

# THE LIGHTS GO OUT, ONE BY ONE

Kofi Nyameye

**Much to his parents' dismay, Kofi Nyameye (@KofiNyameye) quit school—twice—to focus on his dream of becoming a speculative fiction author. He currently lives and writes in Accra, Ghana. Kofi's work has appeared in *The Manchester Review*, *Cracked.com*, and *The Naked Convos*. In his first tale for *Asimov's*, the author forces us to face the unthinkable when . . .**

## THE LIGHTS GO OUT, ONE BY ONE

They told us emerging from cryosleep was like surfacing from the depths of a clear lake on a perfect summer's day: a peaceful ascent from deep unconsciousness, delivering us once again to the land of the living. Almost like being reborn.

They were wrong. Emerging from cryosleep is like waking up from a bad dream. You fight your way toward alertness as your brain realizes you're breathing liquid and panics, but at the same time a part of you wants to stay down, stay asleep, find out just how deep the dream goes.

That, at least, is how it is for me.

The cryosleep pod fits around my body like a coffin. The minutes I spend in darkness waiting for the liquid perfluorocarbons to drain out of my lungs and leave my body able to breathe air once more are some of the longest minutes of my life. Within this time, my disorientation fades. I remember who I am, where I am, why I'm here.

Who I am: an employee of the United World Government, Deep Space Division. This I have been since I was born. I do not know how, or what it means, to be anything else.

Where I am: Aboard the *UWG Solstice V*, somewhere in the Perseus arm of the Milky Way, thousands of light-years from Earth.

Why I'm here: To save the human race.

And here emerging from cryosleep is again like waking up from a bad dream, for once I remember these things I want nothing more than to close my eyes and go back to sleep.

Because if I'm awake, then it means all the other teams have failed.

\* \* \*

I stumble out of the bedroom on unsteady legs. I nearly fall, and reach out for one of the *Solstice V's* walls for support. I wince at how cold it is. The ship, I know, has only begun to warm itself after the near absolute zero temperatures of Z Space. No

use in wasting energy on heating the ship these past five years when all the crew have been asleep.

Being the first to wake, it falls to me to get the ship's systems up and running. Boot up the computer, check food and water supplies, check on the payload. Those are problems for later, though. Right now I have another need to attend to.

I find the toilets right outside the bedroom. Rushing inside, I collapse to my knees before one of the bowls. I barely make it in time.

And then I vomit. Up comes all the fluid in my stomach—inert chemicals the cryosleep pod filled our stomachs with so we'd have something to vomit when we woke—but even that isn't enough. Long after my stomach is empty I dry heave, with nothing to do but kneel there and wait for it to be over.

Done, I close the lid and listen as it flushes automatically. At least that still works. Feeling weaker now than when I entered, I pick myself up off the cold floor and go hunting for my pills.

I find them in my uniform, which, in turn, I find in our sleeping quarters—not to be confused with the bedroom. I put on my uniform first, shake two of the pills into my hand, fetch a glass of water to wash them down. Once this is done, I sit. I wait. I swear I feel better already, then my stomach lurches. I rush to the toilets. I throw it all back up.

I learn to dry swallow the pills.

\* \* \*

Ahmad wakes next, and I help him out of his cryosleep pod and into the toilets. While he busies himself in there, I leave him and walk through the ship, turning on the lights as I go.

I wind up at the cockpit, find myself facing rows and rows of controls and dead screens. The windows are dark, opaque. I stare at them for a second, trying to imagine what this system looks like on the other side of the shields, but no matter how hard I try I can only picture Earth's Solar System as I last saw it: Mars and Jupiter visible on opposite ends of our windows, both of them roughly the same size due to relative distance; Earth itself a faint blue half-sphere growing ever smaller; the stars filling the spaces between, shining beautifully as though they weren't how all our problems began.

I start the computer and instruct it to run full diagnostics of the ship, then make my way back to the sleeping quarters, where I find Ahmad in the last stages of putting on his uniform. His face is pale and shiny with sweat. He looks around the room. "Never actually thought I'd see any of this again," he says, then looks at me. "Guess it's up to us then, huh?"

"Yeah," I say. "Guess so."

"Adanna?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"How do you feel?"

I remember how I felt when I first learned I'd be on the *Solstice V*, a member of the fourth backup crew in the Solstice mission. I remember climbing into the cryosleep pods months later, fully expecting to never wake up again. "A little scared," I admit.

"Yeah," he says. "Me, too."

"Ahmad?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't take the pills with water."

He looks at me funny. "Why not?"

"Because it'll only make you throw up again."

His eyes widen. Then his hand comes up and covers his mouth. "Oh hell," he says

as he dashes for the toilets.

I hope he makes it. As weak as I feel, I really don't want to have to help him clean up the mess.

\* \* \*

Himiko and the captain wake next, in that order. It is instantly clear something is wrong with Himiko, because she spends twice as long in the toilets as the rest of us did, and when she's done Ahmad and I have to help her into her suit. Even the pills don't seem to help much. We all know what that means and it's so sad, because Himiko was always the liveliest among us.

The ship's intercom fires up; the captain summons us to the cockpit. The three of us walk there, Ahmad and me supporting Himiko till she finds her feet.

The captain is standing in the fore of the cockpit, his hands behind his back. He turns to face us as we walk in. You wouldn't know he was our leader to look at him. He is dressed exactly as we are. His uniform carries no symbol of rank or position. If there's anything that sets the captain apart from us it's the way he carries himself. I find it difficult to imagine him kneeling in front of a toilet bowl.

He glances at me, and for a moment I remember how surprised and angry I was when I first learned that this man was the captain on my ship, this man whom I'd thought I was leaving behind forever. How betrayed I felt when he pulled me aside that first day and told me about the things he'd done just to be here with me.

That was then, though. Right now I look at him, and I feel nothing. I force myself to feel nothing.

"Good morning," he says to us.

The last thing he said to us before we entered the bedroom, a wry smile on his face, was "Goodnight." That was five years ago. It feels like only yesterday.

"Good morning," we say back to him.

"How are we all feeling?" he asks, looking pointedly at Himiko.

We all reply that we're fine, even though none of us is, not exactly. The captain nods. "As you've all no doubt figured out, the fact that we're awake means *Solstice I* through *IV* have all been unsuccessful. It's our turn now." He pauses. "The good news is, all our systems are running perfectly. The payload is secure and unharmed. The ship's functions are going as well as we could hope to expect."

We say nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"The bad news," he continues, "is that as we speak we have received no information from the other *Solstice* ships. No warnings, no mission reports, nothing at all."

He pauses to let this information sink in. "We don't know why the *Solstice IV* didn't send us its reports," the captain says, "but we *can* try to find out. We can open a wormhole to its target location and try to locate the ship or, if for some reason the *Solstice IV* has been destroyed, search for its black box. There's no guarantee that we'll find it, but we can try.

"Alternatively, we can stay right where we are and continue our mission as best we can. Ultimately the mission is all-important, and we don't have all the time in the world. These are the two options before us. Stay here, or go searching for what happened to the other ships."

I know what's coming before he says it.

"As captain of the *Solstice V*, I call for a Decision to be made." His eyes land on mine. "Adanna?"

Leaving Himiko and Ahmad behind, I step forward, already feeling the familiar anxiety tightening around my heart. I step forward to Decide.

This is my true role on the *Solstice V*. I am the ship's Decision Maker, chosen by genetic right. There is no one better suited to make important deliberate decisions on the ship. Not even the captain.

There was someone like me on each of the Solstice ships, just as there has been someone like me on every major project and mission on Earth for years past and years still to come. Deep down I know this is supposed to fill me with confidence, even pride, but every time I step forward to Decide, all I feel is nervous.

I take a deep breath, and I say the words:

“What are the arguments?”

“We can leave this system and go searching for *Solstice IV* or its black box,” the captain says to me. “It’ll cost us time and resources, and another trip through Z-space. But should we succeed, we will obtain information that may prove invaluable to the mission.”

I nod, filing away the information.

“On the other hand, we can stay here and proceed with our mission as best as we can. Leaving will wreck our timelines, and the information we stand to obtain from the other ships may turn out to be unimportant and a waste of time. Our best course of action may be to stay and do our job. Those are the arguments.”

He falls silent, and now it’s up to me.

As always, I can’t help but think that this would have been much easier if our Decision Makers were perfectly designed, adaptable, artificially intelligent computers, but I know that’ll never happen. The great AI dream was abandoned centuries ago after the Virtual Siege of Silicon Valley. Humanity realized that truly intelligent computers would never hold human values and priorities.

The silence in the cockpit stretches still. The captain shifts his weight, looking expectantly at me.

*Think, Adanna. Think.*

And, just like that, the answer comes to me.

“Let’s stay,” I say. “No matter what did or didn’t happen to the other ships, we cannot jeopardize the mission to chase information we may or may not find that may or may not prove useful. If the other teams failed because of a problem the Division never foresaw, then we’re screwed no matter what, and knowing about it won’t change anything. I choose to stay and proceed with the mission.”

The captain exhales slowly, and I see by the look on his face that this is what he thought we should do all along. In spite of my feelings toward him, I feel a little proud of myself.

“The Decision is made,” the captain says. He turns to face the main console, says to us over his shoulder: “Prepare to jettison the shields.”

My job done, I am once more just a crewmember. Himiko, Ahmad, and I take our places at our individual consoles. My chair is uncomfortable. The fate of the world in the palm of our hands and not even a cushion to rest our asses on. The UWG can be such cheap bastards.

We initialize the jettisoning sequence. The shields around the *Solstice V* disengage with a shudder that runs through the whole ship and fall away, and we see, for the first time, a section of space no humans ever before have.

Having looked forward to this for so long, I can’t help but feel disappointed. The scene that unfolds before us is almost identical to the one we left behind. The sun in this system, the planets that orbit it and the stars out here may be different from the ones back home, but I’ve seen too many disembodied spheres and pinpricks of light floating in darkness to really care. Space may be infinite, but what’s the point if it all looks the same?

Footsteps behind my chair. I know it’s the captain even before he stops, even before he places a hand gently on my shoulder, even before I shift slightly so his hand is suddenly touching only air.

“Adanna . . .” he starts.

I never find out what he wants to say, because we are interrupted at that moment by Himiko's sudden, furious coughing. I turn and see her wiping her mouth with her sleeve, doing her best to pretend nothing's happening, but we all see the blood staining her sleeve.

The captain stares quietly at Himiko. He opens his mouth, closes it again. Rubs his eyes slowly, walks back to his console. "Prepare the payload," he says, and we get back to work, just like that.

I busy myself with what needs to be done and am grateful for it, because it keeps my mind and hands busy, helps me to not think about the fact that out of all of us—even Himiko, who is so obviously dying—I'm the only one who doesn't want to be here.

\* \* \*

In the past, when people thought of destruction from space they thought of asteroids: big, angry rocks that dropped in uninvited like an estranged aunt at Christmas. But asteroids were okay. Asteroids could be destroyed before they got too close. The real danger, when it came, was much worse.

It was a black hole.

No ordinary black hole either, but the result of two stellar black holes crashing into each other, a cosmic bastard weighing more than a thousand red giants. They named it Apollyon—literally, "Destroyer."

It was heading directly for Earth's Sun.

After eating the Sun, Apollyon's gravity would pull Mercury into itself, then Venus, and then Earth. By then it wouldn't matter anyway: with the Sun gone, Earth would long be dead, barren, cold.

This is the world I was born into. My father was born when the initial Age of Panic was at its peak. When he met my mother, the nations of the world had seen the value in working together, and the United World Government formed. By the time I arrived, the Solstice mission was already in development.

I know all about this, you see, because as far back as I can remember the mission has been my life. I was chosen for it almost as soon as I could walk.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Even though the selection criteria were strict, there were more possible candidates than the Deep Space Division knew what to do with. Thousands of us, and we all had to undergo procedures and tests *as babies*. The point, apparently, was to make sure whoever was chosen possessed the instinct needed for the mission in our DNA and not as something learned. Because what is learned can be forgotten, but instinct never fades. Apparently.

So they tested our capacity for delaying gratification, and our intelligence and tolerance for pain, and prodded and poked us and recorded us when we cried or laughed or—I imagine—pooped at inopportune moments. And they tested our capacity for decision-making, and it is here that I apparently shone the brightest.

(How you can test the decision-making of a six-month-old is something that's never made sense to me, but then maybe the people in the UWG know something I don't.)

My father told me he always knew I'd be chosen. He said he saw it in my eyes, in the way I was always the last to cry during the tests. I guess he would know—he worked in the Division.

The day I was finally chosen, the day he signed the paperwork that gave me completely over to the Division, was, he told me, the proudest of his life.

Nor was he the only one of that opinion. Growing up in the Division, everyone told me what a great honor it was to be given the chance to save all of humanity, how proud I should feel, out of the billions of children on the planet, to do this. Nobody asked me if I was happy. Nobody asked me if there was anything else I'd rather be

doing with my life. All they told me was how much of a hero I was, how history would remember me and my colleagues forever.

Thing is, I know they were right.

I just wish I'd been given a choice in the matter.

\* \* \*

By the time we launch the payload, Himiko is dead. Not only does she not get to see our mission's end, she also doesn't get to feel the vibration that runs through the ship as the thirty-six rockets power up and leave the ship, taking with them most of the physical bulk we've been carrying, doesn't see the thirty-six points of light streaking into dark space. They look like comets racing one another.

Himiko would've liked it.

\* \* \*

The day after we launch the payload, I find a sore spot on the roof of my mouth. I poke it with my tongue and it starts bleeding. I've been taking the pills daily, but even they can't win against nature forever.

Two days later I find the first blisters on my skin. I double my pill dosage, and am reminded of all the time we don't have.

\* \* \*

Four hundred years. That was the time Earth had till Apollyon came barreling into our system. Four hundred years till our world's end.

The obvious solution was to escape. Mankind had developed wormhole technology, the invention of which was the greatest scientific achievement of the twenty-third century; we could flee the Solar System before death arrived. But Z-Space travel came with its own problems, and besides, where would we go? There weren't many known habitable planets. In fact, there weren't any that had all the favorable conditions needed to sustain human life.

Ten years later, a young astronomer changed all that.

She discovered a planet similar in size to the Earth floating in the Andromeda galaxy, part of a cluster of planets, but not a solar system, since it had no star to orbit. The planet was 60 percent water, frozen in huge seas. With a theoretical Earth Similarity Index of 0.95, it should, given the right conditions, be able to support plant and human life.

All it needed was a sun.

\* \* \*

I stand at the windows and look out at the star we have come to collect. It looks so small, this thing we're relying on to save our species. So small. I feel like I can reach out and cover it with my hand.

I wonder if the payload has reached it yet. I wonder if the mission will go according to plan, or if something, somewhere, will go wrong.

I wonder if all of this will make any difference at all.

\* \* \*

A few days later I'm in our quarters trying to get some sleep when my headset crackles to life and Ahmad calls my name. I'm tired, so the first thing I feel is annoyed. But I catch the uncertainty in his voice, so I ask: "What is it?"

"Come to the cockpit. You need to see this." He clicks off.

I consider calling him back to tell him if he can't just say what it is then it obviously isn't urgent and can wait, but I know Ahmad wouldn't drag me across the ship unless it's important.

I find him with the captain in the cockpit. They're standing by one of the side windows. When they see me enter, they step back wordlessly. Ahmad points to the window. I go to it and look out.

In the past few days, our ship's trajectory has brought us close to the fourth planet

in this system, a rocky giant slightly bigger than Jupiter. We call it Target Planet 4, TP4 for short. Naming things isn't our strong point. We are close enough that it looms in our view whenever we look out. I give it a cursory glance before moving on.

"I don't see anything," I say.

"TP4," says Ahmad. "Look at TP4."

"I'm *looking* at TP4, and I don't see . . ." Just then I see it, and I trail off.

As part of our preparation on Earth for the Solstice mission, we studied all the planets in this system, spending hours poring over the images sent back by unmanned drones through their respective wormholes. Because of this, I've seen, more times than I can remember, the huge methane seas on TP4's cold surface and the rocky terrain that makes up most everything else under the planet's gas-heavy, translucent atmosphere.

I have never before seen the blue spot.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the Great Red Spot on Jupiter, but this is different. This is *huge*. This makes the one on Jupiter look childish. It takes up at least a third of the side of the planet I can see. It's a solid, featureless blue, shaped like a horizontal oval, standing distinctly against the hazy gray atmosphere and the dark brown rock that makes up the bulk of the monstrous planet.

I think: *That wasn't there yesterday.*

I turn to Ahmad. "What *is* that?"

"I don't know," he says. I see the uneasiness in both their faces, and I don't blame them. On a mission like ours, where everything has, of necessity, been planned to the minutest details, something like this *should* make us feel nervous.

Ahmad steps back to the window and stands beside me. He rubs his hand through his beard the way I've seen him do since we were both trainees in the Division. The only difference now is that his beard is much thinner and patchier, and whenever he runs his hands through it I see more hairs fall out into his hand. *So it's catching up to you, too*, I think, but Ahmad either doesn't notice the hairs in his hand or ignores them.

"What are we going to do about this?" he asks.

*What are we going to do about this?* I marvel at the audacity of his question, as though the three of us in our spaceship could do something about this thing that is bigger across than Uranus.

"Forget what we can do about it," the captain says, eerily echoing my thoughts. "I still want to know what it *is*."

"Maybe it's a storm," I offer.

He shakes his head. "That's no storm."

"There's nothing in our files on TP4 that can explain what that is either," Ahmad says. He should know. The captain may be our leader, but Ahmad is probably the most knowledgeable one among us.

The captain goes on frowning, thinking. I can imagine his dilemma, because all three of us are thinking the same thing.

*What are the arguments?*

The blue spot is new, but we don't know how important it is, don't know if it has any bearing on our mission or not. If we investigate and it turns out to be inconsequential, we will have wasted precious time and resources, none of which we have in infinite supply.

On the other hand, if we ignore it and it turns out to be important, if it has an effect on us and our mission . . .

The captain looks at me, and for now I forget the bad blood between us. I give him the tiniest of nods, which he returns. "We can't take chances," he says. "Set a course for TP4. We're going to find out what the hell that thing is."

\* \* \*

Over the next few days, we do not find out what the hell that thing is.

We do, however, discover a few things. Even though TP4 rotates as we approach it, whenever we look out we see the spot clearly. Every single time. This means the spot is moving, and moving at a fantastic speed, to counter the planet's rotation so perfectly.

And for some reason, it moves so it's always pointed toward us.

To say this amazes us would be a great understatement. We can't see the surface of the planet clearly, but given how the spot follows us, we know it must travel over TP4's methane seas and rocky plains with equal ease.

Even when we park the *Solstice V* in TP4's orbit, the blue spot follows us. When we cross to the planet's dark side, our ship entirely in TP4's shadow, the only light we see is bright and blue and oval, following us in perfect sync.

Days pass like this. One week becomes two. And always we see the spot. Is it any wonder that I start thinking of the spot as an eye? Is it as unbelievable as it might sound that I feel the planet is watching us?

\* \* \*

Still, in spite of all the time we spend watching the spot, none of us comes up with a viable explanation for it. Neither do we know how—or why—it follows us.

But I have an idea, one I've been carrying for the past few days. It's far-fetched and it's absurd and probably won't work, but maybe it's worth a try. "Captain?"

He turns to me and I see his eyes are bloodshot. I don't know if it's because he, like me, hasn't been sleeping well lately or if it's because of something else. "Yes?"

"I'd like to try something, with your permission."

He looks at me for a while without speaking, then gives me the tiniest of nods.

I walk to the main console and start flipping virtual switches. One by one, every light on the ship turns off. Every last one. The *Solstice V* goes dark like it hasn't been since we emerged from cryosleep.

"What are you doing?" Ahmad asks, the alarm evident in his voice.

"Playing a hunch," I reply.

I wait a full minute, then turn all the lights back on. Then I look outside. Nothing happens, nothing changes. The blue spot remains as it always has.

*Oh well, I think, it was worth a shot.*

And then the spot vanishes.

I don't know who's more shocked: Ahmad, the captain, or me. Certainly we are too shocked to do anything but stare in amazement as the blue spot fades slowly into being till it's shining bright and blue once more, gazing calmly into space—and at us.

"I don't believe this," Ahmad whispers.

"Again," the captain says. "Do it again."

I turn the lights off again, turn them on. The blue spot vanishes, then comes back.

I turn the lights off, on, off again, on again. The spot goes out, comes back, goes out, comes back. The great planet is winking at us.

At this point I treat the ship's lights like a child playing with a switch. I turn them on and off like I'm trying to speed read in Morse code.

The blue spot matches my pattern exactly, a strobe light blinking in the depths of space.

"Oh my God," someone says. I do not know who. Maybe it's Ahmad. Maybe it's the captain.

Maybe it's me.

\* \* \*

Once, in my early teens, my father took me outside and showed me the night sky with all the stars distantly twinkling.

"Look at them," he said, "aren't they beautiful?"

I tried to see them the way he did, but all I could think was that the black hole that would destroy our planet began its life as one of those shining points.

My dad must have read my thoughts in my face, because he laughed. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "Apollyon, right? Somewhere out there and heading our way. Try not to think too badly of it, Adanna. It's only doing what black holes do. All it knows how to do. You can't blame it for that any more than you can blame a liger for killing an antelope for food, or a volcano for erupting, or . . ."

"... our ancestors for nearly cooking the Earth?" I said.

My dad smiled and looked up again, ignoring my question. "One day when you're up there, you'll see so many amazing things, more beautiful, more enthralling, than anything here on Earth."

I faked a smile and said nothing, paying him back in his own coin, but inside my head I couldn't help but think his words were full of shit.

I know better now.

I was wrong, Dad. I was wrong.

\* \* \*

It is the captain who finally puts words to what is on all our minds. "Ahmad, Adanna," he says quietly, "something on that planet is alive, and it is trying to talk to us."

\* \* \*

"What I don't get," Ahmad says excitedly, "is how they see us."

He's been talking almost non-stop for the past hour. We're sitting at a table in the dining room. Well, the captain and I are sitting—Ahmad is pacing the room excitedly. I'm nowhere near as animated as he is, but that doesn't mean I'm not excited, too. I haven't been thinking straight since we left the cockpit. A part of me still can't believe all this is happening.

The captain sits with his head in his hands, staring at the tabletop.

By asking ourselves a series of questions and coming up with the most plausible scientific answers, we've deduced a few things about the nature of the life form on the planet. With the vast amounts of liquid methane and rock present on the planet, it can either be methane- or silicon-based. Or, given how the blue spot traveled so effortlessly over sea and land alike, some strange combination of the two.

We can't find out for sure, because the *Solstice V* is equipped for space travel, not for planetary landing. We have no lab for experiments, no rovers to collect samples. Besides, if we try to land on a planet as big and dense as TP4, the gravity will absolutely crush us.

All this is as mind-boggling as it is frustrating. The first known alien life form mankind has ever discovered—one that is *actively* trying to communicate with us—and we can't study it in any detail. All we can do is watch from thousands of miles away and ask questions.

"I mean," Ahmad continues, "to them we must be just another point of light in space, indistinguishable from a billion stars. How did they pick us out of all those lights?"

It's a question I've been thinking about myself. My personal theory is that the planet's life form, whatever their nature, must have their skies perfectly mapped. They must know the position and trajectory of every star and planet visible from TP4's surface. When they saw our ship, they must instantly have known we didn't belong.

I share this theory with Ahmad. He rubs his scragglier-than-ever chin. "It makes sense, but to do that they'd need an absolutely gigantic eye. The kind that absolutely dwarfs our biggest satellites back home."

The captain speaks up. "The whole planet's their eye."

Ahmad and I both do a double take. "What?"

The captain sighs. “*Think*, both of you. You saw how big that blue spot is, and you saw how uniformly it behaved. If our hypotheses are correct, do you know how many individual cells it would take to make something like that? How impossible it would be to coordinate such uniform behavior? Unless . . .”

I see where he’s going. “Unless they all act as *one* individual. Unless it’s a hive mind!”

“Exactly. Unless the whole sees whatever a part sees. If those cells are photo-sensitive in any way—and they must be, to communicate with light—then the combined effect of all of them put together . . .”

“. . . makes an eye,” Ahmad finishes.

The captain nods, but he looks more miserable than ever. I can’t understand his reaction. We’ve just made a historic discovery, but he doesn’t look excited at all.

I think of the planet covered in an alien species that communicates instantly among itself. It makes sense that it be a sentient race, even if the individual cells are not. The cells could act as individual brain cells making a collective brain. Suddenly, another possibility occurs to me. “What if we’re looking at this wrong?”

The captain cocks an eyebrow at me. Ahmad asks, “How?”

I say, “We’re assuming the life form *covers* the planet, right? That’s how the blue spot was able to follow us around, not by actually moving but by different cells lighting up to reflect our position . . .”

“If you have a point, please go straight to it,” says the captain.

“What if the planet *itself* is sentient? What if the *planet* is the life form?”

A complete silence falls in the room.

Then Ahmad begins to laugh.

“A sentient *planet*! I can’t believe it! This is amazing! This is *absolutely* incredible!” he pumps his fist in the air. “Wait till the people on Earth hear of this!”

His enthusiasm is infectious and I find myself getting caught up in it, right up until the captain says, very quietly:

“No one on Earth will hear of this.”

The silence that falls now is, if possible, thicker than the one that just preceded it.

“What . . . what do you mean?” Ahmad says. “We’ve just discovered life in space! *Life!* We *have* to tell them!”

“And how,” the captain asks, “do you figure we do that?”

“We’ll use a wormhole! If we hurry, we can make it back to Earth before . . .” He trails off, looks down at the blisters on his skin.

“We don’t know that we have that much time. Or that we’ll survive the trip.”

“We’ve got to try, don’t we?” Ahmad shoots back.

“And the mission?” the captain asks, and I suddenly know why he looks so miserable, so conflicted.

“The mission?” Ahmad looks lost.

“Ahmad,” the captain says very gently. “We came here to do one job and one job only.”

Ahmad’s eyes widen. “No. No, no, no. We *can’t*. Not now . . . not after what we’ve just discovered!”

“The entire human race is counting on us.”

“There is *life* on that planet!”

“I know, Ahmad, but New Earth needs that sun.”

“New Earth needs a sun. It doesn’t have to be *that* one.”

“Look, we don’t even know if the life on that planet *needs* their sun to live,” the captain counters desperately. “They may do just fine without it.”

“With all due respect, captain,” Ahmad says, “that is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

"Ahmad," the captain pleads in a tone I have never before heard him use, "you know all the other teams failed. It's the only reason we woke from cryosleep: their beacons never fired to tell the ship to keep us asleep. If we don't do this, no one else will. And New Earth will never live."

Ahmad's face hardens. He walks over and slams his hands on the table, looming above us. "And what right do we have to kill another species just so *ours* can live?!"

The captain hesitates, and I know he has no answer for this. A look of satisfaction crosses Ahmad's face. He knows he has won. He knows it, I know it, all of us know it.

So when the captain turns to me, I am not surprised. Not really. Before he says my name, I can guess what he is about to say.

"You must Decide," he says.

*No. Not me.* I don't want to do this. I don't want to be responsible for this.

But Ahmad is nodding, too, and I know it's a lost cause to protest.

"I . . . I can't," I stammer.

"You must," the captain says.

"Why?"

"Because," the captain says sadly, "there's no one else."

Dear God, but why am I nodding?

"What are the arguments?" I whisper.

"We need that sun," the captain says, simply. "We're the only hope Earth has." He hesitates. "I want you to know what whatever you decide is what we will do. I trust you."

That's funny, because I don't trust myself right now.

"Please," Ahmad says, imploring me with his soft eyes. "Please don't kill that planet. We don't know what that species will evolve into in a million years. We don't know what they will *do*. We can't decide who lives and who dies in the Universe."

That's funny, because I thought we'd been doing just that on Earth for millennia.

Both their cases presented, the captain and Ahmad stand back, watching me. I can't seem to think. Nothing in my training prepared me for a Decision of this magnitude. I shouldn't have to make this choice.

I wonder what my peers—the Decision Makers on the other Solstice ships—would have done in my shoes. I wonder if they *did* face similar situations, which is why none of them ever delivered their suns.

I remember how I felt when the blue spot blinked so wonderfully back at us, and I wonder why my heart feels like breaking in two.

There is sorrow in the captain's eyes as he looks at me. He knows what he has done to me, what he is asking me to do. Ahmad looks at me with a terrible, desperate hope.

I can't meet either of their eyes right now so I look away, out the window. I see the planet. I see the great spot, bright and blue. Its color reminds me of Earth.

Of home.

And what else can I do?

\* \* \*

Ahmad locks himself in our sleeping quarters and refuses to come out. I knock and knock but he does not open. He doesn't answer when I call his name. When it is clear he won't come out no matter what I do, I turn and walk away.

\* \* \*

When we fire up the payload, a few days later, it is only the captain and me in the cockpit. Ahmad, some time ago, left our pills and uniforms outside the door to the sleeping quarters. He himself remains inside. I wonder if he's watching from behind his closed doors, wonder if he sees as the thirty-six devices we left in place weeks ago fire up behind the star and open a gigantic wormhole between them, wonder how he

feels as the wormhole slowly starts to swallow the star.

The wormhole eats the star, and the captain and I watch. It takes four months. By that time, I no longer harbor hopes of seeing Ahmad again.

At one point, when I turn to look at the captain, I see the tears shining in his eyes.

\* \* \*

With the star gone, darkness has fallen over everything.

Almost.

The blue spot still shines. It has grown so much dimmer these four months. Now it is only a pale shade of its former brilliance. I can only imagine how much energy it has cost the planet to keep the spot lit, keep its light shining at us in the abyss. I wonder if the life on that planet understands what has happened, if they know that they, too, are going to die. I wonder if they know we're the ones who took their light from them. I hope they don't. I really hope they don't.

And even if they do, I hope they don't blame us for it any more than they'd blame a liger for killing an antelope, or a volcano for erupting.

I think: *What have I done?*

I think: *I'm sorry.*

I'm so sorry.

\* \* \*

What we have done is only the beginning. All we can do now is hope the star came out exactly where we meant it to. After that, all the planets in the new solar system will have to be set in motion around it, each in its perfect orbit. Especially New Earth. There is still so much that can go wrong, but we have done our part. There are other teams to take care of the rest, other teams to handle the long millennia of terraforming New Earth while the rest of the human race travels across dark space to our new home. No wormhole travel for them. The lucky ones.

The captain and I will never return to Earth, never know if our mission was a success or a failure. There's no point in going back, because we are all dead on this ship. We were dead the moment we entered the wormhole that brought us here. Even with the ship's shields, the best technology mankind has been able to come up with, there is simply too much radiation inside a wormhole. The pills have kept us alive long enough to do our job, but we cannot fight forever. The radiation poisoning has already taken my hair and most of my teeth. Soon it will take everything else.

I can't help but think maybe I deserve it.

\* \* \*

When I find the captain in the cockpit, his skin is cold. The pill bottle has fallen from his fingers and rolled almost underneath his chair. I reach down and pick it up. It's empty. Of course it is.

There's probably a note somewhere around here. I don't go looking for it. Instead for a long time I just stand there, looking down at him. I want to shout at him. I want to hit him. I want to be angry. But I'm not.

You know, it's funny. I don't remember exactly when I started to hate my father. As far back as I can remember I've always hated his beliefs, hated his long speeches, hated that he sacrificed me in the service of the greater good when the Division came asking.

But I have had a lot of time to think in space, and I think I'm finally beginning to understand him. I'm finally beginning to understand that sometimes there are no clean choices. You do your best with the options you're given, and then you deal with the consequences—and your conscience—however you can.

I take a deep breath and say the words I should have told him much earlier: "I love you, Dad."

Then I leave him and walk through the ship, manually turning off every light as I

go. The last place I go is the dining room. As I place my hand on the final switch, I look out. Directly ahead of me the great blue spot shines. I take a deep breath and flick the switch. The lights dim slowly, and then they go out. Now the ship is as dark as space itself.

The blue spot wavers once, then it dims, and dims further still. I don't look away. I don't even blink. Someone must watch. Someone must see. I owe them this, at least.

Before the end, the spot flares brightly one last time, and then the great eye goes dark forever.

I leave the room and feel my way back to the front of the ship, take a seat next to my captain. When he takes my hand in the darkness, I do not pull away. Or am I the one who takes his? I don't know. It doesn't matter.

The seat is uncomfortable. I don't mind.

We drift through space and time and darkness together, and when I look out, I see that in the total absence of light all the stars have come out to play.

—*For Geoff and Wole*