

## Vanilla Cake

I remember that day clearly. I was eleven years old, and my mom was staring at a video on her phone. She had been doing this a lot lately. Sometimes she would even cry, the salty tears trailing down her cheeks.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

She sighed and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“Oh, nothing Aizina sweetie.” She smiled. My mom looked at me with her deep brown eyes, and I could feel her breath on my face, catching a waft of vanilla from her hair.

“We are going to live on a big ship in the sky. It’s difficult to live here, so we have to.” She could tell I was sad already, and tried to cheer me up. “Don’t worry, your friends will be there too.” Laughing brightly at my seemingly trivial worries, my mom hugged me close and pulled me into the kitchen to make the last vanilla cake I thought we would ever have together on the Earth’s surface.

“Aizina, you have to have this mask on all the time, do you understand?”

“Yes, mom.”

“Good.” She kissed my forehead and opened the door, letting in dim yellow sunlight and smoky air. I took her hand, walking together down the dust-covered steps of our apartment. At the car, my mom opened the door and clicked my seatbelt in. The seat cushion hissed as my mom sat down and pulled her own seat belt over her shoulder. Key in the ignition, the car shuddered to life, choking on exhaust and jerking into reverse. We drove on the road for 30

minutes, my mom constantly glancing at me in the backseat as if I would disappear. We reached a rural area with a large white sign, which read, “Expeditionary Departures 4B.”

My mom parked in an empty parking lot, save for a few cars nearby, and quickly got out of the car to unbuckle me.

“We have to hurry, Aizina.” I had never seen my mom so anxious before. In an instant, it seemed like all the wrinkles she had never gotten decided today was the perfect moment to appear. I struggled to keep up with my mom’s long strides and was out of breath by the time we reached the glass doors. She picked me up in her arms and shouted for the doors to open.

“Please! Somebody? I need two Delta spots. I’ll pay.”

There was a buzz, and then an ominous mechanized voice. “How much?”

My head against her breast, I could feel her heart beat faster. “1 million.”

The voice, sentient, contemplated its next move. “I’ll need a lil’ more.”

I coughed, and my mom looked alarmed. “I only have 1 million... and my car. Would that be enough?”

“How’s the tanker?”

“Three-quarters full with another refill in the trunk.”

“I’ll take it,” the voice said as the doors squeaked open. “Line is down the hall and to the left. Watch out for your kid, ‘specially.” It continued its narration. “You don’t know what people here are up to. Ever since the last river was polluted and disappear’d, they’ve been goin’ hysterical over water.”

“I’ll watch out then.” She held me a bit closer. We waited in the back of the line, and an older woman turned around to greet us.

“It’s a shame your little girl won’t have the chance to see the ocean like I did. It used to be the prettiest sight you could see. There was blue everywhere, the salty breeze in the air, the seaweed wrapping around your legs...” She went on like this for a while. “The way we are now, no amount of cleaning could save the planet.” The woman chuckled, somehow finding it funny.

“Mhm.” My mom needed to satisfy the chatterbox, but I could tell she didn't like talking to strangers.

The line moved forward and we entered our Delta shuttle. Once everyone was inside, the administrators called out names and stated the procedure. “Put on your belts.” The clicking of belts resounded around the room. In a short while, we did a few test runs and then we were all transported to the ports of the ship.

On that ship, *Eternity*, was where I started to really grow up. But two years later, my mom disappeared on a scouting mission to the surface, and never came back. I myself have been training to become a scout ever since, and I plan to find her today.

Today is my first real mission ever since I completed the scout program a week ago. Lleulio, my partner, graduated the same time as me. He is horrible at math but he is, unbelievably, a whiz at chemistry.

“Are you excited?” Lleulio asked as he caught my smile. We were walking down the corridor, helmets in hand and suits on, ready to explore the forgotten world we once knew.

“Of course! And you?”

Lleulio looked away nervously. “A bit scared.”

“Don’t worry, everything is going to be fine. Anything goes wrong, I’m here, right?” I nudged his side with my elbow.

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Only you calm me down, Aizina.” We went into our separate pods and dropped onto the surface below.

The pods burst open and a spray gathered on my visor. The view was not what I expected. Embedded in the rocks were bits of colored plastic, the waters doused with oil and chunks of netting and plastic flowing on the waves’ edges. I thought I could be able to see seabirds, crabs, and beautiful shells on the shore. But all I could see was a dull blue gray ocean touching the even grayer sky. There was nothing beautiful about it.

“Aizina, I’ve picked something up nearby. Let’s check it out.” Lleulio walked straight ahead.

We got closer to what seemed to be a metal cage until we got closer and realized it was a cart. I picked off chrome flakes with my finger, revealing a rusty wound underneath. “Lleulio, want this beamed to the ship?”

He studied it closely. “Yeah, just—” A steady beeping from his radar interrupted him.

As I was punching in the keys, a strong gust of wind blew the cart into me and I felt the point pierce into my side. I fell over into the water and screamed; the acidic ocean water was burning my suit.

The beeping got faster. “Aizina, we have to go now!” Lleulio grabbed my hand and pulled me up as we ran back to our pods. My oxygen valve burst and I fell onto the sand, cracking my visor. My vision became blurry and dark.

“Aizina!” Lleulio ran back towards me, but suddenly stopped, horror on his face as he looked at something behind me. He fell onto the sand screaming, backpedaled and jumped in his own pod. As his engines started, I choked on my breath and blacked out.

I awoke, my lungs slightly burning, smelling smoky air before I opened my eyes. It was dim, except for a small gas lamp in the corner of the room on an old wooden dresser. I hadn't seen that material, even a tree, for a long time. Throwing off woolen blankets, I noticed walls of coated steel with beams running across.

“Awake already, Aizina?” The familiar voice of my mom called from the darkness.

“Mom? Where are you?”

“I'm here, don't worry. But... I can't show myself to you.”

“Why not? I don't care, you're my mom! You'll always be beautiful to me.”

“I'm glad I taught you well, love.” She laughed. “Aizina... don't be scared, okay?”

I nodded, staring at the figure in the dim light. “I won't be.”

The figure leaned forward, a golden glow hitting its face on one side. I stifled a gasp. Patches of shedding hair, blistering sores all over the face and arms, a stained uniform. But my mother's familiar brown eyes got to me, and I knew it was her.

“What happened? You look like a...”

“Yes, a monster... It's the air, Aizina. Everything on the surface, it's all contaminated. I couldn't believe it, but it's even worse than when we first left. You saw the ocean, didn't you?”

“I did.”

“Then you know that it’s too late for humanity to change its ways. On the *Eternity*, everything was so clean, right? But really, all our waste was being dumped down here. We treated the planet as a landfill even after we left.” After a pause, she resumed. “I think no matter how I look... even if I look like *this*, the rest of humanity are the real monsters.”

“Monsters.” I repeated, rolling the word around in my mind.

My mom shifted, then stood up and smiled. “Let’s make something.”

We walked into the kitchen together, hand in hand, and enjoyed a last slice of vanilla cake; a delicate light yellow, it resembled the shade of Earth’s dim, dying sun. Its last golden ray rested on a lonely cart, the tides pulling it into the impenetrable depths.