io and take off with slick fish from the satellite's Equatorial Station. They, like us, would never know whether Earth is as blue as people say.

Anela and Soulness are still conscious. Anela looks at me with eyes like lunar eclipses and stretches out her arms. I help Soulness to his feet and support his trembling body against my shoulder. Let's go to the helm, I say. Soulness murmurs something about finding help. We'll be OK up there, I tell him, it's the best place to receive our welcome from Earth, robed in blue and white like the cosmic bride of Time. Soulness barely manages to force his purple lips into a smile. Anela has fallen asleep again, maybe for the last time.

At the helm, I help Soulness into a seat. I sit beside him, with Anela in my arms, and hold his icy hand. Maybe this is where the commander used to sit, back when this freighter brought life to Earth. I imagine myself as him, delivering my brother, my sister, my father, and all of Io's children to

the city with the white towers on a green lake. I fight the permanent sleep that's overtaking me. I want to see Earth . . . just long enough to wink at her . . . We'll be passing by . . . with nothing to declare.

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