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"Howey's *Wool* is an epic feat of imagination. You will live in this world."
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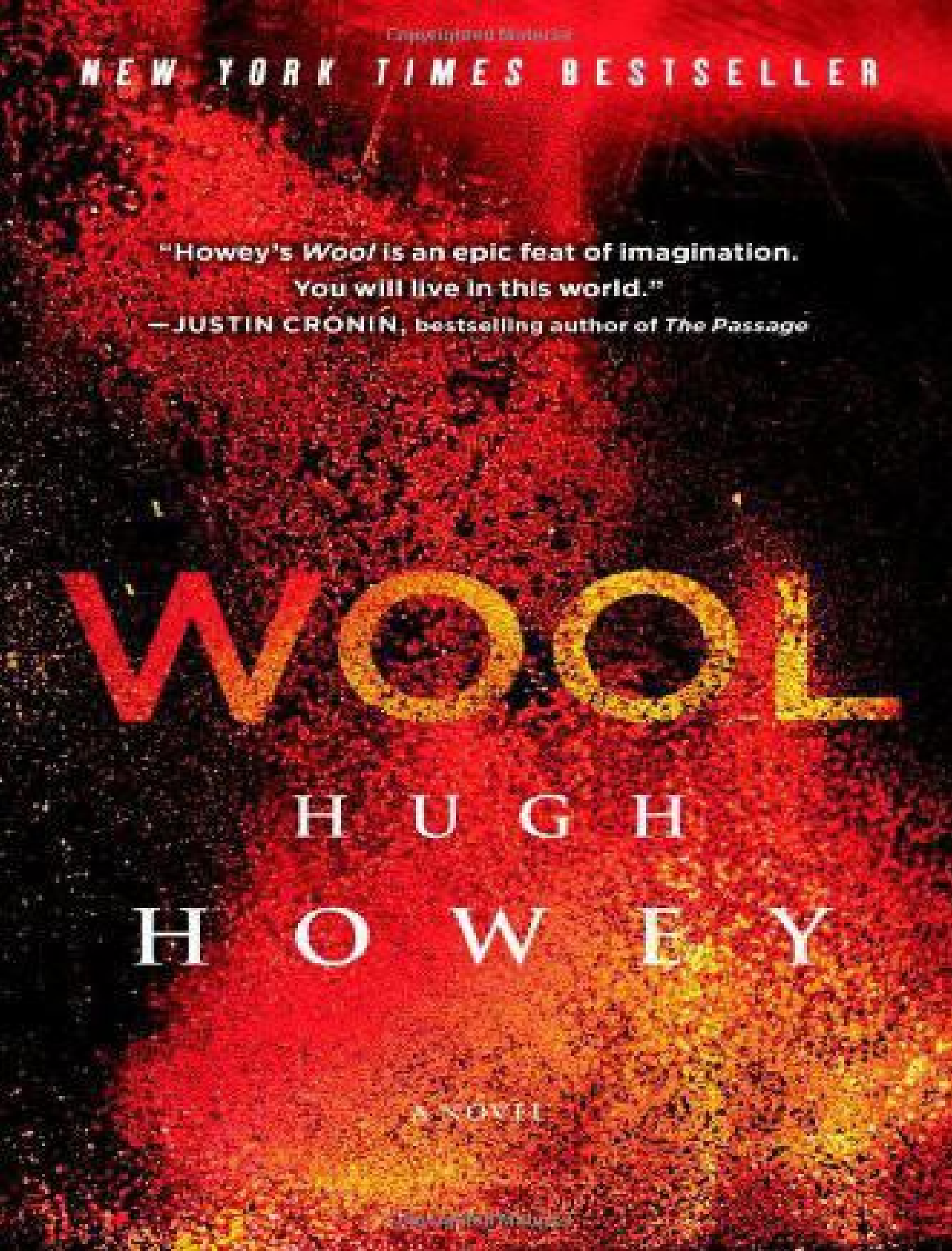

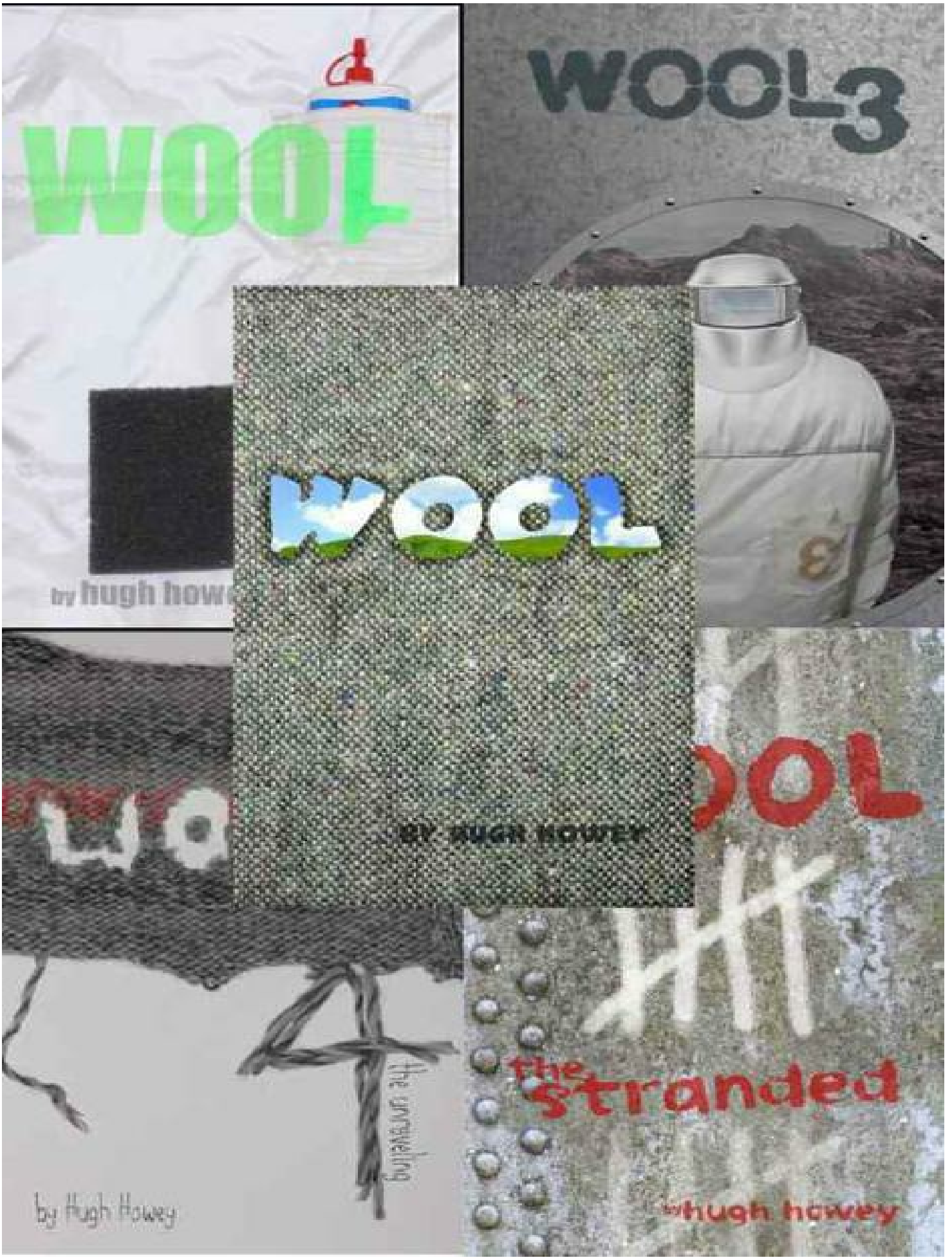
WOOL
WOOL 3
WOOL
BY HUGH HOWEY
by hugh howey
the unraveling
by Hugh Howey
the stranded
by hugh howey

Wool Omnibus Edition

The Collected Works of Wool 1 – 5

by Hugh Howey

Wool

This colected work is dedicated to anyone who dares

dream of a better place.

1

The children were playing while Holston climbed to his

death; he could hear them squealing as

only happy

children do. While they thundered about franticaly

above, Holston took his time, each step methodical and

ponderous, as he wound his way around and around

the spiral staircase, old boots ringing out on metal

treads.

The treads, like his father’s boots, showed signs of

wear. Paint clung to them in feeble chips, mostly in the

corners and undersides, where they were safe. Traffic

elsewhere on the staircase sent dust shivering off in

smal clouds. Holston could feel the vibrations in the

railing, which was worn down to the gleaming metal.

That always amazed him: how centuries of bare palms

and shuffling feet could wear down solid

steel. One

molecule at a time, he supposed. Each life might wear

away a single layer, even as the silo wore away that life.

Each step was slightly bowed from generations of

traffic, the edge rounded down like a pouting lip. In the

center, there was almost no trace of the smal diamonds

that once gave the treads their grip. Their absence could

only be inferred by the pattern to either side, the smal

pyramidal bumps rising from the flat steel with their

crisp edges and flecks of paint.

Holston lifted an old boot to an old step, pressed down,

and did it again. He lost himself in what the untold years

had done, the ablation of molecules and lives, layers

and layers ground to fine dust. And he thought, not for

the first time, that neither life nor staircase had been

meant for such an existence. The tight confines of that

long spiral, threading through the buried silo like a straw

in a glass, had not been built for such abuse. Like much

of their cylindrical home, it seemed to have been made

for other purposes, for functions long since forgotten.

What was now used as a thoroughfare

for thousands of

people, moving up and down in repetitious, daily cycles,

seemed more apt in Holston's view to be used only in

emergencies and perhaps by dozens.

Another floor went by—a pie-shaped division of

dormitories. As Holston ascended the last few levels,

the last steps of his life, the sounds of childlike delight

rained down even louder from above. This was the

laughter of youth, of souls who had not yet come to

grips with where they lived, who did not yet feel the

press of the earth on al sides, who in their minds were

not buried at al, but *alive*. Alive and unworn, dripping

happy sounds down the stairwel, trils that were

incongruous with Holston's actions, his

decision and

determination to die.

As he neared the upper level, one young voice rang out

above the others, and Holston remembered being a

child in the silo—al the schooling and the games. Back

then, the stuffy concrete cylinder had felt, with its floors

and floors of apartments and workshops and

hydroponic gardens and purification rooms with their

tangles of pipes, like a vast universe, a wide expanse

one could never fuly explore, a labyrinth he and his

friends could get lost in forever.

But those days were more than thirty years distant.

Holston’s childhood now felt like something two or

three lifetimes ago, something someone else had

enjoyed. Not him. He had an entire lifetime as sheriff

weighing heavy, blocking off that past. And more

recently, there was this third stage of his life—a secret

life beyond childhood and being sheriff. It was the last

layers of himself ground to dust, three years spent

silently waiting for what would never come, each day

longer than any month from his happier

lifetimes.

At the top of the spiral stairway, Holston's hand ran out

of railing. The curvy bar of worn steel ended as the

stairwel emptied into the widest rooms of the entire silo

complex: the cafeteria and the adjoining lounge. The

playful squeals were level with him now. Darting bright

shapes zagged between scattered chairs, playing chase.

A handful of adults tried to contain the chaos. Holston

saw Donna picking up scattered chalk and crayon from

the stained tiles. Her husband Clarke sat behind a table

arranged with cups of juice and bowls of cornflour

cookies. He waved at Holston from across the room.

Holston didn’t think to wave back, didn’t have the

energy or the desire. He looked past the

adults and

playing children to the blurry view beyond, projected on

the cafeteria wal. It was the largest uninterrupted vista

of their inhospitable world. It was a morning scene.

Dawn’s dim light coated lifeless hils that had hardly

changed since Holston was a boy. They sat, just as they

always had, while he had gone from playing chase

among the cafeteria tables to whatever empty thing he

was now. And beyond the stately roling crests of these

hils, the top of a familiar and rotting skyline caught the

morning rays in feeble glints. Ancient glass and steel

stood distantly where people, it was suspected, had

once lived aboveground.

A child, ejected from the group like a comet, bumped

into Holston's knees. He looked down and moved to

touch the kid—Susan's boy—but just like a comet, the

child was gone again, puled squealing back into the

orbit of the others.

Holston thought suddenly of the lottery he and Alison

had won the year of her death. He stil had the ticket; he

carried it everywhere. One of these kids —maybe he or

she would be two by now and tottering after the older

children—could've been theirs. They had dreamed, like

al parents do, of the double fortune of twins. They had

tried, of course. Night after glorious night of attempting

to redeem that ticket, other parents wishing them luck,

other lottery hopefuls silently praying for an empty year

to pass.

He and Alison had invited superstition into their lives,

looking to anything for help. Tricks like hanging garlic

over the bed that supposedly increased fertility, two

dimes under the mattress for twins, a pink ribbon in

Alison's hair, smudges of blue dye under Holston's

eyes—al of it ridiculous and desperate and fun. The

only thing crazier would have been to

not try

everything, to leave some sily séance or tale untested.

But it wasn't to be. Before their year was even out, the

lottery had passed to another couple. It hadn't been for

a lack of trying; it had been a lack of time. A sudden

lack of *wife*.

Holston turned away from the games and the blurry

view and walked toward his office, situated between

the cafeteria and the silo's airlock. As he covered that

ground, his thoughts went to the struggle that once took

place there, a struggle of ghosts he'd had to walk

through every day for the last three years. And he knew

—if he turned and hunted that expansive view on the

wal—if he squinted past the ever

worsening blur of

cloudy camera lenses and airborne grime, if he folowed

that dark crease up the hil, that wrinkle that worked its

way over the muddy dune toward the city beyond, he

could pick out her quiet form. There, on that hil, his

wife could be seen. She lay like a sleeping boulder, the

air and toxins wearing away at her, her arms curled

under her head.

Maybe.

It was difficult to see, hard to make out clearly even

back before the blurring had begun anew. And besides,

there was little to trust in that sight. There was much, in

fact, to doubt. So Holston simply chose not to look. He

walked through that place of ghostly struggle where bad

memories lay eternal, that scene of sudden madness,

and entered his office.

“Wel, look who’s up early,” Marnes said, smiling.

Holston’s deputy closed a metal drawer on the filing

cabinet, a lifeless cry singing from its ancient joints. He

picked up a steaming mug, then noted Holston’s solemn

demeanor. “You feeling okay, boss?”

Holston nodded. He pointed to the rack of keys behind

the desk. “Holding cel,” he said.

The deputy’s smile drooped into a confused frown. He

set down the mug and turned to retrieve the key. While

his back was turned, Holston rubbed the sharp, cool

steel in his palm one last time, then placed the star flat

on the desk. Marnes turned and held out the key.

Holston took it.

“You need me to grab the mop?”

Deputy Marnes jabbed a thumb back toward the

cafeteria. Unless someone was in cuffs, they only went

into the cel to clean it.

“No,” Holston said. He jerked his head toward the

holding cel, beckoning his deputy to folow.

He turned—the chair behind the desk

squeaked as

Marnes rose to join him—and Holston completed his

march. The key slid in with ease. There was a sharp

clack from the wel-built and wel-maintained inner

organs of the door. The barest squeak from the hinges,

a determined step, a shove and a clank, and the ordeal

was over.

“Boss?”

Holston held the key between the bars. Marnes looked

down at them, unsure, but his palm came up to accept.

“What’s going on, boss?”

“Get the mayor,” Holston said. He let out a sigh, that

heavy breath he’d been holding for three years.

“Tel her I want to go outside.”

2

The view from the holding cel wasn't as blurry as it had

been in the cafeteria, and Holston spent his final day in

the silo puzzling over this. Could it be that the camera

on that side was more out of the toxic wind? Did each

cleaner, condemned to death, put more care in

preserving the view they'd enjoyed on their last day?

Or was the extra effort a gift to the *next*

cleaner, who

would spend their final day in that same cel?

Holston preferred this last explanation. It made him

think longingly of his wife. It reminded him why he was

there, on the wrong side of those bars, and wilingly.

As his thoughts drifted to Alison, he sat and stared out

at the dead world some ancient peoples had left behind.

It wasn't the best view of the landscape around their

buried bunker, but it wasn't the worst, either. In the

distance, low roling hils stood a pretty shade of brown,

like coffee mash with just the right amount of pig's milk

in it. The sky above the hils was the same dul gray of

his childhood and his father's childhood and his

grandfather's childhood. The only

moving feature on the

landscape was the clouds. They hung ful and dark over

the hils. They roamed free like the herded beasts from

the picture books.

The view of the dead world filed up the entire wal of

his cel, just like al the wals on the silo's upper level,

each one ful of a different slice of the blurry and ever

blurrier wasteland beyond. Holston's little piece of that

view reached from the corner by his cot, up to the

ceiling, to the other wal, and down to the toilet. And

despite the soft blur—like oil rubbed on a lens—it

looked like a scene one could strol out into, like a

gaping and inviting hole oddly positioned across from

forbidding prison bars.

The ilusion, however, only convinced from a distance.

Leaning closer, Holston could see a handful of dead

pixels on the massive display. They stood stark white

against al the brown and gray hues. Shining with

ferocious intensity, each pixel (Alison had caled them

“stuck” pixels), was like a square window to some

brighter place, a hole the width of a

human hair that

seemed to beckon toward some better reality. There

were dozens of them, now that he looked. Holston

wondered if anyone in the silo knew how to fix them, or

if they had the tools required for such a delicate job.

Were they dead forever, like Alison? Would al of the

pixels be dead eventualy? Holston imagined a day

when half of the pixels were stark white, and then

generations later when only a few gray and brown ones

remained, then a mere dozen, the world having flipped

to a new state, the people of the silo thinking the outside

world was on fire, the only *true* pixels now mistaken for

malfunctioning ones.

Or was that what Holston and his people were doing

even now?

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Holston

turned and saw Mayor Jahns standing on the other side

of the bars, her hands resting in the bely of her

coverals. She nodded gravely toward the cot.

“When the cel’s empty, at night when you and Deputy

Marnes are off duty, I sometimes sit right there and

enjoy that very view.”

Holston turned back to survey the muddy, lifeless

landscape. It only looked depressing compared to

scenes from the children’s books—the only books to

survive the uprising. Most people doubted those colors

in the books, just as they doubted purple elephants and

pink birds to have ever existed, but Holston felt that

they were truer than the scene before him. He, like

some others, felt something primal and deep when he

looked at those worn pages splashed green and blue.

Even so, when compared to the stifling silo, that muddy

gray view outside looked like some kind of salvation,

just the sort of open air men were born to breathe.

“Always seemed a little clearer in

here,” Jahns said.

“The view, I mean.”

Holston remained silent. He watched a curling piece of

cloud break off and move in a new direction, blacks

and grays swirling together.

“You get your pick for dinner,” the mayor said. “It’s

tradition—”

“You don’t need to tel me how this works,” Holston

said, cutting Jahns off. “It’s only been three years since

I served Alison her last meal right here.” He reached to

spin the copper ring on his finger out of habit, forgetting

he had left it on his dresser hours ago.

“Can’t believe it’s been that long,” Jahns murmured to

herself. Holston turned to see her squinting at the clouds

displayed on the wal.

“Do you miss her?” Holston asked venomously. “Or

do you just hate that the blur has had so much time to

build?”

Jahn’s eyes flashed his way a moment, then fel to the

floor. “You know I don’t want this, not for any view.

But rules are the rules—”

“It’s not to be blamed,” Holston said, trying to let the

anger go. “I know the rules better than most.” His hand

moved, just a little, toward the missing badge, gone like

his ring. “Hel, I enforced those rules for most my life,

even after I realized they were bulshit.”

Jahns cleared her throat. “Wel, I won’t ask why you

chose this. I’l just assume it’s because you’d be

unhappier here.”

Holston met her gaze, saw the film on her eyes before

she was able to blink it away. Jahns looked thinner than

usual, comical in her gaping overals. The lines in her

neck and radiating from her eyes were deeper than he

remembered. Darker. And he thought the crack in her

voice was genuine regret, not just age and more than

her ration of tobacco.

Suddenly, Holston saw himself through Jahn's eyes,

saw a broken man sitting on a worn bench, his skin gray

from the pale glow of the dead world beyond, and the

sight made him dizzy. His head spun as it groped for

something reasonable to latch onto, something that

made sense. It seemed a dream, the predicament his life

had become. None of the last three years

seemed true.

Nothing seemed true anymore.

He turned back to the tan hils. In the corner of his eye,

he thought he saw another pixel die, turning stark white.

Another tiny window had opened, another clear view

through an ilusion he had grown to doubt.

Tomorrow will be my salvation, Holston thought

savagely, *even if I die out there*.

“I’ve been Mayor too long,” Jahns said.

Holston glanced back and saw that her wrinkled hands

were wrapped around the cold steel.

“Our records don’t go back to the beginning, you

know. They don’t go back before the uprising a century

and a half ago, but since then no Mayor has sent more

people to cleaning than I have.”

“I’m sorry to burden you,” Holston said dryly.

“I take no pleasure in it. That’s al I’m saying. No

pleasure at al.”

Holston swept his hand at the massive screen.

“But you’l be the first to watch a clear sunset

tomorrow night, won’t you?” He hated the way he

sounded. Holston wasn’t angry for his death, or life, or

whatever came after tomorrow, but resentment over

Alison's fate stil lingered. He continued to see

inevitable events from the past as avoidable, long after

they'd taken their course. "You'l al love the view

tomorrow," he said to himself.

"That's not fair at al," Jahns said. "The law is the law.

You broke it. You knew you were breaking it."

Holston looked at his feet. The two of them alowed a

silence to form. Mayor Jahns was the one who

eventualy broke it.

“You haven’t threatened yet to *not* go through with it.

Some of the others are nervous that you might not do

the cleaning because you aren’t saying you won’t.”

Holston laughed. “They’d feel better if I said I *wouldn’t*

clean the sensors?" He shook his head at the mad logic.

"Everyone who sits there says they aren't gonna do it,"

Jahns told him, "but then they do. It's what we've al

come to expect—"

"Alison never threatened that she wouldn't do it,"

Holston reminded her, but he knew what Jahns meant.

He himself had been sure Alison wouldn't wipe the

lenses. And now he thought he understood what she'd

been going through as she sat on that very bench. There

were larger things to consider than the act of cleaning.

Most prisoners sent outside were caught at something,

were surprised to find themselves in that cel, their fate

mere hours away. Revenge was on their mind when

they said they wouldn't do it. There was

a reflexive

obstinacy. But Alison and now Holston had bigger

worries. Whether or not they'd clean was

inconsequential; they had arrived here because they

wanted, on some insane level, to *be* here. Al that

remained was the curiosity of it al. The wonder of the

outside world beyond the veil of lies.

“So, are you planning on going through with it or not?”

Jahns asked directly, her desperation evident.

“You said it yourself.” Holston shrugged. “Everyone

does it. There must be some reason, right?”

He pretended not to care, to be disinterested in the *why*

of the cleaning, but he had spent most of his life, the

past three years especialy, agonizing

over the why. The

question drove him nuts. And if his refusing to answer

Jahns caused pain to those who had murdered his wife,

he wouldn’t be upset.

Jahns rubbed her hands up and down the bars, anxious.

“Can I tel them you’l do it?” she asked.

“Or tel them I won’t. I don’t care. It sounds like either

answer wil mean the same to them.”

Jahns didn’t reply. Holston looked up at her, and the

Mayor nodded.

“If you change your mind about the meal, let Deputy

Marnes know. He’l be at the desk al night, as is

tradition—”

She didn’t need to say. Tears came to Holston’s eyes

as he remembered that part of his former duties. He had

manned that desk twelve years ago when Donna

Parkins was put to cleaning, eight years ago when it

was Jack Brent's time. And he had spent a night

clinging to the bars, lying on the floor, a complete

wreck, three years ago when it was his wife's turn.

Mayor Jahns turned to go.

"Sheriff," Holston muttered before she got out of

earshot.

“I’m sorry?” Jahns lingered on the other side of the

bars, her gray, bushy brows hanging over her eyes.

“It’s Sheriff Marnes, now,” Holston reminded her.

“Not Deputy.”

Jahns rapped a steel bar with her knuckles. “Eat

something,” she said. “And I won’t insult you by

suggesting you get some sleep."

3

Three years earlier

"You've gotta be *kidding* me," Alison said. "Honey,

listen to this. You won't believe this. Did you know

there was more than *one* uprising?"

Holston looked up from the folder spread across his

lap. Around him, scattered piles of paper covered the

bed like a quilt—stacks and stacks of old files to sort

through and new complaints to manage. Alison sat at

her smal desk at the foot of the bed. The two of them

lived in one of the silo condos that had only been

subdivided twice over the decades. It left room for

luxuries like desks and wide non-bunk beds.

“And how would I have known about

that?” he asked

her. His wife turned and tucked a strand of hair behind

her ear. Holston jabbed a folder at her computer

screen. “Al day long you’re unlocking secrets hundreds

of years old and I’m supposed to know about

them before *you* do?”

She stuck out her tongue. “It’s an expression. It’s my

way of informing you. And why don't you seem more

curious? Did you hear what I just said?"

Holston shrugged. "I never would've assumed the one

uprising we know about was the first—just that it was

the most recent. If I've learned one thing from my job,

it's that no crime or crazy mob is ever al that original."

He picked up a folder by his knee. "You think this is the

first water thief the silo's known? Or that it'l be the

last?"

Alison's chair squealed on the tile as she turned to face

him. The monitor on the desk behind her blinked with

the scraps and fragments of data she had puled from

the silo's old servers, the remnants of information long

ago deleted and overwritten countless times. Holston

stil didn’t understand how the retrieval process

worked, or why someone smart enough to come up

with it was dumb enough to love him, but he accepted

both as truth.

“I’m piecing together a series of old reports,” she said.

“If true, they mean something like our old uprising used

to take place regularly. Like once every generation or

so.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know about the old times,”

Holston said. He rubbed his eyes and thought about al

the paperwork he wasn’t getting done. “Maybe they

didn’t have a system for cleaning the sensors, you

know? I’l bet back then, the view upstairs just got

blurrier and blurrier until people went crazy, there’d be

a revolt or something, and then they'd finaly exile a few

people to set things straight. Or maybe it was just

natural population control, you know, before the

lottery."

Alison shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm starting to

think—" She paused and glanced down at the spread

of vilainous paperwork around Holston. The sight of al

the logged transgressions seemed to make her consider

carefuly what she was about to say. “I’m not passing

judgment, not saying anyone was right or wrong or

anything like that, I’m just suggesting that maybe the

servers weren’t wiped out by the rebels during the

uprising. Not like we’ve always been told, anyway.”

That got Holston’s attention. The

mystery of the blank

servers, the empty past of the silo's ancestors, haunted

them al. The erasure was nothing more than fuzzy

legend. He closed the folder he was working on and set

it aside. "What do you think caused it?" he asked his

wife. "Do you think it was an accident? A fire or a

power outage?" He listed the common theories.

Alison frowned. “No,” she said. She lowered her voice

and looked around anxiously. “I think *we* wiped the

hard drives. Our ancestors, I mean, *not* the rebels.”

She turned and leaned toward the monitor, running her

finger down a set of figures Holston couldn’t discern

from the bed. “Twenty years,” she said. “Eighteen.

Twenty-four.” Her finger slid down the

screen with a

squeak. “Twenty-eight. Sixteen. Fifteen.”

Holston plowed a path through the paperwork at his

feet, putting the files back in stacks as he worked his

way toward the desk. He sat on the foot of the bed, put

a hand on his wife’s neck, and peered over her

shoulder at the monitor.

“Are those dates?” he asked.

She nodded. “Just about every two decades, there’s a

major revolt. This report catalogued them. It was one of

the files deleted during the most recent uprising. *Our*

uprising.”

She said “our” like either of them or any of their friends

had been alive at the time. Holston knew what she

meant, though. It was the uprising they had been raised

in the shadow of, the one that seemed to have spawned

them, the great conflict that hung over their childhoods,

over their parents and grandparents. It was the uprising

that filed whispers and occupied sideways glances.

“And what makes you think it was us, that it was the

good guys who wiped the servers?”

She half turned and smiled grimly. “Who says we are

the good guys?”

Holston stiffened. He puled his hand away from

Alison’s neck. “Don’t start. Don’t say anything that

might—”

“I’m kidding,” she said, but it wasn’t a thing to kid

about. It was two steps from traitorous, from *cleaning*.

“My theory is this,” she said quickly, stressing the word

theory. “There’s generational upheaval, right? I mean

for over a hundred years, maybe longer. It’s like

clockwork.” She pointed at the dates. “But then, during

the great uprising—the only one we’ve known about til

now—someone wiped the servers. Which, I’l tel you,

isn’t as easy as pressing a few buttons or

starting a fire.

There's redundancies on top of redundancies. It would

take a concerted effort, not an accident or any sort of

rushed job or mere sabotage—"

"That doesn't tel you who's responsible," Holston

pointed out. His wife was a wizard with computers, no

doubt, but sleuthing was not *her* bag, it was his.

“What tels me something,” she continued, “is that there

were uprisings every generation for al this time, but

there hasn’t been an uprising *since*.”

Alison bit her lip.

Holston sat up straight.

He glanced around the room and alowed this

observation to sink in. He had a sudden vision of his

wife yanking his sleuthing bag out of his

hands and

making off with it.

“So you’re saying—” He rubbed his chin and thought

this through. “You’re saying that someone wiped out

our history to stop us from repeating it?”

“Or worse.” She reached out and held his hand with

both of hers. Her face had deepened from seriousness

to something severe. “What if the reason

for the revolts

was right there on the hard drives? What if some part of

our known history, or some data from the outside, or

maybe the knowledge of whatever it was that made

people move in here long, long ago—what if that

information built up some kind of pressure that made

people lose their marbles, or go stir crazy, or just want

out? ”

Holston shook his head. “I don’t want you thinking that

way,” he cautioned her.

“I’m not saying they were right to go nuts,” she told

him, back to being careful. “But from what I’ve pieced

together so far, this is my theory.”

Holston gave the monitor an untrusting glance. “Maybe

you shouldn’t be doing this,” he said.

“I’m not even sure

how you’re doing it, and maybe you shouldn’t be.”

“Honey, the information is there. If I don’t piece it

together now, somebody else wil at some point. You

can’t put the genie back in the bottle.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve already published a white paper on how to

retrieve deleted and overwritten files.

The rest of the IT

department is spreading it around to help people

who've unwittingly flushed something they needed."

"I stil think you should stop," he said. "This isn't the

best idea. I can't see any good coming of it—"

"No good coming from the truth? Knowing the truth is

always good. And better that it's us discovering it than

someone else, right?”

Holston looked at his files. It’d been five years since the

last person was sent to cleaning. The view outside was

getting worse every day, and he could feel the pressure,

as sheriff, to find someone. It was growing, like steam

building up in the silo, ready to launch something out.

People got nervous when they thought the time was

near. It was like one of those self-fulfiling prophecies

where the nerves finaly made someone twitch, then lash

out or say something regretful, and then they were in a

cel, watching their last blurry sunset.

Holston sorted through the files al around him, wishing

there was something in them. He would put a man to his

death tomorrow to release that steam. His wife was

poking some great, overly ful baloon with a needle,

and Holston wanted to get that air out of it before she

poked too far.

4

Present Time

Holston sat on the lone steel bench in the airlock, his

brain numb from lack of sleep and the surety of what

lay before him. Nelson, the head of the

cleaning lab,

knelt in front of him and worked a leg of the white

hazard suit over Holston's foot.

"We've played around with the joint seals and added a

second spray-on lining," Nelson was saying. "It should

give you more time out there than anyone has had

before."

This registered for Holston, and he

remembered

watching his wife go about her cleaning. The top floor

of the silo with its great screens showing the outside

world was usualy empty for cleanings. The people

inside couldn’t bear to watch what they’d done—or

maybe they wanted to come up and enjoy a nice view

without seeing what it took to get it. But Holston had

watched; there was never any doubt that he would. He

couldn’t see Alison’s face through her silver-masked

helmet, couldn’t see her thin arms through the bulky suit

as she scrubbed and scrubbed with her wool pads, but

he knew her walk, her mannerisms. He had watched

her finish the job, taking her time and doing it wel, and

then she had stepped back, looked in the

camera one

last time, waved at him, then turned to walk away. Like

others before her, she had lumbered toward a nearby

hil and had begun climbing up, trudging toward the

dilapidated spires of that ancient and crumbling city just

visible over the horizon. Holston hadn’t moved the

entire time. Even as she fel on the side of the hil,

clutching her helmet, writhing while the toxins first ate

away the spray-on linings, then the suit, and finaly his

wife, he hadn’t moved.

“Other foot.”

Nelson slapped his ankle. Holston lifted his foot and

alowed the tech to bunch the rest of the suit around his

shins. Looking at his hands, at the black carbon

undersuit he wore against his skin, Holston pictured it al

dissolving off his body, sloughing away like flakes of

dried grease from a generator's pipe while the blood

burst from his pores and pooled up in his lifeless suit.

"If you'l grab the bar and stand—"

Nelson was walking him through a routine he'd seen

twice before. Once with Jack Brent, who had been

beligerent and hostile right up to the end, forcing him as

sheriff to stand guard by the bench. And once with his

wife, whom he had watched get ready through the

airlock's smal porthole. Holston knew what to do from

watching these others, but he stil needed to be told. His

thoughts were elsewhere. Reaching up, he grabbed the

trapeze-like bar hanging above him and

puled himself

upright. Nelson grabbed the sides of the suit and

yanked them up to Holston's waist. Two empty arms

flapped to either side.

"Left hand here."

Holston numbly obeyed. It was surreal to be on the

other side of this—this mechanical death-walk of the

condemned. Holston had often wondered

why people

complied, why they just went along. Even Jack Brent

had done what he was told, as foul mouthed and

verbaly abusive as he'd been. Alison had done it quiet,

just like this, Holston thought as he inserted one hand

and then the other. The suit came up, and Holston

thought maybe that people went along because they

couldn’t believe it was happening. None of it was real

enough to rebel against. The animal part of his mind

wasn’t made for this, to be calmly ushered to a death it

was perfectly aware of.

“Turn.”

He did.

There was a tug at the smal of his back, and then a

noisy zipping sound up to his neck.

Another tug,

another zip. Two layers of futility. The crunch of

industrial Velcro over top. Pats and double-checks.

Holston heard the holow helmet slide off its shelf; he

flexed his fingers inside the puffy gloves while Nelson

checked over the dome's innards.

"Let's go over the procedure one more time."

“It’s not necessary,” Holston said quietly.

Nelson glanced toward the airlock door leading back to

the silo. Holston didn’t need to look to know someone

was likely watching. “Bear with me,” Nelson said. “I

have to do it by the book.”

Holston nodded, but he knew there wasn’t any “book.”

Of al the mystic oral traditions passed through silo

generations, none matched the cult-like intensity of the

suit makers and the cleaning techs. Everyone gave them

their space. The banned might do the physical cleaning,

but these were the people who made it possible. These

were the men and women who maintained the view to

that wider world beyond the silo's stifling confines.

Nelson placed the helmet on the bench.

“You got your

scrubbers here.” He patted the wool pads stuck to the

front of the suit.

Holston puled one off with a ripping sound, studied the

whorls and curls of the rough material, then stuck it

back on.

“Two squirts from the cleaning bottle before you scrub

with the wool, then dry with this towel,

then put the

ablating films on last.” He patted the pockets in order,

even though they were clearly labeled and numbered—

upside down so Holston could read them —and color-

coded.

Holston nodded and met the tech’s eyes for the first

time. He was surprised to see fear there, fear he had

learned wel to notice in his profession. He almost

asked Nelson what was wrong before it occurred to

him: The man was worried al these instructions were

for naught, that Holston would walk out —like everyone

in the silo feared al prisoners would— and not do his

duty. Not clean up for the people whose rules had

kiled him. Or was Nelson worried that

the expensive

and laborious gear he and his coleagues had built, using

those secrets and techniques handed down from wel

before the uprising, would go away and rot to no

purpose?

“You okay?” Nelson asked. “Anything too tight?”

Holston glanced around the airlock. *My life is too*

tight, he wanted to say. *My skin is too tight. The*

walls are too tight.

He just shook his head.

“I’m ready,” he whispered.

It was the truth. Holston was oddly and truly very much

ready to go.

And he remembered, suddenly, how ready his wife had

been as wel.

5

Three Years Earlier

“I want to go out. I want to go out. Iwanttogoout.”

Holston arrived at the cafeteria in a sprint. His radio

was stil squawking, Deputy Marnes yeling something

about Alison. Holston hadn’t even taken the time to

respond, had just bolted up three flights of stairs toward

the scene.

“What’s going on?” he asked. He swam through the

crowd by the door and found his wife writhing on the

cafeteria floor, held down by Connor and two other

food staff employees. “Let her go!” He slapped their

hands off his wife’s shins and nearly got one of her

boots to his chin. “Settle down,” he said. He reached

for her wrists, which were twisting this way and that to

get out of the desperate grips of grown men. “Baby,

what the *hell* is going on?”

“She was running for the airlock,” Conner said through

grunts of exertion. Percy corraled her kicking feet, and

Holston didn’t stop him. He saw now why three men

were needed. He leaned close to Alison, making sure

she saw him. Her eyes were wild, peeking through a

curtain of disheveled hair.

“Alison, baby, you’ve gotta settle down.”

“I want to go out. I want to go out.”

Her voice had quieted, but the words kept tumbling out.

“Don’t say that,” Holston told her. Chils ran through

his body at the sound of the grave utterances. He held

her cheeks. “Baby, don’t say that!”

But some part of him knew, in a jolting flash, what it

meant. He knew it was too late. The others had heard.

Everyone had heard. His wife had signed her death

certificate, and right before him. The room spun around

Holston as he begged Alison to be quiet. It was like he

had arrived at the scene of some horrible accident—

some mishap in the machine shop—to find a person he

loved wounded. Arrived to find them alive and kicking,

but knowing at a glance that the injury was a mortal

one.

Holston felt warm tears streak down his cheeks as he

tried to wipe the hair from her face. Her eyes finaly met

his, stopped their fevered swirling and locked onto his

with awareness. And for a moment, just a second,

before he could wonder if she'd been drugged or

abused in any way, a spark of calm clarity registered

there, a flash of sanity, of cool calculation. And then it

was blinked away and her eyes went wild again as she

begged to be let out, over and over.

"Lift her up," Holston said. His husband eyes swam

behind tears while he alowed his dutiful, sheriff-self to

intervene. There was nothing for it but to lock her up,

even as he wanted nothing else but room enough to

scream. “That way,” he told Connor, who had both

hands under her twisting shoulders. He nodded toward

his office and the holding cel beyond. Just past that,

down at the end of the hal, the bright

yelow paint on

the great airlock door stood out, serene and menacing,

silent and waiting.

Once in the holding cel, Alison immediately calmed.

She sat on the bench, no longer struggling or

blabbering, as if she'd only stopped in to rest and enjoy

the view. Holston was now the writhing wreck. He

paced outside the bars and asked unanswered

questions while Deputy Marnes and the Mayor handled

his procedural work. The two of them were treating

Holston and his wife *both* like patients. And even as

Holston's mind spun with the horror of the past half

hour, in the back of his sheriff brain, where he was

always alert for the rising tensions in the

silo, that part of

him was dimly aware of the shock and rumors trembling

through wals of concrete and rebar. The enormous

pent-up pressure of the place was now hissing through

the seams in whispers.

“Sweetheart, you’ve gotta talk to me,” he pleaded

again and again. He stopped his pacing and twisted the

bars in his hands. Alison kept her back to him. She

gazed at the wal screen, at the brown hils and gray sky

and dark clouds. Now and then a hand came up to

brush hair out of her face, but otherwise she didn't

move or speak. Only when Holston's key had gone into

the lock, not long after they had wrestled her in and shut

the door, did she utter a single "*don't*"

that had

convinced him to remove it.

While he pleaded and she ignored, the machinations of

the looming cleaning gyred through the silo. Techs

rumbled down the halway as a suit was sized and

readied. Cleaning tools were prepped in the airlock. A

canister hissed somewhere as argon was loaded into the

flushing chambers. The commotion of it sporadicaly

rumbled past the holding cel where Holston stood

gazing at his wife. Chattering techs went dreadfuly silent

as they squeezed past—they didn't even seem to

breathe in his presence.

Hours went by and Alison refused to talk —a behavior

that created its own stir in the silo. Holston spent the

entire day blubbering through the bars, his brain on fire

with confusion and agony. It had happened in a single

moment, the destruction of al that he knew. He tried to

wrap his brain around it while Alison sat in the cel,

gazing out at the dismal land, seemingly pleased with her

far worse status as someone doomed.

It was after dark when she finaly spoke, after her last

meal had been silently refused for the final time, after the

techs had finished in the airlock, closing the yelow door

and retiring for a sleepless night. It was after his deputy

had gone for the night, patting Holston on the shoulder

twice. What felt like many hours after that, when

Holston was near to passing out in fatigue from his

crying and hoarse remonstrations, long

after the hazy

sun had settled over the hils visible from the cafeteria

and lounge—the hils that hid the rest of that distant,

crumbling city. In the near-dark left in the holding cel,

Alison whispered something almost inaudible:

“It’s not real.”

That’s what Holston *thought* he heard. He stirred.

“Baby?” He gripped the bars and puled himself up to

his knees. “Honey,” he whispered, wiping the crust

from his cheeks.

She turned. It was like the sun changing its mind and

rising back over the hils. To acknowledge him gave him

hope. It choked him up, causing him think this had al

been a sickness, a fever, something they could have

Doc write up to excuse her for everything she'd uttered.

She'd never meant it. She was saved just by snapping

out of it, and Holston was saved just by seeing her turn

to him.

"Nothing you see is real," she said quietly. She seemed

calm of body even as her craziness continued,

condemning her with forbidden words.

“Come talk to me,” Holston said. He waved her to the

bars.

Alison shook her head. She patted the cot’s thin

mattress beside her.

Holston checked the time. It was long past visiting

hours. He could be sent to cleaning just for doing what

he was about to do.

The key went into the lock without

hesitation.

A metalic click rang out impossibly loud.

Holston stepped inside with his wife and sat beside her.

It kiled him to not touch her, to not wrap her up or

drag her out to some safe place, back to their bed

where they could pretend it had al been a bad dream.

But he didn’t dare move. He sat and twisted his hands

together while she whispered:

“It doesn’t have to be real. Any of this. None of this.”

She looked to the screen. Holston leaned so close he

could smel the dried sweat from the day’s struggle.

“Baby, what’s going on?”

Her hair stirred with his words. She reached out and

rubbed the darkening display, feeling the pixels.

“It could be morning right now and we’d never know.

There could be people outside.” She turned and looked

at him. “They could be watching us,” she said with a

sinister grin.

Holston held her gaze. She didn’t seem crazy at al, not

like earlier. Her *words* were crazy, but she didn’t seem

to be. “Where did you get that idea?” he asked. He

thought he knew, but he asked anyway. “Did you find

something on the hard drives?” He’d heard that she had

run straight from her lab toward the airlock, already

barking her madness. Something had happened while

she was at work. “What did you find?”

“There’s more deleted than just from the uprising,” she

whispered. “Of course there would be. Everything is

deleted. Al the recent stuff, too." She laughed. Her

voice got suddenly loud and her eyes lost focus. "Emails

you never sent me, I bet!"

"Honey." Holston dared to reach for her hands, and

she didn't pul away. He held them. "What did you

find? Was it an email? Who was it from?"

She shook her head. "No. I found the programs they

use. The ones that make pictures on the screens that

look so *real*." She looked back to the quickening dusk.

"IT," she said. "Eye. Tee. They're the ones. They

know. It's a secret that only they know." She shook

her head.

"What secret?" Holston couldn't tel if this was

nonsense or important. He only knew that she was

talking.

“But now I know. And you wil too. I’l come back for

you, I swear. This’l be different. We’l break the cycle,

you and me. I’l come back and we’l go over that hil

together.” She laughed. “If it’s there,” she said loudly.

“If that hil is there and it’s green, we’l go over it

together.”

She turned to him.

“There is no uprising, not realy, there’s just a gradual

leak. Just the people who know, who want out.” She

smiled. “They get to go out,” she said. “They get just

what they ask for. I know why they clean, why they say

they won’t but why they do. I know. I know. And they

never come back, they wait and wait and wait, but I

won’t. I’l come right back. This’l be different.”

Holston squeezed her hands. Tears were dripping off

his cheeks. “Baby, why are you doing this?” He felt like

she wanted to explain herself now that the silo was dark

and they were al alone.

“I know about the uprisings,” she said.

Holston nodded. “I know. You told me. There were

others—”

“No.” Alison puled away from him, but it was only to

make space so she could look him in the eyes. Hers

were no longer wild, as before.

“Holston, I know why the uprisings took place. I know

why.”

Alison bit her lower lip. Holston waited, his body tense.

“It was always over the doubt, the

suspicion, that things

weren't as bad out there as they seemed. You've felt

that, right? That we could be *anywhere*, living a lie?"

Holston knew better than to answer, to even twitch.

Broaching this subject led to cleaning. He sat frozen and

waited.

"It was probably the younger generations," Alison

said. “Every twenty years or so. They wanted to push

further, to explore, I think. Don’t you ever feel that

urge? Didn’t you when you were younger?” Her eyes

lost focus. “Or maybe it was the couples, newly

married, who were driven to madness when they were

told they couldn’t have kids in this damned, limited

place. Maybe they were wiling to risk

everything for

that chance—”

Her eyes focused on something far away. Perhaps she

was seeing that lottery ticket they had yet to redeem

and now never would. She looked back to Holston. He

wondered if he could be sent to cleaning even for his

silence, for not yeling her down as she uttered every

one of the great forbidden words.

“It could even have been the elderly residents,” she

said, “cooped up too long, no longer afraid in their final

years, maybe wanting to move out and make room for

the others, for the few precious grandchildren. Whoever

it was, whoever, every uprising took place because of

this doubt, this feeling, that *we’re* in the bad place right

here.” She looked around the cel.

“You can’t say that,” Holston whispered. “That’s the

great offense—”

Alison nodded. “Expressing any desire to leave. Yes.

The great offense. Don’t you see why? Why is that so

forbidden? Because al the uprisings started with that

desire, that’s why.”

“You get what you ask for,” Holston

recited, those

words driled into his head since youth. His parents had

warned him—their only precious child—to never want

out of the silo. Never even *think* it. Don’t let it cross

your mind. It was instant death, that thought, and it

would be the destruction of their one and only.

He looked back to his wife. He stil didn’t understand

her madness, this decision. So she had found deleted

programs that could make worlds on computer screens

look real. What did that mean? Why do this?

“Why?” he asked her. “Why do it this way? Why

didn’t you come to me? There has to be a better way to

find out what’s going on. We could start by teling

people what you’re finding on those

drives—”

“And be the ones who start the next great uprising?”

Alison laughed. Some of the madness was stil there, or

maybe it was just an intense frustration and boiling

anger. Perhaps a great, multi-generational betrayal had

pushed her to the edge. “No thanks,” she said, her

laughter subsiding. “I wiped everything I found. I don’t

want them to know. Damn them if they stay here. I'm

only coming back for *you*."

"You don't come *back* from this," Holston said angrily.

"You think the banished are stil out there? You think

they choose to not come back because they feel

betrayed by us?"

"Why do you think they do the cleaning?" Alison

asked. “Why do they pick up their wool and set to

work without hesitation?”

Holston sighed. He felt the anger in him draining away.

“No one knows why,” he said.

“But why do you *think?* ”

“We’ve talked about this,” he said. “How many times

have we discussed this?” He was sure al couples

whispered their theories when they were

alone. He

looked past Alison as he remembered those times. He

looked to the wal and saw the moon's position and

read in it the night's hour. Their time was limited. His

wife would be gone tomorrow. That simple thought

came often like lightning from stormy clouds.

"Everyone has theories," he said. "We've shared ours

countless times. Let's just—"

"But now you know something new," Alison told him.

She let go of his hand and brushed the hair from her

face. "You and I know something new, and now it al

makes sense. It makes perfect sense. And tomorrow

I'l know for sure." Alison smiled. She patted Holston's

hand as if he were a child. "And one day, my love, you

wil know it, too.”

6

Present Time

The first year without her, Holston had waited, buying

into her insanity, hoping she’d come back. He’d spent

the first anniversary of her death scrubbing the holding

cel clean, washing the yelow airlock door, straining for

some sound, some knock, that the ghost

of his wife was

back to set him free.

When it didn’t happen, he began to consider the

alternative: Going out after her. He had spent enough

days, weeks, months going through her computer files,

reading some of what she had pieced together, making

sense of half of it, to become half mad himself. His

world was a lie, he came to believe, and without Alison

in it he had nothing to live for even if it were truth.

The second anniversary of her departure was his year

of cowardice. He had walked to work, the poisonous

words in his mouth—his desire to go out—but he had

choked them down at the last second. He and Deputy

Marnes had gone on patrol that day with

the secret of

how near he'd come to death burning inside of him.

That was a long year of cowardice, of letting Alison

down. The first year had been her failure; last year had

been his. But no more.

Now, one more year later, he was alone in the airlock,

wearing a cleaning suit, ful of doubts and convictions.

The silo was sealed off behind him, that thick yelow

door bolted tight, and Holston thought that this was *not*

how he'd thought he'd die, or what he had hoped

would become of him. He had thought he would remain

in the silo forever, his nutrients going as the nutrients of

his parents had—into the soil of the eighth floor dirt

farm. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had

dreamed of a

family, of his own child, a fantasy of twins or another

lottery win, a wife to grow old with—

A klaxon sounded on the other side of the yelow

doors, warning everyone but him away. He was to stay.

There was nowhere else for him to go.

The argon chambers hissed, pumping the room ful of

the inert gas. After a minute of this,

Holston could feel

the pressure of the air as it crinkled the cleaning suit

tight around his joints. He breathed the oxygen

circulating inside his helmet and stood before the other

door, the forbidden door, the one to the awful outside

world, and waited.

There was a metal groan from pistons deep within the

wals. The sacrificial plastic curtains covering the interior

of the airlock wrinkled from the pressure of the built up

argon. These curtains would be incinerated inside the

airlock while Holston cleaned. The area would be

scrubbed clean before nightfal, ready for the next

cleaning.

The great metal doors before him shuddered, and then

a shaft of incredible space appeared at their

joint, widening as the doors withdrew into the jamb.

They wouldn’t open al the way, not like they were

once designed to—the risk of invading air had to be

minimized.

An argon torrent hissed through the gap, duling to a

roar as the space grew. Holston pressed close, as

horrified at himself for not resisting as he'd previously

been perplexed by the actions of others. Better to go

out, to see the world one time with his own eyes, than

to be burned alive with the plastic curtains.

As soon as the opening was wide enough, Holston

squeezed through, his suit catching and rubbing at the

doors. There was a veil of fog al around

him as the

argon condensed in the less pressurized air. He

stumbled forward blindly, pawing through the soft

cloud.

While stil in that mist, the outer doors groaned and

began closing. The klaxon howls behind were

swalowed by the press of thick steel against thick steel,

locking him out forever while cleansing fires began to

rage inside the airlock.

Holston found himself at the bottom of a concrete ramp,

a ramp that led *up*. His time felt short—there was

a constant reminder thrumming in the back of his skul

— *hurry! Hurry!* His life was ticking away. He

lumbered up the ramp, confused to not already be

above ground, so used as he was to seeing the world

and the horizon from the cafeteria and lounge, which

were on the same level as the airlock.

He shuffled up the narrow ramp, wals of chipped

concrete to either side, his visor ful of a confusing,

briliant light. At the top of the ramp, Holston saw the

heaven into which he'd been condemned for his simple

sin of hope. He whirled around, scanning the horizon,

his head dizzy from the sight of so much green!

Green hils, green grass, green carpet beneath his feet.

Holston whooped in his helmet. His mind buzzed

with the sight. Hanging over al the green, there was the

exact hue of blue from the children's books, the white

clouds untainted, the movement of living

things flapping

in the air.

Holston turned around and around, taking it in. He had

a sudden memory of his wife doing the same; he had

watched her awkwardly, slowly turning, almost as if she

were lost or confused or considering whether to do the

cleaning at al.

The cleaning!

Holston reached down and puled a wool pad from his

chest. The cleaning! He knew, in a dizzying rush, a

torrent of awareness, why, why. *Why!*

He looked where he always assumed the tal circular

wal of the uppermost silo floor would be, but of

course that wal was buried. Al that stood behind him

was a smal mound of concrete, a tower no more than

eight or nine feet tal. A metal ladder ran up one side;

antenna bristled from the top. And on the side facing

him—on al the sides he saw as he approached—were

the wide, curving, fisheye lenses of the silo’s powerful

cameras.

Holston held out his wool and approached the first. He

imagined the view of himself from inside the cafeteria,

staggering forward, becoming impossibly large. He had

watched his wife do the same thing three years ago. He

remembered her waving, he had thought at the time for

balance, but had she been teling him something? Had

she been grinning like a fool, as wide as he was grinning

now, while she remained hidden behind that silver

visor? Had her heart been pounding with

foolish hope

while she sprayed, scrubbed, wiped, applied? Holston

knew the cafeteria would be empty; there was no one

left who loved him enough to watch, but he waved

anyway. And for him, it wasn't the raw anger he

imagined many might have cleaned with, it wasn't the

knowledge that they in the silo were condemned and

the condemned set free, it wasn't the feeling of betrayal

that guided the wool in his hand in smal, circular

motions. It was pity. It was raw pity and unconstrained

joy.

The world blurred, but in a good way, as tears came to

Holston's eyes. His wife had been right: The view from

inside was a lie. The hils were the same —he'd

recognize them at a glance after so many years of living

with them—but the colors were al wrong. The screens

inside the silo, the programs his wife had found, they

somehow made the vibrant greens look gray, they

somehow removed al signs of life. Extraordinary life!

Holston polished the grime off the camera lens and

wondered if the gradual blurring was

even real. The

grime certainly was. He saw it as he rubbed it away.

But was it simple dirt, rather than some toxic, airborne

grime? Could the program Alison discovered only

modify what was already seen? Holston's mind spun

with so many new facts and ideas. He was like an adult

child, borne into a wide world, so much to piece

together al at once that his head throbbed.

The blur is real, he decided, as he cleaned the last of the

smear from the second lens. It was an overlay, like the

false grays and browns the program must use to hide

that green field and this blue sky dotted with puffy

white. They were hiding from them a world so beautiful,

Holston had to concentrate to not just

stand stil and

gape at it.

He worked on the second of the four cameras and

thought about those untrue wals beneath him, taking

what they saw and modifying it. He wondered how

many people in the silo knew. *Any* of them? What kind

of fanatical devotion would it take to maintain this

depressing ilusion? Or was this a secret from *before*

the last uprising? Was it an unknown lie perpetuated

through the generations—a fibbing set of programs that

continued to hum away on the silo computers with

nobody aware? Because, if someone knew, if they

could show anything, why not something nice?

The uprisings! Maybe it was just to

prevent them from

happening over and over again. Holston applied an

ablative film on the second sensor and wondered if the

ugly lie of an unpleasant outside world was some

misguided attempt to keep people from *wanting* out.

Could someone have decided that the truth was worse

than a loss of power, of control? Or was it something

deeper and more sinister? A fear of unabashed, free,

many-as-you-like

children?

So

many

horrible

possibilities.

And what of Alison? Where was she? Holston shuffled

around the corner of the concrete tower

toward the

third lens, and the familiar but strange skyscrapers in the

distant city came into view. Only, there were more

buildings than usual there. Some stood to either side,

and an unfamiliar one loomed in the foreground. The

others, the ones he knew by heart, were whole and

shining, not twisted and jagged. Holston gazed over the

crest of the verdant hils and imagined Alison would be

walking over them at any minute. But that was

ridiculous. How would she know he'd been expeled on

this day? Would she remember the anniversary? Even

after he'd missed the last two? Holston cursed his

former cowardice, the years wasted. He would have to

go to *her*, he decided.

He had a sudden impulse to do just that, to tear off his

helmet and bulky suit and scamper up the hil in nothing

but his carbon undersuit, breathing in deep gulps of

crisp air and laughing al the way to his waiting wife in

some vast, unfathomable city ful of people and

squealing children.

But no, there were appearances to keep, ilusions to

maintain. He wasn't sure why, but it was what his wife

had done, what al the other cleaners before him had

done. Holston was now a member of that club, a

member of the *out* group. There was a press of history,

o f *precedent*, to obey. They had known best. He

would complete his performance for the *in* group he

had just joined. He wasn't sure why he

was doing it,

only that everyone before him had, and look at the

secret they al shared. That secret was a powerful drug.

He only knew to do what he had been told, to folow

the numbers on the pockets, to mechanicaly clean while

he considered the awesome implications of an outside

world so big one couldn’t live to see it al, couldn’t

breathe al the air, drink al the water, eat al the food.

Holston dreamed of such things while he scrubbed

dutifuly on the third lens, wiped, applied, sprayed,

then moved to the last. His pulse was audible in his

ears; his chest pounded in that constricting suit.

Soon, soon, he told himself. He used the second wool

pad and polished the grime off the final

lens. He wiped

and applied and sprayed a final time, then put

everything back in its place, back in the numbered

pouches, not wanting to bespoil the gorgeous and

healthy ground beneath his feet. Done, Holston stepped

back, took one last look into the nobodies not watching

from the cafeteria and lounge, then turned his back on

those who had turned their backs on Alison and al the

others before her. There was a reason nobody came

back for the inside people, Holston thought, just as

there was a reason everyone cleaned, even when they

said they wouldn’t. He was free; he was to join the

others, and so he stroled toward that dark crease that

ran up the hil, folowing in his wife’s

footsteps, aware

that some familiar boulder, long-sleeping, no longer lay

there. That, too, Holston decided, had been nothing

more than another awful lie.

7

Holston was a dozen paces up the hil, stil marveling at

the bright grass at his feet and the briliant sky above,

when the first pang lurched in his

stomach. It was a

writhing cramp, something like intense hunger. At first,

he worried he was going too fast, first with the cleaning

and now with his impatient shuffling in that cumbersome

suit. He didn’t want to take it off until he was over the

hil, out of sight, maintaining whatever ilusion the wals

in the cafeteria held. He focused on the tops of the

skyscrapers and resigned himself to slowing down, to

calming down. One step at a time. Years and years of

running up and down thirty flights of stairs should make

this nothing.

Another cramp, stronger this time. Holston winced and

stopped walking, waiting for it to pass. When did he eat

last? Not al yesterday. Stupid. When did he last use the

bathroom? Again, he couldn't remember. He might

need to get the suit off earlier than he'd hoped. Once

the wave of nausea passed, he took a few more steps,

hoping to reach the top of the hil before the next bout

of pain. He only got another dozen steps in before it hit

him, more severe this time, worse than anything he'd

ever felt. Holston retched from the

intensity of it, and

now his dry stomach was a blessing. He clutched his

abdomen as his knees gave out in a shiver of weakness.

He crashed to the ground and groaned. His stomach

was burning, his chest on fire. He managed to crawl

forward a few feet, sweat dripping from his forehead

and splashing on the inside of his helmet. He saw sparks

in his vision; the entire world went bright white, several

times, like lightning strikes. Confused and senseless, he

crawled ever upward, moving laboriously, his startled

mind stil focused on his last, clear goal: cresting that hil.

Again and again, his view shimmered, his visor letting in

a solid bright light before it flickered away. It became

difficult to see. Holston ran into

something before him,

and his arms colapsed. He blinked and gazed forward,

up the hil, waiting for a clear sight of what lay ahead,

but saw only infrequent strobes of green grass.

And then his vision went away completely. Al was

black. Holston clawed at his face, even as his stomach

tangled in a new torturous knot. There was a glow, a

blinking in his vision, so he knew he wasn't blind. But

the blinking seemed to be coming from *inside* his

helmet. He could see the blinking. It was his *visor* that

had become suddenly blind, not him.

Holston felt for the latches on the back of the helmet.

He wondered if he'd used up al his air. Was he

asphyxiating? Being poisoned by his own exhalations?

Of course! Why would they give him more air than he

needed for the cleaning? He fumbled for the latches

with his bulky gloves. They weren't meant for this. The

gloves were part of his suit, his suit a single piece zipped

up twice at the back and velcroed over. It wasn't meant

to come off, not without help. Holston was going to die

in it, poison himself, choke on his own

gasses, and now

he knew *true* fear of containment, a true sense of being

closed in. The silo was nothing to this as he scrambled

for release, as he writhed in pain inside his tailored

coffin. He squirmed and pounded at the latches, but his

padded fingers were too big. And the blindness made it

worse, made him feel smothered and trapped. Holston

wretched again in pain. He doubled over, hands spread

in the dirt, and felt something through his glove—a

poke.

He fumbled for the object and found it: a sharp rock. A

tool. Holston tried to calm himself. His years of

enforcing calm, of soothing others, of bringing stability

to chaos came back to him. He gripped the rock

carefuly, terrified of losing it to his blindness, and

brought it up to his helmet. There was a brief thought of

cutting away his gloves with the rock, but he wasn't

sure his sanity or air would last that long. He jabbed the

point of the rock at his armored neck, right where the

latch should be. He heard the crack as it landed.

Crack. *Crack*. Pausing to probe with

padded finger,

retching again, Holston took more careful aim. There

was a click instead of a crack. A sliver of light intruded

as one side of the helmet came free. Holston was

choking on his exhalations, on the stale and used air

around him. He moved the rock to his other hand and

aimed for the second latch. Two more cracks before it

landed, the helmet popping free.

Holston could *see*. His eyes burned from the effort,

from not being able to breathe, but he could see. He

blinked the tears away and tried to suck in a deep,

crisp, revitalizing lungful of blue air.

What he got instead was like a punch to the chest.

Holston gagged. He threw up spittle and stomach acid,

the very lining of him trying to flee. The world around

him had gone brown. Brown grass and gray skies. No

green. No blue. No life.

He colapsed to one side, landing on his shoulder. His

helmet lay open before him, the visor black and lifeless.

There was no looking through the visor. Holston

reached for it, confused. The outside of the visor was

coated silver, the other side was nothing. No glass. A

rough surface. Wires leading in and out of it. A display

gone dark. Dead pixels.

He threw up again. Wiping his mouth feebly, looking

down the hil, he saw the world with his naked eyes as it

was, as he'd always known it to be. Desolate and

bleak. He let go of the helmet, dropping the lie he had

carried out of the silo with him. He was dying. The

toxins were eating him from the inside. He blinked up at

the black clouds overhead, roaming like beasts. He

turned to see how far he had gotten, how far it was to

the crest of the hil, and he saw the thing he had

stumbled into while crawling. A boulder, sleeping. It

hadn’t been there in his visor, hadn’t

been a part of the

lie on that little screen, running one of the programs

Alison had found.

Holston reached out and touched the object before him,

the white suit flaking away like brittle rock, and he

could no longer support his head. Colapsing to the

ground, curling up in pain from the slow death

overtaking him, he held what remained of his wife and

thought, with his last thought, what this death of his must

look like to those who could see, this curling and dying

in the black crack of a lifeless brown hil, a rotting city

standing silent and forlorn over him.

What would they see, anyone who had chosen to

watch?

Wool 2 – Proper Gauge

1

Her knitting needles rested in a leather pouch in pairs,

two matching sticks of wood, side by side like the

delicate bones of the wrist wrapped in dried and ancient

flesh. Wood and leather. Artifacts like clues handed

down from generation to generation, innocuous winks

from her ancestors, harmless things like children's

books and wood carvings that managed to survive the

uprising and the purge. Each clue stood as a smal hint

of a world beyond their own, a world where buildings

stood aboveground like the crumbling ruins visible over

the gray and lifeless hils.

After much deliberation, Mayor Jahns selected a pair of

needles. She always chose carefuly, for proper gauge

was critical. Too smal a needle, and the knitting would

prove difficult, the resulting sweater too tight and

constricting. Too large a needle on the other hand, and

it would create a garment ful of large holes. The knitting

would remain loose. One would be able to see straight

through it.

Her choice made, the wooden bones removed from

their leather wrist, Jahns reached for the large bal of

cotton yarn. It was hard to believe, weighing that knot

of twisted fibers, that her hands could make of it

something ordered, something useful. She fished for the

end of the yarn, dweling on how things came to be.

Right now, her sweater was little more

than a tangle and

a thought. Going back, it had once been bright fibers of

cotton blooming in the dirt farms, puled, cleaned, and

twisted into long strands. Even further, and the very

substance of the cotton plant itself could be traced to

those souls who had been laid to rest in its soil, feeding

the roots with their own leather while the air above

baked under the ful glory of powerful grow lights.

Jahns shook her head at her own morbidity. The older

she got, the quicker her mind went to death. Always, in

the end, the thoughts of death.

With practiced care, she looped the end of the yarn

around the point of one needle and crafted a triangle-

shaped web with her fingers. The tip of the needle

danced through this triangle, casting the yarn on. This

was her favorite part, casting on. She liked beginnings.

The first row. Out of nothing comes something. Since

her hands knew what to do, she was free to glance up

and watch a gust of morning wind chase pockets of

dust down the slope of a hil. The clouds were low and

ominous today. They loomed like

worried parents over

these smaler darting clouds of windswept soil, which

tumbled like laughing children, twirling and spiling,

folowing the dips and valeys as they flowed toward a

great crease where two hils colided to become one.

Here, Jahns watched as the puffs of dust splashed

against a pair of dead bodies, the frolicking twins of dirt

evaporating into ghosts, solid playful children returning

once more to dreams and scattered mist.

Mayor Jahns settled back in her faded plastic chair and

watched the fickle winds play across the forbidding

world outside. Her hands worked the yarn into rows,

requiring only occasional glances to keep her place.

Often, the dust flew toward the silo’s sensors in sheets,

each wave causing her to cringe as if a physical blow

were about to land. This assault of blurring grime was

anytime difficult to watch, but especialy brutal the day

after a cleaning. Each touch of dust on the clouding

lenses was a violation, a dirty man touching something

pure. Jahns remembered what that felt like. And sixty

years later, she sometimes wondered if

this misting of

grime that led to a different sort of bodily sacrifice

wasn't even more painful for her to abide.

"Ma'am?"

Mayor Jahns turned away from the sight of the dead

hils cradling her recently deceased sheriff. She turned

to find Deputy Marnes standing by her side.

“Yes, Marnes?”

“You asked for these.”

Marnes placed three manila folders on the cafeteria

table and slid them toward her through the scattered

crumbs and juice stains of last night’s cleaning

celebration. Jahns set her knitting aside and reluctantly

reached for the folders. What she realy wanted was to

be left alone a little longer to watch rows of knots

become something. She wanted to enjoy the peace and

quiet of this unspoiled sunrise before the grime and the

years duled it, before the rest of the upper silo awoke,

rubbed the sleep from their eyes and the stains from

their consciences, and came up to crowd around her in

their own plastic chairs and take it al in.

But duty beckoned; she was mayor by choice; and the

silo needed a sheriff. So Jahns put aside her own wants

and desires and weighed the folders in her lap.

Caressing the cover of the first one, she looked down at

her hands with something between pain and

acceptance. The backs of them appeared as dry and

crinkled as the pulp paper hanging out of

the folders.

She glanced over at Deputy Marnes, whose white

mustache was flecked with the occasional black. She

remembered when the colors there were the other way

around. She remembered when his tal and thin frame

were a mark of vigor and youth rather than gaunt

fragility. He was handsome stil, but only because she

knew him from long ago, only because her old eyes stil

remembered.

“You know,” she told Marnes, “we could do this

different this time. You could let me promote you to

sheriff, hire yourself a deputy, and do this proper.”

Marnes laughed. “I’ve been deputy almost as long as

you’ve been mayor, Ma’am. Don’t figure on being

nothing else but dead one day.”

Jahns nodded. One of the things she loved about having

Marnes around was that his thoughts could be so black

as to make hers shine gray. “I fear that day is rapidly

approaching for us both,” she said.

“Truer than true, I reckon. Never figured to outlive so

many. Sure as sin don’t see me outliving you.” Marnes

rubbed his mustache and studied the view of the

outside. Jahns smiled at him, opened the folder on top,

and studied the first bio.

“That’s three decent candidates,” Marnes said. “Just

like you asked for. Be happy to work with any of them.

Juliette, I think she’s in the middle there, would be my

first pick. Works down in Mechanical. Don’t come up

much, but me and Holston—”

Marnes paused and cleared his throat. Jahns glanced

over and saw that her Deputy’s gaze had crept toward

that dark crook in the hil. He covered his mouth with a

fist of sharp knuckles and faked a cough.

“Excuse me,” he said. “As I was sayin’, the sheriff and

me worked a death down there a few years back. This

Juliette—I think she prefers Jules, come to think of it—

was a right shiner. Sharp as a tack. Big help on this

case, good at spotting details, handling people, being

diplomatic but firm, al that. I don’t think she comes up

past the eighties much. A down-deeper for sure, which

we ain’t had in a while.”

Jahns sorted through Juliette’s folder, checking her

family tree, her voucher history, her current pay in chits.

She was listed as a shift foreman with good marks. No

history in the lottery.

“Never married?” Jahns asked.

“Nope. Something of a johnboy. A wrencher, you

know? We were down there a week, saw how the guys

took to her. Now, she could have her pick of them

boys but chooses not to. Kind of person who leaves an

impression but prefers to go it alone."

"Sure seems like she left an impression on you," Jahns

said, regretting it immediately. She hated the jealous

tone in her own voice.

Marnes shifted his weight to his other foot. "Wel, you

know me, Mayor. I'm always sizing up candidates.

Anything to keep from bein' promoted."

Jahns smiled. "What about the other two?" She

checked the names, wondering if a down-deeper was a

good idea. Or possibly worried about Marnes having a

crush. She recognized the name on the top folder. Peter

Bilings. He worked a few floors down in judicial, as a

clerk or a judge's shadow.

“Honestly, ma’am? They’re filer to make it seem fair.

Like I said, I’d work with them, but I think Jules is your

girl. Been a long time since we had a lass for a Sheriff.

Be a popular choice with an election comin’ up.”

“That won’t be why we choose,” Jahns said.

“Whoever we decide on wil probably be here long

after we’re gone—” She stopped herself

as she recaled

having said the same thing about Holston, back when

he’d been chosen.

Jahns closed the folder and returned her attention to the

walscreen. A smal tornado had formed at the base of

the hil, the gathering dust whipped into an organized

frenzy. It built some steam, this smal wisp, as it sweled

into a larger cone, spinning and spinning on a wavering

tip like a child's top as it raced toward sensors that

fairly sparkled in the wan rays of a clear sunrise.

"I think we should go see her," Jahns finaly said. She

kept the folders in her lap, fingers like roled parchment

toying with the rough edges of handmade paper.

"Ma'am? I'd rather us fetch her up here.

Do the

interview in your office like we've always done. It's a

long way down to her and an even longer way back

up."

"I appreciate the concern, Deputy, I do. But it's been a

long while since I've been much past the fortieth. My

knees are no excuse to not see my people __"

The Mayor stopped. The tornado of dust wavered,

turned, and headed straight for them. It grew and grew

—the wide angle of the lens distorting it into a monster

much larger and more fierce than she knew it to actualy

be—and then it blew over the sensor array, the entire

cafeteria descending into a brief darkness until the

zephyr caromed past, retreating across

the screen in the

lounge and leaving behind it a view of the world now

tainted with a slight, dingy film.

“Damn those things,” Deputy Marnes said through

gritted teeth. The aged leather of his holster squeaked

as he rested his hand on the butt of his gun, and Jahns

imagined the old Deputy out on that landscape, chasing

the wind on thin legs while pumping bulets into a cloud

of fading dust.

The two of them sat silent a moment, surveying the

damage. Finaly, Jahns spoke.

“This trip won’t be about the election, Marnes. It won’t

be for votes, either. For al I know, I’l run again

unopposed. So we won’t make a deal of it, and we’l

travel light and quiet. I want to *see* my people, not be

seen by them." She looked over at him, found that he

was watching her. "It'l be for me, Marnes. A

getaway."

She turned back to the view.

"Sometimes . . . sometimes I just think I've been up

here too long. The both of us. I think we've been

anywhere too long—”

The ringing of morning footsteps on the spiral staircase

gave her pause, and they both turned toward the sound

of life, the sound of a waking day. And she knew it was

time to start getting the images of dead things out of her

mind. Or at least, to bury them a while.

“We’l go down and get us a proper gauge of this

Juliette, you and me. Because sometimes, sitting here,

looking out on what the world makes us do—it needles

me deep, Marnes. It needles me straight through.”

••••

They met after breakfast in Holston’s old office. Jahns

stil thought of it as his, a day later. It was too early for

her to think of the room as anything else. She stood

beyond the twin desks and old filing cabinets and

peered into the empty holding cel while Deputy Marnes

gave last minute instructions to Terry, a security worker

from IT who often held down the fort while Marnes and

Holston were away on a case. Standing dutifuly behind

Terry was a teenager named Marcha, a young girl with

dark hair and bright eyes who was

apprenticing for

work in IT. She was Terry's shadow—just about half

the silo had one. They ranged in age from twelve to

twenty, these ever-present sponges absorbing the

lessons and techniques for keeping the silo operational

one generation more.

Deputy Marnes reminded Terry how rowdy people got

after a cleaning. Once the tension was released, people

tended to live it up a little. Most of them were too

young to remember the last double cleaning, so they

thought it couldn’t happen. They thought, for a few

months at least, that anything went.

The warning hardly needed saying—the revelry in the

next room could be heard through the shut door. Most

residents from the top forty were already packed into

the cafeteria and lounge. Hundreds more from the mids

and the down deep would trickle up throughout the

day, asking off work and turning in holiday chits just to

see the mostly clear view. It was a pilgrimage for many.

Some only came up once every few years, stood

around for an hour muttering that it

looked the same as

they remembered, then shooing their children down the

stairs ahead of them, fighting the upward surging

crowds.

Terry was left with the keys and a temporary badge.

Marnes checked the batteries in his wireless, made sure

the volume on the office unit was up, and inspected his

gun. He shook Terry's hand and wished him luck. Jahns

sensed it was almost time for them to go and turned

away from the empty cel. She said goodbye to Terry,

gave Marcha a nod, and folowed Marnes out the door.

"You feel okay leaving right after a cleaning?" she

asked as they stepped out into the cafeteria. She knew

how rowdy it would get later that night,

and how testy

the crowd. It seemed an awful time to drag him away

on a mostly selfish errand.

“Are you kidding? I need this. I need to get away.” He

glanced toward the walscreen, which was obscured by

the crowds. “I stil can’t figure what Holston was

thinking, can’t reckon why he never talked to me about

al that was going on in that head of his. Maybe by the

time we get back, I won't feel him in the office

anymore, 'cause right now I can't hardly breathe in

there."

Jahns thought about this as they fought through the

crowd. Plastic cups sloshed with a mix of fruit juices,

and she smeled the sting of tub-brewed alcohol in the

air, but ignored it. People were wishing her wel, asking

her to be careful, promising to vote. News of their trip

had leaked out faster than the spiked punch, despite

hardly teling anyone. Most were under the impression

that it was a goodwil trip. A reelection campaign. The

younger silo residents, who only remembered Holston

as sheriff, were already saluting Marnes

and giving him

that honorific title. Anyone with wrinkles in their eyes

knew better. They nodded to the duo as they passed

through the cafeteria and wished them a different sort of

unspoken luck. *Keep us going*, their eyes said. *Make it*

so my kids live as long as me. Don't let it unravel,

not just yet.

Jahns lived under the weight of this pressure, a burden

brutal on more than knees. She kept quiet as they made

their way to the central stairwel. A handful caled for

her to make a speech, but the lone voices did not gain

traction. No chant formed, much to her relief. What

would she say? That she didn’t know why it al held

together? That she didn’t even

understand her own

knitting, how if you made knots, and if you did it right,

things just worked out? Would she tel them it only took

one snip for it al to unravel? One cut, and you could

pul and pul and turn that garment into a pile. Did they

realy expect her to understand, when al she did was

folow the rules, and somehow it kept working out, year

after year after year?

Because she didn't understand what held it together.

And she didn't understand their mood, this celebration.

Were they drinking and shouting because they were

safe? Because they'd been spared by fate, passed over

for cleaning? Her people cheered while a good man,

her friend, her partner in keeping them alive and wel,

lay dead on a hil next to his wife. If she gave a speech,

if it weren't ful of the forbidden, it would be this: That

no two better people had ever gone to cleaning of their

own free wils, and what did that say about the lot of

them who remained?

Now was not the time for speeches. Or for drinking. Or

for being merry. Now was the hour of quiet

contemplation, which was one of the reasons Jahns

knew she needed to get away. Things had changed.

Not just by the day, but by the long years. She knew

better than most. Maybe old lady McNeil down in

Supply knew, could see it coming. One had to live a

long time to be sure, but now she was. And as time

marched on, carrying her world faster

and faster than

her feet could catch up, Mayor Jahns knew that it

would soon leave her completely behind. And her great

fear, unspoken but daily felt, was that this world

probably wouldn’t stagger very far along without her.

2

Jahns’ walking stick made a conspicuous ring as it

impacted each metal step. It soon became a metronome

for their descent, timing the music of the stairwel, which

was crowded and vibrating with the energy of a recent

cleaning. Al the traffic save for the two of them seemed

to be heading upward. They jostled against the flow,

elbows brushing, cries of, “Hey, Mayor!” folowed by

nods to Marnes. And Jahns saw it on

their faces: the

temptation to cal him sheriff tempered by their respect

for the awful nature of his assumed promotion.

“How many floors you up for?” Marnes asked.

“Why, you tired already?” Jahns glanced over her

shoulder to smirk at him, saw his bushy mustache

twisted up in a smile of his own.

“Going down ain’t a problem for me. It’s the going

back up I can’t stand.”

Their hands briefly colided on the twisted railing of the

spiral staircase, Jahns’ hand trailing behind her, Marnes’

reaching ahead. She felt like teling him she wasn’t tired

at al, but she did feel a sudden weariness, an

exhaustion more mental than physical. She had a

childish vision of more youthful times and pictured

Marnes scooping her up and carrying her down the

staircase in his arms. There would be a sweet release of

strength and responsibility, a sinking in to another's

power, no need to feign her own. This was not a

remembrance of the past—it was a future that had

never happened. And Jahns felt guilty for

even thinking

it. She felt her husband beside her, his ghost perturbed

by her thoughts—

“Mayor? How many you thinking?”

The two of them stopped and hugged the rail as a

porter trudged up the stairs. Jahns recognized the boy,

Conner, stil in his teens but already with a strong back

and steady stride. He had an array of

bundles strapped

together and balanced on his shoulders. The sneer on

his face was not from exhaustion or pain, but

annoyance. Who were al these people suddenly on his

stairwel? These tourists? Jahns thought of something

encouraging to say, some smal verbal reward for these

people who did a job her knees never could, but he

was already gone on his strong young feet, carrying

food and supplies up from the down deep, slowed only

by the crush of traffic attempting to worm up through

the silo for a peek of the clear and wide outside.

She and Marnes caught their breath for a moment

between flights. Marnes handed her his canteen, and

she took a polite sip before passing it

back.

“I’d like to do half today,” she finaly answered. “But I

want to make a few stops on the way.”

Marnes took a swig of water and began twisting the

cap back on. “House cals?”

“Something like that. I want to stop at the nursery on

twenty.”

Marnes laughed. “Kissin’ babies? Mayor, ain’t nobody

gonna vote you out. Not at your age."

Jahns didn't laugh. "Thanks," she said, with a mask of

false pain. "But no, not to kiss babies." She turned her

back and resumed walking; Marnes folowed. "It's not

that I don't trust your professional opinion about this

Jules lady. You haven't picked anything but a winner

since I've been mayor—"

“Even—?” Marnes interrupted.

“Especialy him, “Jahns said, knowing what he was

thinking. “He was a good man, but he had a broken

heart. That’l take even the best of them down.”

Marnes grunted his agreement. “So what’re we

checkin’ at the nursery? This Juliette weren’t born on

the twentieth, not if I recal—”

“No, but her father works there now. I thought, since

we were passing by, that we’d get a feel for the man,

get some insight on his daughter.”

“A father for a character witness?” Marnes laughed.

“Don’t reckon you’l get much of an impartial, there.”

“I think you’l be surprised,” Jahns said. “I had Alice

do some digging while I was packing. She found

something interesting.”

“Yeah?”

“This Juliette character stil has every vacation chit

she’s ever earned.”

“That ain’t rare for Mechanical,” Marnes said. “They

do a lot of overtime.”

“Not only does she not get out, she doesn’t have

visitors.”

“I stil don’t see where you’re going.”

Jahns waited while a family passed. A young boy, six or

seven probably, rode on his father’s shoulders, his head

stooped to avoid the undersides of the stairs above.

The mother brought up the rear, an overnight bag

draped over her shoulder, a swaddled infant cradled in

her arms. It was the perfect family, Jahns thought.

Replacing what they took. Two for two. Just what the

lottery aimed for and sometimes provided.

“Wel then, let me tel you where I’m going with this,”

she told Marnes. “I want to find this girl’s father, look

him in the eyes, and ask him why, in the nearly twenty

years since his daughter moved to Mechanical, he

hasn’t visited her. Not once.”

She looked back at Marnes, saw him frowning at her

beneath his mustache.

“And why she hasn’t once made her way up to see

him,” she added.

••••

The traffic thinned as they made their way into the teens

and past the upper apartments. With each step down,

Jahns dreaded having to reclaim those

lost inches on the

way back up. This was the easy part, she reminded

herself. The descent was like the uncoiling of a steel

spring, pushing her down. It reminded Jahns of

nightmares she'd had of drowning. Sily nightmares,

considering she'd never seen enough water to submerge

herself in, much less enough that she couldn't stand to

breathe. But they were like the occasional dreams of

faling from great heights, some legacy of another time,

broken fragments unearthed in each of their sleeping

minds that suggested: We weren't supposed to live like

this.

And so the descent, this spiraling downward, was much

like the imagined drowning that swalowed her at night.

It felt inexorable and inextricable. Like a weight puling

her down combined with the knowledge that she'd

never be able to claw her way back up.

They passed the garment district next, the land of multi-

colored coverals and the place her bals of yarn came

from. The smel of the dyes and other chemicals drifted

over the landing. A window cut into the curving

cinderblocks looked through to a smal food shop at the

edge of the district. It had been ransacked by the

crowds, shelves emptied by the crushing demand of

exhausted hikers and the extra post-cleaning traffic.

Several porters crowded up the stairs with heavy loads,

trying their best to satisfy demand, and Jahns

recognized an awful truth about

yesterday's cleaning:

The barbaric practice brought more than psychological

relief, more than just a clear view of the outside—it also

buttressed the silo's economy. There was suddenly an

excuse to travel. An excuse to trade. And as gossip

flowed, and family and old friends met again for the first

time in months or perhaps years, there was a vitality

injected into the entire silo. It was like an old body

stretching and loosening its joints, blood flowing to the

extremities. A decrepit thing was becoming *alive* again.

“Mayor!”

She turned to find Marnes almost out of sight around

the spiral above her. She paused while he caught up,

watching his feet as he hurried.

“Easy,” he said. “I can’t keep up if you take off like

that.”

Jahns apologized. She hadn’t been aware of any change

in her pace.

As they entered the second tier of apartments, down

below the sixteenth floor, Jahns realized she was

already in territory she hadn’t seen in almost a year.

There was the rattle, here, of younger legs chasing along

the stairwel, getting tangled up in the slow climbers.

The grade school for the upper third was just above the

nursery. From the sound of al the traffic and voices,

school had been canceled. Jahns imagined it was a

combination of knowing how few would turn up for

class (with parents taking their kids up

to the view) plus

how many teachers would want to do the same. They

passed the landing for the school, where chalk games of

Hop and Square-Four were blurred from the day's

traffic, where kids sat hugging the rails, skinned knees

poking out, feet swinging below the jutting landings, and

where catcals and eager shouts faded to secret

whispers in the presence of adults.

“Glad we’re almost there, I need a rest,” Marnes said,

as they spiraled down one more flight to the nursery. “I

just hope this feler is available to see us.”

“He wil be,” Jahns said. “Alice wired him from my

office that we were coming.”

They crossed traffic at the nursery landing and caught

their breath. When Marnes passed his canteen, Jahns

took a long pul and then checked her hair in its curved

and dented surface.

“You look fine,” he said.

“Mayoral?”

He laughed. “And then some.”

Jahns thought she saw a twinkle in his old, brown eyes

when he said this, but it was probably the light bouncing

off the canteen as he brought it to his lips.

“Twenty floors in just over two hours. Don’t

recommend the pace, but I’m glad we’re this far

already.” He wiped his mustache and reached around

to try and slip the canteen back into his pack.

“Here,” Jahns said. She took the canteen from him and

slid it into the webbed pouch on the rear

of his pack.

“And let me do the talking in here,” she reminded him.

Marnes lifted his arms and showed his palms, as if no

other thought had ever crossed his mind. He stepped

past her and puled one of the heavy metal doors open,

the customary squeal of rusted hinges not coming as

expected. The silence startled Jahns. She was used to

hearing the chirp of old doors al up and down the

staircase as they opened and closed. They were the

stairwel's version of the wildlife found in the farms, ever

present and always singing. But these hinges were

coated in oil, rigorously maintained. The signs on the

wals of the waiting room reinforced the observation.

They demanded silence in bold letters,

accompanied by

pictures of fingers over lips and circles with slashes

through open mouths. The nursery evidently took their

quietude seriously.

“Don’t remember so many signs last time I was here,”

Marnes whispered.

“Maybe you were too busy yapping to notice,” Jahns

replied.

A nurse glared at them through a glass window, and

Jahns elbowed Marnes.

“Mayor Jahns to see Peter Nichols,” she told the

woman.

The nurse behind the window didn’t blink. “I know who

you are. I voted for you.”

“Oh, of course. Wel, thank you.”

“If you’l come around.” The woman hit a button on her

desk and the door beside her buzzed faintly. Marnes

pushed on the door, and Jahns folowed him through.

“If you’l don these.”

The nurse—Margaret, according to the hand-drawn tag

on her colar—held out two neatly folded white cloth

robes. Jahns accepted them both and handed one to

Marnes.

“You can leave your bags with me.”

There was no refusing Margaret. Jahns felt at once that

she was in this much younger woman’s world, that she

had become her inferior when she passed through that

softly buzzing door. She leaned her walking stick

against the wal, took her pack off and lowered it to the

ground, and then shrugged on the robe. Marnes

struggled with his until Margaret helped, holding the

sleeve in place. He wrestled the robe over his denim

shirt and held the loose ends of the long fabric waist tie

as if its working was beyond his abilities. He watched

Jahns knot hers, and finaly made enough of a mess of it

for the robe to hold fairly together.

“What?” he asked, noticing the way Jahns was

watching him. “This is what I’ve got cuffs for. So I

never learned to tie a knot, so what?”

“In sixty years,” Jahns said.

Margaret pressed another button on her desk and

pointed down the hal. “Doctor Nichols is in the

nursery. I’l let him know you’re coming.”

Jahns led the way. Marnes folowed, asking her: “Why

is that so hard to believe?”

“I think it’s cute, actualy.”

Marnes snorted. “That’s an awful word to use on a man

my age.”

Jahns smiled to herself. At the end of the hal, she

paused before a set of double doors before pushing

them open a crack. The light in the room beyond was

dim. She opened the door further, and

they entered a

sparse but clean waiting room. She remembered a

similar one from the mid levels where she had waited

with a friend to be reunited with her child. A glass wal

looked into a room that held a handful of cribs and

bassinets. It was too dark inside to see if any of the

smal beds stirred with newborns. Jahns, of course, was

notified of every birth, signed a letter of congratulations

and a birth certificate for each one, but the names ran

together with the days. She could rarely remember what

level the parents lived on, if it was their first or second.

It made her sad to admit it, but those certificates had

just become more paper for her to sign.

The shadowy outline of an adult moved among the smal

cribs, the shiny clamp of a clipboard and the flash of a

metal pen winking from the light of the observation

room. The dark shape was obviously tal, with the gait

and build of a man. He took his time, noting something

as he hovered over a crib, the two shimmers of metal

uniting to jot a note. When he was done, he crossed the

room and passed through a wide door to

join Marnes

and Jahns in the waiting room.

Peter Nichols was an imposing man, Jahns saw. Tal

and lean, but not like Marnes, who seemed to fold and

unfold unsure limbs to move about. Peter was lean like

a habitual exerciser, like a few porters Jahns knew who

could take the stairs two at a time and make it look like

they'd been expressly designed for such a gait. It was

height that lent confidence. Jahns could feel it as she

took Peter's outstretched hand and let him pump it

firmly.

"You came," Doctor Nichols said simply. It was a cold

observation. There was only a hint of surprise. He

shook Marnes' hand, but his eyes returned to Jahns. "I

explained to your secretary that I wouldn't be much

help. I'm afraid I haven't seen Juliette since she became

a shadow twenty years ago."

"Wel, that's actualy what I wanted to talk to you

about." Jahns glanced at the cushioned benches where

she imagined anxious grandparents, aunts, and uncles

waited while parents were united with their newborns.

“Could we sit?”

Doctor Nichols nodded and waved them over.

“I take each of my appointments for office very

seriously,” Jahns explained, sitting across from the

doctor. “At my age, I expect most judges and lawmen I

instal to outlive me, so I choose carefuly.”

“But they don’t always, do they?” Doctor Nichols tilted

his head, no expression on his lean and carefuly shaven

face. “Outlive you, I mean.”

Jahns swalowed. Marnes stirred on the bench beside

her.

“You must value family,” Jahns said, changing the

subject, realizing this was just another observation, no

harm meant. “To have shadowed so long and to choose

such a demanding line of work."

Nichols nodded.

"Why do you and Juliette never visit? I mean, not once

in almost twenty years. She's your only child."

Nichols turned his head slightly, his eyes drifting to the

wal. Jahns was momentarily distracted by the sight of

another form moving behind the glass, a nurse making

the rounds. Another set of doors led off to what she

assumed were the delivery rooms, where a

convalescing new mother right now was probably

waiting to be handed her most precious possession.

“I had a son as wel,” Doctor Nichols said.

Jahns felt herself reaching for her bag to procure the

folders within, but it wasn’t by her side.

This was a

detail she had missed, a brother.

“You couldn’t have known,” Nichols said, correctly

reading the shock on Mayor Jahns’ face. “He didn’t

survive. Technicaly, he wasn’t born. The lottery moved

on.”

“I’m sorry—”

She fought the urge to reach over and hold Marnes’

hand. It had been decades since the two of them had

purposefuly touched, even innocently, but the sudden

sadness in the room punctured that intervening time.

“His name was going to be Nicholas, my father’s

father’s name. He was born prematurely. One pound

eight ounces.”

The clinical precision in his voice was somehow sadder

than his processing any feelings might have been.

“They intubated, moved him into an incubator, but

there were . . . complications.” Doctor Nichols looked

down at the backs of his hands. “Juliette was twelve at

the time. She was as excited as we were, if you can

imagine, to have a baby brother on the way. She was

one year out from shadowing her mother,

who was a

delivery nurse.” Nichols glanced up. “Not here in this

nursery, mind you, but in the old mid-level nursery.

Where we both worked. I was stil an intern then.”

“And Juliette?” Mayor Jahns stil didn’t understand the

connection.

“There was a failure with the incubator. When Nicholas

—” the doctor turned his head to the side and reached

halfway to his eyes, but was able to compose himself.

“I’m sorry. I stil cal him that.”

“It’s okay.”

Mayor Jahns was holding Deputy Marnes’ hand. She

wasn’t sure when or how that had happened. The

doctor didn’t seem to notice, or more likely, care.

“Poor Juliette.” He shook his head. “She was

distraught. She blamed Rhoda at first, this experienced

delivery nurse who had done nothing but work a

miracle to give our boy the slim chance he had. I

explained this. I think Juliette knew. She just needed

someone to hate.” He nodded to Jahns. “Girls that age,

you know?”

“Believe it or not, I remember.” Jahns forced a smile

and Doctor Nichols returned it. She felt Marnes

squeeze her hand.

“It wasn’t until her mother died that she took to

blaming the incubator that had failed. Wel, not the

incubator, but the poor condition it was in. The general

state of rot al things become.”

“Your wife died from the complications?” It was

another detail Jahns felt she must have missed from the

file.

“My wife kiled herself a week later.”

Again, the clinical detachment. Jahns wondered if this

was a survival mechanism that had kicked in after these

events, or a personality trait already in place.

“Seems like I would remember that,” Deputy Marnes

said, the first words he’d uttered since introducing

himself to the doctor.

“Wel, I wrote the certificate myself. So I could put

whatever cause I wanted—”

“And you admit to this?” Marnes seemed ready to leap

off the bench. To do what, Jahns could hardly guess.

She held his arm to keep him in place.

“Beyond the statute of limitations? Of course. I admit it.

It was a worthless lie, anyway. Juliette was smart, even

at that age. She knew. And this is what drove her—”

He stopped himself.

“Drove her what?” Mayor Jahns asked. “Crazy?”

“No.” Doctor Nichols shook his head. “I wasn’t going

to say that. It's what drove her away. She applied for a

change in casters. Demanded to move down to

Mechanical, to enter the Shop as a shadow. She was a

year young for that sort of placement, but I agreed. I

signed off on it. I thought she'd go, get some deep air,

come back. I was naive. I thought the freedom would

be good for her."

“And you haven’t seen her since?”

“Once. For her mother’s funeral, just a few days later.

She marched up on her own, attended the burial, gave

me a hug, then marched back down. Al without rest,

from what I’ve heard. I try to keep up with her. I have

a coleague in the deep nursery who wil wire now and

then with a bit of news. It’s al focus, focus, focus with

her.”

Nichols paused and laughed.

“You know, when she was young, al I saw was her

mother in her. But she grew up to be more like me.”

“Is there anything you know that would preclude her

from or make her il suited for the job of silo sheriff?

You do understand what’s involved with the job, right?”

“I understand.” Nichols looked over at Marnes, his eye

drifting to the copper badge visible through the open,

shoddily tied robe, down to the bulge of a pistol at his

side. “Al the little lawmen throughout the silo have to

have someone up top, giving commands, is that it?”

“More or less,” Jahns said.

“Why her?”

Marnes cleared his throat. “She helped us with an

investigation once—”

“Jules? She was up here?”

“No. We were down there.”

“She has no training.”

“None of us have,” Marnes said. “It’s more of a . . .

political office. A citizen’s post.”

“She won’t agree to it.”

“Why not?” Jahns asked.

Nichols shrugged. “You’l see for yourself, I suppose.”

He stood. “I wish I could give you more time, but I

realy should get back.” He glanced at the set of double

doors. “We’l be bringing a family in soon—”

“I understand.” Jahns rose and shook his hand. “I

appreciate you seeing us.”

He laughed. “Did I have a choice?”

“Of course.”

“Wel, I wish I would’ve known that sooner.”

He smiled, and Jahns saw that he was joking. Or

attempting to. As they parted company and walked

back down the halway to colect their things and return

the robes, Jahns found herself more and more intrigued

by this nomination of Marnes’. It wasn’t his style, a

woman from the down deep. A person with baggage.

She wondered if his judgment was perhaps clouded by

other factors. And as he held the door for her, leading

out to the main waiting room, Mayor Jahns wondered if

she was going along with him because *her* judgment

was clouded as wel.

3

It was lunchtime, but neither of them were powerfuly

hungry. Jahns nibbled on a cornbar while she walked,

priding herself on “eating on the climb” like a porter.

They continued to pass these tradesmen, and Jahns’

esteem of their profession grew and grew. There was a

strange pang of guilt to be heading down under such a

light load while these men and women

trudged up

carrying so much. And they moved so *fast*. She and

Marnes pressed themselves against the rail as a

downward porter apologeticaly stomped past. His

shadow, a girl of fifteen or sixteen, was right behind

him, loaded down with what looked to be sacks of

garbage for the recycling center. Jahns watched the

young girl spiral out of sight, sinewy and smooth legs

hanging miles out of her shorts, and felt suddenly very

old and very tired.

The two of them fel into a rhythmic pace, the reach of

each foot hovering over the next tread, a sort of

colapsing of the bones, a resignation to gravity, faling

to that foot, sliding the hand, reaching the walking stick

forward, repeat. Doubt crept into Jahns around the

thirtieth floor. What seemed a fine adventure at sunrise

now seemed a mighty undertaking. Each step was

performed reluctantly, knowing how grueling it would

be to win that elevation back.

They passed the upper water treatment plant on thirty

two, and Jahns realized she was seeing portions of the

silo that were practicaly new to her. It had been a

lifetime ago that she'd been this deep, a shameful thing

to admit. And in that time, changes had been made.

Construction and repair were ongoing. Wals were a

different color than she remembered. But then, it was

hard to trust one's memory.

The traffic on the stairs lightened as they neared the IT

floors. Here were the most sparsely populated levels of

the silo, where less than two dozen men and women—

but mostly men—operated within their own little

kingdom. The silo servers took up almost an entire

floor, the machines slowly rebuilding with recent history,

having been wiped completely during the uprising.

Access to them was now severely

restricted, and as

Jahns passed the landing on the thirty third, she swore

she could hear the mighty thrumming of al the electricity

they consumed. Whatever the silo had been, or had

been designed for, she knew without asking or being

told that these strange machines were some organ of

primacy. Their power draw was a constant source of

contention during budget meetings. But the necessity of

the cleaning, the fear of even talking about the outside

and al the dangerous taboos that went with it, gave IT

incredible leeway. They housed the labs that made the

suits, each one tailored to the person waiting in the

holding cel, and this alone set them apart from al else.

No, Jahns told herself, it wasn’t simply

the taboo of the

cleaning, the fear of the outside. It was the hope. There

was this unspoken, deadly hope in every member of the

silo. A ridiculous, fantastical hope. That maybe not for

them, but perhaps for their children, or their children's

children, that life on the outside would be possible once

again, and that it would be the work of IT and the bulky

suits that emerged from their labs that would make it al

possible.

Jahns felt a shiver even to think it. Living outside. The

childhood conditioning was that strong. Maybe God

would hear her thoughts and rat her out. She imagined

herself in a cleaning suit, a far too common visual,

placing herself into the flexible coffin into which she had

condemned so many—

On the thirty-fourth, she slipped off onto the landing.

Marnes joined her, his canteen in hand. Jahns realized

she'd been drinking out of his al day while hers stayed

strapped to her back. There was something childlike

and romantic about this, but also something practical. It

was more difficult to reach one's own water than it was

to grab that of the other from their pack.

“You need a break?” He passed the canteen, which

had but two swalows left in it. Jahns took one of them.

“This is our next stop,” she said.

Marnes looked up at the faded number stenciled over

the doorway. He had to know what floor they were on,

but it was as if he needed to double check.

Jahns returned his canteen. “In the past, I’ve always

wired them to get the okay on my nominations. It was

something Mayor Humphries did before me, and

Mayor Jeffers before him.” She shrugged. “Way of the

world.”

“I didn’t know they had to approve.” He took the last

swalow and patted Jahns on the back, twirled his finger

for her to turn around.

“Wel, they’ve never rejected any of my nominations

—” Jahns felt her canteen tugged out of her pouch,

Marnes’ canteen shoved in its place. Her pack felt a

smidgen lighter. She realized Marnes wanted to carry

her water and share it until it too was empty. “I think the

unwritten rule is there just so we’l carefuly consider

every judge and lawman, knowing there's some

informal oversight."

"So this time you're doing it in person."

She turned back around to face her deputy. "I figured

we were passing this way—" She paused while a young

couple hurried up the stairs behind Marnes, holding

hands and taking the treads two at a time. "And that it

might feel even more conspicuous to *not* stop and

check in.”

“Check in,” Marnes said. Jahns half expected him to

spit over the railing—the tone seemed to require such

punctuation. She suddenly felt another of her

weaknesses exposed.

“Think of it as a goodwil mission,” she said, turning

toward the door.

“I’m gonna think of it as a fact-finding raid,” Marnes

muttered, folowing her.

••••

Unlike at the nursery, Jahns could tel that they would

not be buzzed through and sent back into the

mysterious depths of IT. While they waited to be seen,

she watched as even a member of the

staff, identifiable

from their red coverals, was patted down and searched

just to *leave* the wing and exit toward the stairs. A man

with a wand—like Terry, a member of IT's own

internal security detail—seemed to have the job of

checking everyone who passed through the metal gates.

The receptionist on the outside of the gates was

deferent enough and seemed pleased to have the

Mayor for a visit. She expressed her condolences for

the recent cleaning, an odd thing to say but something

Jahns wished she heard more often. They were shown

to a smal conference room attached to the main foyer,

a place, she supposed, for meeting with various

departments without putting them through

the hassle of

passing through security.

“Look at al this space,” Marnes whispered, once they

were alone in the room together. “Did you see the size

of that entrance hal?”

Jahns nodded. She looked around the ceiling and wals

for some peephole, something to confirm the creepy

sensation that she was being watched.

She set her bag

and walking stick down and colapsed wearily into one

of the plush chairs. When it moved, she realized the

thing was on wheels. Nicely oiled wheels.

“Always wanted to check this place out,” Marnes said.

He peered through the glass window that looked back

into the wide foyer. “Every time I’ve passed this place

—and it's only been a dozen times or so —I've been

curious to see what's inside."

Jahns nearly asked him to stop talking, but worried that

it would hurt his feelings.

"Boy, he's coming in a hurry. Must be because of

you."

Jahns turned and looked out the window to see

Bernard Holand heading their way. He

disappeared

from view as he approached the door, the handle

flicked down, and the smal man whose job it was to

keep IT running smoothly strode into the room.

“Mayor.”

Bernard was al teeth, the front ones crooked. He

reached for Jahns’ hand as she rose from the chair, the

blasted thing nearly scooting out from underneath her as

she pressed down on the arm rests.

“Careful,” Bernard said, grabbing her elbow to steady

her. “Deputy.” He nodded toward Marnes while Jahns

steadied herself. “It’s an honor to have you down. I

know you don’t take these trips often.”

“Thanks for seeing us on short notice,” Jahns said.

“Of course. Please, make yourselves comfortable.” He

swept his hand over the lacquered conference table. It

was nicer than the one in the Mayor’s office, though

Jahns assuaged herself by assuming it was shiny from

being less frequently employed. She sat, approaching

the chair warily, then reached into her bag and

produced the set of files.

“Straight to business, as always,” Bernard said, sitting

beside her. He pushed his glasses up his nose and

glided forward on the chair until his plump little bely

met the desk. “Always appreciated that about you. We

are, as you can imagine with yesterday’s unfortunate

events, as busy as ever. Lots of data to go through.”

“How’s that going?” Jahns asked, while

she arranged

the material in front of her.

“Some positives and negatives, as always. Readouts

from some of the seal sensors showed improvement.

Atmospheric levels of eight of the known toxins have

declined, though not by much. Two have risen. Most

have remained unchanged.” He waved his hand. “It’s a

lot of boring technical stuff, but it'l al be in my report. I

should have it ported up before you get back to your

office."

"That'l be fine," Jahns said. She wanted to say

something else, to acknowledge his department's hard

work, to let him know that another cleaning had been

successful, God knew why. But it was Holston out

there, the closest thing she'd ever had to a shadow, the

only man she ever saw running for her office when she

was dead and feeding the roots of the fruit trees. It was

too soon to mention it, much less applaud it.

"I normaly wire this sort of thing to you," she said, "but

since we were passing by, and you won't be up for the

next committee meeting for, what,

another three

months?”

“The years go fast,” Bernard said.

“I just figured we could informaly agree to this now, so

I could offer our best candidate the job.” She glanced

up at Marnes. “Once she accepts, we can finish the

paperwork on our way back up, if you don’t mind.”

She slid the folder toward Bernard, and

was surprised

when he produced one of his own, rather than accept

hers.

“Wel, let’s go over this,” Bernard said. He opened his

folder, licked his thumb, and flipped through a few

pieces of high quality paper. “We were wired about

your visit, but your list of candidates didn’t hit my desk

until this morning. Otherwise, I would have tried to save

you the trip down and back up." He puled out a piece

of paper devoid of creases. It didn't even look

bleached. Jahns wondered where IT got such things

while her office was held together with cornstarch

paste. "I'm thinking, of the three names listed here, that

Bilings is our man."

“We may consider him next—” Deputy Marnes started

to say.

“I think we should consider him now.” He slid the

paper toward Jahns. It was an acceptance contract.

There were signatures at the bottom. One line was left

blank, the Mayor’s name neatly printed underneath.

She had to catch her breath.

“You’ve already contacted Peter about this?”

“He accepted. The judge’s robe was going to be a little

stifling for him, being so young and ful of energy. I

thought he was a fine choice for that role, but I think

he’s an even better one now for the job of sheriff.”

Jahns remembered Peter’s nomination process. It had

been one of the times she’d gone along

with Bernard's

suggestion, seeing it as a trade for a future pick of her

own. She studied the signature, Peter's hand familiar

from his various notes sent up on behalf of Judge

Wilson. She imagined one of the porters who had flown

past them on the steps that day, apologizing as they

went, rushing this very piece of paper down.

“I’m afraid Peter is currently third on our list,” Mayor

Jahns finaly said. Her voice suddenly felt tired. It

sounded frail and weak in the cavernous and wasteful

space of that underused and outsized conference room.

She looked up at Marnes, who was glaring at the

contract, his jaw clenching and unclenching.

“Wel, I think we both know Donald’s

name is on this

list for flattery. He's too old for the job __"

"Younger than me," Marnes spat. "I hold up just fine."

Bernard tilted his head. "Yes, wel, your first choice

simply won't do, I'm afraid."

"And why is that?" Jahns asked.

"I'm not sure how . . . *thorough* your background

check has been, but we've had enough

problems with

this candidate that I recognized her name. Even though

she *is* from Maintenance."

Bernard said this last word like it was ful of nails and

might gut him to spit it out.

"What kinda problem?" Marnes demanded to know.

Jahns shot the deputy a look of warning.

"Nothing we would have wanted to report, mind you."

Bernard turned to Marnes. There was venom in the

smal man's eyes, a raw hatred for the Deputy, or

perhaps for the star on his chest. "Nothing worth

involving the *law*. But there have been some . . .

creative requisitions from her office, items rerouted from

our use, improper claims of priority and the like."

Bernard took a deep breath and folded

his hands

together on top of the folder in front of him. “I wouldn’t

go as far as caling it *stealing*, per se, but we have filed

complaints with Deagan Knox as head of Mechanical to

inform him of these . . . irregularities.”

“That’s it?” Marnes growled. “Requisitions?”

Bernard frowned. He spread his hands on the folder.

“That’s it? Have you been listening? The woman has

practicaly stolen goods, has had items re-routed from

my department. It’s not clear if these are even for silo

use. They could be for personal gain. God knows, the

woman uses more than her alowance of electricity.

Maybe she trades for chits—”

“Is this a formal accusation?” Marnes asked. He made

a show of puling his pad from his pocket and clicking

his mechanical pen.

“Ah, no. As I said, we would not want to trouble your

office. But, as you can see, this is not the sort of person

to enter a career in high law. It’s what I expect of a

mechanic, to be honest, which is where, I’m afraid, this

candidate should stay.” He patted the folder as if putting

the issue to rest.

“That’s your suggestion,” Mayor Jahns said.

“Why, yes. And I think since we have such a fine

candidate ready and wiling to serve and already living

in the up-top—”

“I’l take your *suggestion* into account.” Jahns took the

crisp contract from the table and conspicuously folded it

in half, pinching the crease with her fingernails as she

slid them down its length. She stuck the piece of paper

in one of her folders while Bernard watched, horrified.

“And since you have no *formal* complaints about our

first candidate, I wil take this as tacit approval to speak

with her about the job.” Jahns stood and grabbed her

bag. She slid the folders into the outside

pouch and

secured the flap, then grabbed her walking stick from

where it leaned against the conference table. “Thank

you for seeing us.”

“Yes, but—” Bernard scooted away from the table and

hurried after her as Jahns made for the door. Marnes

got up and folowed, smiling.

“What should I tel Peter? He’s of the

assumption that

he starts any time!”

“You should never have told him anything,” Jahns said.

She stopped in the foyer and glared at Bernard. “I gave

you my list in confidence. You betrayed that. Now, I

appreciate al you do for the silo. You and I have a long

and peaceable history working together, overseeing

what might be the most prosperous age our people

have known—”

“Which is why—” Bernard began.

“Which is why I’m forgiving this trespass,” Mayor

Jahns said. “This is *my* job. My people. They elected

me to make these kinds of decisions. So my deputy and

I wil be on our way. We wil give our top choice a fair

interview. And I wil be sure to stop by on my way up

in case there is anything to sign.”

Bernard spread his hands in defeat. “Very wel,” he

said. “I apologize. I only hoped to expedite the process.

Now please, rest a little, you are our guests. Let me get

you some food, maybe some fruit?”

“We’l be on our way,” Jahns said.

“Fine.” He nodded. “But at least some

water? Top up

your canteens?”

Jahns remembered one of them was already empty, and

they had a few more flights to go.

“That would be a kind gesture,” she said. She waved

to Marnes, who turned so she could grab his canteen

from his pack. Then she turned her back so he could

grab hers as wel. Bernard waved to one

of his workers

to come fetch them and fil them up, but the entire time,

he had his eyes on this curious and intimate exchange.

4

There were almost down to the fifties before Jahns

could think straight. She imagined she could feel the

weight of Peter Bilings' contract in her pack. Marnes

muttered his own complaints from a few steps behind,

bitching about Bernard and trying to keep up, and Jahns

realized she was fixated, now. The weariness in her

thighs and calves had become compounded by the

growing sense that this trip was more than a mistake: it

was probably futile. A father who warns her that his

daughter won’t accept. Pressure from IT

to choose

another. Now, each step of their descent could be

taken with dread. Dread and yet a new certainty that

Juliette was their man. This woman from Mechanical

would be convinced to take the job, if only to show

Bernard, if only to keep the arduous journey from

becoming a total waste.

Jahns was old, had been Mayor a long time, partly

because she got things done, partly because she

prevented worse things from happening, but mostly

because she made little turmoil. She felt like it was

about time. Now, while she was old enough for it to not

matter the consequences. She glanced back at Marnes

and knew the same went for him. Their

time was almost

up. The best, the most important thing they could do for

the silo, was to make sure their legacy endured. No

uprisings. No abuses of power. It was why she ran

unopposed the last few elections. But now she could

sense that she was gliding to the finish while stronger

and younger runners were preparing to overtake her.

How many judges had she signed off on at Bernard's

request? And now the sheriff, too? How long before

Bernard was mayor? Or worse: a puppet master with

strings interwoven throughout the silo.

"Take it easy," Marnes huffed.

Jahns realized she was going too fast. She slowed her

pace.

"That bastard's got you riled up," he

said.

“And you better be as wel,” she hissed back at him.

“You’re passing the gardens.”

Jahns checked the landing number and saw that he was

right. If she’d been paying attention, she would’ve

noticed the smel. When the doors on the next landing

flew open, a porter bearing sacks of fruit on each

shoulder strode out, the scent of lush and wet

vegetation accompanying him and overpowering her.

It was past dinner time, and the smel was intoxicating.

The porter, even overburdened, saw that they were

leaving the stairwel for the landing and held the door

open with a planted foot as his arms bulged around the

weight of the large sacks.

“Mayor,” he said, bowing his head and then nodding to

Marnes as wel.

Jahns thanked him. Most of the porters looked familiar

to her, having seen them over and over as they

delivered throughout the silo. But they never stayed in

one place long enough for her to catch and remember a

name, a normaly keen skil of hers. She wondered, as

she and Marnes entered the hydroponic farms, if the

porters made it home every night to be with their

families. Or did they even have families? Were they like

the priests? She was too old and too curious not to

know these things. But then, maybe it took a day on the

stairwel to appreciate their job, to fuly notice them.

The porters were like the air she

breathed, always

there, always serving, so necessary as to be ubiquitous

and taken for granted. But now the weariness of the

climb had opened her senses fuly to them. It was like a

sudden drop in the oxygen, triggering her appreciation.

“Smel those oranges,” Marnes said, snapping Jahns

out of her thoughts. He sniffed the air as they passed

through the low garden gates. A staff member in green

coverals waved them through. “Bags here, Mayor,” he

said, gesturing to a wal of cubbies sporadicaly

occupied with shoulder bags and bundles.

Jahns complied, leaving her kit in one of the cubbies.

Marnes pushed hers to the back and added his to the

same one. Whether it was to save space

or merely his

habitual protectiveness, Jahns found the act as sweet as

the air inside the gardens.

“We have reservations for the evening,” Jahns told the

worker.

He nodded. “One flight down for the rooms. I believe

they’re stil getting yours ready. Are you here just for a

visit or to eat?”

“A little of both.”

The young man smiled. “Wel, by the time you’ve had a

bite, your rooms should be available.”

Rooms, Jahns thought. She thanked the young man and

folowed Marnes into the garden network.

“How long since you were here?” she asked the

Deputy.

“Wow. A while back. Four years or

so?”

“That’s right.” Jahns laughed. “How could I forget?

The heist of the century.”

“I’m glad you think it’s funny,” Marnes said.

At the end of the halway, the twisting spiral of the

hydroponic gardens diverted off both ways. This main

tunnel snaked through two levels of the silo, curving

maze-like al the way to the edges of the distant

concrete wals. The constant sound of water dripping

from the pipes was oddly soothing, the splatters echoing

off the low ceiling. The tunnel was open on either side,

revealing the bushy green of plants, vegetables, and

smal trees growing amid the lattice of white plastic

pipes, twine strung everywhere to give

the creeping

vines and stems something to hold. Men and women

with their young shadows tended to the plants, al in

green coverals. Sacks hung around their necks bulged

with the day's harvest, and the cutters in their hands

clacked like little claws that were a biological part of

them. The pruning was mesmerizingly adroit and

effortless, the sort of task that only came from day after

week after year of practice and repetition.

“Weren’t you the first one to suggest the thievery was

an inside job?” Jahns asked, stil laughing to herself. She

and Marnes folowed the signs pointing toward the

tasting and dining hals.

“Are we realy going to talk about this?”

“I don’t know why it’s embarrassing. You’ve got to

laugh about it.”

“With time.” He stopped and gazed through the mesh

fencing at a stand of tomatoes. The powerful odor of

their ripeness made Jahns’ stomach grumble.

“We were realy hyped up to make a bust at the time,”

Marnes said quietly. “Holston was a mess during al of

this. He was wiring me every night for an update. I've

never seen him want to take someone down so bad.

Like he realy needed it, you know?" He wrapped his

fingers in the protective grate and stared past the

vegetables as if into the years gone by. "Looking back,

it's almost like he knew something was up with Alison.

Like he saw the madness coming."

Marnes turned to

Jahns. “Do you remember what it was like before she

cleaned? It had been so long. Everyone was on edge.”

Jahns had long since stopped smiling. She stood close

to Marnes. He turned back to the plants, watched a

worker snip off a red ripe tomato and place it in her

basket.

“I think Holston wanted to let the air out of the silo, you

know? I think he wanted to come down and investigate

the thefts himself. Kept wiring me every day for reports

like a life depended on it.”

“I’m sorry to bring it up,” Jahns said, resting a hand on

his shoulder.

Marnes turned and looked at the back of her hand. His

bottom lip was visible below his mustache. Jahns could

picture him kissing her hand. She puled it away.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Without al that baggage, I guess it

is pretty funny.” He turned and continued down the

halway.

“Did they ever figure out how it got in here?”

“Up the stairwel,” Marnes said. “Had to be. Though I

heard one person suggest that a child could've stolen

one to keep as a pet and then released it up here."

Jahns laughed. She couldn't help herself. "One rabbit,"

she said, "confounding the greatest lawman of our time

and making off with a year's salary of greens."

Marnes shook his head and chuckled a little. "Not the

greatest," he said. "That was never me."

He peered

down the halway and cleared his throat, and Jahns

knew perfectly wel who he was thinking of.

••••

After a large and satisfying dinner, they retired a level

down to the guest rooms. Jahns had a suspicion that

extra pains had been taken to accommodate them.

Every room was packed, many of them double and

triple booked. And since the cleaning had been

scheduled wel before this last-minute interview

adventure of theirs, she suspected rooms had been

bumped around to make space. The fact that they had

given them separate rooms, the mayor’s with two beds,

made it worse. It wasn’t just the waste,

it was the

arrangement. Jahns was hoping to be more . . .

inconvenienced.

And Marnes must've felt the same way. Since it was

stil hours before bedtime, and they were both buzzing

from a fine meal and strong wine, he asked her to his

smal room so they could chat while the gardens settled

down.

His room was tastefuly cozy, with only a single twin

bed, but nicely appointed. The upper gardens were one

of just a dozen large private enterprises. Al the

expenses for their stay would be covered by her

office’s travel budget, and that money and the fares of

the other travelers helped to afford finer things, like nice

sheets from the looms and a mattress that didn’t

squeak.

Jahns sat on the foot of the bed. Marnes took off his

holster, placed it on the dresser, and plopped onto a

changing bench just a few feet away. While she kicked

off her boots and rubbed her sore feet, he went on and

on about the food, the waste of separate rooms,

brushing his mustache down with his hand as he spoke.

Jahns worked her thumbs into the soreness in her heels.

“I feel like I’m going to need a week of rest at the

bottom before we start the climb up,” she said during a

pause.

“It’s not al that bad,” Marnes told her. “You watch.

You’l be sore in the morning, but once you start

moving, you'l find that you're stronger than you were

today. And it's the same on the way up. You just lean

into each step, and before you know it, you're home."

"I hope you're right."

"Besides, we'l do it in four days instead of two. Just

think of it as an adventure."

"Trust me," Jahns said. "I already am."

They sat quietly for a while, Jahns

resting back on the

pilows, Marnes staring off into space. She was

surprised to find how calming and natural it was, just

being in a room, alone, with him. The talk wasn't

necessary. They could just *be*. No badge, no office.

Two people.

"You don't take a priest, do you?" Marnes finaly

asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “Do you?”

“I haven’t. But I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Holston?”

“Partly.” He leaned forward and rubbed his hands

down his thighs like he was squeezing the soreness out

of them. “I’d like to hear where they think his soul has

gone.”

“It’s stil with us,” Jahns said. “That’s what they’d say,

anyway.”

“What do you believe?”

“Me?” She leaned up from the pilows and rested on

one elbow, watching him watch her. “I don’t know,

realy. I keep too busy to think about it.”

“Do you think Donald’s soul is stil here with us?”

Jahns felt a shiver. She couldn’t

remember the last time

someone had uttered his name.

“He’s been gone more years than he was ever my

husband,” she said. “I’ve been married more to his

ghost than to him.”

“That don’t seem like the right thing to say.”

Jahns looked down at the bed, the world a little blurry.

“I don’t think he’d mind. And yes, he’s

stil with me. He

motivates me every day to be a good person. I feel him

watching me al the time."

"Me too," Marnes said.

Jahns looked up and saw that he was staring at her.

"Do you think he'd want you to be happy? In al things,

I mean?" He stopped rubbing his legs and sat there,

hands on his knees, until he had to look

away.

“You were his best friend,” Jahns said. “What do you

think he’d want?”

He rubbed his face, glanced toward the closed door as

a squealing kid thundered down the halway. “I reckon

he only ever wanted you to be happy. That’s why he

was the man for you.”

Jahns wiped at her eyes while he wasn’t

looking and

peered curiously down at her wet fingers.

“It’s getting late,” she said. She slid to the edge of the

smal bed and reached down for her boots. Her bag

and stick were waiting for her by the door. “And I think

you’re right. I think I’l be a little sore in the morning,

but I think I’l feel stronger, eventualy.”

5

On the second and final day of their descent into the

down deep, the novel gradualy became the habitual.

The clank and thrum of the great spiral staircase found a

rhythm. Jahns was able to lose herself in her thoughts,

daydreaming so serenely that she would glance up at

the floor number, seventy-two, eighty-four, and wonder

where a dozen landings went. The kink in her left knee

was even soothed away, whether by the numbness of

fatigue or an actual return to health, she didn’t know.

She took to using the walking stick less, finding it only

held up her pace as it often slipped between the treads

and got caught there. With it tucked under her arm, it

felt more useful. Like another bone in

her skeleton,

holding her together.

When they passed the ninetieth floor, with the stench of

fertilizer and the pigs and other animals that produced

this useful waste, Jahns pressed on, skipping the tour

and lunch she'd planned, thinking only briefly of the

smal rabbit that somehow had escaped from another

farm, made it twenty floors up without being spotted,

and ate its fil for three weeks while it confounded half a

silo.

Technicaly, they were already in the down deep when

they reached ninety-seven. The bottom third. But even

though the silo was mathematicaly divided into three

sections of forty-eight floors each, her brain didn’t work

that way. Floor one hundred was a better demarcation.

It was a milestone. She counted the floors down until

they reached the first landing with three digits, and

stopped for a break.

Marnes was breathing deeply, she noticed. But she felt

great. Alive and renewed in the way she had hoped the

trip would make her. The futility, dread, and exhaustion

from the day before were gone. Al that remained was a

smal twinge of fear that these dour feelings could

return, that this exuberant elation was a temporary high,

that if she stopped, if she thought on it too long, it would

spiral away and leave her dark and moody once more.

They split a smal loaf of bread between them, sitting on

the metal grating of the wide landing

with their elbows

propped up on the railings, their feet swinging over

empty space, like two kids cutting class. Level one

hundred teemed with people coming and going. The

entire floor was a bazaar, a place for exchanging goods,

for cashing in work chits for whatever was needed or

merely coveted. Workers with their trailing shadows

came and went, families yeled for one another among

the dizzying crowds, merchants barked their best deals.

The doors remained propped open for the traffic, letting

the smels and sounds drift out onto the double-wide

landing, the grating shivering with excitement.

Jahns reveled in the anonymity of the passing crowd.

She bit into her half of the loaf, savoring

the fresh

yeastiness of bread baked that morning, and felt like

just another person. A younger person. Marnes cut her

a piece of cheese and a slice of apple and sandwiched

them together. His hand touched hers as he passed it to

her. Even the breadcrumbs in his mustache were part of

the moment’s perfection.

“We’re way ahead of schedule,” Marnes said before

taking a bite of fruit. It was just a pleasant observation.

A pat on their elderly backs. “I figure we’l hit one-forty

by dinner.”

“Right now, I’m not even dreading the climb out,”

Jahns said. She finished the cheese and apple and

chewed contentedly. Everything tasted better while

climbing, she decided. Or in pleasant company, or amid

the music leaking out of the bazaar, some beggar

strumming his uke over the noise of the crowd.

“Why don’t we come down here more often?” she

asked.

Marnes grunted. “Because it’s a hundred flights down?

Besides, we’ve got the view, the lounge, the bar at

Kipper's. How many of these people come up to any

of that more than once every few years?"

Jahns chewed on that and on her last bite of bread.

"Do you think it's natural? Not wandering too far from

where we live?"

"Don't folow," Marnes said around a bite of food.

"Pretend, just as a hypothetical mind you, that people

lived in those ancient aboveground silos poking up over

the hilside. You don’t think they would move around so

little, do you? Like stay in the same silo? Never wander

over here or up and down a hundred flights of stairs?”

“I don’t think on those things,” Marnes said. Jahns

took it as a hint that she shouldn’t, either. It was

impossible sometimes to know what

could and couldn’t

be said about the outside. Those were discussions for

spouses, and maybe the walk and the day together

yesterday had gotten to her. Or maybe she was as

susceptible to the post-cleaning high as anyone else: that

sense that rules could be relaxed, temptations courted,

the lack of pressure and the waste of a double cleaning

giving excuse for a month of jubilant wiggling in one's

own skin.

"Should we get going?" Jahns asked, as Marnes

finished his bread.

He nodded, and they stood and colected their things. A

woman walking by turned and stared, a flash of

recognition on her face, gone as she hurried to catch up

to her children.

It was like another world down here, Jahns thought to

herself. She had gone too long without a visit. And even

as she promised herself to not let that happen again,

some part of her knew, like a rusting machine that could

feel its age, that this journey would be her last.

••••

Floors passed without care. The lower gardens, the

larger farm on the one-thirties, the pungent water

treatment plant below that. Jahns found herself lost in

thought, thinking on her conversation with Marnes the

night before, the idea of Donald living with her more in

memory than reality, when she came to the gate at one-

forty.

She hadn’t even noticed the change in the traffic, the

preponderance of blue denim coverals, the porters with

more satchels of parts and tools than clothes, food, or

personal deliveries. But the crowd at the gate showed

her that she’d arrived at the upper levels of Mechanical.

Gathered at the entrance were workers in loose blue

coverals spotted with age-old stains.

Jahns could nearly

peg their professions by the tools they carried. It was

late in the day, and she assumed most were returning

home from repairs made throughout the silo. The

thought of climbing so many flights of stairs and *then*

having to work boggled her mind. And then she

remembered she was about to do that very thing.

Rather than abuse her station or Marnes' power, they

waited in line while the workers checked through the

gate. As these tired men and women signed back in and

logged their travel and hours, Jahns realized the time she

had wasted ruminating about her own life during the

long descent, time she should've spent polishing her

appeal to this Juliette. Rare nerves

twisted her gut as the

line shuffled forward. The worker ahead of them

showed his ID, the card colored blue for Mechanical.

He scratched his information on a dusty slate. When it

was their turn, they pushed through the outer gate and

showed their golden IDs. The station guard raised his

eyebrows, then seemed to recognize the mayor.

“Your honor,” he said, and Jahns didn’t correct him.

“Weren’t expecting you this shift.” He waved their IDs

away and reached for a nub of chalk. “Let me.”

Jahns watched as he spun the board around and wrote

their names in neat print, the side of his palm colecting

dust from the old film of chalk below. For Marnes, he

simply wrote “Sheriff,” and again, Jahns

didn’t correct

him.

“I know she wasn’t expecting us until later,” Jahns said,

“but I wonder if we could meet with Juliette Nichols

now.”

The station guard turned and looked behind him at the

digital clock that recorded the proper time. “She won’t

be off the generator for another hour.

Maybe two,

knowing her. You could hit the mess hal and wait."

Jahns looked to Marnes, who shrugged. "Not entirely

hungry yet," he said.

"What about seeing her at work? It would be nice to

see what she does. We'd try our best to stay out of the

way."

The guard lifted his shoulders. "You're

the mayor. I

can’t say no.” He jabbed the nub of chalk down the

hal, the people lined up outside the gate shifting

impatiently as they waited. “See Knox. He’l get

someone to run you down.”

Knox was a man hard to miss. He amply filed the

largest set of coverals Jahns had ever seen. She

wondered if the extra denim cost him more chits, and

how a man managed to keep such a bely ful. A thick

beard added to his scope. If he smiled or frowned at

their approach, it was impossible to know. He was as

unmoved as a wal of concrete.

Jahns explained what they were after. Marnes said

helo, and she realized they must’ve met the last time he

was down. Knox listened, nodded, and then belowed

in a voice so gruff, the words were indistinguishable

from one another. But they meant something to

someone, as a young boy materialized from behind him,

a waif of a kid with unusualy bright orange hair.

“Gitemoffandowntojules,” Knox growled, the space

between the words as slender as the gap

in his beard

where a mouth should have been.

The young boy, young even for a shadow, waved his

hand and darted away. Marnes thanked Knox, who

didn’t budge, and they folowed after the boy.

The corridors in Mechanical, Jahns saw, were even

tighter than elsewhere in the silo. They squeezed

through the end-of-shift traffic, the concrete blocks on

either side primed but not painted, and rough where

they brushed against her shoulder. Overhead, paralel

and twisting runs of pipe and wire conduit hung

exposed. Jahns felt the urge to duck, despite the half

foot of clearance. She did notice many of the taler

workers walking with a stoop. The lights

overhead

were dim and spaced wel apart, making the sensation

of tunneling deeper and deeper into the earth

overwhelming.

The young shadow with the orange hair led them

around several turns, his confidence in the route

seemingly habitual. They came to a flight of stairs, the

square kind that made right turns, and went down two

more levels. Jahns heard a rumbling grow louder as they

descended. When they left the stairwel on one-forty-

two, they passed an odd contraption in a wide open

room just off the halway. A steel arm the size of several

people end to end was lifting up and down, driving a

piston through the concrete floor. Jahns

slowed to

watch its rhythmic gyrations. The air smeled of

something chemical, something rotten. She couldn't

place it.

"Is this the generator?"

Marnes laughed in a patronizing, uniquely manly way.

"That's a pump," he said. "Oil wel. It's how you read

at night."

He squeezed her shoulder as he walked past, and Jahns

forgave him instantly for laughing at her. She hurried

after him and Knox's young shadow.

"The generator is that thrumming you hear," Marnes

said. "The pump brings up oil, they do something to it in

a plant a few floors down, and then it's ready to burn."

Jahns vaguely knew some of this, possibly from a

committee meeting. She was amazed, once again, at

how much of the silo was alien to even her, she who

was supposed to be—nominaly at least—running

things.

The persistent grumbling in the wals grew louder as

they neared the end of the hal. When the boy with the

orange hair puled open the doors, the sonic blast was

immediate. Jahns felt wary about approaching further,

and even Marnes seemed to stal. The kid waved them

forward with frantic gestures, and Jahns found herself

wiling her feet to carry her toward the noise. She

wondered, suddenly, if they were being led *outside*. It

was an ilogical, senseless idea, borne of imagining the

most dangerous threat she could possibly

summon.

As she broke the plane of the door, cowering behind

Marnes, the boy let the door slam shut, trapping them

inside with the onslaught. He puled headphones—no

wires dangling from them—from a rack by the wal.

Jahns folowed his lead and put a pair over her own

ears. The noise deadened, remaining only in her chest

and nerve endings. She wondered why, for what cause,

this rack of ear protection would be located *inside* the

room rather than outside.

The boy waved and said something, but it was just

moving lips. They folowed along a narrow passageway

of steel grating, a floor much like the landings on each

silo floor. When the halway turned, one wal fel away

and was replaced with a railing of three horizontal bars.

Beyond, a machine beyond reckoning loomed. It was

the size of her entire apartment and office put together,

in a room larger than many in the gardens. Nothing

seemed to be moving at first, nothing to justify the

pounding she could feel in her chest and across her

skin. It wasn’t until they fuly rounded the

machine that

she saw the steel rod sticking out of the back of the

unit, spinning ferociously, and disappearing into another

massive metal machine which had cables as thick as a

man’s waist rising up toward the ceiling.

The power and energy in the room were palpable. As

they reached the end of the second machine, Jahns

finaly saw a solitary figure working beside it. A young

looking woman in coverals, a hardhat on, brown

braided hair hanging out the back, was leaning into a

wrench nearly as long as she was tal. Her presence

gave the machines a terrifying sense of scale, but she

didn’t seem to fear them. She thew herself into her

wrench, her body frightfuly close to the

roaring unit,

reminding Jahns of an old children's tale where a mouse

puled a barb out of an imaginary beast caled an

elephant. The idea of a woman this size fixing a machine

of such ferocity seemed absurd. But she watched the

woman work while the young shadow slipped through a

gate and ran up to tug on her coverals.

The woman turned, not startled, and squinted at Jahns

and Marnes. She wiped her forehead with the back of

one hand, her other hand swinging the wrench around

to rest on her shoulder. She patted the young shadow

on the head and walked out to meet them. Jahns saw

that the woman’s arms were lean and defined with

muscle. She wore no undershirt, just

blue coverals cut

high up over her chest, exposing a bit of olive skin that

gleamed with sweat. She had the same dark

complexion as the farmers who worked under grow

lights, but it could have been as much from the grease

and grime if her denims were any indication.

She stopped short of Jahns and Marnes and nodded at

them. She smiled at Marnes with a hint of recognition.

She didn’t offer a hand, for which Jahns was grateful.

Instead, she pointed toward a door by a glass partition,

and then headed that way herself.

Marnes folowed on her heels like a puppy, Jahns close

behind. She turned to make sure the shadow wasn’t

underfoot, only to see him scurrying off the way he had

come, his hair glowing in the wan overhead lights of the

generator room. His duty, as far as he was concerned,

was done.

Inside the smal control room, the noise lessened. It

dropped almost to nothing as the thick door was shut

tight. Juliette puled off her hardhat and earmuffs and

dropped them on a shelf. Jahns took hers away from

her head tentatively, heard the noise reduced to a

distant hum, and removed them al the way. The room

was tight and crowded with metal surfaces and winking

lights unlike anything she had ever seen. It was strange

to her that she was Mayor of this room as wel, a thing

she hardly knew existed and certainly couldn’t operate.

While the ringing in Jahns’ ears

subsided, Juliette

adjusted some spinning knobs, watching little arms

waver under glass shields. “I thought we were doing this

tomorrow morning,” she said. She concentrated intently

on her work.

“We made better time than I’d hoped.”

Jahns looked to Marnes, who was holding his ear

protection in both hands, shifting

uncomfortably.

“Good to see you again, Jules,” he said.

She nodded and leaned down to peer through the thick

glass window at the gargantuan machines outside, her

hands darting over the large control board without

needing to look, adjusting large black dials with faded

white markings.

“Sorry about your partner,” she said,

glancing down at

a bank of readouts. She turned and studied Marnes,

and Jahns saw that this woman, beneath the sweat and

grime, was beautiful. Her face was hard and lean, her

eyes bright. She had a fierce inteligence you could

measure from a distance. And she peered at Marnes

with utmost sympathy, visible in the furrow of her

brows. “Realy,” she said. “I’m terribly sorry. He

seemed like a good man.”

“The best,” Marnes sputtered, his voice cracking.

Juliette nodded as if that was al that needed saying. She

turned to Jahns.

“That vibration you feel in the floor, Mayor? That’s a

coupling when it’s barely two milimeters off. If you

think it feels bad in here, you should go put your hands

on the casing. It’l jiggle your fingers numb immediately.

Hold it long enough, and your bones wil rattle like

you’re coming apart.”

She turned and reached between Jahns and Marnes to

throw a massive switch, then turned back to the control

board. “Now imagine what that generator is going

through, shaking itself to pieces like that. Teeth start

grinding together in the transmission, smal bits of metal

shavings cycle through the oil like sandpaper grit. Next

thing you know, there's an explosion of steel and we've

got no power but whatever the backup can spit out."

Jahns held her breath.

"You need us to get someone?" Marnes asked.

Juliette laughed. “None of this is news or different from

any other shift. If the backup unit wasn’t being torn

down for new gaskets, and we could go to half power

for a week, I could pul that coupler, adjust the mounts,

and have her spinning like a top.” She shot a look at

Jahns. “But since we have a mandate for ful power, no

interruptions, that’s not happening. So

I’m going to

keep tightening bolts while they keep trying to shake

loose, and try and find the right revolutions in here to

keep her fairly singing.”

“I had no idea, when I signed that mandate—”

“And here I thought I dumbed down my report enough

to make it clear,” Juliette said.

“How long before this failure happens?”

Jahns suddenly realized she wasn't here interviewing

this woman. The demands were heading the opposite

direction.

"How long?" Juliette laughed and shook her head. She

finished a final adjustment and turned to face them with

her arms crossed. "It could happen right now. It could

happen a hundred years from now. The point is: it's

going to happen, and it's entirely preventable. The goal

shouldn't be to keep this place humming along for our

lifetimes—" She looked pointedly at Jahns. "—or our

current term. If the goal ain't forever, we should pack

our bags right now."

Jahns saw Marnes stiffen at this. She felt her own body

react, a chil coursing across her skin. This last line was

dangerously close to treason. The metaphor only half

saved it.

“I could declare a power holiday,” Jahns suggested.

“We could stage it in memory of those who clean.” She

thought more about this. “It could be an excuse to

service more than your machine here. We could—”

“Good luck getting IT to power down shit,” Juliette

said. She wiped her chin with the back of her wrist,

then wiped this on her coverals. She looked down at

the grease transferred to the denim. “Pardon my

language, Mayor.”

Jahns wanted to tel her it was quite al right, but the

woman’s attitude, her power, reminded her too much of

a former self that she could just barely recal. A younger

woman who dispensed with niceties and got what she

wanted. She found herself glancing over at Marnes.

“Why do you single out their department? For the

power, I mean.”

Juliette laughed and uncrossed her arms. She tossed her

hands toward the ceiling. “Why? Because IT has, what,

three floors out of one forty-four? And yet they use up

over a quarter of al the power we produce. I can do

the math for you—”

“That’s quite alright.”

“And I don’t remember a server ever feeding someone

or saving someone’s life or stitching up a hole in their

britches.”

Jahns smiled. She suddenly saw what Marnes liked

about this woman. She also saw what he

had once seen

in her younger self, before she married his best friend.

“What if we had IT ratchet down for some

maintenance of their own for a week? Would that

work?”

“I thought we came down here to recruit her *away*

from al this,” Marnes grumbled.

Juliette shot him a look. “And I thought I

told your—or

your secretary—not to bother. Not that I've got

anything against what you do, but I'm needed down

here." She raised her arm and checked something

dangling from her wrist. It was a timepiece. But she was

studying it as if it stil worked.

"Look, I'd love to chat more." She looked up at Jahns.

“Especialy if you can guarantee a holiday from the

juice, but I’ve got a few more adjustments to make and

I’m already into my overtime. Knox gets pissed if I

push into too many extra shifts.”

“We’l get out of your hair,” Jahns said. “We haven’t

had dinner yet, so maybe we can see you after? Once

you punch out and get cleaned up?”

Juliette looked down at herself, as if to confirm she even

needed cleaning. “Yeah, sure,” she said. “They’ve got

you in the bunkhouse?”

Marnes nodded.

“Alright. I’l find you later. And don’t forget your

muffs.” She pointed to her ears, looked Marnes in the

eye, nodded, then returned to her work, letting them

know the conversation, for now, was over.

6

Marnes and Jahns finished their meals, which consisted

of large bowls of soup and hunks of dry, almost stale

bread, and exited a mess hal nearly as noisy as the

generator room. During the entire meal, Jahns had

regretted not bringing those plastic and foam ear

protection muffs to dinner. The men and women of

Mechanical were as loud and boisterous as they were

filthy. She wondered if perhaps they al yeled because

they were going deaf in the constant hammering of the

place.

Outside, they folowed Knox’s directions to the

bunkroom, where they found a cot made up for

Marnes, and one of the attached private rooms

reserved for Jahns. They bided their time in the smal

room, rubbing aches in their legs, talking about how

different the down deep was, until there was a knock

on their door and Juliette pushed it open and stepped

inside.

“They got you both in one room?” she asked,

surprised.

Jahns laughed. “No, they’ve got a bunk set aside as

wel. And I would’ve been happy staying out there with

the others.”

“Forget it,” Juliette said. “They put up recruits and

visiting families in here al the time.”

Jahns watched as Juliette placed a length of string in her

mouth, then gathered her hair, stil wet

from a shower,

and tied it up in a tail. She had changed into another

pair of coverals, and Jahns guessed the stains in them

were permanent, that the fabric was actualy laundered

and ready for another shift.

“So how soon could we announce this power holiday?”

Juliette asked. She finished her knot and crossed her

arms, leaning back against the wal beside the door. “I

would think you’d wanna take advantage of the post-

cleaning mood, right?”

“How soon can *you* start?” Jahns asked. She realized,

suddenly, that part of the reason she wanted this

woman as her sheriff was that she felt unattainable.

Jahns glanced over at Marnes and wondered how much

of his attraction to her, al those many years ago when

she was young and with Donald, had been as simply

motivated.

“I can start tomorrow,” Juliette said. “We could have

the backup generator online by morning. I could work

another shift tonight to make sure the gaskets and seals

___”

“No,” Jahns said, raising her hand. “How soon can you

start as sheriff?” She dug through her open bag, sorting

folders across the bed, looking for the contract.

“I’m—I thought we discussed this. I have no interest in

being—”

“They make the best ones,” Marnes said. “The ones

who have no interest in it.” He stood across from

Juliette, this thumbs tucked into his coverals, leaning

against one of the smal apartment's wals.

"I'm sorry, but there's no one down here who can just

slip into my boots," Juliette said, shaking her head. "I

don't think you two understand al that we do—"

"I don't think you understand what we do up top,"

Jahns said. "Or why we need you."

Juliette tossed her head and laughed. “Look, I’ve got

machines down here that you can’t possibly—”

“And what good are they?” Jahns asked. “What do

these machines do?”

“They keep this whole goddamned place running!”

Juliette declared. “The oxygen you breathe? We

recycled that down here. The toxins you exhale? We

pump them back into the earth. You want me to write

up a list of everything oil makes? Every piece of plastic,

every ounce of rubber, al the solvents and cleaners,

and I’m not talking about the power it generates, but

everything else!”

“And yet it was al here before you were born,” Jahns

pointed out.

“Wel it wouldn’t have lasted my lifetime, I’l tel you

that. Not in the state it was in.” She crossed her arms

again and leaned back against the wal. “I don’t think

you get what mess we’d be in without these machines.”

“And I don’t think you get how pointless these

machines are going to become without al these

people.”

Juliette looked away. It was the first time Jahns had

seen her flinch.

“Why don’t you ever visit your father?”

Juliette snapped her head around and looked at the

other wal. She wiped loose hair back on her forehead.

“Go look at my work log,” she said. “Tel me when I’d

fit it in.”

Before Jahns could reply, could say that

it was family,

that there's always time, Juliette turned to face her. "Do

you think I don't care about people? Is that it? Because

you'd be wrong. I care about every person in this silo.

And the men and women down here, the forgotten eight

floors of Mechanical, *this* is my family. I visit with them

every day. I break bread with them several times a day.

We work, live, and die alongside one another.” She

looked to Marnes. “Isn’t that right? You’ve seen it.”

Marnes didn’t say anything. Jahns wondered if she was

referring specificaly to the “dying” part.

“Did you ask him why he never comes to see me?

Because he has al the time in the world. He has

nothing up there.”

“Yes, we met with him. Your father seemed like a very

busy man. As determined as you.”

Juliette looked away.

“And as stubborn.” Jahns left the paperwork on the

bed and went to stand by the door, just a pace away

from Juliette. She could smel the soap in the younger

woman’s hair. Could see her nostrils flare with her

rapid, heavy breathing.

“The days pile up and weigh smal decisions down,

don’t they? That decision to not visit. The first few days

slide by easy enough, anger and youth powers them

along. But then they pile up like unrecycled trash. Isn’t

that right?”

Juliette waved her hand. “I don’t know what you’re

talking about.”

“I’m talking about days becoming weeks becoming

months becoming years—” She almost said that she’d

been through the same exact thing, was stil piling them

up, but Marnes was in the room, listening. “After a

while, you’re staying mad just to justify an old mistake.

Then it’s just a game. Two people staring away,

refusing to look back over their shoulders, afraid to be

the first one to take that chance—”

“It wasn’t like that,” Juliette said. “I don’t want your

job. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of others who do.”

“If it’s not you, it’s someone I’m not sure I can trust.

Not anymore.”

“Then give it to the next girl.” She smiled.

“It’s you or him. And I think he’l be getting more

guidance from the thirties than he wil from me, or from

the Pact.”

Juliette seemed to react to this. Her arms loosened

across her chest. She turned and met Jahns’ gaze.

Marnes was studying al of this from across the room.

“The last sheriff, Holston, what happened to him?”

“He went to cleaning,” Jahns said.

“He volunteered,” Marnes added gruffly.

“I know, but why?” She frowned. “I heard it was his

wife.”

“There’s al kinds of speculation—”

“I remember him talking about her, when you two

came down to look into Rick’s death. I thought, at first,

that he was flirting with me, but al he could talk about

was this wife of his."

"They were in the lottery while we were down here,"

Marnes reminded her.

"Yeah. That's right." She studied the bed for a while.

Paperwork was spread across it.

"I wouldn't know how to do this job. I only know how

to fix things."

"It's the same thing," Marnes told her. "You were a big

help with our case down here. You see how things

work. How they fit together. Little clues that other

people miss."

"You're talking about *machines*," she said.

"People aren't much different," Marnes told her.

"I think you already know this," Jahns said. "I think you

have the right attitude, actualy. The right disposition.

This is only slightly a political office. Distance is good."

Juliette shook her head and looked back to Marnes.

"So you nominated me for this, is that it? I wondered

how this came up. Seemed like something right out of

the ground."

"You'd be good at it," Marnes told her. "I think you'd

be damned good at anything you set your mind to. And

this is more important work than you think."

"And I'd live up top?"

"Your office is on level one. Near the airlock."

Juliette seemed to mul this over. Jahns was excited to

have her even asking questions.

"The pay is more than you're making now, even with

the extra shifts."

"You checked?"

Jahns nodded. “I took some liberties before we came

down.”

“Like talking to my father.”

“That’s right. He would love to see you, you know. If

you come with us.”

Juliette looked down at her boots. “Not sure about

that.”

“There’s one other thing,” Marnes said, catching Jahns’

eye. He glanced at the paperwork on the bed. The

crisply folded contract for Peter Bilings was on top.

“IT,” he reminded her.

Jahns caught his drift.

“There’s one matter to clear up, before you accept.”

“I’m not sure I’m accepting. I’d want to hear more

about this power holiday, organize the work shifts down

here—”

“According to tradition, IT signs off on al nominated

positions—”

Juliette roled her eyes and blew out her breath. “IT.”

“Yes, and we checked in with them on the way down

as wel, just to smooth things over.”

“I’m sure,” Juliette said.

“It’s about these requisitions,” Marnes interjected.

Juliette turned to him.

“We know it probably ain’t nothing, but it’s gonna

come up—”

“Wait, is this about the heat tape?”

“Heat tape?”

“Yeah.” Juliette frowned and shook her head. “Those

bastards.”

Jahns pinched two inches of air. “They had a folder on

you this thick. Said you were skimming supplies meant

for them."

"No they didn't. Are you kidding?" She pointed

toward the door. "We can't get any of the supplies we

need because of them. When I needed heat tape—we

had a leak in a heat exchanger a few months back—we

couldn't get any because Supply tels us the backing

material for the tape is al spoken for. Now, we had that

order in a while back, and then I find out from one of

our porters that the tape is going to IT, that they've got

miles of the stuff for the skins of al their test suits."

Juliette took a deep breath.

"So I had some intercepted." She looked to Marnes as

she admitted this. "Look, I'm keeping the power on so

they can do whatever it is they do up there, and I can't

get basic supplies. And even when I do, the quality is

complete crap, probably because of unrealistic quotas,

rushing the manufacturing chain—"

"If these are items you realy needed," Jahns

interrupted, "then I understand."

She looked to Marnes, who smiled and dipped his chin

as if to say he *told* her this was the right woman for the

job.

Jahns ignored him. “I’m actualy glad to hear your side

of this,” she told Juliette. “And I wish I had made this

trip more often, as sore as my legs are. There are things

we take for granted up top, mostly because they aren’t

wel understood. I can see now that our offices need to

be in better communication, have more of the constant

contact I have with IT."

"I've been saying that for just about twenty years,"

Juliette said. "Down here, we joke that this place was

laid out to keep us wel out of the way. And that's how

it feels, sometimes."

"Wel, if you come up top, if you take this job, people

wil hear you. You could be the first link in that chain of

command.”

“Where would IT fal?”

“There wil be resistance, but that’s normal with them.

I’ve handled it before. I’l wire my office for some

emergency waivers. We’l make them retroactive, get

these acquisitions above board.” Jahns studied the

younger woman. “As long as I have your assurance that

every one of these diverted supplies were absolutely

necessary.”

Juliette did not flinch away from the chalenge. “They

were,” she said. “Not that it mattered. The stuff we got

from them was crap. Couldn’t have falen apart better if

it’d been designed to. I’l tel you what, we finaly got

our shipment from Supply and have extra tape. I'd love

to drop off a peace offering on our way up. Our design

is so much better—"

"Our way up?" Jahns asked, making sure she

understood what she was saying, what she was

agreeing to.

Juliette looked them both over. She nodded. "You'l

have to give me a week to sort out the generator. I'm

holding you to that power holiday. And just so you

understand, I'l always consider myself Mechanical, and

I'l be doing this partly because I see what happens

when problems are ignored. My big push down here

has been preventive maintenance. No more waiting for

things to break before we fix them, but to

go around

and make them hum while they're stil working. Too

many issues have been ignored, let degrade. And I

think, if the silo can be thought of as one big engine, we

are like the dirty oil pan down here that needs some

people's attention." She reached her hand out to Jahns.

"Get me that power holiday, and I'm your man."

Jahns smiled and took her hand, admired the warmth

and power in her confident handshake.

“I’l get on it first thing in the morning,” she said. “And

thank you. Welcome aboard.”

Marnes crossed the room to shake Juliette’s hand as

wel. “Nice to have you on, Boss.”

Juliette smirked as she took his hand. “Wel, now, let’s

not get ahead of ourselves. I think I’l

have a lot to learn

before you go caling me that.”

7

It felt appropriate that their climb back to the up-top

would occur during a power holiday. Jahns could feel

her own energy complying with the new decree,

draining away with each laborious step. The agony of

the descent had been a tease, the

discomfort of

constant movement disguising itself as the fatigue of

exercise. But now her frail muscles were realy put to

work. Each step was something to be conquered. She

would lift a boot to the next tread, place a hand on her

knee, and push herself another ten inches up what felt

like a milion feet of spiral staircase.

The landing to her right displayed the number “58.”

Each landing seemed to be in view forever. Not like the

trip down, where she could daydream and skip right

past several floors. Now they loomed in sight gradualy

beyond the outer railing, and held there, taunting in the

dim green glow of the emergency lights, as she struggled

up one plodding and wavering step at a

time.

Marnes walked beside her, his hand on the inner rail,

hers on the outer, the walking stick clanging on the

lonely treads between them. Occasionaly, their arms

brushed against one another. It felt as though they'd

been away for months, away from their offices, their

duties, their cold familiarity. The adventure down to

wrangle a new sheriff had played out differently than

Jahns had imagined it would. She had dreamed of a

return to her youth and had instead found herself

haunted by old ghosts. She had hoped to find a

renewed vigor and instead felt the years of wear in her

knees and back. What was to be a grand tour of her

silo was instead trudged in relative

anonymity, and now

she wondered if its operation and upkeep even needed

her.

The world around her was stratified. She saw that ever

more clearly. The up-top concerned itself with a

blurring view, taking for granted the squeezed juice

enjoyed with breakfast. The people who lived below

and worked the gardens or cleaned animal cages

orbited their own world of soil, greenery, and fertilizer.

To them, the outside view was peripheral, ignored until

there was a cleaning. And then there was the down

deep, the machine shops and chemistry labs, the

pumping oil and grinding gears, the hands-on world of

grease limned fingernails and the musk

of toil. To these

people, the outside world and the food that trickled

down were mere rumors and bodily sustenance. The

point of the silo was for the people to keep the

machines running, when Jahns had always, her entire

long life, seen it the other way around.

Landing fifty-seven appeared through the fog of

darkness. A young girl sat on the steel grate, her feet

tucked up against herself, arms wrapped around her

knees, a children's book in its protective plastic cover

held out into the feeble light spiling from an overhead

bulb. Jahns watched the girl, who was unmoved save

her eyes as they darted over the colorful pages. The girl

never looked up to see who was passing

the

apartment's landing. They left her behind, and she

gradualy faded in the darkness as Jahns and Marnes

struggled ever upward, exhausted from their third day

of climbing, no vibrations or ringing footsteps above or

below them, the silo quiet and eerily devoid of life,

room enough for two old friends, two comrades, to

walk side by side on the crumbling steps of chipping

paint, their arms swinging and every now and then, and

very occasionaly, brushing together.

••••

They stayed that night at the mid-level deputy station,

the officer of the mids insisting they take his hospitality

and Jahns eager to buttress support for yet another

sheriff nominated from outside the profession. After a

cold dinner in near darkness and enough idle banter to

satisfy their host and his wife, Jahns retired to the main

office where a convertible couch had been made as

comfortable as possible, the linens borrowed from a

nicer elsewhere and smeling of two-chit soap. Marnes

had been set up on a cot in the holding

cel, which stil

smeled of tub-gin and a drunk who had gotten too

carried away after the cleaning.

It was impossible to notice when the lights went out,

they were so dim already. Jahns rested on the cot in the

darkness, her muscles throbbing and luxuriating in her

body’s stilness, her feet cramped and feeling like solid

bone, her back tender and in need of stretching. Her

mind, however, continued to move. It drifted back to

the weary conversations that had passed the time on

their most recent day of climbing.

She and Marnes seemed to be spiraling around one

another, testing the memory of old attractions, probing

the tenderness of ancient scars, looking for some soft

spot that remained among brittle and broken bodies,

across wrinkled and dried-paper skin, and within hearts

caloused by law and politics.

Donald's name came up often and tentatively, like a

child sneaking into the adult bed, forcing wary lovers to

make room in the middle. Jahns grieved anew for her

long lost husband. She grieved for the first time in her

life for the subsequent decades of solitude. What she

had forever seen as her caling—this living apart and

serving the greater good—now felt more a curse. Her

life had been taken from her. Squeezed into pulp. The

juice of her efforts and sacrificed years had dripped

down through a silo that, just forty levels below her,

hardly knew and barely cared.

The saddest part of this journey had been this

understanding she'd come to with Holston's ghost. She

could admit it now: A great reason for her hike, perhaps

even the reason for wanting Juliette as sheriff, was to fal

al the way to the down deep, away from the sad sight

of two lovers nestled together in the crook of a hil as

the wind etched away al their wasted

youth. She had

set out to escape Holston, and had instead found him.

Now she knew, if not the mystery of why al sent out to

clean actualy did so, why a sad few would dare

volunteer for the duty. Better to join a ghost than be

haunted by them, Jahns now knew. Better no life than

an empty one—

The door to the deputy's office squeaked on a hinge

long worn beyond the repair of grease. Jahns tried to sit

up, to see in the dark, but her muscles were too sore,

her eyes too old. She wanted to cal out, to let her hosts

know that she was okay, in need of nothing, but she

listened instead.

Footsteps came to her, nearly invisible in the worn

carpet. There were no words, just the creaking of old

joints as they approached the bed, the lifting of

expensive and fragrant sheets, and an understanding

between two living ghosts.

Jahns' breath caught in her chest. Her hand groped for

a wrist as it clutched her sheets. She slid over on the

smal convertible bed to make room and puled him

down beside her.

Marnes wrapped his arms around her back, wiggled

beneath her until she was lying on his side, a leg draped

over his, her hands on his neck. She felt his mustache

brush against her cheek, heard his lips purse and peck

the corner of hers.

Jahns held his cheeks and burrowed her face into his

shoulder. She cried, like a schoolchild, like a new

shadow who felt lost and afraid in the wilderness of a

strange and terrifying job. She cried with fear, but that

soon drained away. It drained like the soreness in her

back as his hands rubbed her there. It drained until

numbness found its place, and then, after what felt like a

forever of shuddering sobs, with

sensation taking the

place of that.

Jahns felt alive in her skin. She felt the tingle of flesh

touching flesh, of just her forearm against his hard ribs,

her hands on his shoulder, his hands on her hips. And

then the tears were some joyous release, some

mourning of the lost time, some welcomed sadness of a

moment long delayed and finaly there, arms wrapped

around it and holding tight.

She fel asleep like that, exhausted from far more than

the climb, nothing more than a few trembling kisses,

hands interlocking, a whispered word of tenderness and

appreciation, and then the depths of sleep puling her

down, the weariness in her joints and bones succumbing

to a slumber she didn't want but sorely needed. She

slept with a man in her arms for the first time in

decades, and woke to a bed familiarly empty, but a

heart strangely ful.

••••

In the middle of their fourth and final day of climbing,

they approached the mid-thirties of IT. Jahns had found

herself taking more breaks for water and to rub her

muscles along the way, not for the exhaustion she

feigned, but the dread of this stopover and seeing

Bernard, the fear of their trip ever coming to an end.

The dark and deep shadows cast by the power holiday

folowed them up, the traffic sparse as most merchants

had closed for the silo-wide brownout.

Juliette, who

had stayed behind to oversee the repairs, had warned

Jahns of the flickering lights from the backup generator.

Stil, the effect of the shimmering ilumination had worn

on her during the long climb. The inconstancy was

bothersome.

When they reached the thirty-fourth, Jahns felt like they

were, in a sense, home again. Back in the realm of the

familiar, at the main landing for IT. She waited by the

railing, leaning on it and her walking stick, while Marnes

got the door. As it was cracked open, the pale glow of

diminished power was swept off the stairwel by the

bright lights blooming inside. It hadn’t been widely

publicized, but the reason for the severe

power

restrictions on other levels was largely due to the

exemption IT maintained it possessed in spite of this

holiday. Bernard had pointed to various clauses in the

Pact to support this. Juliette had bitched that servers

shouldn’t get priority over grow lights, but resigned

herself to getting the main generator re-aligned, and

taking what she could. Jahns told Juliette to view this as

her first lesson in political compromise. Juliette said she

saw it as a display of weakness.

Inside, Jahns found Bernard waiting on them, a look on

his face like he'd swalowed sour fruit juice. A

conversation between several IT workers standing off

to the side quickly silenced with their entry, leaving

Jahns little doubt that they'd been spotted on the way

up and expected.

"Bernard," she said, trying to keep her breathing

steady. She didn't want him to know how tired she

was. Let him think she was stroling by on her way up

from the down deep, like it was no big deal.

"Marie."

It was a deliberate slight. He didn't even look Marnes'

way or acknowledge that the deputy was in the room.

"Would you like to sign these here? Or in the

conference room?" She dug into her bag for the

contract with Juliette's name on it.

"What games are you playing at, Marie?"

Jahns felt her temperature rise. The cluster of workers

in silver IT jumpsuits were folowing the exchange.

“Playing at?” she asked.

“You think this *power holiday* of yours is cute? Your

way of getting back at me?”

“Getting back—?”

“I’ve got servers, Marie—”

“Your servers have their ful alocation of power,”

Jahns reminded him, her voice rising.

“But their cooling comes ducted from Mechanical, and

if temps get any higher, we’l be ramping down, which

we’ve *never* had to do!”

Marnes stepped between the two of them, his hands

raised. “Easy,” he said cooly, his gaze on Bernard.

“Cal off your little shadow here,” Bernard said.

Jahns placed a hand on Marnes’ arm.

“The Pact is clear, Bernard. It’s my choice. My

nomination. You and I have a nice history of signing off

on each others—”

“And I told you this girl from the pits wil not do—”

“She’s got the job,” Marnes said, interrupting. Jahns

noticed his hand had falen to the butt of his gun. She

wasn’t sure if Bernard noticed or not, but he fel silent.

His eyes, however, did not leave Jahns'.

"I won't sign it."

"Then next time, I won't ask."

Bernard smiled. "You think you'l outlive another

sheriff?" He turned toward the workers in the corner

and waved one of them over. "Why do I somehow

doubt that?" The worker approached. Bernard nodded

to the young man, a face familiar to

Jahns from level

meetings. “Sign whatever she needs, I refuse to. Make

copies. Take care of the rest.” He waved his hand

dismissively, turned and looked Marnes and Jahns up

and down one final time, as if disgusted with their

condition, their age, their positions, *something*. “Oh,

and top off their canteens and see that they have food

enough to stagger back to their homes. Whatever it

takes to power their decrepit legs to wherever it is they

belong."

And with that, Bernard strode off toward the barred

gates that led into the heart of IT, back to his brightly lit

offices where servers hummed happily, the temperature

rising in the slow-moving air like the heat of angered

flesh as capilaries squeezed, the blood in them rising to

a boil.

8

The floors flew by faster as they approached home. In

the darkest sections of the staircase, between quiet

floors of people hunkered down and awaiting a return

to normalcy, old hands wrapped around each other and

swung between two climbers, brazenly and open,

grasping each other while their other hands slid up the

cool steel of the rails.

Jahns only let go sporadicaly to check that her walking

stick was secure against her back, or to grab Marnes'

canteen from his pack and take a sip. They had taken

to drinking each other's water, it being easier to reach

across than around one’s own back. There was a

sweetness to it as wel, this carrying the sustenance

another needed, this being able to provide and

reciprocate in a perfectly equitable relationship. It was a

thing worth dropping hands for. Momentarily, at least.

Jahns finished a sip, screwed on the metal cap with its

dangling chain, and replaced it in his

outer pouch. She

was dying to know if things would be different once

they got back. They were only twenty floors away. An

impossible distance yesterday now seemed like

something that could slip away without noticing. And as

they arrived, would familiar surroundings bring familiar

roles? Would last night feel more and more like a

dream? Or would old ghosts become more and more

solid?

She wanted to ask these things, but talked of trivialities

instead. When would Jules, as she insisted they cal her,

be ready for duty? What case files did he and Holston

have open that needed tending to first? What

concession would they make to keep IT happy, to calm

down Bernard? And how would they handle Peter

Bilings' disappointment? What impact would this have

on hearings he might one day preside over as judge?

Jahns felt butterflies in her stomach as they discussed

these things. Or perhaps it was the nerves of al she

wanted to say, but couldn't. These topics were as

numerous as grains of dust in the outside

air, and just as

likely to dry her mouth and stil her tongue. She found

herself drinking more and more from his thermos, her

own water making noises at her back, her stomach

lurching with every landing, each number counting down

toward the conclusion of their journey, an adventure

that had been a complete success in so many ways.

To start with, they had their sheriff. A fiery girl from the

down deep who seemed every bit as confident and

inspiring as Marnes had intimated. Jahns saw her kind

as the future of the silo. People who thought long term.

Who planned. Who got things done. There was

precedence of sheriffs running for mayor. She thought

Juliette would eventualy make a fine

choice.

And speaking of running, the trip had fired up her own

goals and ambitions. She was excited for the upcoming

elections, however unopposed she might be, and had

even come up with dozens of short speeches during the

climb. She saw how things could run better, how she

could perform her duties more diligently, and how the

silo could have new life breathed into old bones.

But the biggest change was whatever had grown

between herself and Marnes. She had even begun to

suspect, just in the last hours, that the real reason for

him never taking a promotion was because of her. As

deputy, there was enough space between them to

contain his hope, his impossible dream

of holding her.

As sheriff, it couldn't happen. Too much conflict of

interest, too much his immediate superior. This theory of

hers contained a powerful sadness and an awe-inspiring

sweetness. She squeezed his hand as she thought on

this theory, and it filed her with a deep holowness, a

cramp in her gut at al he had silently sacrificed, a

massive debt to live up to no matter what happened

next.

They approached the landing to the nursery, and had no

plans for stopping to see Juliette's father, to urge him to

receive his daughter on the way up, but Jahns changed

her mind as she felt her bladder beg for release.

"I've got to go pretty bad," she told Marnes,

embarrassed as a child to admit she couldn't hold it.

Her mouth was dry and her stomach churning from so

much fluid, and maybe from a little fear of the journey

being over and done. "I wouldn't mind seeing Juliette's

father, either," she added.

Marnes' mustache bent up at the corners with the

excuse. "Then we should stop," he said.

The waiting room was empty, the signs reminding them

to be quiet. Jahns peered through the glass partition and

saw a nurse padding through the dark corridor toward

her, a frown becoming a slight smile of recognition.

“Mayor,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry not to have wired ahead, but I was hoping

to see Doctor Nichols? And possibly use your

restroom?”

“Of course.” She buzzed the door and waved them

through. “We’ve had two deliveries since you last

stopped by. Things have been crazy with this generator

mess—”

“Power holiday,” Marnes corrected, his voice gruff and

louder than theirs.

The nurse shot him a look, but nodded as

if duly noted.

She took two robes from the racks and had them put

these on and leave their stuff by her desk.

In the waiting room, she waved toward the benches and

said she would find the doctor. “The bathrooms are

through there.” She pointed at a door, the old sign

painted on its surface nearly eroded clean away.

“I’l be right back,” Jahns told Marnes. She fought the

urge to reach out and squeeze his hand, as normal as

that dark and hidden habit had lately become.

The bathroom was almost completely devoid of light.

Jahns fumbled with an unfamiliar lock on the stal door,

cursed under her breath as her stomach churned noisily,

then finaly threw the stal open and

hurried to sit down.

Her stomach felt like it was on fire as she relieved

herself. The mixture of welcomed release and the burn

of having held it too long left her unable to breathe. She

went for what felt like forever, remained sitting as her

legs shook uncontrolably, and realized she had pushed

herself too hard on the climb up. The thought of another

twenty levels mortified her, made her insides feel holow

with dread. She finished and moved over to the

adjoining toilet to splash herself clean, then dried herself

with one of the towels. She flushed both units to cycle

the water. It al required fumbling in the darkness,

unable to see and unfamiliar with the spacing and

location that were second nature in her

apartment and

office.

She staggered out of the bathroom on weak legs,

wondering if she might need to stay one more night,

sleep in a delivery bed, wait until the morning to make

the climb to her office. She could barely feel her legs as

she puled open the door and returned to Marnes in the

waiting room.

“Better?” he asked. He sat on one of the family

benches, a space left conspicuously beside him. Jahns

nodded and sat heavily. She was breathing in shalow

pants and wondered if he’d find her weak to admit she

couldn’t go any further that day.

“Jahns? You okay?”

Marnes leaned forward. He wasn’t

looking at her, he

was looking toward the ground. “Jahns. What the hel

happened?”

“Lower your voice,” she whispered.

He screamed, instead.

“Doctor!” he yeled. “Nurse!”

A form moved beyond the dusky glass of the nursery.

Jahns laid her head back against the seat cushion, trying

to form the words on her lips, to tel him to keep it

down.

“Jahns, sweetheart, what did you do?”

He was holding her hand, patting the back of it. He

shook her arm. Jahns just wanted to sleep. There was

the slapping of footsteps running their way. Lights

turned up forbiddingly bright. A nurse yeled something.

There was the familiar voice of Juliette's father, a

doctor. He would give her a bed. He would understand

this exhaustion—

There was talk of blood. Someone was examining her

legs. Marnes was crying, tears faling into his white

mustache, peppered with black. He was shaking her

shoulders, looking her in the eye.

“I’m okay,” Jahns tried to say.

She licked her lips. So dry. Mouth, so damned dry. She

asked for water. Marnes fumbled for his canteen,

brought it to her lips, splashing water against and into

her mouth.

She tried to swalow, but couldn’t. They were stretching

her out on the bench, the doctor touching her ribs,

shining a light in her eyes. But things were getting darker

anyway.

Marnes clutched the canteen in one hand, rubbed her

hair back with the other. He was blubbering. So sad for

some reason. So much more energy than her. She

smiled at him and reached for his hand, a miraculous

effort. She held his wrist and told him that she loved

him. That she had for as long as she could remember.

Her mind was tired, loosing its grip on her secrets,

mouthing them to him as his eyes flowed with tears.

His eyes, bright and wrinkled, peering down at her, then

turning to the canteen in his hand.

The canteen that he had carried.

The water, and poison, meant for him.

The generator room was unusualy crowded and eerily

silent. Mechanics in worn coverals stood three deep

behind the railing and watched the first shift crew work.

Juliette was only dimly aware of them; she was more

keenly aware of the silence.

She leaned over a device of her own making, a tal

platform welded to the metal floor and arrayed with

mirrors and tiny slits that bounced light across the room.

This light shined on mirrors attached to the generator

and its large dynamo, helping her get them in perfect

alignment. It was the shaft between the two of them that

she cared about, that long steel rod the size of a man's

waist where the power of combusting fuel was

transformed into the spark of electricity.

She was

hoping to have the machines on either end of this rod

aligned to within a thousandth of an inch. But everything

they were doing was without precedent. The

procedures had been hurriedly planned in al-night

sessions while the backup generator was put online.

Now, she could only concentrate, could only hope the

eighteen hour shifts had been good for something, and

trust in plans made back when she'd had some decent

rest and could soundly think.

While she guided the final placement, the chamber

around her stood deathly quiet. She gave a sign, and

Marck and his team tightened several of the massive

bolts on the new rubber floor mounts. They were four

days into the power holiday. The generator needed to

be up and running by morning and at ful power that

next evening. With so much done to it—the new

gaskets and seals, the polishing of cylinder shafts that

had required young shadows to crawl down into the

heart of the beast—Juliette was worried about it even

starting up. The generator had never

been fuly powered

down during her lifetime. Old Knox could remember it

shutting itself down in an emergency once, back when

he was a mere shadow, but for everyone else the

rumble was as constant and close as their own

heartbeats. Juliette felt inordinate pressure for

everything to work. She was the one who had come up

with the idea to do a refit. She calmed herself with

reassurances that it was the right thing to do, and that

the worst that could happen now was that the holiday

would get extended until they sorted out al the kinks.

That was much better than a catastrophic failure years

from now.

Marck signaled that the bolts were secure, the lock nuts

tightened down. Juliette jumped off her homemade

platform and stroled over to the generator to join him.

It was difficult to walk casualy with so many eyes on

her. She couldn’t believe this rowdy crew, this

extended and dysfunctional family of hers, could be so

perfectly silent. It was like they were al holding their

breath, wondering if the crushing

schedule of the last

few days was going to be for naught.

“You ready?” she asked Marck.

He nodded, wiping his hands on a filthy rag that always

seemed to be draped over his shoulder. Juliette

checked her watch. The sight of its second hand ticking

around in its constant path comforted her. Whenever

she had doubts about something working,

she looked at

her wrist. Not to see the time, but to see a thing she had

fixed. A repair so intricate and impossible—one that

had taken years of cleaning and setting parts almost too

smal to see—that it made her current task, whatever it

was, feel smal by comparison.

“We on schedule?” Marck asked, grinning.

“We’re doing fine.” She nodded to the control room.

Whispers began to stir through the crowd as they

realized the restart was imminent. Dozens of them

puled sound protection from their necks and settled the

muffs over their ears. Juliette and Marck joined Shirly in

the control room.

“How’s it going?” Juliette asked the second shift

foreman, a young woman, smal but fiery.

“Golden,” Shirly said as she continued to make

adjustments, zeroing out al the corrections that had built

up over the years. They were starting from the ground

up, none of the patches and fixes of old to disguise any

new symptoms. A fresh start. “We’re good to go,” she

said.

She backed away from the controls and moved to

stand near her husband. The gesture was transparent,

leaving the controls. This was Juliette's project, perhaps

the last thing she would ever try and fix in the down

deep of Mechanical. She would have the honor, and the

ful responsibility, of firing the generator up.

Juliette stood over the control board,

looking down at

knobs and dials that she could locate in utter darkness.

It was hard to believe that this phase of her life was

over, that some new one was about to begin. The

thought of traveling to the up-top frightened her more

than this project could. The idea of leaving her friends

and family, of dealing with politics, did not taste as

sweet to her as the sweat and grease on her lips. But at

least she had alies up there. If people like Jahns and

Marnes were able to get by, to survive, she figured

she’d be okay.

With a trembling hand, more from exhaustion than

nerves, Juliette engaged the starter motor. There was a

loud whine as a smal electrical engine tried to get the

massive diesel generator moving. It seemed to be taking

forever, but Juliette had no idea what normal sounded

like. Marck stood by the door, propping it open so they

could better hear any shouts to abort. He glanced over

at Juliette as she continued to hold the ignition, creases

of worry in his brow as the starter whined and groaned

in the next room.

Someone outside waved both arms, trying to signal her

through the glass.

“Shut it off, shut it off,” Marck said. Shirly hurried over

toward the control panel to help.

Juliette let go of the ignition and reached for the kil

switch, but she stopped herself from pressing it. There

was a noise outside. A powerful hum. She thought she

could feel it through the floor, but not like the vibration

of old.

“It’s already running!” someone yeled.

“It was already running,” Marck said, laughing.

The mechanics outside were cheering. Someone puled

off their ear protection and hurled the muffs up into the

air. Juliette realized the starter motor was louder than

the rebuilt generator, that she'd been holding the ignition

even as it had already started and continued to run.

Shirly and Marck hugged one another. Juliette checked

the temps and pressures on al the zeroed gauges and

saw little to adjust, but she wouldn't be sure until it

warmed up. Her throat constricted with emotion, the

release of so much pressure. Work

crews were leaping

over the railing to crowd around the rebuilt beast. Some

who rarely visited the generator room were reaching out

to touch it, almost with reverent awe.

Juliette left the control room to watch them, to listen to

the sound of a perfectly working machine, of gears in

alignment. She stood behind the railing, hands on a steel

bar that used to rattle and dance while the generator

labored, and watched an unlikely celebration take place

in a normaly avoided workspace. The hum was

magnificent. Power without dread. The culmination of

so much hurried labor and planning.

The success gave her a new confidence for what lay

ahead, for what lay above. She was in such fine spirits

and so fixated on the powerful and improved machines

that she didn't notice the young porter hurry into the

room, his face ashen, his chest sweling with the deep

gulps of a long and frantic run. She barely noticed the

way the news traveled from mouth to mouth throughout

the room, spreading among the mechanics until fear and

sadness registered in their eyes. It

wasn’t until the

celebration died completely, the room faling into a

different sort of quiet, one studded with sobs and gasps

of disbelief, of grown men wailing, that Juliette knew

something was amiss.

Something had happened. A great and powerful thing

had falen out of alignment.

And it had nothing to do with her

generator.

Wool 3 – Casting Off

1

Casting Off

There were numbers on each of the pockets. Juliette

could look down at her chest and read them, and so it

occurred to her that they must be printed upside down.

They were there for her to read, and for no one else.

She numbly stared at them through her helmet visor

while the door behind her was sealed. There was

another door, a forbidden one, looming in front of her.

It stood silently as it waited to be opened.

Juliette felt lost in this void between the two doors,

trapped in this airlock ful of its brightly colored pipes al

jutting from the wals and ceiling,

everything shimmering

behind plastic-wrapped shrouds.

The hiss of Argon being pumped into the room sounded

distant through her helmet. It let her know the end was

near. Pressure built against the plastic, crinkling it across

the bench and wals, wrapping it tightly around the

pipes. She could feel the pressure against her suit, like

an invisible hand gently squeezing.

She knew what was to happen next. And part of her

wondered how she had gotten here, a girl from

Mechanical who had never cared one whit about the

outside, who had only ever broken minor laws, and

who would’ve been content for the rest of her life to live

in the deepest bowels of the earth, covered in grease

and fixing the broken things, little concern for the wider

world of the dead that surrounds her—

2

Days Earlier

Juliette sat on the floor of the holding cel, her back

against the tal rows of steel bars, a mean world

displayed on the walscreen before her. For the past

three days, while she attempted to teach

herself how to

be silo sheriff, she had studied this view of the outside

and wondered what the fuss was al about.

Al she saw out there were dul slopes of ground, these

gray hils rising up toward grayer clouds, dappled

sunlight straining to iluminate the land with little success.

Across it al were the terrible winds, the frenzied gusts

that whipped smal clouds of soil into curls and whorls

that chased one another across a landscape meant only

for them.

For Juliette, there was nothing inspiring about the view,

nothing that aroused her curiosity. It was an

uninhabitable wasteland devoid of anything useful.

There were no resources beyond the tainted steel of

crumbling towers visible over the hils, steel it would no

doubt cost more to reclaim, transport, smelt, and purify

than it would to simply pul new ore from the mines

beneath the silo.

The forbidden dreams of the outside world, she saw,

were sad and empty dreams. Dead dreams. The people

of the up-top who worshipped this view had it al

backwards—the future was *below*. That's where the oil

came from that provided their power, the minerals that

became anything useful, the nitrogen that renewed the

soil in the farms. Any who shadowed in the footsteps of

chemistry and metalurgy knew this. Those who read

children's books, those who tried to piece together the

mystery of a forgotten and unknowable

past, remained

deluded.

The only sense she could make of their obsession was

the open space itself, a feature of the landscape that

frankly terrified her. Perhaps it was something wrong

with *her* that she loved the wals of the silo, loved the

dark confines of the down deep. Was everyone else

crazy to harbor thoughts of escape? Or was it

something about her?

Juliette looked from the dry hils and the fog of soil to

the scattered folders around her. It was her

predecessor's unfinished work. A shiny star sat

balanced on one of her knees, not yet worn. There was

a canteen sitting on one of the folders, safe inside a

plastic reusable evidence bag. It looked innocent

enough lying there, having already done its deadly deed.

Several numbers written with black ink on the bag had

been crossed out, cases long since solved or

abandoned. A new number stood to one side, a case

number matching a folder not present, a folder filed

with page after page of testimony and

notes dealing with

the death of a mayor that everyone had loved—but that

someone had kiled.

Juliette had seen some of those notes, but only from a

distance. They were written in Deputy Marnes' hand,

hands that would not relinquish the folder, hands that

clutched it madly. She had taken peeks at the folder

from across his desk and had seen the splatters that

faded occasional words and caused the paper to

pucker. The writing amid these drying tears was a

scrawl, not as neat as his notes in the other folders.

What she could see seemed to crawl angrily across the

page, words slashed out violently and replaced. It was

the same ferocity Deputy Marnes

displayed al the time

now, the boiling anger that had driven Juliette away

from her desk and into the holding cel to work. She

had found it impossible to sit across from such a broken

soul and be expected to think. The view of the outside

world that loomed before her, however sad, cast a far

less depressing shadow.

It was in the holding cel that she kiled time between the

static-filed cals on her radio and the jaunts down to

some disturbance. Often, she would simply sit and sort

and re-sort her folders according to perceived severity.

She was sheriff of al the silo. A job she had not

shadowed for, but one she was beginning to

understand. One of the last things Mayor

Jahns had told

her had proved truer than she could imagine: People

were like machines. They broke down. They rattled.

They could burn you or maim you if you weren't

careful. Her job was to not only figure out why this

happened, and who was to blame, but also to listen for

the signs of it coming. Being sheriff, like being a

mechanic, was as much the fine art of preventive

maintenance as it was the cleaning up after a

breakdown.

The folders scattered on the floor were sad cases of the

latter. Complaints between neighbors that got out of

hand. Reported thefts. The source of a poisonous batch

of amateur shower gin. Several more cases stemming

from the trouble this gin had caused. Each folder

awaited more findings, more legwork, more hikes down

the twisting stairs to engage in twisted dialog, sorting lies

from truth.

Juliette had read the Law portion of the Pact twice in

preparation for the job. Lying in her bed in the down

deep, her body exhausted from the work of aligning the

primary generator, she had studied the proper way to

file case folders, the danger of disturbing evidence, al of

it logical and analogous to some part of her old job as

mechanic. Approaching the scene of a crime or an

active dispute was no different than walking into a pump

room where something was broken. Someone or some

thing was always at fault. She knew to

listen, to

observe, to ask questions of anyone who could have

had anything to do with the faulty equipment or the tools

that had served the equipment, folowing a chain of

events al the way down to the bedrock itself. There

were always confounding variables—you couldn’t

adjust one dial without sending something else a-kilter

—but Juliette had a skil, a talent, for knowing what was

important and what could be ignored.

She assumed it was this talent that Deputy Marnes had

originaly seen in her, this patience and skepticism she

employed to ask one more stupid question and stumble

eventualy onto the answer. It was a boost to her

confidence that she had helped solve a case before. She

hadn’t known it then, had been more concerned with

simple justice and her private grief, but that case had

been job training and an interview al in one.

She picked up that very folder from years gone by, a

pale red stamp on its cover reading “Closed” in bold

block letters. She peeled the tape holding its edges

together and flipped through the notes.

Many of them

were in Holston's neat hand, a forward-slanting print

she recognized from just about everything on and inside

her desk, a desk that had once been his. She read his

notes about her, re-familiarized herself with a case that

had seemed an obvious murder but had actualy been a

series of unlikely events. Going back through it,

something she had avoided until now, resurfaced old

pains. And yet—she could also recal how comforting it

had been to distract herself with the clues. She could

remember the rush of a problem solved, the satisfaction

of having answers to offset the holowness left by her

lover’s death. The process had been similar to fixing a

machine on extra shifts. There was the

pain in her body

from the effort and exhaustion, offset slightly by the

knowledge that a rattle had been wrenched away.

She set the folder aside, not yet ready to relive it al.

She picked up another and placed it in her lap, one

hand faling to the brass star on her knee —

A shadow danced across the walscreen, distracting

her. Juliette looked up and saw a low wal of dirt spil

down the hil. This layer of soot seemed to shiver in the

wind as it traveled toward sensors she had been trained

to think of as important, sensors that gave her a view of

the outside world she had been frightened as a child into

believing was dear.

But she wasn’t so sure, now that she was old enough to

think for herself and near enough to observe it firsthand.

This up-top's obsession with cleaning barely trickled its

way to the down deep where *true* cleaning kept the silo

humming and everyone alive. But even down there, her

friends in Mechanical had been told since birth not to

speak of the outside. It was an easy enough task when

you never saw it, but now, walking by it

to work, sitting

before this view of a vastness one's brain could not

comprehend, she saw how the inevitable questions must

surface. She saw why it might be important to squelch

certain ideas before a stampede to the exits formed,

before questions foamed on people's mad lips and

brought an end to them al.

Rather than ponder this further, she flipped opened

Holston's folder. Behind the bio tab was a thick stack

of notes about his last days as sheriff. The portion

relating to his actual crime was barely half a page long,

the rest of the piece of paper blank and wasted. A

single paragraph simply explained that he had reported

to the up-top holding cel and had

expressed an interest

in the outside. That was it. A few lines to spel a man's

doom. Juliette read the words several times before

flipping the page over.

Underneath was a note from Mayor Jahns asking that

Holston be remembered for his service to the silo and

not as just another cleaner. Juliette read this letter,

written in the hand of someone who was also recently

deceased. It was strange to think of people she knew

that she could never see again. Part of the reason she

avoided her father al these years was because he was,

simply put, *still there*. There was never the threat of her

not being able to change her mind. But it was different

with Holston and Jahns; they were gone

forever. And

Juliette was so used to rebuilding devices thought

beyond repair that she felt if she concentrated enough,

or performed the correct series of tasks in the right

order, that she should be able to bring the deceased

back, be able to recreate their wasted forms. But she

knew that wasn’t the case.

She flipped through Holston's folder and asked herself

forbidden questions, some for the very first time. What

had seemed trivial when she lived in the down deep,

where exhaust leaks could asphyxiate and broken flood

pumps could drown everyone she knew, now loomed

large before her. What was it al about, this life they

lived in underground confines? What

was out there,

over those hils? Why were they here, and for what

purpose? Had her kind built those tal silos crumbling in

the distance? What for? And most vexing of al: What

had Holston, a reasonable man—or his wife for that

matter—been thinking to want to leave?

Two folders to keep her company, both marked

“Closed.” Both belonging in the Mayor’s office, where

they should be sealed up and filed away. But Juliette

kept finding herself returning to them rather than the

more pressing cases in front of her. One of these folders

held the life of a man she had loved, whose death she

had helped unravel in the down deep. In the other lived

a man she had respected whose job she

now held. She

didn’t know why she obsessed over the two folders,

especialy since she couldn’t stomach seeing Marnes

peer forlornly down at his own loss, studying the details

of Mayor Jahns’ death, going over the depositions,

convinced he had a kiler but with no evidence to corner

the man—

Someone knocked on the bars above Juliette's head.

She looked up, expecting to find Deputy Marnes teling

her it was time to cal it a day, but saw a strange man

peering down at her instead.

"Sheriff?" he asked.

Juliette set the folders aside and palmed the star off her

knee. She stood up and turned around, facing this smal

man with a protruding gut, glasses perched at the end of

his nose, his silver IT coverals snugly tailored and

freshly pressed.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

The man stuck his hand between the bars. Juliette

moved the star from one palm to the other and reached

out to accept it.

“Sorry I’m late getting up here,” he said.

“There’s been

a lot going on, what with the ceremonies, that generator

nonsense, and al the legal wrangling. I’m Bernard,

Bernard Holand.”

Juliette felt her blood run cold. The man’s hand was so

smal around, it felt like it was missing a finger. Despite

this, his grip was solid. She tried to pul back, but he

refused to let go.

“As sheriff, I’m sure you already know the Pact inside

and out, so you know that I’l be acting Mayor, at least

until we can arrange a vote.”

“I’d heard,” Juliette said cooly. She wondered how this

man had gotten past Marnes’ desk without some sort of

violence. Here was their prime suspect in Jahns’ death

—only he was on the wrong side of the bars. And

Juliette realized the same was true of her.

“Doing some filing, are you?” He relinquished his grip,

and Juliette puled her hand away. He peered down at

the paperwork strewn across the floor, his eyes

seeming to settle on the canteen in its plastic bag, but

Juliette couldn’t be sure.

“Just familiarizing myself with our ongoing cases,” she

said. “There’s a little more room in here to . . . wel,

think.”

“Oh, I’m sure a lot of deep thought has taken place in

this room.” Bernard smiled, and Juliette noticed his front

teeth were crooked, one of them overlapping the other.

It made him look like the stray mice she used to trap in

the pump rooms.

“Yes, wel, I’ve found the space conducive to sorting

my thoughts out, so maybe there’s something to that.

And besides,” she leveled her eyes at him, “I don’t

expect it to remain empty for long. And once it’s

occupied, I’l be able to take leave of al this deep

thought for a day or two while someone is put to

cleaning—”

“I wouldn’t count too much on that,” Bernard said. He

flashed his crooked teeth again. “The word down

below is that the poor Mayor, rest her soul, plum wore

herself out with this crazy climb of hers. I believe she

was hiking down to see *you*, isn’t that right?”

Juliette felt a sharp sting in her palm. She loosened her

grip on the brass star, the knuckles on both hands white

from making fists.

Bernard adjusted his glasses. “But now I hear you’re

investigating for foul play?”

Juliette leveled her eyes at him, trying not to be

distracted by the reflection of the dul hils visible in his

spectacles. “I suppose you should know, as *acting*

Mayor, that we're treating this very much as a murder,"

she said.

"Oh my." His eyes widened over a limp smile. "So the

rumors are true. Who would do such a thing?" The

smile grew, and Juliette realized she was dealing with a

man who felt himself invulnerable. It wasn't the first time

she'd encountered a dirty and outsized ego such as his.

Her time as a shadow in the down deep had been spent

surrounded by them.

“I believe we’l find the party responsible was the one

with the most to gain,” she said dryly. After a pause,

she added: “*Mayor*.”

The crooked smile faded. Bernard let go of the bars

and stepped back, his hands tucking into his coverals.

“Wel, it’s nice to finaly put a face with the name. I’m

aware that you haven’t spent much time out of the

down deep—and to be honest I’ve stayed much too

insulated in my own office—but things are changing

around here. As mayor and sheriff, we wil be working

together a lot, you and me.” He glanced down at the

files at her feet. “So I expect you to keep

me posted.

About everything.”

With that, Bernard turned and left, and it required a

concerted effort for Juliette to relax her fists. When she

finaly peeled her fingers away from the star, she found

its sharp edges had gouged into her palm, cutting her

and causing her to bleed. A few drops caught the light

on the edge of the brass, looking like wet rust. Juliette

wiped the star clean on her new coverals, a habit borne

of her previous life among the sludge and grease. She

cursed herself when she saw the dark spot the blood

left on her new clothes. Turning the star over, she

peered at the stamped insignia on its face. There were

the three triangles of the silo and the

word “Sheriff”

arched over top of them. She turned it over again and

fingered the clasp that held the sharp spike of a pin. She

opened the clasp and let the pin hinge free. The stiff

needle had been bent and straightened in several places

over the years, giving it a hand-forged look. It wobbled

on its hinge—much like her hesitation to wear the thing.

But as Bernard's footsteps receded, as she heard him

say something indecipherable to Deputy Marnes, she

felt a new resolve steel her nerves. It was like

encountering a rusted bolt that refused to budge.

Something about that intolerable stiffness, that

reluctance to move, set Juliette's teeth on edge. She

had come to believe that there was no

fastener she

couldn’t unstick, had learned to attack them with grease

and with fire, with penetrating oil and with brute

strength. With enough planning and persistence, they

always gave. Eventualy.

She forced the wavy needle through the breast of her

coverals and clasped the catch on the back. Looking

down at the star was a little surreal. There were a dozen

folders at her feet demanding her attention, and Juliette

felt, for the first time since arriving at the up-top, that

this was her job. Her work at Mechanical was behind

her. She had left that place in far better condition than

she'd found it, had stayed long enough to hear the near-

silent hum of a repaired generator, to see

a shaft spin in

such perfect alignment that one couldn't tel if it was

moving at al. And now she had traveled to the up-top

to find here the rattle and squelch and grind of a

different set of gears, a misalignment that was eating

away at the true engine of the silo, just as Jahns had

forewarned.

Leaving most of the folders where they were, she

picked up Holston's, a folder she shouldn't even be

looking at but couldn't be without, and puled the cel

door open. Rather than turn to her office, she first

walked the other way toward the yelow steel entrance

to the airlock. Peering through the triple paned glass for

the dozenth time in several days, she

imagined the man

she had replaced standing inside, wearing one of those

ridiculously bulky suits, waiting for those far doors to

open. What goes through a man's thoughts as he waits

there alone to be cast off? It couldn't be mere fear, for

Juliette had tasted that wel enough. It had to be

something beyond that, a wholy unique sensation, the

calm beyond the pain or the numbness past the terror.

Imagination, she figured, just wasn't up to the task of

understanding unique and foreign sensations. It only

knew how to dampen or augment what it already knew.

It would be like teling someone what sex felt like, or an

orgasm. Impossible. But once you felt it yourself, you

could then imagine varying degrees of

this new

sensation.

It was the same as color. You could only describe a

new color in terms of hues previously seen. You could

mix the known, but you couldn’t create the strange out

of nothing. So maybe it was only the cleaners who

understood what it felt like to stand there, trembling—

or perhaps not afraid one bit—as they waited for their

death.

The obsession with *why* played out in whispers through

the silo—people wanting to know why they did what

they did, why they left a shiny and polished gift to those

who had exiled them—but that did not interest Juliette

at al. She figured they were seeing new colors, feeling

the indescribable, perhaps having a religious experience

that only occurred in the face of the reaper. Wasn't it

enough to know that it happened without fail? Problem

solved. Take it as an axiom. Move on to a real issue,

like what it must *feel* like to be the one going through it.

That was the real shame of the taboos: not that people

couldn't pine for the outside world, but

that they

weren’t even alowed to commiserate with the cleaners

during the weeks after, to wonder what they had

suffered, to properly express their thanks or regrets.

Juliette tapped the yelow door with the corner of

Holston’s folder, remembering the man in better times,

back when he was in love, a lottery winner, teling her

about his wife. She nodded to his ghost and stepped

away from the imposing metal door with its smal panes

of thick glass. There was a kinship she felt from

working in his post, now wearing his star, even sitting in

his cel. She had loved a man once, and knew what that

felt like. She had loved in secret, not involving the silo in

their relationship, ignoring the Pact. And

so she also

knew what it meant to lose something so precious. She

could imagine, if her old lover was out there on that hil

—wasting away in plain sight rather than feeding the

roots—that she could be driven to cleaning, to wanting

to see those new colors for herself.

She opened Holston's file again as she wandered back

toward her desk. *His* desk. Here was one man who

knew of her secret love. She had told him, once the

case was settled in the down deep, that the man who

had died, whose case she had helped solve, had been

her lover. Maybe it was how he had gone on and on

about his wife the days before. Maybe it was his

trustworthy smile that made him such a

good sheriff,

engendering this baffling urge to divulge secrets.

Whatever the cause, she had admitted something to a

man of the law that could have gotten her in trouble, an

affair completely off the books, a wanton disregard for

the Pact, and al he had said, this man entrusted with

upholding those laws, was: “I’m sorry.”

Sorry for her loss. And he had hugged her. Like he

knew what she was holding inside, this secret grief that

had hardened where her hidden love once lay.

And she had respected him for that.

Now she sat at his desk, in his chair, across from his

old deputy, who held his head in his hands and peered

down, unmoving, at an open folder dotted with tears.

Al it took was a glance for Juliette to suspect that some

forbidden love lay between him and the contents of that

folder as wel.

“It’s five o’clock,” Juliette said as quietly and gently as

she could.

Marnes lifted his face out of his hands. His forehead

was red from resting it there so long. His eyes were

bloodshot, his gray mustache caked with tears and snot.

He looked so much older than he had a week ago in the

down deep, when he had come to recruit her. Swiveling

in his old wooden chair, the legs squeaking as if startled

by the sudden movement, he glanced at the clock on

the wal behind him and surveyed the time imprisoned

behind its yelowed and crazed plastic

dome. He

nodded silently at the ticking of the hand, stood up, his

back stooped for a moment as he fought to straighten it.

He ran his hands down his coverals, reached to the

folder, closed it tenderly, and tucked it under his arm.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered, nodding to Juliette.

“See you in the morning,” she said, as he staggered out

toward the cafeteria.

Juliette watched him go, feeling the sorriest for him. She

recognized the love behind his loss. It was painful to

imagine him back in his smal apartment, sitting on a cot

wide enough for one, sobbing over that folder until he

finaly colapsed into his fitful dreams.

Once alone, she placed Holston’s folder on her desk

and slid her keyboard closer. The keys had been worn

bare long ago, but someone in recent years had neatly

reprinted the letters in black ink. Now even these

handwritten faces were fading and would soon need

another coat. Juliette would have to see to that—she

couldn’t type without looking at her keyboard like al

these office people could.

She slowly pecked out a request to wire down to

Mechanical. After another day of getting little done, of

being distracted by the mystery of Holston's decision,

she had come to a realization: there was no way she

could perform this man's job until she first understood

why he had turned his back on it, and on the silo itself.

It was a nagging rattle keeping her from

other problems.

So instead of kidding herself, she was going to embrace

the chalenge. Which meant that she needed to know

more than his folder contained.

She wasn’t sure how to get the things she needed, how

to even access them, but she knew people who might.

This was what she missed most about the down deep.

They were family there, al with useful skils that

overlapped and covered one another. Anything she

could do for any of them, she would. And she knew

they would do the same, even be an army for her. This

was a comfort she sorely missed, a safety net that felt al

too far away.

After sending the request, she sat back with Holston's

folder. Here was a man, a good man, who had known

her deepest secrets. He was the only one who ever

had. And soon, God wiling, Juliette would uncover his.

3

It was wel after ten by the time Juliette pushed away

from her desk. Her eyes had become too sore to stare

at her monitor any longer, too tired to read one more

case note. She powered down her computer, filed the

folders away, kiled the overhead lights, and locked the

office door from the outside.

As she pocketed her keys, her stomach grumbled, and

the fading odor of a rabbit stew reminded her that she'd

missed yet another dinner. That made it three nights in a

row. Three nights of focusing so hard on a job she

barely knew how to perform, a job she had no one to

guide her through, that she'd neglected to eat. If her

office didn't abut a noisy, aroma-filed cafeteria, she

might be able to forgive herself.

She puled her keys back out and crossed the dimly lit

room, weaving around nearly invisible chairs left

scattered between the tables. A teenage couple was

just leaving, having stolen a few dark moments in the

walscreen's twilight before curfew. Juliette caled out

for them to descend safely, mostly because it felt like

the sheriff thing to do, and they giggled at her as they

disappeared into the stairwel. She imagined they were

already holding hands and would steal a few kisses

before they got to their apartments.

Adults knew of

these ilicit things but let them slide, a gift each

generation bestowed on the next. For Juliette, however,

it was different. She had made the same choices as an

adult, to love without sanction, and so her hypocrisy

was more keenly felt.

As she approached the kitchen, she noticed the

cafeteria wasn’t quite empty. A lone figure sat in the

deep shadows by the walscreen, staring at the inky

blackness of nighttime clouds hanging over darkened

hils.

It appeared to be the same figure as the night before,

the one who had watched the sunlight gradualy fade

while Juliette worked alone in her office. She adjusted

her route to the kitchen in order to pass behind the man.

Staring al day at folders ful of bad intentions had made

her a budding paranoid. She used to admire people

who stood out, but now she could feel herself wary of

them.

She moved between the walscreen and the nearest

table, pausing to push chairs back into place, their metal

feet scraping on the tile. She kept an eye on the seated

man, but he never once turned toward the noise. He

just stared up at the clouds, something in his lap, a hand

held up by his chin.

Juliette walked right behind him, passing between the

table and his chair, which had been moved strangely

close to the walscreen. She fought the urge to clear her

throat or ask him a question. Instead, she passed on by,

jangling her master key from the crowded ring that had

come with her new job.

Twice, she glanced back over her shoulder before she

reached the kitchen door. The man did not move.

She let herself inside the kitchen and hit one of the light

switches. After a genial flicker, the overhead bulbs

popped on and shattered her night vision. She puled a

galon of juice from one of the walk-in refrigerators and

grabbed a clean glass from the drying rack. Back in the

walk-in, she found the stew—covered and already cold

—and brought it out as wel. She ladled two scoops

into a bowl and rattled around in a drawer for a spoon.

She only briefly considered heating up

the stew as she

returned the large pot to its frosted shelf.

With her juice and bowl in hand, she returned to the

cafeteria, knocking the lights off with her elbow and

pushing the door shut with her foot. She sat down in the

darkness at the end of one of the long tables and

slurped on her late meal, keeping an eye on this strange

man who seemed to peer into the darkness as if

something could be seen out there.

Her spoon eventualy scraped the bottom of her empty

bowl, she finished the last of her juice, and not once had

the man turned away from the walscreen. She pushed

the dishes away from herself, insanely curious. The

figure reacted to this, unless it was mere coincidence.

He leaned forward and held his outstretched hand out

at the screen. Juliette thought she could make out a rod

or stick in his grasp—but it was too dark to tel. After a

moment, he leaned over his lap, and Juliette heard the

squeak of charcoal on expensive-sounding paper. She

got up, taking this movement as an opening, and stroled

closer to where he was sitting.

“Raiding the larder, are we?” he asked.

His voice startled her.

“Worked through dinner,” she stammered, as if *she*

needed to explain herself.

“Must be nice to have the keys.”

He stil didn’t turn away from the screen, and Juliette

reminded herself to lock the kitchen door before she

left.

“What’re you doing?” she asked.

The man reached behind himself and grabbed a nearby

chair, slid it around to face the screen. “You wanna

see?”

Juliette approached warily, grabbed the backrest, and

deliberately slid the chair a few inches further from the

man. It was too dark in the room to make out his

features, but his voice sounded young. She chastised

herself for not committing him to memory the night

before when there'd been more light. She would need

to become more observant if she was going to be any

good at her job.

"What're we looking at, exactly?" she asked. She stole

a glance at his lap, where a large piece of white paper

faintly glowed in the wan light leaking from the stairwel.

It was spread flat across his thighs as if a board or

something hard rested beneath it.

“I think those two are going to part. Look there.”

The man pointed at the walscreen and into a mix of

blacks so rich and so deep as to appear as one. The

contours and shadowy hues Juliette could make out

almost seemed to be a trick played by her eyes—as

real as ghosts. But she folowed his finger, wondering if

he were mad or drunk, and tolerated the exhausting

silence that folowed.

“There,” he whispered, excitement on his breath.

Juliette saw a flash. A spot of light. Like someone

flicking on a torch far across a dark generator room.

And then it was gone.

She bolted out of her chair and stood near to the

walscreen, wondering what was out there.

The man's charcoal squeaked on his paper.

"What the hel was *that*?" Juliette asked.

The man laughed. "A star," he said. "If you wait, you

might see it again. We've got thin clouds tonight and

high winds. That one there is getting ready to pass."

Juliette turned to find her chair and saw that he was

holding his charcoal at arm's length, staring up at the

spot where the light had flashed, one eye winked shut.

"How can you see anything out there?" she asked,

settling back into her plastic chair.

"The longer you do this, the better you see at night."

He leaned over his paper and scribbled some more.

“And I’ve been doing this a long time.”

“Doing what, exactly? Just staring at the clouds?”

He laughed. “Mostly, yeah. Unfortunately. But what I’m

trying to do is see past them. Watch, we might get

another glance.”

She peered up in the general area of the last flash.

Suddenly, it popped back into view, a pinprick of light

like a signal from high over the hil.

“How many did you see?” he asked.

“One,” she told him. She was almost breathless from

the newness of the sight. She knew what stars were—

they were a part of her vocabulary—but she’d never

seen one before.

“There was a faint one just to the side of

it as wel. Let

me show you.”

There was a soft click, and a red glow spiled over the

man’s lap. Juliette saw that he had a flashlight hanging

around his neck, a film of red plastic wrapped around

the end. It made the lens look like it was on fire, but it

emanated a gentle glow that didn’t barrage her eyes the

way the kitchen lights had.

Spread across his lap, she saw a large piece of paper

covered with dots. They were arranged haphazardly, a

few perfectly straight lines running in a grid around

them. Tiny notes were scattered everywhere.

“The problem is that they move,” he told her. “If I see

that one here tonight—” He tapped one of the dots with

his finger. There was a smaler dot beside it. “—at the

same exact time tomorrow, it’l be a little over here.”

Turning to Juliette, she saw that the man was young,

probably in his late twenties. He smiled, was quite

handsome, and added: “It took me a long time to figure

that out.”

Juliette wanted to tel him that he hadn’t been *alive* a

long time, but remembered what it had felt like as a

shadow when people dismissed her the same way.

“What’s the point?” she asked, and saw his smile fade.

“What’s the point of anything?” He returned his gaze to

the wal and doused the flashlight. Juliette realized she’d

asked the wrong question, had upset him. And then she

wondered if there was anything ilicit in

this activity of

his, anything that defied the taboos. Was colecting data

on the outside any different than the people who sat and

stared at the hils? She made a mental note to ask

Marnes about this, when the man turned to her again in

the darkness.

“My name’s Lukas,” he said. Her eyes had adjusted

wel enough to see his hand stretched out toward her.

“Juliette,” she replied, grabbing and squeezing his palm.

“The new sheriff.”

It wasn’t a question, and of course he knew who she

was. Everyone up top seemed to.

“What do you do when you’re not up here?” she

asked. She was pretty sure this wasn’t his job. Nobody

should get chits for staring up at the clouds.

“I live in the upper mids,” Lukas said. “I work on

computers during the day. I only come up when the

viewing’s good.” He switched the light back on and

turned toward her in a way that suggested the stars

weren’t the most important thing on his mind anymore.

“There’s a guy on my hal who works up

here on dinner

shift. When he gets home, he lets me know what the

clouds were like during the day. If he gives me the

thumbs up, I come take my chances."

"And so you're making a schematic of them?" Juliette

gestured toward the large sheet of paper.

"Trying to. It'l probably take a few lifetimes." He

tucked his charcoal behind his ear, puled

a rag from his

coverals, and wiped his fingers clean of black residue.

“And then what?” Juliette asked.

“Wel, hopefuly I’l infect some shadow with my

sickness and they’l pick up wherever I leave off.”

“So literaly, like, several lifetimes.”

He laughed, and Juliette realized it was a pleasant one.

“At least,” he said.

“Wel, I’l leave you to it,” she said, suddenly feeling

guilty for talking to him. She stood and reached out her

hand, and he took it warmly. He pressed his other palm

to the back of her hand and held it a moment longer

than she would have expected.

“Pleasure to meet you, Sheriff.”

He smiled up at her. And Juliette didn’t understand a

word of what she muttered in return.

4

The next morning, Juliette arrived early at her desk

having stolen little more than four hours of sleep. Beside

her computer, she saw a package waiting on her—a

smal bundle wrapped in recycled pulp paper and

encircled with white electrical ties. She smiled at this last

touch and reached into her coverals for her multi-tool.

Puling out the smalest pick from the tool, she stuck it

into the clasp of one of the electrical ties and slowly

puled the ratcheting device apart, keeping it intact for

future use. She remembered the trouble she'd gotten

into as a mechanic's shadow the day she'd been caught

cutting a plastic tie from an electrical

board. Walker,

already an old crank those decades ago, had yeled at

her for the waste and then had shown her how to tease

the little clasp loose to preserve the tie for later use.

Years had passed, and when she was much older, she

had found herself passing this lesson on to another

shadow named Scottie. He had been a young lad at the

time, but she had lit into him when he had made the

same careless mistake she once had. She remembered

frightening the poor boy white as a cinder block, and he

had remained nervous around her for months after.

Maybe because of that outburst, she had paid him more

attention as he continued his training, and eventualy, the

two had grown close. He quickly grew

up to become a

capable young man, a whiz with electronics, able to

program a pump’s timing chip in less time than it took

her to break one down and put it back together.

She loosened the other tie crossing the package, and

knew the bundle was from him. Several years ago,

Scottie had been recruited by IT and had moved up to

the thirties. He had become “too smart for Mechanical,”

as Knox had put it. Juliette set the two electrical straps

aside and pictured the young man preparing this

package for her. The request she’d wired down to

Mechanical the night before must’ve bounced back up

to him, and he had spent the night dutifuly doing this

favor for her.

She pried the paper apart carefuly. Both it and the

plastic ties would need to be returned; they were both

too dear for her to keep and light enough to porter on

the cheap. As the package came apart, she noticed that

Scottie had crimped the edges and had folded these

tabs under each other, a trick children learned so they

could wrap notes without the expense of

glue or tape.

She disassembled his meticulous work with care, and

the paper finaly came loose. Inside, she found a plastic

box like the kind used to sort nuts and bolts for smal

projects down in Mechanical.

She opened the lid and saw that the package wasn’t

just from Scottie—it must’ve been hurried up to him

along with a copy of her request. Tears came to her

eyes as the smel of Mama Jean's oatmeal and cornflour

cookies drifted out. She plucked one, held it to her

nose, and breathed deeply. Maybe she imagined it, but

she swore she noted a hint of oil or grease emanating

from the old box—the smels of home.

Juliette folded the wrapping paper carefuly and placed

the cookies on top. She thought of the people she

would have to share them with. Marnes, of course, but

also Pam in the cafeteria, who had been so nice in

helping her settle into her new apartment. And Alice,

Jahns young secretary, whose eyes had been red with

grief for over a week. She puled the last cookie out

and finaly spotted the smal data drive

rattling around in

the bottom of the container, a little morsel baked special

by Scottie and hidden among the crumbs.

Juliette grabbed it and set the plastic case aside. She

blew into the little metal end of the drive, getting any

debris out, before slotting it into the front of her

computer. She wasn’t great with computers, but she

could get around them. You couldn’t do anything in

Mechanical without submitting a claim, a report, a

request, or some other piece of nonsense. And they

were handy for logging into pumps and relays remotely

to shut them on or off, see their diagnostics, al of that.

Once the light on the drive winked on, she navigated to

it on her screen. Inside, she found a host

of folders and

files; the little drive must've been stuffed to the brim

with them. She wondered if Scottie had gotten any

sleep at al the night before.

At the top of a list of primary folders was a file named

"Jules." She clicked this one, and up popped a short

text file obviously from Scottie, but noticeably unsigned:

J--

Don't get caught with this, okay? This is everything

from Mr. Lawman's computers, work and home, the

last five years. A ton of stuff, but wasn't sure what

you needed and this was easier to automate.

Keep the ties -- I got plenty.

(And I took a cookie. Hope you don't mind)

Juliette smiled. She felt like reaching out and brushing

her fingers across the words, but it wasn't paper and

wouldn't be the same. She closed the note and deleted

it, then cleared out her trash. Even the first letter of her

name up there felt like too much information.

She leaned away from her desk and peered into the

cafeteria, which appeared dark and

empty. It was not

yet five in the morning, and she would have the upper

floor to herself for a while. She first took a moment to

browse through the directory structure to see what kind

of data she was dealing with. Each folder was neatly

labeled. It appeared she had an operating history of

Holston's two computers, every keystroke, every day,

going back a little more than five years, al organized by

date and time. Juliette felt overwhelmed by the sheer

amount of information—it was far more than she could

hope to weed through in a lifetime.

But at least she had it. The answers she needed were in

there, somewhere, among al those files. And somehow

it felt better, *she* felt better, just knowing the solution to

this riddle, to Holston's decision to go to cleaning,

could now fit in the palm of her hand.

••••

She was several hours into sifting through the data when

the cafeteria crew staggered in to clean up last night's

mess and prepare for breakfast. One of the most

difficult things to get used to about the up-top was the

exacting schedule everyone kept. There was no third

shift. There was barely a second shift, except for the

dinner staff. In the down deep, the machines didn’t

sleep, and so the workers barely did either. Work

crews often stayed on into extra shifts, and so Juliette

had gotten used to surviving on a handful of hours of

rest a night. The trick was to pass out

now and then

from sheer exhaustion, to just rest against a wal with

one’s eyes closed for fifteen minutes, long enough to

hold the tiredness at bay.

But what had once been survival was now luxury. The

ability to forego sleep gave her time in the morning and

at night to herself, time to invest in frivolous pursuits on

top of the cases she was supposed to be working. It

also gave her the opportunity to teach herself how to do

the blasted job, since Marnes had become too

depressed to help get her up to speed.

Marnes—

She looked at the clock over his desk. It was ten

minutes after eight, and the vats of warm oatmeal and

corn grits were already filing the cafeteria with the

smels of breakfast. Marnes was late. She'd been

around him less than a week, but she had yet to see him

late to anything, ever. This break in the routine was like

a timing belt stretching out of shape, a piston developing

a knock. Juliette turned her monitor off and pushed

away from her desk. Outside, first shift

breakfast was

beginning to file in, food tokens clinking in the large

bucket by the old turnstiles. She left her office and

passed through the traffic spiling from the stairwel. In

the line, a young girl tugged on her mother’s coverals

and pointed to Juliette as she passed. Juliette heard the

mother scolding her child for being rude.

There had been quite a bit of chatter the past few days

over her appointment, this woman who had

disappeared into Mechanical as a child and who had

suddenly re-emerged to take over for one of the more

popular sheriffs in memory. Juliette cringed from the

attention and hurried into the stairwel. She wound her

way down the steps as fast as a lightly

loaded porter,

her feet bouncing off each tread, faster and faster in

what felt like an unsafe pace. Four flights down, after

squeezing around a slow couple and between a family

heading up for breakfast, she hit the apartment landing

just below her own and passed through the double

doors.

The halway beyond was busy with morning sights and

sounds: a squealing teapot, the shril voices of children,

the thunder of feet overhead, shadows hurrying to meet

their casters before trailing them off to work. Younger

children were lumbering reluctantly off to school;

husbands and wives kissed in doorways while toddlers

tugged at their coverals and dropped

toys and plastic

cups.

Juliette took several turns, winding through the halways

and around the central staircase to the other side of the

level. The Deputy’s apartment was on the far side, way

in the back. She surmised that Marnes had qualified for

several upgrades over the years, but had passed on

them. The one time she had asked Alice, Mayor Jahns'

old secretary about Marnes, she had shrugged and told

Juliette that he had never wanted or expected anything

more than second fiddle. Juliette assumed she meant

that he never wanted to be sheriff, but she had begun to

wonder in how many other areas of his life that

philosophy applied.

As she reached his hal, two kids ran by holding hands,

late for school. They giggled and squealed around the

corner, leaving Juliette alone in the halway. She

wondered what she would say to Marnes to justify

coming down, to explain her worry. Maybe now was a

good time to ask for the folder that he couldn’t seem to

be without. She could tel him to take the

day off, let her

handle the office while he got some rest, or maybe fib a

little and say she was already in the area for a case.

She stopped outside his door and lifted her hand to

knock. Hopefuly he wouldn’t see this as her projecting

authority, right? She was just concerned for him. That

was al.

She rapped on the steel door and waited for him to cal

her inside—and maybe he did. His voice over the last

few days had eroded into a dul and thin rasp. She

knocked again, louder this time.

“Deputy?” she caled. “Everything okay in there?”

A woman popped her head out of a door down the

halway. Juliette recognized her from school recess time

in the cafeteria, was pretty sure her name was Gloria.

“Hey, Sheriff.”

“Hey, Gloria, you haven’t seen Deputy Marnes this

morning, have you?”

She shook her head, placed a metal rod in her mouth

and started wrapping her long locks into a bun. “I

haben’t,” she mumbled. She shrugged her shoulders

and jabbed the rod through her bun, locking her hair

into place. “He was on the landing last night, looking as

whipped as ever.” She frowned. “He not show up for

work?”

Juliette turned back to the door and tried the handle. It

clicked open with the feel of a wel maintained lock.

She pushed the door in. “Deputy? It’s Jules. Just

checkin' in on ya."

The door swung open into the darkness. The only light

spiling in was from the halway, but it was enough.

Juliette turned to Gloria. "Cal Doc Hicks— No, shit

—" She was stil thinking down deep. "Who's the

closest doctor up here? Cal him!"

She ran into the room, not waiting for a reply. There

wasn’t much space to hang oneself in the smal

apartment, but Marnes had figured out how. His belt

was cinched around his neck, the buckle lodged into the

top of the bathroom door. His feet were on the bed, but

at a right angle, not enough to support his weight. His

butt drooped below his feet, his face no longer red, the

belt biting deep into his neck.

Juliette hugged Marnes' waist and lifted him up. He was

heavier than he looked. She kicked his feet off the bed,

and they flopped to the floor, making it easier to hold

him. There was a curse at the door. Gloria's husband

ran in and helped Juliette support the Deputies' weight.

The both of them fumbled for the belt, trying to dislodge

it from the door. Juliette finaly tugged

the door open,

freeing him.

“On the bed,” she huffed.

They lifted him to the bed and laid him out flat.

Gloria’s husband rested his hands on his knees and

took deep breaths. “Gloria ran for Doctor O’Neil.”

Juliette nodded and loosened the belt from around

Marnes’ neck. The flesh was purple

beneath it. She felt

for a pulse, remembering Roger looking just like this

when she'd found him down in Mechanical, completely

stil and unresponsive. It took her a moment to be sure

that she was looking at the second dead body she had

ever seen.

And then she wondered, as she sat back, sweating,

waiting for the doctor to arrive, whether this job she

had taken would ensure it wasn't the last.

5

After filing out reports, discovering Marnes had no next

of kin, speaking with the coroner at the dirt farm, and

answering questions from nosy neighbors, Juliette finaly

took a long and lonely walk up eight flights of stairs,

back to her empty office.

She spent the rest of the day getting little work done,

the door to the cafeteria open, the smal room much too

crowded with ghosts. She tried repeatedly to lose

herself in the files from Holston's computers, but

Marnes' absence was incredibly sadder than his moping

presence had been. She couldn't believe he was gone.

It almost felt like an affront, to bring her here and then

leave her so suddenly. And she knew this was a

horrible and selfish thing to feel and even worse to

admit.

As her mind roamed, she glanced occasionaly out the

door, watching the clouds slide across the distant

walscreen. She debated with herself on whether they

appeared light or dense, if tonight would be a good one

for viewing stars. It was another guilt-ridden thought,

but she felt powerfuly alone, a woman who prided

herself on needing no one.

She played some more with the maze of files while the

light of an unseen sun diminished in the cafeteria, while

two shifts of lunch and two shifts of dinner vibrated and

then subsided around her, al the while watching the

roiling sky and hoping, for no real logical reason, for

another chance encounter with the strange star hunter

from the night before.

And even sitting there, with the sounds and scents of

everyone on the upper forty-eight eating, Juliette forgot

to. It wasn’t until the second shift staff was leaving, the

lights cut down to quarter power, that Pam came in with

a bowl of soup and a biscuit. Juliette thanked her and

reached into her coverals for a few chits, but Pam

refused. The young woman's eyes—red from crying—

drifted to Marnes' empty chair, and Juliette realized the

cafeteria staff had probably been as close to the deputy

as anyone.

Pam left without a word, and Juliette ate with what little

appetite she could manage. She eventualy thought of

one more search she could try on Holston's data, a

global spelcheck to look for names that might offer

clues, and eventualy figured out how to run it.

Meanwhile, her soup grew cold. While her computer

began to churn through the hils of data,

she took her

bowl and a few folders and left her office to sit at one of

the cafeteria tables near the walscreen.

She was looking for stars on her own when Lukas

appeared silently at her side. He didn’t say anything,

just puled up a chair, sat down with his board and

paper, and peered up at the expansive view of the

darkened outside.

Juliette couldn’t tel if he was being polite to honor her

silence, or if he was being rude not to say helo. She

finaly settled on the former, and eventualy the quiet felt

normal. Shared. A peace at the end of a horrible day.

Several minutes passed. A dozen. There were no stars

and nothing was said. Juliette held a folder in her lap,

just to give her fingers something to do. There was a

sound from the stairwel, a laughing group moving

between the apartment levels below, and then a return

to the quiet.

“I’m sorry about your partner,” Lukas finaly said. His

hands smoothed the paper on the board. He had yet to

make a single mark or note.

“I appreciate that,” Juliette said. She wasn’t sure what

the appropriate response was, but this seemed the least

wrong.

“I’ve been looking for stars, but haven’t seen any,” she

added.

“You won’t. Not tonight.” He waved his hand at the

walscreen. “These are the worst kinds of clouds.”

Juliette studied them, barely able to make them out with

the last of twilight's distant glow. They looked no

different to her than any others.

Lukas turned almost imperceptibly in his seat. "I have a

confession, since you're the law and al."

Juliette's hand groped for the star on her chest. She

was often in danger of forgetting what she was.

“Yeah?”

“I knew the clouds were gonna be bad tonight. But I

came up anyway.”

Juliette trusted the darkness to conceal her smile.

“I’m not sure the Pact has much to say on such

duplicity,” she told him.

Lukas laughed. It was strange how familiar it already

sounded, and how badly she needed to

hear it. Juliette

had a sudden urge to grab him, to tuck her chin into his

neck, and to cry. She could almost feel her body begin

to piece the moves together—even though her skin

would not budge. It could never happen. She knew this,

even as the sensation vibrated within her. It was just the

loneliness, the horror of holding Marnes in her arms, of

feeling that lifeless heft of a body removed of whatever

animates it. She was desperate for contact, and this

stranger was the only person she knew little enough to

want it from.

“What happens now?” he asked, his laughter fading.

Juliette almost blurted out, inanely, *Between* us? but

Lukas saved her:

“Do you know when the funeral wil be? And where?”

he asked.

She nodded in the darkness.

“Tomorrow. There’s no family to travel up, no

investigation to make.” Juliette choked back the tears.

“He didn’t leave a wil, so they left it up to me to make

arrangements. I decided to lay him to rest near the

Mayor.”

Lucas looked to the walscreen. It was dark enough

that the bodies of the cleaners couldn’t be seen, a

welcome relief. “As he should be,” he said.

“I think they were lovers in secret,” Juliette blurted out.

“If not lovers, then just as close.”

“There’s been talk,” he agreed. “What I don’t get is

why keep it a secret. Nobody would've cared."

Somehow, sitting in the darkness with a complete

stranger, these things were more easily aired than in the

down deep among friends.

"Maybe *they* would have minded people knowing,"

she thought out loud. "Jahns was married before. I

suspect they chose to respect that."

“Yeah?” Lukas scratched something on his paper.

Juliette looked up, but was sure there hadn’t been a

star. “I can’t imagine loving in secret like that,” he said.

“I can’t imagine needing someone’s permission, like the

Pact or a girl’s father, to be in love in the first place,”

she replied.

“No? How else would it work? Just any two people

any time they liked?”

She didn’t say.

“How would anyone ever enter the lottery?” he asked,

persisting in the line of thought. “I can’t imagine it not

being out in the open. It’s a celebration, don’t you

think? There’s this ritual, a man asks a girl’s father for

permission—”

“Wel, aren’t you with anyone?” Juliette

asked, cutting

him off. “I mean . . . I’m just asking because it sounds

like, like you have strong opinions but maybe haven’t

___”

“Not yet,” he said, rescuing her again. “I have a little

strength left yet for enduring my mom’s guilt. She likes

to remind me every year how many lotteries I missed

out on, and what this did to her overal chances for a

bevy of grandchildren. As if I don't know my statistics.

But hey, I'm only twenty five."

"That's al," Juliette said.

"What about you?"

She nearly told him straight away. Nearly blurted out

her secret with almost no prompting. As if this man, this

boy, a stranger to her, could be trusted.

“Never found the right one,” she lied.

Lukas laughed his youthful laugh. “No, I mean, how old

are you? Or is that impolite?”

She felt a wave of relief. She thought he’d been asking

her about being with anyone. “Thirty four,” she said.

“And I’m told it’s impolite to ask, but I’ve never been

one for rules.”

“Says our sheriff,” Lukas said, laughing

at his own

joke.

Juliette smiled. “I guess I’m stil getting used to that.”

She turned back to the walscreen, and they both

enjoyed the silence that formed. It was strange, sitting

with this man. She felt younger and somehow more

secure in his presence. Less lonely, at least. She pegged

him as a loner as wel, an odd sized washer that didn't

fit any standard bolt. And here he had been, at the

extreme other end of the silo searching for stars, while

she'd been spending what spare time she could down in

the mines, as far away as possible, hunting for pretty

rocks.

"It's not going to be a very productive night for either

of us, looks like," she eventualy said, ending the

silence, rubbing the unopened folder in her lap.

"Oh, I don't know," Lukas told her. "That depends on

what you came up here for."

Juliette smiled. And across the wide room, barely

audible, the computer on her desk beeped, a search

routine having finaly pawed through Holston's data

before spitting out its results.

6

The next morning, instead of climbing to her office,

Juliette descended five flights to the upper dirt farm for

Marnes' funeral. There would be no folder for her

deputy, no investigation, just the lowering of his old and

tired body into the deep soil where it would decompose

and feed the roots. It was a strange thought, to stand in

that crowd and think of him as a folder or not. Less

than a week on the job, and she already saw the manila

jackets as places where ghosts reside. Names and case

numbers. Lives distiled onto twenty or so sheets of

recycled pulp paper, bits of string and darts of random

color woven beneath the black ink that

jotted their sad

tale.

The ceremony was long, but didn’t feel so. The earth

nearby was stil mounded where Jahns had been buried.

Soon, the two of them would intermingle inside the

plants, and these plants would nourish the occupants of

the silo.

Juliette accepted a ripe tomato as the

priest and his

shadow cycled among the thick crowd. The two of

them, draped in red fabric, chanted as they went, their

voices sonorous and complimenting one another.

Juliette bit into her fruit, alowing a polite amount of

juice to spatter her coverals, chewed and swalowed.

She could tel the tomato was delicious, but only in a

mechanical way. It was hard to truly enjoy it.

When it became time for the soil to be shoveled back

into the hole, Juliette watched the crowd. Two people

dead from the up-top in less than a week. There had

been four deaths total in that time, a very bad week for

the silo.

Or good, depending on who you were. She noticed

childless couples biting vigorously into their fruit, their

hands intertwined, silently doing the math. Lotteries

folowed too closely after deaths for Juliette's tastes.

She always thought they should fal on the same dates

of the year, just to look as though they were going to

happen anyway, whether anyone died or not.

But then, the lowering of the body and

the plucking of

ripe fruit just above the graves was meant to hammer

this home: The cycle of life is here. It is inescapable. It is

to be embraced, cherished, appreciated. One departs

and leaves behind the gift of sustenance, of life. They

make room for the next generation. We are born, we

are shadows, we cast shadows of our own, and then

we are gone. Al anyone can hope for is to be

remembered two shadows deep.

Before the hole was completely filed, members of the

feast stepped up to the edge of the farm's soil and

tossed what remained of their fruit into the hole. Juliette

stepped forward and added the rest of her tomato to

the colorful hail of rind and pulp. An acolyte leaned on

his too-large shovel and watched the last of the fruit fly.

Those that missed, he knocked in with scoops of dark,

rich soil, leaving a mound that would, in time and with a

few waterings, settle.

After the funeral, Juliette began the climb back to her

office. She could feel the flights of stairs in her legs,

even though she prided herself as being in shape. But

walking and climbing were different sorts of exercise. It

wasn’t turning wrenches or loosening stubborn bolts,

and the endurance was of a different kind than merely

staying up and alert for an extra shift. She decided it

was unnatural, this climbing. Humans weren’t meant for

it. She doubted they were engineered to travel much

beyond a single level of a silo. But then

another porter

flew down the steps past her, a smile of quick greeting

on his non-winded face, his feet dancing across steel

treads, and she wondered if perhaps it was something

that just took practice.

When she finaly made it back to the cafeteria, it was

lunchtime, and the room was buzzing with noisy chatter

and the clinking of metal forks on metal plates. The pile

of folded notes outside her office door had grown.

There was a plant in a plastic bucket, a pair of shoes, a

smal sculpture made of colorful wire. Juliette paused

over the colection. Without any family, she supposed it

would be up to her to go through it al, to make sure the

items went to those who would use them

best. She bent

down and picked up one of the cards. The writing was

in unsure print, scrawled with crayon. She imagined the

upper grade school had spent craft time that day

making cards for Deputy Marnes. This saddened

Juliette more than any of the ceremonies. She wiped

tears out of her eyes and damned the teachers who

thought to get the kids involved in the nastiness of it al.

“Leave them out of it,” she whispered to herself.

She replaced the card and composed herself. Deputy

Marnes would have liked to have seen this, she

decided. He was an easy man to figure, one of those

who had grown old everywhere but in his heart, that

one organ he had never worn out

because he'd never

dared to use it.

Inside her office, she was surprised to find she had

company. A stranger sat at Deputy Marnes' desk. He

looked up from the computer and smiled at her. She

was about to ask who he was when Bernard—she

refused to think of him as even *interim* Mayor—

stepped out of the holding cel, a folder in hand, smiling

at Juliette.

“How were the services?” he asked.

Juliette crossed the office and snatched the folder out of

his hand. “Please don’t tamper with anything,” she said.

“Tamper?” Bernard laughed and adjusted his glasses.

“That’s a closed case. I was going to take it back to my

offices and re-file it.”

Juliette checked the folder and saw that it was

Holston’s.

“You do know that you report to me, right? You were

supposed to have at least glanced over the Pact before

Jahns swore you in.”

“I’l hold onto this, thanks.”

Juliette left him by the open cel and went to her desk.

She shoved the folder in the top drawer, checked that

the data drive was stil jutting out from her computer,

and looked up at the guy across from her.

“And you are?”

He stood, and Deputy Marnes’ chair let out its

customary squeak. Juliette tried to force herself not to

think of it as his anymore.

“Peter Bilings, Ma’am.” He held out his

hand. Juliette

accepted it. “I was just sworn in myself.” He pinched

the corner of his star and held it away from his coverals

for her to see.

“Peter here was actualy up for *your* job,” Bernard

said.

Juliette wondered what he meant by that, or what the

point was to even mention it. “Did you

need

something?" she asked Bernard. She waved at her

desk, which had piled up the day before as she had

spent most of her time managing Marnes' affairs.

"Because anything you need doing, I can add it to the

bottom of one of these piles, here."

"Anything I give you goes on *top*," Bernard said. He

slapped his hand down on the folder with Jahns' name

on it. "And I'm doing you a favor by coming up and

having this meeting here rather than have you come

down to *my* office."

"What meeting is this?" Juliette asked. She didn't look

up at him, but busied herself sorting papers. Hopefuly

he would see how busy she was and leave, and she

could start getting Peter up to speed on what little she

herself had figured out.

“As you know, there’s been quite a bit of . . . *turnover*

these past weeks. Unprecedented, realy, at least since

the uprising. And that’s the danger, I’m afraid, if we

aren’t al on the same page.” He pressed his finger onto

the folder Juliette was trying to move, pinning it in place.

She glanced up at him.

“People want continuity. They want to know tomorrow

wil be a lot like yesterday. They want reassurances.

Now, we’ve just had a cleaning, and we’ve suffered

some losses, so the mood is naturaly a bit raucous.” He

waved at the folders and piles of pulp paper spiling

from Juliette’s desk to Peter’s. The young man across

from her seemed to eye the mound warily, like more of

the pile could shift toward him, giving him more of it to

do. “Which is why I am going to announce a

forgiveness moratorium. Not only to strengthen the

spirits of the entire silo, but to help you two clear the

slate so you don’t get overwhelmed while you’re getting

up to speed on your duties.”

“Clear the slate?” Juliette asked.

“That’s right. Al these drunken misdemeanors. What’s

this one for?” He picked up a folder and studied the

name on the label. “Oh, now what’s Pickens done this

time?”

“He ate a neighbor’s rat,” Juliette said. “Family pet.”

Peter Bilings chuckled. Juliette squinted at him,

wondering why his name seemed familiar. Then she

placed it, recaling a memo he had written in one of the

folders. This kid, practicaly a boy, had been shadowing

a silo judge, she thought. She had a difficult time

imagining that, looking at him. He seemed more the IT

type.

“I thought owning rats as pets was ilegal,” Bernard

said.

“It is. He’s the claimant. It’s a counter suit in retaliation

—” She sorted through her folders. “For this one right

here.”

“Let’s see,” Bernard said. He grabbed the other folder,

held the two of them together, and then dropped them

both into her recycle bin, al the carefuly organized

papers and notes spiling out and intermingling in a

jumbled pile on top of other scraps of paper to be re-

pulped.

“Forgive and forget,” he said, wiping his palms

together. “That’s going to be my election motto. The

people need this. This is about new beginnings,

forgetting the past during these tumultuous times,

looking to the *future*!" He slapped her on the back,

hard, nodded to Peter, and headed for the door.

"Election motto?" she asked before he could get away.

And it occurred to her that one of the folders he was

suggesting could be forgiven was the one wherein *he*

was the prime suspect.

"Oh yes," Bernard caled over his shoulder. He

grabbed the jamb and looked back at her. “I’ve

decided, after much deliberation, that there is no one

better qualified for this job than me. I don’t see any

problem with continuing my duties in IT while

performing the role as mayor. In fact, I already am!” He

winked. “Continuity, you know.” And then he was

gone.

••••

Juliette spent the rest of that afternoon, wel past what

Peter Bilings considered “sensible working hours,”

getting him up to speed. What she needed most of al

was someone to field complaints and to respond to the

radio. This was Holston’s old job, ranging the top forty-

eight and caling on any disturbance. Deputy Marnes

had hoped to see Juliette fil that role with her younger,

fresher legs. He also had said that a pretty female might

“do the public wil some good.” Juliette had other ideas

about his intentions. She suspected Marnes had wanted

her away so he could spend time alone with his folder

and its ghost. And she wel understood that urge. So as

she sent Peter Bilings home with a list of

apartments

and merchants to cal on the next day, she finaly had

time to sit down to her computer and see the results

from the previous night's search.

The spelchecker had turned up interesting results. Not

so much the names she had hoped for, but rather these

large blocks of what looked like coded text—gibberish

with strange punctuation, indentation, and embedded

words she recognized but that seemed out of place.

These massive paragraphs were spread throughout

Holston's home computer, first showing up just over

three years ago. That made it fit the timeline, but what

realy caught Juliette's eye was how often the data

appeared in nested directories,

sometimes a dozen or

more folders deep. It was as if someone had taken

pains to keep them hidden, but had wanted multiple

copies stashed away, terrified of losing them.

She assumed it was encoded, whatever it was, and

important. She tore off bites of a smal loaf of bread and

dipped these in cornspread while she gathered a ful

copy of this gibberish to send down to Mechanical.

There were a few guys perhaps smart enough to make

some sense of the code, starting with Walker. She

chewed her food and spent the next hours going back

over the trail she had managed to tease out of Holston's

final years on the job. It had been difficult to narrow his

activities down, to figure out what was

important and

what was noise, but she had approached it as logicaly

as any other breakdown. Because that's what she was

dealing with, she decided. A breakdown. Gradual and

interminable. Almost inevitable. Losing his wife had

been like a seal or a gasket cracking. Everything that

had rattled out of control for Holston could be traced

back, almost mechanicaly, to that.

One of the first things she'd realized was that his activity

on the work computer held no secrets. Holston had

obviously become a night rat, just like her, staying up

for hours in his apartment. It was yet another

commonality she felt between them, further

strengthening her obsession with the man. Sticking to his

home computer meant she could ignore over half the

data. It also became apparent that he had spent most of

his time investigating his wife, just as Juliette was now

prying into *him*. This was their deepest shared bond,

Juliette's and Holston's. Here she was, looking into the

last voluntary cleaner as he had looked into his wife,

hoping to discover what torturous cause

might lead a

person to choose the forbidden outside.

And it was here that Juliette began to find clues almost

eerie in their connection. Alison, Holston's wife,

seemed to be the one who had unlocked the mysteries

of the old servers. The very method that had made

Holston's data available to Juliette had at some point

brought some secret to Alison, and then to Holston. By

focusing on deleted emails between the couple, and

noting the explosion of communication around the time

she had published a document detailing some un-

deletion method, Juliette stumbled onto what she felt

was a valid trail. She became more certain that Alison

had found something on the servers. The

trouble was

determining what it was—and whether she'd recognize

it herself even if she found it.

She toyed with several ideas, even the chance that

Alison had been driven to rage by infidelity, but Juliette

had enough of a feel for Holston to know that this

wasn't the case. And then she noticed each trail of

activity seemed to lead back to the paragraphs of

gibberish, an answer Juliette kept looking for any

excuse to reject because she couldn’t make sense of it.

Why would Holston, and Alison especialy, spend so

much time looking at al that nonsense? The activity logs

showed her keeping them open for hours at a time, as if

the scrambled letters and symbols could

be read. To

Juliette, it looked like a wholy new language.

So what was it that sent Holston and his wife to

cleaning? The common assumption around the silo was

that Alison had gotten the stirs, had gone crazy for the

out-of-doors, and that Holston eventualy succumbed to

his grief. But Juliette never bought that. She didn’t like

coincidences. When she tore a machine down to repair

it, and a new problem surfaced a few days later, al she

usualy had to do was go back through the steps from

the last repair. The answer was always there. She saw

this riddle the same way: It was a much simpler

diagnosis if both of them were driven out by the *same*

thing.

She just couldn’t see what it might be. And part of her

feared that finding it could drive her crazy as wel.

Juliette rubbed her eyes. When she looked at her desk

again, Jahns’ folder caught her attention. On top of her

folder sat the doctor’s report for Marnes. She moved

the report aside and reached for the note underneath,

the one Marnes had written and left on

his smal

bedside table:

It should have been me.

So few words, Juliette thought. But then, who remained

in the silo for him to speak to? She studied the handful

of words, but there was little to squeeze from them. It

was *his* canteen that had been poisoned, not Jahns'. It

actualy made her death a case of

manslaughter, a new

term for Juliette. Marnes had explained something else

about the law: the worst offense they could hope to pin

on anyone was the *attempted* and unsuccessful murder

o n *him* rather than the botched accident that had

claimed the Mayor. Which meant, if they could nail the

act on a guilty party, that person could be put to

cleaning for what they had *failed* to accomplish with

Marnes, while only getting five years probation and silo

service for what had *accidentally* happened to Jahns.

Juliette thought it was this crooked sense of fairness as

much as anything else that had worn down poor

Marnes. There was never any hope for true justice, a

life for a life. These strange laws,

coupled with the

agonizing knowledge that he had carried the poison on

his own body, had gravely wounded him. He had to live

with being the poison's porter, with the hurtful

knowledge that a good deed, a shared walk, had been

his love's death.

Juliette held the suicide note and cursed herself for not

seeing it coming. It should have been a foreseeable

breakdown, a problem solved by a little preventative

maintenance. She could have said more, reached out

somehow. But she had been too busy trying to stay

afloat those first few days to see that the man who had

brought her to the up-top was slowly unraveling right

before her eyes.

The flash of her inbox icon interrupted these disturbing

thoughts. She reached for the mouse and cursed herself.

The large chunk of data she had sent down to

Mechanical some hours earlier must've been rejected.

Maybe it was too much to send at once. But then she

saw that it was a message from Scottie, her friend in IT

who had supplied the data drive.

“Come now,” it read.

It was an odd request. Vague and yet dire, especialy

for the late hour. Juliette powered down her monitor,

grabbed the drive from the computer in case she had

more visitors, and briefly considered strapping Marnes’

ancient gun around her waist. She stood, went to the

key locker, and ran her hand down the soft belt, feeling

the indention where the buckle had, for decades, worn

into the same spot on the old leather. She thought again

of Marnes' terse note and looked to his empty chair.

She decided in the end to leave the gun hanging where it

was. She nodded to his desk, made sure she had her

keys, and hurried out the door.

It was thirty four levels down to IT. Juliette skipped

across the steps so swiftly, she had to keep a hand on

the inner railing to keep from flying outward into the

occasional upbound traffic. She overtook a porter near

six, who was startled from being passed. By the tenth

floor, she was beginning to feel dizzy from the round

and round. She wondered how Holston

and Marnes

had ever responded to trouble with any degree of

urgency. The other two deputy stations, the one in the

mids and the one in the down-deep, were nicely

situated near the dead center of their forty-eight floors,

a far superior arrangement. She passed into the twenties

thinking about this: that her office was not idealy

positioned to respond to the far edge of her precinct.

Instead, it had been located by the airlock and the

holding cel, close to the highest form of the silo’s

capital punishment. Her legs cursed this decision as she

considered the long slog back up.

In the high twenties, she practicaly bowled a man over

who wasn’t watching where he was going. She

wrapped one arm around him and gripped the railing,

keeping them both from a nasty tumble. He apologized

while she swalowed a curse. And then she saw it was

Lukas, his lapboard strapped to his back, nubs of

charcoal sticking out of his coverals.

“Oh,” he said. “Helo.”

He smiled at seeing her, but his lips drooped into a

frown when he realized she'd been hurrying the

opposite direction.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've got to go."

"Of course."

He stood out of the way, and Juliette finaly took her

hand off his ribs. She nodded, not sure what to say, her

thoughts only on Scottie, and then she continued her run

down, moving too fast to chance a

glance back.

When she finaly got to thirty-four, she paused on the

landing to catch her breath and let the dizziness fade.

Checking her coverals—that her star was in place and

the flash drive stil in her pocket—she puled open the

main doors to IT and tried to strol in as if she belonged

there.

She sized up the entrance room quickly. To her right, a

glass window looked into a conference room. The light

was on, even though it was now the middle of the night.

A handful of heads were visible through the glass, a

meeting taking place. She thought she heard Bernard's

voice, loud and nasaly, leeching through the door.

Ahead of her stood the low security

gates leading back

to IT's labyrinth of apartments, offices, and workshops.

Juliette could imagine the floor plan; she'd heard the

three levels shared much in common with Mechanical,

only without the fun.

"Can I help you?" a young man in silver coverals

asked from behind the gates.

She approached.

“Sheriff Nichols,” she said. She waved her ID at him,

then passed it under the gate’s laser scanner. The light

turned red and the gate let out an angry buzz. It did not

open. “I’m here to see Scottie, one of your techs.” She

tried the card again, with the same result.

“Do you have an appointment?” the man asked.

Juliette narrowed her eyes at the man.

“I’m the sheriff. Since when do I need appointments?”

Again with the card, and again the gate buzzed at her.

The young man did not move to help.

“Please do not do that,” he said.

“Look, Son, I’m in the middle of an investigation here.

And you’re impeding my progress.”

He smiled at her. “I’m sure you’re familiar with the

unique position we maintain here and

that your powers

are—”

Juliette put her ID away and reached over the gate to

grab the straps of his coverals with both hands. She

puled him almost clear over the gates, her arms bulging

with the sinewy muscles that had freed countless bolts.

“Listen here you blasted runt, I’m coming *through*

these gates or I'm coming over them and then through

you. I'l have you know that I report directly to Bernard

Holand, acting Mayor, and your goddamned boss. Do

I make myself clear?"

The kid's eyes were wide and al-pupil. He jerked his

chin up and down.

"Then move it," she said, letting go of his coverals with

a shove.

He fumbled for his ID—swiped it through the scanner.

Juliette pushed through the spinning arms of the turnstile

and past him. Then stopped.

“Uh, which way, exactly?”

The boy was stil trying to get his ID back into his chest

pocket, his hand trembling. “Th-thataway, ma’am.” He

pointed to the right. “Second hal, take a

left. Last

office.”

“Good man,” she said. She turned and smiled to

herself. It seemed that the same tone that got bickering

mechanics to snap-to back home worked here as wel.

And she laughed to herself to think of the argument she

had used: Your boss is also my boss, so open up. But

then, with eyes that wide and that much fear in his veins,

she could've read him Mama Jean's bread recipe with

the same tone and gotten through the gates. This was a

skil to remember.

She took the second halway, passing by a man and

woman in IT silver as they walked the other way. They

turned to watch her pass. At the end of the hal, she

found offices on both sides and didn't know which one

was Scottie's. She peeked first into the one with the

open door, but the lights were off. She turned to the

other one and knocked.

There was no answer at first, but the light at the bottom

of the door dimmed, as if someone had walked across

it.

“Who’s there?” a familiar voice whispered through the

door.

“Open this damn thing,” Juliette said. “You know who

this is.”

The lever dipped, the door clicking open. Juliette

pushed her way inside, and Scottie shoved the door

closed behind her, engaging the lock.

“Were you seen?” he asked.

She looked at him incredulously. “Was I seen? Of

course I was seen. How do you think I got in? There’re

people everywhere.”

“But did they see you come in *here*?” he whispered.

“Scottie, what the hel is going on?” Juliette was

beginning to suspect she had hurried al this way for

nothing. “You sent me a wire, which already seemed

desperate enough, but you told me to come now. So

here I am."

"Where did you get this stuff?" he asked. Scottie

grabbed a spool of printout from his desk and held it in

trembling hands.

Juliette stepped beside him. She placed a hand on his

arm and looked at the paper. "Just calm down," she

said quietly. She tried to read a few lines and

immediately recognized the gibberish she had sent to

Mechanical earlier that day. “How did you get this?”

she asked. “I just wired this to Knox a few hours ago.”

Scottie nodded. “And he wired it to me. But he

shouldn’t have. I can get into a lot of trouble for this.”

Juliette laughed. “You’re kidding,

right?”

She saw that he wasn’t.

“Scottie, you’re the one who puled al this stuff for me

in the first place.” She stepped back and looked hard at

him. “Wait, you know what this nonsense is, right? You

can read it?”

He bobbed his head. “Jules, I didn’t know what I was

grabbing for you at the time. It was gigs

of crap. I didn't

look at it. I just grabbed it and passed it on—"

"Why is this so dangerous?" she asked.

"I can't even talk about it," Scottie said. "I'm not

cleaning material, Jules. I'm not." He held out the scrol.

"Here. I shouldn't have even printed it, but I wanted to

delete the wire. You've got to take it. Get it out of here.

I can’t be caught with it.”

Juliette took the scrol, but just to calm him down.

“Scottie, sit down. Please. Look, I know you’re

scared, but I need you to sit and talk to me about this.

It’s very important.”

He shook his head.

“Scottie, sit the hel down right now.” She pointed at

the chair, and Scottie numbly obeyed.

Juliette sat on the

corner of his desk and noted that the cot at the back of

the room had been recently slept on, and felt pity for the

young man.

“Whatever this is—” She shook the rol of paper. “—

it’s what caused the last two cleanings.”

She told him this like it was more than a rapidly forming

theory, like it was something she knew.

Maybe it was

the fear in his eyes that cemented the idea, or the need

to act strong and sure to help calm him. “Scottie, I need

to know what it is. Look at me.”

He did.

“Do you see this star?” She flicked it with her finger,

causing a dul ring.

He nodded.

“I’m not your shift foreman anymore, lad. I’m the law,

and this is very important. Now, I don’t know if you’re

aware of this, but you can’t get into any trouble for

answering my questions. In fact, you’re *obligated* to

answer them.”

He looked up at her with a twinge of hope. He

obviously didn’t know that she was making this up. Not

lying—she would never turn Scottie in for al the silo—

but she was pretty sure there was no such thing as

immunity, not for anyone.

“What am I holding?” she asked, waving the scrol of

printout.

“It’s a program,” he whispered.

“You mean like a timing circuit? Like a —?”

“No, for a computer. A programming

language. It's a

—" He looked away. "I don't want to say. Oh, Jules, I

just want to go back to Mechanical. I want none of this

to have happened."

These words were like a splash of cold water. Scottie

was more than frightened—he was terrified. For his

life. Juliette got off the desk and crouched beside him,

placed her hand on the back of his hand, which rested

on his anxiously bouncing knee.

“What does the program do?” she asked.

He bit his lip and shook his head.

“It’s okay. We’re safe here. Tel me what it does.”

“It’s for a display,” he finaly said. “But not for like a

readout, or an LED, or a dot matrix. There are

algorithms in here I recognize. Anyone

would . . .“

He paused.

“Sixty-four bit color,” he whispered, staring at her.

“Sixty-four bit. Why would anyone need that much

color?”

“Dumb it down for me,” Juliette said. Scottie seemed

on the verge of going mad.

“You’ve seen it, right? The view up top?”

She dipped her head. “You know where I work.”

“Wel, I’ve seen it too, back before I started eating

every meal in here, working my fingers to the bone.” He

rubbed his hands up through his shaggy, sandy-brown

hair. “This program, Jules—what you’ve got, it could

make something like that walscreen look *real*.”

Juliette digested this. Then laughed. “But

wait, isn’t that

what it does? Scottie, there are sensors out there. They

just take the images they see, and then the screen has to

display the view, right? I mean, you’ve got me

confused, here.” She shook the printed scrol of

gibberish. “Doesn’t this just do what I think it does? Put

that image on the display?”

Scottie wrung his hands together. “You wouldn’t need

anything like this. You’re talking about passing an image

through. I could write a dozen lines of code to do that.

No, this, this is about *making* images. It’s more

complex.”

He grabbed Juliette’s arm.

“Jules, this thing can make brand new views. It can

show you anything you *like*."

He sucked in his breath, and a slice of time hung in the

air between them, a pause where hearts did not beat

and eyes did not blink.

Juliette sat back on her haunches, balancing on the toes

of her old boots. She finaly settled her butt to the floor

and leaned back against the metal paneling of his office

wal.

“So now you see—” Scottie started to say, but Juliette

held up her hand, hushing him. It never occurred to her

that the view could be fabricated. But why not? And

what would be the point?

She imagined Holston’s wife discovering this. She

must’ve been at least as smart as Scottie —she was the

one who came up with the technique he had used to

find this in the first place, right? What would she have

done with this discovery? Say something out loud and

cause a riot? Tel her husband, the sheriff? What?

Juliette could only know what she herself would do in

that position, if she were almost convinced. She was by

nature too curious a person to doubt

what she might do.

It would gnaw at her, like the rattling innards of a sealed

machine, or the secret workings of an unopened device.

She would have to grab a screwdriver and a wrench

and have a peek—

“Jules—”

She waved him off. Details from Holston’s folder

flooded back. Notes about Alison, how

she suddenly

went crazy, almost out of nowhere. Her curiosity must

have driven her there. Unless—unless Holston didn't

know. Unless it was al an act. Unless Alison had been

shielding her husband from some horror with a mock

veil of insanity.

But would it have taken Holston *three years* to piece

together what she had figured out in a *week*? Or did he

already know and it just took three years to summon

the courage to go after her? Or did Juliette have an

advantage he didn't? She had Scottie. And she was,

after al, folowing the breadcrumbs of someone else

folowing more breadcrumbs, a much easier and more

obvious trail.

She looked up at her young friend, who was peering

worriedly down at her.

“You have to get those out of here,” he said, glancing

at the printouts.

Juliette nodded. She pushed up from the floor and

tucked the scrol into the breast of her coverals. It

would have to be destroyed, she just wasn’t sure how.

“I deleted my copies of everything I got for you,” he

said. “I’m done looking at them. And you should do the

same.”

Juliette tapped her chest pocket, felt the hard bulge of

the flash drive there.

“And Jules, can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“See if there’s any way I can transfer back to

Mechanical, wil you? I don’t want to be up here

anymore.”

She nodded and squeezed his shoulder. “I’l see what I

can do,” she promised, feeling a knot in her gut for

getting the poor kid involved at al.

8

Juliette arrived late at her desk the next morning

exhausted, her legs and back sore from

the late climb

down to IT and from not getting an ounce of sleep. She

had spent the entire night tossing and turning, wondering

if she'd discovered a box that was better left unopened,

worried she might be raising questions that promised

nothing but bad answers. If she went out into the

cafeteria and looked in a direction she normaly

avoided, she would be able to see the last two cleaners

lying in the crook of a hil, almost as if in one another's

arms. Did those two lovers throw themselves into the

rotting wind over the very thing Juliette was now

chasing? The fear she'd seen in Scottie's eyes made her

wonder if she wasn't being careful enough. She looked

across her desk at her new deputy,

greener even at this

job than she, as he transcribed data from one of the

folders.

“Hey Peter?”

He looked up from his keyboard. “Yeah?”

“You were in Justice before this, right? Shadowing with

a judge?”

He tilted his head to the side. “No, I was a court

assistant. I actualy shadowed in the mids' deputy office

until a few years ago. I wanted that job, but none came

up."

"Did you grow up there? Or the up-top?"

"The mids." His hands fel away from his keyboard to

his lap. He smiled. "My dad was a plumber in the

hydroponics. He passed away a few years ago. My

mom, she works in the nursery."

"Realy? What's her name?"

"Rebecca. She's one of the—"

"I know her. She was shadowing when I was a kid.

My father—"

"He works in the upper nursery, I know. I didn't want

to say anything—"

"Why not? Hey, if you're worried about me playing

favorites, I'm guilty. You're my deputy now, and I'l

have your back—"

"No, it's not that. I just didn't want you to hold

anything against me. I know you and your father don't

__"

Juliette waved him off. "He's stil my father. We just

grew apart. Tel your mom I said hi."

"I wil." Peter smiled and bent over his

keyboard.

“Hey. I’ve got a question for you. Something I can’t

figure.”

“Sure,” he said, looking up. “Go ahead.”

“Can you think of why it’s cheaper to porter a paper

note to someone than it is to just wire them from a

computer?”

“Oh, sure.” He nodded. “It’s a quarter chit per

character to wire someone. That adds up!”

Juliette laughed. “No, I know what it costs. But paper

isn’t cheap, either. And neither is porting. But it seems

like sending a wire would be practicaly free, you

know? It’s just information. It weighs nothing.”

He shrugged. “It’s been a quarter chit a character since

I’ve been alive. I dunno. Besides, we’ve

got a fifty chit

per day alowance from here, plus unlimited

emergencies. I wouldn’t stress.”

“I’m not stressed, just confused. I mean, I understand

why everyone can’t have radios like we carry, because

only one person can transmit at a time, so we need the

air open for emergencies, but you’d think we could al

send and receive as many wires as we wanted."

Peter propped his elbows up and rested his chin on his

fists. "Wel, think about the cost of the servers, the

electricity. That means oil to burn and al the

maintenance of the wires and cooling and what-not.

Especialy if you have a ton of traffic. Factor that against

pressing pulp on a rack, letting it dry,

scratching some

ink on it, and then having a person who's already

heading that way walk it up or down for you. No

wonder it's cheaper!"

Juliette nodded, but mostly for his benefit. She wasn't

so sure. She hated to voice why, but she couldn't help

herself.

"But what if it's for a *different* reason?

What if

someone made it expensive on *purpose*?"

"What? To make money?" Peter snapped his fingers.

"To keep the porters employed with running notes!"

Juliette shook her head. "No, what if it's to make

conversing with each other more difficult? Or at least

costly. You know, separate us, make us keep our

thoughts to ourselves.”

Peter frowned. “Why would anyone want to do that?”

Shrugging, Juliette looked back at her computer screen,

her hand creeping to the scrol hidden in her lap. “I

don’t know,” she said. “Forget about it. It’s just a sily

thought.”

She puled her keyboard toward her and was just

glancing up at her screen when Peter saw the

emergency icon first.

“Wow. Another alert,” he said.

She started to click on the flashing icon, heard Peter

blow out his breath.

“What the hel’s going on around here?” he asked.

She puled the message up on her screen and read it

quickly, disbelieving. Surely this wasn’t

the way of the

job. Surely people didn't die this often, her just not

hearing about it because her nose was always in some

crankcase or under an oil pan.

The blinking number code above the message was one

she recognized without even needing her cheat sheet. It

was becoming sadly familiar. Another suicide. They

didn’t give the victim’s name, but there was an office

number. And she knew the floor and address. Her legs

were stil sore from her trip down there.

“No—” she said, gripping the edge of her desk.

“You want me to—?” Peter reached for his radio.

“No, damnit, no.” Juliette shook her head. She pushed

away from her desk, knocking over the recycling bin,

which spiled out al the pardoned folders across the

floor. The scrol from her lap roled into them.

“I can—” Peter began.

“I got this,” she said, waving him away. “Damnit.” She

shook her head. The office was spinning around her

head, the world getting blurry. She staggered for the

door, arms wide for balance, when Peter snapped back

to his computer screen, dragging his mouse with its little

cord behind, clicking something.

“Uh, Juliette—?”

But she was already stumbling out the door, bracing

herself for the long and painful descent —

“Juliette!”

She turned to find Peter running behind her, his hand

steadying the radio attached to his hip.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m sorry— It’s— I don’t know how to do this—”

“Spit it out,” she said impatiently. Al she could think of

was little Scottie, hanging by his neck. It was electrical

ties in her imagination. That’s how her waking

nightmare, her morbid thoughts, crafted the scene of his

death in her head.

“It’s just that, I got a private wire and __”

“Keep up if you want, but I’ve got to get down there.”

She spun toward the stairwel.

Peter grabbed her arm. Roughly. A forceful grip.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, but I’m supposed to take you into

custody—”

She whirled on him and saw how unsure of himself he

looked.

“What did you say?”

“I’m just doing my duty, Sheriff, I swear.” Peter

reached for his metal cuffs. Juliette stared at him,

disbelieving, as he snapped one link around her wrist

and fumbled for the other.

“Peter, what’s going on? I’ve got a friend I need to see

to—”

He shook his head. “The computer says you’re a

suspect, Ma’am. I’m just doing what it tels me to do

___”

And with that, the second link clicked around her other

wrist, and Juliette looked down at her predicament,

dumbfounded, the image of her young friend hanging by

his neck unable to be shaken loose from her mind.

9

She was alowed a visitor, but who would Juliette want

to see her like this? No one. So she sat with her back

against the bars, the bleak view outside brightening with

the rising of an unseen sun, the floor around her bare of

folders and ghosts. She was alone, stripped of a job she

wasn’t sure she ever wanted, a pile of bodies in her

wake, her simple and easily understood life having

come unraveled.

“I’m sure this wil pass,” a voice behind her said.

Juliette leaned away from the steel rods and looked

around to find Bernard standing behind her, his hands

wrapped around the bars.

Juliette moved away from him and sat on the cot,

turning her back to the gray view.

“You know I didn’t do this,” she said. “He was my

friend.”

Bernard frowned. “What do you think you’re being

held for? The boy committed suicide. He seems to have

been distraught from recent tragedies. This is not

unheard of when people move to a new section of the

silo, away from friends and family, to take a job they're

not entirely suited for—"

"Then why am I being held here?" Juliette asked. She

realized suddenly that there may be no double cleaning

after al. Off to the side, down the halway, she could

see Peter shuffling back and forth like some physical

barrier prevented him from coming any closer.

“Unauthorized entry on the thirty-fourth,” Bernard said.

“Threatening a member of the silo, tampering with IT

affairs, removing IT property from secured quarters—”

“That’s ratshit,” Juliette said. “I was summoned by one

of your workers. I had every right to be there!”

“We wil look into that,” Bernard said. “Wel, Peter

here wil. I’m afraid he’s had to remove

your computer

for evidence. My people down below are best qualified

to see if—”

“*Your* people? Are you trying to be Mayor or IT

Head? Because I looked into it, and the Pact clearly

states you can’t be both—”

“That wil be put to a vote soon enough. The Pact has

changed before. It’s designed to change

when events

cal for it."

"And so you want me out of the way." Juliette stepped

closer to the bars so she could see Peter Bilings, and

have him see her. "I suppose you were to have this job

al along? Is that right?"

Peter slunk out of sight.

"Juliette. Jules." Bernard shook his head and clicked

his tongue at her. “I don’t want you out of the way. I

wouldn’t want that for any member of the silo. I want

people to be in their *place*. Where they fit in. Scottie

wasn’t cut out for IT, I see that now. And I don’t think

you were meant for the up-top.”

“So, what, I’m banished back to Mechanical? Is that

what’s going on? Over some ratshit charges?”

“Banished is such a horrible word. I’m sure you didn’t

mean that. And don’t you want your old job back?

Weren’t you happier then? There’s so much to learn up

here that you’ve never shadowed for. And the people

who thought you best fit for this job, who I’m sure

hoped to ease you into it . . .”

He stopped right there, and it was somehow worse that

he left the sentence open like that, forcing Jules to

complete the image rather than just hear it. She pictured

two mounds of freshly turned soil in the gardens, a few

mourning rinds tossed on top of them.

“I’m going to let you gather your things, what isn’t

needed for evidence, and then alow you to see yourself

back down. As long as you check in with my deputies

on the way and report your progress, we'l drop these

charges. Consider it an extension of my little . . .

forgiveness holiday."

Bernard smiled and straightened his glasses.

Juliette gritted her teeth. It occurred to her that she had

never, in her entire life, punched someone in the face.

And it was only her fear of missing, of not doing it

correctly and cracking her knuckles on one of the steel

bars, that she didn’t put an end to that streak.

••••

It was just about a week since she had arrived at the

up-top, and Juliette was leaving with fewer belongings

than she’d brought. A blue Mechanical coveral had

been provided, one much too big for her. Peter didn’t

even say goodbye. Juliette thought it was more out of

shame than anger or blame. He walked her through the

cafeteria to the top of the stairs, and as she turned to

shake his hand, she found him staring down at his toes,

his thumbs caught in his coverals, her sheriff's badge

pinned at an angle over his left breast.

Juliette began her long walk down through the length of

the silo. It would be less physicaly taxing than her walk

up had been, but more draining in other ways. What

exactly had happened to the silo, and why? She

couldn’t help but feel in the middle of it al, to shoulder

some of the blame. None of this would have happened

had they left her in Mechanical, had they never come to

see her in the first place. She would stil

be bitching

about the alignment of the generator, not sleeping at

night as she waited for the inevitable failure and a

descent into chaos as they learned to survive on backup

power for the decades it would take to rebuild the

thing. Instead, she had been witness to a different type

of failure: a throwing not of rods but of bodies. She felt

most horrible for poor Scottie, a boy with so much

promise, so many talents, taken before his prime.

She had been sheriff for a short time, a star appearing

on her breast for but a wink, and yet she felt an

incredible urge to investigate. There was something not

right about Scottie kiling himself. The signs were there,

sure. He had been afraid to leave his

office—but then,

he’d also shadowed under Walker and had maybe

picked up the habit of reclusiveness from the old man.

Scottie had also been harboring secrets too big for his

young mind, had been fearful enough to wire her to

come quickly—but she knew the boy like her own

shadow, and knew he didn’t have it in him. She

suddenly wondered if Marnes had ever had it in him as

wel. If Jahns were here beside her, would the old

Mayor be screaming for Jules to investigate both their

deaths? Teling her that none of this fit?

“I can’t,” Juliette whispered to the ghost, causing an

upbound porter to turn his head as he passed.

She kept further thoughts to herself. As she descended

toward her father's nursery, she paused at the landing,

contemplating longer and harder about going in to see

him than she had on her way up. Pride had prevented

her the first time. And now shame set her feet into

motion once again, spiraling down away from him,

chastising herself for thinking on the ghosts from her

past that had long ago been banished

from memory.

At the thirty-fourth, the entrance to IT, she again

considered stopping. There would be clues in Scottie's

office, maybe even some they hadn't managed to scrub

away. She shook her head. The conspiracies were

already forming in her mind. And as hard as it was to

leave the scene of the crime behind, she knew she

wouldn’t be alowed anywhere near his office.

She continued down the staircase and thought, as she

considered IT’s location in the silo, that this couldn’t be

an accident either. She had another thirty-two floors to

go before she checked in with the first deputy, who was

located near the center of the mids. The sheriff’s office

was thirty-three floors above her head.

IT, then, was as

far as it could get from any deputy station in the silo.

She shook her head at this paranoid thinking. It wasn't

how diagnoses were made. Her father would have told

her so.

After meeting with the first deputy around noon, and

accepting a piece of bread and fruit, along with a

reminder to eat, she made good time down through the

mids, wondering as she passed the upper apartments

which level Lukas lived on, or if he even knew of her

arrest.

The weight of the past week seemed to pul her down

the stairwel, gravity sucking at her boots, the pressures

of being sheriff dissipating as she left that office far

behind. Those pressures were slowly replaced with an

eagerness to return to her friends, even in shame, as she

got closer and closer to Mechanical.

She stopped to see Hank, the down deep deputy, on

level one-twenty. She had known him for a long time,

was becoming more and more surrounded with familiar

faces, people who waved helo, their moods somber as

if they knew every detail of her time away. Hank tried

to get her to stay and rest a while, but she only paused

long enough to be polite, to refil her canteen, and then

to shuffle the remaining twenty floors to the place she

truly belonged.

Knox seemed thriled to have her back. He wrapped

her up in a crippling hug, lifting her feet off the ground

and roughing up her face with his beard. He smeled of

grease and sweat, a mix Juliette had never fuly noticed

in the down deep because she had never been free from

it.

The walk to her old room was punctuated by slaps on

her back, wel-wishes, questions about the up-top,

people caling her sheriff in jest, and the sort of rude

frivolities she had grown up in and grown used to.

Juliette felt more saddened by it al than anything. She

had set out to do something and had failed. And yet her

friends were just happy to have her back.

Shirly from second shift spotted her coming down the

halway and accompanied Juliette on the rest of the

walk to her room. She updated Juliette

on the status of

the generator and the output from the new oil wel, as if

Juliette had simply been on vacation for a short while.

Juliette thanked her at the door to her room, stepped

inside, and kicked her way through al the folded notes

slipped under the door. She lifted the strap of her

daypack over her head and dropped it, then colapsed

onto her bed, too exhausted and upset at herself to

even cry.

She awoke in the middle of the night. Her smal display

terminal showed the time in green blocky numbers: 2:14

AM.

Juliette sat at the edge of her old bed in coverals that

weren’t truly hers and took stock of her situation. Her

life was not yet over, she decided. It just felt that way.

Tomorrow, even if they didn't expect her to, she would

be back at work in the pits, keeping the silo humming,

doing what she did best. She needed to wake up to this

reality, to set other ideas and responsibilities aside.

Already, they felt so far away. She doubted she would

even go to Scottie's funeral, not unless

they sent his

body down to be buried where it belonged.

She reached for the keyboard slotted into the wal rack.

Everything was covered in a layer of grime, she saw.

She had never noticed it before. The keys were filthy

from the dirt she had brought back from each shift. The

monitor’s glass was limned with grease. She fought the

urge to wipe the screen and smear the shiny coat of oil

around, but she would have to clean her place a little

deeper, she decided. She was viewing things with

untainted and more critical eyes.

Rather than chase pointless sleep, she keyed the

monitor awake to check the work logs for the next day,

anything to get her mind off the past week. But before

she could open her task manager, she saw that she had

over a dozen wires in her inbox. She'd never *seen* so

many. Usualy people just slid recycled notes under

each other's doors—but then, she had been a long way

away when the news of her arrest had hit, and she

hadn't been able to get to a computer since.

She logged onto her email account and

puled up the

most recent wire. It was from Knox. Just a semicolon

and a parenthesis—a half-chit smile.

Juliette couldn't help it, she smiled back. She could stil

smel Knox on her skin and realized, as far as the big

brute was concerned, that al the troubles and problems

percolating in whispers down the stairwel about her

paled in comparison to her return. To him, the worst

thing that had happened in the last week was probably

the chalenge of replacing her on first shift.

Jules went to the next message, one from the third shift

foreman, welcoming her home. Probably because of the

extra time his crew was putting in to help cover her old

shift.

There was more. A day's pay of a note from Shirly,

wishing her wel on her journey. These were al notes

they had hoped she would receive up-top to make the

trip down easier, hoping she wouldn't loathe herself and

would know she shouldn't feel humiliated, or even a

failure. Juliette felt tears wel up at how considerate it al

was. She had an image of her desk,

Holston's desk,

with nothing but unplugged wires snaking across its

surface, her computer removed. There was no way she

could've gotten these messages when they were meant

to be read. She wiped at her eyes and tried not to think

of the wired notes as money wasted, but rather as

extravagant tokens of her friendships in the down deep.

Reading each one, trying to hold it together, made the

last message she came to doubly jarring. It was

paragraphs long. Juliette assumed it was an official

document, maybe a list of her offenses, a formal ruling

against her. She had only seen such messages from the

Mayor’s office, usualy on holidays, notes that went out

to every silo member. But then she saw

that it was from

Scottie.

Juliette sat up straight and tried to clear her head. She

started from the beginning, damning her blurred vision.

J-

I lied. Couldn't delete this stuff. Found more. That

tape I got you? Your joke was truth. And the

program - NOT for big screen. Pxl

density not right.

32,768 X 8,192! Not sure what's that size. 8" X 2"?

So many pxls if so.

Putting more together. Don't trust porters, so

wiring this. Screw cost, wire me back. Need transfr

to Mech. Not safe here.

-S

Juliette read it a second time, crying now. Here was the

real voice of a ghost warning her of something, al of it

too late. And it wasn't the voice of one who was

planning his death—she was sure of that. She checked

the timestamp of the wire; it was sent before she had

even arrived back at her office the day before, before

Scottie had died.

Before he had been *killed*, she corrected herself. They

must have found him snooping, or maybe her visit had

alerted them. She wondered what IT could see, if they

could break into her wire account, even. They must not

have yet, or the message wouldn’t be there, waiting for

her.

She leapt suddenly from her bed and grabbed one of

the folded notes by the door. Digging a charcoal from

her daypack, she sat back down on the bed. She

copied the entire wire, every odd speling, double-

checking each number, and then deleted the message.

She had chils up and down her arms by the time she

finished, as if some unseen person was racing toward

her, hoping to break into her computer before she

dispensed with the evidence. She

wondered if Scottie

had been cautious enough to have deleted the note from

his sent wires, and assumed, if he'd been thinking

clearly, that he would.

She sat back on her bed, holding the copied note,

thoughts about the work log for the next day gone.

Instead, she studied the sinister mess revolving around

her, spiraling through the heart of the silo. Things were

bad, from top to bottom. A great set of gears had been

thrown out of alignment. She could hear the noise from

the past week, this thumping and clanging, this machine

lumbering off its mounts and leaving bodies in its wake.

And Juliette was the only one who could hear it. She

was the only one who knew. And she

didn’t know who

she could trust to help set things right. But she did know

this: It would require a diminishing of power to align

things once again. And there would be no way to cal

what happened next a “holiday.”

10

Juliette showed up at Walker’s electronics workshop at

five, worried she might find him asleep

on his cot, but

smeling instead the distinctive odor of vaporized solder

wafting down the halway. She knocked on the open

door as she entered, and Walker looked up from one

of his many green electronics boards, corkscrews of

smoke rising from the tip of his soldering iron.

“Jules!” he shouted. He lifted the magnifying lens off his

gray head and set it and the soldering iron down on the

steel workbench. “I heard you were back. I meant to

send a note, but—” He waved around at the piles of

parts with their work order tags dangling from strings.

“Super busy,” he explained.

“Forget it,” she said. She gave Walker a hug, smeling

the electrical fire scent on his skin that reminded her so

much of him. And of Scottie.

“I’m going to feel guilty enough taking some of your

time with this,” she said.

“Oh?” He stepped back and studied her, his bushy

white brows and wrinkled skin furrowed with worry.

“You got something for me?” He looked her up and

down for a broken thing, a habit formed from a lifetime

of being brought smal devices that needed repairing.

“I actualy just wanted to pick your brain.” She sat

down on one of his workbench stools, and Walker did

the same.

“Go ahead,” he said. He wiped his brow with the back

of his sleeve, and Juliette saw how old Walker had

become. She remembered him without so much white in

his hair, without the wrinkles and splotchy skin. She

remembered him with his shadow.

“It has to do with Scottie,” she warned him.

Walker turned his head to the side and nodded. He

tried to say something, tapped his fist against his chest a

few times and cleared his throat. “Damn shame,” was

al he could manage. He peered down at the floor for a

moment.

“It can wait,” Juliette told him. “If you need time—”

“ I *convinced* him to take that job,” Walker said,

shaking his head. “I remember when the offer came,

being scared he’d turn it down. Because of me, you

know? That he’d be too afraid of me bein’ upset at him

for leaving, that he might just stay forever, so I urged

him to take it." He looked up at her, his eyes shining. "I

just wanted him to know he was free to choose. I didn't

mean to *push* him away."

"You didn't," Juliette said. "Nobody thinks that, and

neither should you."

"I just don't figure he was happy up there. That

weren't his home."

"Wel, he was too smart for us. Don't

forget that. We

always said that.”

“He loved you,” Walker said, and wiped at his eyes.

“Damn, how that boy looked up to you.”

Juliette felt her own tears weling up again. She reached

into her pocket and brought out the wire she’d

transcribed onto the back of the note. She had to

remind herself why she was there, to

hold it together.

“Just don’t seem like him to take the easy way—”

Walker muttered.

“No, it doesn’t,” she said. “Walker, I need to discuss

some things with you that can’t leave this room.”

He laughed. Mostly, it seemed, to keep from sobbing.

“Like I ever leave this room,” he said.

“Wel, it can’t be discussed with anyone

else. No one.

Okay?”

He bobbed his head.

“I don’t think Scottie kiled himself.”

Walker threw up his hands to cover his face. He bent

forward and shook as he started to cry. Juliette got off

her stool and went to him, put her arm around his

trembling back.

“I knew it,” he sobbed into his palms. “I knew it, I

knew it.”

He looked up at her, tears coursing through several

days of white stubble. “Who did this? They’l pay,

won’t they? Tel me who did it, Jules.”

“Whoever it was, I don’t think they had far to travel,”

she said.

“IT? Goddamn them.”

“Walker, I need your help sorting this out. Scottie sent

me a wire not long before he . . . wel, before I think he

was kiled.”

“Sent you a wire?”

“Yeah. Look, I met with him earlier that day. He asked

me to come down to see him.”

“Down to IT?”

She nodded. “I’d found something in the last sheriff’s

computer—”

“Holston.” He dipped his head. “The last cleaner.

Yeah, Knox brought me something from you. A

program, looked like. I told him Scottie would know

better than anyone, so we forwarded it along.”

“Wel, you were right.”

Walker wiped at his cheeks and bobbed his head. “He

was smarter than any of us.”

“I know. He told me this thing, that it was a program,

one that made very detailed images. Like the images we

see of the outside—”

She waited a beat to see how he would respond. It was

taboo to even use the word in most settings. Walker

was unmoved. As she had hoped, he was old enough to

be beyond childhood fears. And probably lonely and

sad enough not to have cared anyway.

“But this wire he sent, it says something about P. X.

L.’s being too dense.” She showed him the copy she’d

made. Walker grabbed his magnifiers and slipped the

band over his forehead.

“Pixels,” he said, sniffing. “He’s talking about the little

dots that make up an image. Each one is a pixel." He

took the note from her and read some more. "He says

it's not safe there." Walker rubbed his chin and shook

his head. "Damn them."

"Walker, what kind of screen would be eight inches by

two inches?" Juliette looked around at al the boards,

displays, and coils of loose wire strewn about his

workshop. “Do you have anything like that?”

“Eight by two? Maybe a readout, like on the front of a

server or something. Be the right size to show a few

lines of text, internal temps, clock cycles —” He shook

his head. “But you’d never make one with this kind of

pixel density. Even if it were possible, it wouldn’t make

sense. Your eye couldn’t make out one

pixel from its

neighbor if it were right at the end of your nose.”

He rubbed his stubble and studied the note some more.

“What’s this nonsense about the tape and the joke?

What’s that mean?”

Juliette stood beside him and looked over the note.

“I’ve been wondering about that. He must mean the

heat tape he scored for me a while back."

"I think I remember something about that."

"Wel, do you remember the problems we had with it?

The exhaust we wrapped it in almost caught fire. The

stuff was complete crap. I think he sent a note asking if

the tape had gotten here okay, and I sorta recal writing

back that it did, and thanks, but the tape

couldn’t have

self-destructed better if it’d been *engineered* to.”

“That was your joke?” Walker swiveled in his stool

and rested his elbows on the workbench. He kept

peering over the copied charcoal letters like they were

the face of Scottie, his little shadow coming back one

last time to tel him something important.

“And he says my joke was truth,” Juliette said. “I’ve

been up the last three hours thinking about this, dying to

talk to someone.”

Walter looked back over his shoulder at her, his

eyebrows raised.

“I’m not a sheriff, Walk. Never born to be one.

Shouldn’t have gone. But I know, as sure as everyone,

that what I'm about to say should set me to cleaning—"

Walker immediately slid off his stool and walked away

from her. Juliette damned herself for coming, for

opening her mouth, for not just clocking into first shift

and saying to hel with it al—

Walker shut the door to his workshop and locked it.

He looked at her and lifted a finger, went to his air

compressor and puled out a hose. Then he flipped the

unit on so the motor would start to build up pressure,

which just leaked out the open nozzle in a steady, noisy

hiss. He returned to the bench, the clatter from the noisy

compressor engine awful, and sat down. His wide eyes

begged her to continue.

“There’s a hil up there with a crook in it,” she told him,

having to raise her voice a little. “I don’t know how long

it’s been since you’ve seen this hil, but there are two

bodies nestled together in it, man and wife. If you look

hard, you can see a dozen shapes like this al over the

landscape, al the cleaners, al in various states of decay.

Most are gone, of course. Rotted to dust over the long

years.”

Walker shook his head at the image she was forming.

“How many years have they been improving these suits

so the cleaners have a chance? Hundreds?”

He nodded.

“And yet nobody gets any further. And never once

have they *not* had enough time to clean.”

Walker looked up and met her gaze. “Your joke is

truth," he said. "The heat tape. It's engineered to fail."

Juliette pursed her lips. "That's what I'm thinking. But

not just the tape. Remember those seals from a few

years back? The ones from IT that went into the water

pumps, that were delivered to us by accident?"

"So we've been making fun of IT for being fools and

dulards—"

“But *we’re* the fools,” Juliette said. And it felt so

damned good to say it to another human being. So

good for these new ideas of hers to swim in the air. And

she knew she was right about the cost of sending wires,

that they didn’t want people talking. Thinking was fine;

they would bury you with your thoughts. But no

colaboration, no groups coordinating

together, no

exchange of ideas.

“You think they have us down here to be near the oil?”

she asked Walker. “I don’t think so. Not anymore. I

think they’re keeping anyone with a lick of mechanical

sense as far from them as possible. There’s two supply

chains, two sets of parts being made, al in complete

secrecy. And who questions them? Who would risk

being put to cleaning?”

“You think they kiled Scottie?” he asked.

Juliette nodded. “Walk, I think it’s worse than that.”

She leaned closer, the compressor rattling, the hiss of

released air filing the room. “I think they kil

everybody.”

11

Juliette reported to first shift at six, the conversation

with Walker playing over and over in her head. There

was a sustained and embarrassing applause from the

handful of techs present as she entered dispatch. Knox

just glared at her from the corner, back to his gruff

demeanor. He had already welcomed her back, and

damned if he'd do it again.

She said helo to the people she hadn't seen the night

before and looked over the job queue. The words on

the board made sense, but she had a difficult time

processing them. In the back of her mind, she thought

about poor Scottie, confused and struggling while

someone kiled him. She thought of his little body,

probably riddled with evidence but soon

to feed the

roots of the dirt farms. She thought of a married couple

lying together on a hil, never given a chance to make it

any further, to see beyond the horizon.

She chose a job from the queue, one that would require

little mental exertion on her part, and thought of poor

Jahns and Marnes and how tragic their love—if she had

been reading Marnes correctly—had been. The

temptation to tel the entire room was crippling. She

looked around at Megan and Ricks, at Jenkins and

Marck, and thought about the smal army of tight

brotherhood she could form. The silo was rotten to the

core; an evil man was acting Mayor; a puppet stood

where a good sheriff had been; and al

the good men

and women were gone.

It was comical to imagine: her ralying a band of

mechanics to storm the upper levels and right a wrong.

And then what? Was *this* the uprising they had learned

about as children? Is this how it begins? One sily

woman with fire in her blood stirring the hearts of a

legion of fools?

She kept her mouth shut and made her way to the

pump room, riding the flow of morning mechanics,

thinking more about what she should be doing above

than on what needing repairing below. She descended

one of the side stairwels, stopped by the tool room to

check out a kit bag, and lugged the heavy satchel to one

of the deep pits where pumps ran constantly to keep

the deep silo from filing halfway up with water.

Caryl, a transfer from third shift, was already working

near the pit basin patching rotten cement. She waved

with her trowel, and Juliette dipped her chin and forced

herself to smile.

The offending pump sat idle on one wal, the backup

pump beside it struggling mightily and spraying water

out of dry and cracked seals. Juliette looked into the

basin to gauge the height of the water. A painted

number “9” was just visible above its murky surface.

Juliette did some quick math, knowing the diameter of

the basin and it being almost nine feet ful. The good

news was they had at least a day before

boots were

getting wet. Worst case, they replace the pump with a

rebuilt one from spares and deal with Hendricks

bitching at them for checking it out instead of fixing what

they already had.

As she began stripping the failed pump down, pelted

with spray from its smaler, leaking neighbor, Juliette

considered her life with this new perspective provided

by the morning's revelations. The silo was something

she had always taken for granted. The priests say it had

always been here, that it was lovingly created by a

caring God, that everything they would ever need had

been provided for. Juliette had a hard time with this

story. A few years ago, she had been on

the first team

to dril past 10,000 feet and hit new oil reserves. She

had a sense of the size and scope of the world below

them. And then she had seen with her own eyes the

view of the outside with its phantom-like sheets of

smoke they caled clouds roling by on miraculous

heights. She had even seen a star, which Lukas thought

stood an inconceivable distance away. What God

would make so much rock below and air above and

just a measly silo between?

And then there was the rotting skyline and the images in

the children's books, both of which seemed to hold

clues. The priests, of course, would say that the skyline

was evidence that man wasn't supposed to exceed his

bounds. And the books with the faded color pages?

The fanciful imagination of authors, a class done away

with for al the trouble they inspired.

But Juliette didn’t see fanciful imagination in those

books. She had spent a childhood in the nursery,

reading each one over and over whenever they weren’t

checked out, and things in them and in the wondrous

plays performed in the bazaar made more sense to her

than this crumbling cylinder in which they lived.

She wiggled the last of the water hoses free and began

separating the pump from its motor. The hint of steel

shavings suggested a chewed-up impeler, which meant

puling the shaft. As she worked on automatic, cruising

through a job she'd performed numerous

times before,

she thought back on the myriad of animals that

populated those books, most of which had never been

seen by living eyes. The only fanciful part, she figured,

was that they al talked and acted human. There were

mice and chickens in several of the books that

performed these stunts as wel, and she knew their

breeds were incapable of speech. Al those other

animals must exist somewhere, or used to. She felt this

to the core, maybe because they weren’t imaginative at

al. Each seemed to folow the same plan, just like al

the silo’s pumps. You could tel one was based on the

other. A particular design worked, and whoever had

made one had made them al.

The silo made less sense. It hadn't been created by a

God—it was probably designed by IT. This was a new

theory, but she felt more and more sure of it. They

controled al the important parts. Cleaning was the

highest law and the deepest religion, and both of these

were intertwined and housed within its secretive wals.

And then there was the spacing from

Mechanical and

the spread of the deputy stations—more clues. Not to

mention the clauses in the Pact, which practicaly

granted them immunity. And now the discovery of a

second supply chain, a series of parts engineered to fail,

a purpose behind the lack of progress in survival time

on the outside. IT had built this place and IT was

keeping them there.

Juliette nearly stripped a bolt, she was so agitated. She

turned to look for Caryl, but the younger woman was

already gone, her repair patch a darker shade of gray

as it waited to dry and blend in with the rest. Looking

up, Juliette scanned the ceiling of the pump room where

conduits of wire and piping traveled through the wals

and mingled overhead. A run of steam pipes stood

clustered to the side to keep from melting any of the

wires; a ribbon of heat tape hung off one of these pipes

in a loose coil. It would have to be replaced soon, she

thought. That tape might be ten or twenty years old.

She considered the stolen tape that had caused so much

of the mess she was in, and how it

would’ve been lucky

to survive twenty minutes up there.

And that’s when Juliette realized what she must do. A

project to pul the wool back from everyone’s eyes, a

favor to the next fool who slipped up or dared to hope

aloud. And it would be so easy. She wouldn’t have to

build anything herself—they would do al the work for

her. Al it would take would be some convincing, and

she was mighty good at that.

She smiled, a list of parts forming in her head as the

broken impeler was removed from the faulty pump. Al

she would need to fix this problem was a replacement

part or two. It was the perfect solution to getting

everything in the silo working properly once more.

••••

Juliette worked two ful shifts, wearing her muscles to a

numb ache before returning her tools and showering.

She worked a stiff brush under her nails over the

bathroom sink, determined to keep them up-top clean.

She headed toward the mess hal, looking forward to a

tal plate of high-energy food rather than the weak

rabbit stew from the cafeteria on level one, when she

passed through Mechanical's entrance hal and saw

Knox talking to Deputy Hank. The way they turned and

stared, she knew they were talking about her. Juliette's

stomach sank. Her first thought was of her father. And

then Peter. Who else could they take away from her

that she might care about? They wouldn't

know to

contact her about Lukas, whatever he was to her.

She made a swift turn and headed their direction, even

as the two of them moved to intercept her. The looks

on their faces confirmed her every fear. Something

awful had happened. Juliette barely noticed Hank

reaching for his cuffs.

“I’m sorry, Jules,” he said, as they got close.

“What happened?” Juliette asked. “Dad?”

Hank’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Knox was shaking

his head and chewing on his beard. He studied the

deputy like he might eat the man.

“Knox, what’s going on?”

“Jules, I’m sorry.” He shook his head. He seemed to

want to say more but was powerless to do so. Juliette

felt Hank reaching for her arm.

“You are under arrest for grave crimes against the silo.”

He recited the lines like they were from a sad poem.

The steel clicked around her wrist.

“You wil be judged and sentenced according to the

Pact.”

Juliette looked up at Knox. “What is

this?” she asked.

Was she realy being arrested again?

“If you are found guilty, you wil be given a chance at

honor.”

“What do you want me to do?” Knox whispered, his

vast muscles twitching beneath his coverals. He wrung

his hands together, watching the second metal band

clack around her other wrist, her two

hands shackled

together now. The large Head of Mechanical seemed to

be contemplating violence—or worse.

“Easy, Knox,” Juliette said. She shook her head at him.

The thought of more people getting hurt because of her

was too much to bear.

“Should humanity banish you from this world—” Hank

continued to recite, his voice cracking,

his eyes wet with

shame.

“Let it go,” Juliette told Knox. She looked past him to

where more workers were coming off second shift,

stopping to see this spectacle of their prodigal daughter

being put in cuffs.

“—in that banishment, may you find your sins

scrubbed, scrubbed away,” Hank

concluded.

He looked up at her, one hand gripping the chain

between her wrists, tears streaking down his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Juliette nodded to him. She set her teeth and nodded to

Knox as wel.

“It’s alright,” she said. She kept bobbing her head. “It’s

alright, Knox. Let it go.”

12

The climb up was to take three days. Longer than it

should have, but there were protocols. A day trip up to

Hank's office, a night in his cel, Deputy Marsh coming

down the next morning from the mids to escort her up

another fifty levels to his office.

She felt numb during this second day of climbing, the

looks from passersby sliding off her like water on

grease. It was difficult to concern herself with her own

life—she was too busy talying al the others, some of

them because of her.

Marsh, like Hank, tried to make smal talk, and al

Juliette could contemplate to say in return was that they

were on the wrong side. That evil ran amuck. But she

kept her mouth shut.

At the mids deputy station, she was shown to a familiar

enough cel, just like the one in Hank's. No walscreen,

just a stack of primed cinderblocks. She colapsed onto

the bunk before he even had the gate locked, and lay

there for what felt like hours, waiting for night to come

and pass to dawn, for Peter's new deputy to come and

march her up the last leg of her journey.

She checked her wrist often, but Hank had confiscated

her watch. He probably wouldn't even know how to

wind it. The thing would eventualy fal into disrepair and

return to being a trinket, a useless thing worn upside

down for its pretty band.

This saddened her more than it should have. She

rubbed her bare wrist, dying to know the time, when

Marsh came back and told her she had a visitor.

Juliette sat up on the cot and swung her legs around.

Who would come up to the mids from Mechanical?

When Lukas appeared on the other side of the bars, the

dam that held back al her emotions nearly broke. She

felt her neck constrict, her jaws ache

from fighting the

sobs, the emptiness in her chest nearly puncture and

burst. He grabbed the bars and leaned his head against

them, his temples touching the smooth steel, a sad smile

on his face.

“Hey,” he said.

Juliette barely recognized him. She was used to seeing

him in the dark, had been in a hurry

when they'd

bumped into each other on the stairs. He was a striking

man, his eyes older than his face, his light brown hair

slicked back with sweat from what she assumed was a

hurried walk down.

"You didn't need to come," she said, speaking softly

and slowly to keep from crying. What realy saddened

her was someone seeing her like this, someone she was

beginning to realize she cared about. The indignity was

too much.

“We’re fighting this,” he said. “Your friends are

colecting signatures. Don’t give up.”

She shook her head. “It won’t work,” she told him.

“Please don’t get your hopes up.” She walked to the

bars and wrapped her hands a few inches below his.

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know this is ratshit—”

He turned away, a tear streaking down his cheek.

“Another cleaning?” he croaked. “Why?”

“It’s what they want,” Juliette said. “There’s no

stopping them.”

Lukas’ hands slid down the bars and

wrapped around

hers. Juliette couldn't free them to wipe at her cheeks.

She tried to dip her head to use her shoulder.

"I was coming up to see you that day—" Lukas shook

his head and took a deep breath. "I was coming to ask

you out—"

"Don't," she said. "Lukas. Don't do this."

“I told my mom about you.”

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Lukas—”

“This can’t happen,” he said. He shook his head. “It

can’t. You can’t go.”

When he looked back up, Juliette saw that there was

more fear in his eyes than even she felt. She wiggled

one hand free and peeled his other one off. She pushed

them away. “You need to let this go,”

she said. “I’m

sorry. Just find someone. Don’t end up like me. Don’t

wait—”

“I thought I *had* found someone,” he said plaintively.

Juliette turned to hide her face.

“Go,” she whispered.

She stood stil, feeling his presence on the other side of

those bars, this boy who knew about stars but nothing

about her. And she waited, listening to him sob while

she cried quietly to herself, until she finaly heard his feet

shuffle across the floor, his sad gait carrying him away.

••••

That night, she spent another evening on a cold cot,

another evening of not being told what she'd been

arrested for, and evening to count the hurts she had

unwittingly caused. The next day, there was a final climb

up through a land of strangers, the whispers of a double

cleaning chasing after her, Juliette faling into another

stunned trance, one leg moving and then the other.

At the end of her climb, she was moved into a familiar

cel, past Peter Bilings and her old desk. Her escort

colapsed into Deputy Marnes' squeaking

chair,

complaining of exhaustion.

Juliette could feel the shel that had formed around her

during the long three days, that hard enamel of

numbness and disbelief. People didn’t talk softer, they

just sounded that way. They didn’t stand further from

her, they just seemed more distant.

She sat on the lone cot and listened to

charge her with conspiracy. A data drive hung in a limp

plastic bag like a pet fish that had gobbled al its water

and now lay dead. Dug out of the incinerator,

somehow. Its edges were blackened. A scrol was

unspooled, only partly pulped. Details of her computer

search were listed. She knew most of what they found

was Holston's data, not hers. She wasn't sure what the

point would be of teling them this. They already had

enough for several cleanings.

A judge stood beside Peter in his black coverals while

her sins were listed, as if anyone were realy there to

decide her fate. Juliette knew the decision had already

been made, and by someone else.

Scottie's name was mentioned, but she didn't catch the

context. It could have been that the email on his account

had been discovered. It could be that they were going

to pin his death on her, just in case. Bones buried with

bones, keeping the secrets held between them safe.

She tuned them out and instead watched over her

shoulder as a smal tornado formed on

the flats and

spun toward the hils. It eventualy dissipated as it

crashed into the gentle slope, dissolving like so many

cleaners, thrown to the caustic breeze and left to waste

away.

Bernard never showed himself. Too afraid or too smug,

Jules would never know. She peered down at her

hands, at the thin trace of grease deep under her nails,

and knew that she was already dead. It didn’t matter,

somehow. There was a line of bodies behind and

before her. She was just the shuffling present, the cog in

the machine, spinning and gnashing its metal teeth until

that one gear wore down, until the slivers of her self

broke loose and did more damage, until

she needed to

be puled, cast off, and replaced with another.

Pam brought her oatmeal and fried potatoes from the

cafeteria, her favorite. She left it steaming outside the

bars. Notes were ported up from Mechanical al day

and passed through to her. She was glad none of her

friends visited. Their silent voices were more than

enough.

Juliette's eyes did the crying, the rest of her too numb to

shake or sob. She read the sweet notes while tears

dripped on her thighs. Knox's was a simple apology.

She imagined he would rather have murdered and done

something—even if he were cast out for the attempt—

than the impotent display his note said he would regret

al his life. Others sent spiritual messages, promises to

see her on the other side, quotes from memorized

books. Shirly maybe knew her best and gave her an

update on the generator and the new centrifuge for the

refinery. She told her al would remain wel and largely

because of her. This elicited the faintest of sobs from

Juliette. She rubbed the charcoal letters

with her fingers,

transferring some of her friends' black thoughts to

herself.

She was left at last with Walker's note, the only one she

couldn't figure. As the sun set over the harsh landscape,

the wind dying down for the night and alowing the dust

to settle, she read his words over and over, trying to

deduce what he meant.

Jules-

No fear. Now is for laughing. The truth is a joke

and they're good in Supply.

-Walk

••••

She wasn't sure how she fel asleep, only that she woke

up and found notes like peeled chips of paint around

her cot, more of them slipped between the bars

overnight. Juliette turned her head and peered through

the darkness, realizing someone was there. A man

stood behind the bars. When she stirred, he puled

away, a wedding band singing with the sound of steel

on steel. She rose hurriedly from the cot and rushed to

the bars on sleepy legs. She grabbed

them with

trembling hands and peered through the darkness as the

figure melded with the black.

“Dad—?” she caled out, reaching through the grate.

But he didn’t turn. The tal figure hurried his pace,

slipping into the void, a mirage now, as wel as a distant

childhood memory.

••••

The folowing sunrise was something to behold. There

was a rare break in the low, dark clouds that alowed

visible rays of golden smoke to slide sideways across

the hils. Juliette lay in her cot, watching the dimness

fade to light, her cheek resting on her hands, the smel

of cold untouched oatmeal drifting from outside the

bars. She thought of the men and women

in IT working

through the past three nights to construct a suit tailored

for her, their blasted parts ported up from Supply. The

suit would be timed to last her just long enough, to get

her through the cleaning but no further.

In al the ordeal of her handcuffed climb, the days and

nights of numb acceptance—the thought of the actual

cleaning had never occurred to her until now, on the

very morning of that duty. She felt, with absolute

certainty, that she would not perform the act. She knew

they al said this, every cleaner, and that they al

experienced

some

magical,

perhaps

spiritual,

transformation on the threshold of their deaths and

performed nonetheless. But she had no one up-top to

clean for. She wasn’t the first cleaner from Mechanical,

but she was determined to be the first to refuse.

She said as much as Peter took her from her cel and

led her to that yelow door. A tech from IT was waiting

inside, making last minute adjustments to her suit.

Juliette listened to his instructions with a clinical

detachment. She saw al the weaknesses in the design.

She realized—if she hadn't been so busy working two

shifts in Mechanical to keep the floods out, the oil in,

the power humming—that she could make a better suit

in her sleep. She studied washers and

seals identical to

the kind employed in pumps, but designed, she knew,

to break down. The shiny coat of heat tape, applied in

overlapping strips to form the skin of the suit, she knew

to be purposefuly inferior. She nearly pointed these

things out to the tech as he promised her the latest and

greatest. He zipped her up, tugged on her gloves,

helped with her boots, and explained the numbered

pockets.

Juliette repeated the mantra from Walker's note: *No*

fear. No fear. No fear.

Now is for laughing. The truth is a joke. And they

are in good Supply.

The tech checked her gloves and the velcro seals over

her zippers while Juliette puzzled over

Walker's note.

Why had he capitalized "Supply?" Or was she even

remembering it correctly? Now, she couldn't

remember. A strip of tape went around one boot, then

the other. Juliette laughed at the spectacle of it al. It

was al so utterly pointless. They should bury her in the

dirt farms, where her body might actualy do some

good.

The helmet came last, handled with obvious care. The

tech had her hold it while he adjusted the metal ring

colar around her neck. She looked down at her

reflection in the visor, her eyes holow and so much

older than she remembered yet so much younger than

she felt. Finaly, the helmet went on, the room dimmer

through the dark glass. The tech reminded her of the

argon blast, of the fires that would folow. She would

have to get out quickly or die a far worse death inside.

He left her to consider this. The yelow door behind her

clanged shut. Its wheel spun on the inside as if by a

ghost.

Juliette wondered if she should simply stay and

succumb to the flames, not give this spiritual awakening

a chance to persuade her. What would they say in

Mechanical when that tale spiraled its way through the

silo? Some would be proud of her obstinacy, she knew.

Some would be horrified at her having gone out that

way, in a bone-charring inferno. A few might even think

she’d not been brave enough to take the

first step out

the door, that she'd wasted the chance to see the

outside with her own eyes.

Her suit crinkled as the argon was pumped into the

room, creating enough pressure to temporarily hold the

outside toxins at bay. She found herself shuffling toward

the door, almost against her wil. When it cracked, the

plastic sheeting in the room flattened itself against every

pipe, against the low-jutting bench, and she knew the

end had come. The doors before her parted, the silo

splitting like the skin of a pea, giving her a view of the

outside through a haze of condensing steam.

One boot slid through that crack, folowed by another.

And Juliette moved out into the world,

dead set on

leaving it on her own terms, seeing it for the first time

with her own eyes even through this limited portal, this

roughly eight inch by two inch sheet of glass, she

suddenly realized.

13

Bernard watched the cleaning from the cafeteria while

his techs gathered their supplies in

Peter’s office. It was

his habit to view these things alone—his techs rarely

joined him. They lugged their equipment out of the

office and headed straight for the stairwel. Bernard was

ashamed sometimes of the superstitions, the fears, he

fostered even in his own men.

First the dome of her helmet, and then the shiny specter

of Juliette Nichols, staggered aboveground. She

lumbered up the ramp, her movements stiff and unsure.

Bernard checked the clock on the wal and reached for

his cup of juice. He settled back to see if he could

gauge another cleaner’s reaction to what they were

seeing: A world crisp, bright, and clean, studded with

soaring life, grass wavering in a fresh

breeze, a

glimmering acropolis beckoning from over the hils.

He had watched nearly a dozen cleanings in his day,

always enjoying that first pirouette as they took in their

surroundings. He had seen men who had left families

behind dance before the sensors, waving their loved

ones out, trying to pantomime al the false goodness

displayed on their visor screens, al to no avail, to no

audience. He had seen people reaching madly for flying

birds, mistaking them for insects much closer to their

faces. One cleaner had even gone back down the ramp

and presumably beat on the door as if to signal

something, before finaly getting to cleaning. What were

any of these various reactions but the

proud reminder of

a system that worked? That no matter the individual

psychology, the sight of al their false hopes eventualy

drove them to do what they promised they wouldn’t.

Perhaps that’s why Mayor Jahns could never stomach

to watch. She had no idea what they were seeing,

feeling, responding to. She would come up with her

weak stomach the next morning and take in a sunrise,

mourn in her own way, the rest of the silo granting her

some space. But Bernard cherished this transformation,

this delusion he and his predecessors had honed to

perfection. He smiled and took a sip of fresh fruit juice

and observed this Juliette as she staggered around,

coming to her misguided senses. There

was the barest

coat of grime on the sensor lenses, not even worth a

hard scrub, but he knew from double cleanings in the

past that she would do it anyway. No one had ever not.

He took another sip and turned to the sheriff's office to

see if Peter had summoned the courage to come watch,

but the door was closed al but a crack. He had high

hopes for that boy. Sheriff today, and maybe one day

Mayor. Bernard might hold the post for a short while,

maybe an election or two, but he knew he belonged in

IT, that this was not the job for him. Or rather, that his

other duties were far more difficult to replace.

He turned away from Peter's office and back to the

view—and nearly dropped his paper

cup of juice.

The silvery form of Juliette Nichols was already trudging

up the hil. The grime on the sensors was stil in place.

Bernard stood abruptly, knocking his chair over

backwards. He staggered toward the walscreen,

almost as if he could chase after her.

And then he watched, dumbfounded, as she strode up

that dark crease and paused for a moment over the stil

form of two other cleaners. Bernard checked the clock

again. Any moment now. Any moment. She would

colapse and fumble for her helmet. She would rol in

the dusty soil, kicking up a cloud, sliding down that

slope until she came to a dead rest.

But the second hand ticked along, and so did Juliette.

She left the two cleaners behind, her limbs stil climbing

with power, her steady gait guiding her far up to the

crest of the hil where she stood, taking in a view of

who-knew-what, before disappearing, impossibly, out

of sight.

••••

Bernard’s hand was sticky with juice as he raced down

the stairwel. He kept the crushed paper cup in his fist

for three levels before catching up to his techs and

hurling it at their backs. The bal of trash bounced off

and went tumbling into space, destined to settle on

some distant landing below. Bernard cursed the

confused men and kept running, his feet dangerously

close to tripping over themselves. A

dozen floors down,

he nearly colided with the first hopeful climbers

ascending to see the second crisp sunrise in the past

weeks.

He was sore and winded when he finaly made it down

to thirty-four, his spectacles sliding around on the

sweaty bridge of his nose. He burst through the double

doors and yeled for the gate to be opened. A

frightened guard complied, scanning the reader with his

own ID right before Bernard slammed through the

stubby metal arm. He practicaly ran down the halway,

taking two turns before he got to the most heavily

fortified door in the entire silo.

Swiping his card and punching in his security code, he

hurried inside, past the thick wal of solid steel. It was

hot in the room ful of servers. The identical black cases

rose from the tiled floor like monuments to what was

possible, to the craft and engineering of human

endeavor. Bernard walked among them, the sweat

gathering in his eyebrows, light glittering in his vision, his

upper lip wet with perspiration. He ran

his hands along

the faces of the machines, the flashing lights like happy

eyes trying to soothe his anger, the electrical hum like

whispers to their master, hoping to calm him.

None of it worked. Bernard felt a surge of fear. He

went over and over what could have gone wrong. It

wasn’t as if she would survive, she couldn’t possibly

survive, but his mandate, second only to preserving the

data on these machines, was to never let anyone out of

sight. It was the highest order. He didn’t have to know

why to tremble from the morning’s failure.

He cursed the heat as he reached the server on the far

wal. The vents overhead carried cool air from the

down deep and deposited it into the

server room. Large

fans in the back whisked the heat away and pumped it

through more ducts down the silo, keeping the cool and

dingy nastiness of the triple-digit levels humanely warm.

Bernard glared at the vents, remembering the power

holiday, the week of rising temperatures that had

threatened his servers, al for some generator, and al

because of this woman he had just let out of his sight.

The memory stoked the flames under his colar. He

cursed the design flaw that left the control of those vents

down in Mechanical with those grease monkeys, those

uncivilized tinkerers. He thought of the ugly and loud

machines down there, the smel of leaking exhaust and

burning oil. He had only needed to see it

once—to kil a

man—but even that was too much. Comparing those

noisy engines with the sublime servers was enough to

make him never want to leave IT. Here was where

silicone chips released their tangy scent as they heated

under the strain of crunching data. Here was where one

could smel the rubber coating the wires, running in

paralel, neatly bundled, labeled and coded, and

streaming with gigabits of glorious data every second.

Here was where he oversaw the refiling of their data

drives with al that had been deleted from the last

uprising. Here, a man could think, surrounded by

machines quietly doing the same.

Somewhere down those vents, however, was the

stench of the unclean. Bernard wiped the sweat from his

head and rubbed it on the seat of his coverals. The

thought of that woman, first *stealing* from him, then

rewarded by Jahns with the highest office of law, and

now daring to not clean, to wander off—

It raised his temperature dangerously.

He reached the server at the end of the row and

squeezed between it and the wal to the back. The key

kept around his neck slid into the greased innards of the

case locks. As he turned each one, he reminded himself

that she couldn’t have gotten far. And how much

trouble could this realy cause? More importantly, what

had gone wrong? The timing should always be

impeccable. It always had been.

The back of the server came free, revealing the mostly

empty innards behind. Bernard slipped the key back

into his coverals and set the panel of black steel aside,

the metal damnably hot to the touch. There was a cloth

case fastened inside the server’s bely. Bernard

unloosened the flap and reached inside, extracting the

plastic headset. He puled it down over

his ears,

adjusted the mic, and unspooled the cord.

He could keep this under control, he thought to himself.

He was head of IT. He was Mayor. Peter Bilings was

his man. People liked stasis, and he could maintain the

ilusion of it. They were afraid of change, and he could

conceal it. With him in both offices, who would oppose

him? Who was better qualified? He would explain this.

Everything would be okay.

Stil, he was mightily, uniquely afraid as he located the

correct jack and plugged in the cord. There was an

immediate beeping sound in the headphones, the

connection automaticaly taking place.

He could stil oversee IT from a distance, make sure

this never happened again, be more on top of his

reports. Everything was under control. He told himself

this as his headphones clicked and the beeping stopped.

He knew someone had picked up, even if they refused

anything in the way of a greeting. He felt there was

annoyance hanging in the silence.

Bernard dispensed with the pleasantries as wel. He

jumped right in to what he needed to say.

“Silo one? This is silo eighteen.” He licked the sweat

off his lips and adjusted his mic. His palms suddenly felt

cold and clammy, and he needed to pee.

“We, uh . . . we might have a, uh . . . slight problem

over here—”

Wool 4 – The

unraveling

0

“*The Tragic Historye of Romeus and*

Juliette”

The walk was long, and longer stil for her young mind.

Though Juliette took few of the steps with her own

smal feet, it felt as though she and her parents had

traveled for weeks. Al things took forever in impatient

youth, and any kind of waiting was

torture.

She rode on her father's shoulders, clutched his chin,

her legs wrapped choking around his neck. Riding so

high, she had to stoop her head to avoid the undersides

of the steps. Clangs from strangers' boots rang out on

the treads above her, and sprinkles of rust-dust drifted

into her eyes.

Juliette blinked and rubbed her face into her father's

hair. As excited as she was, the rise and fal of his

shoulders made it impossible to stay awake. When he

complained of a sore back, she rode a few levels on her

mother's hip, fingers interlocked around her neck, her

young head loling as she drifted off to sleep.

She enjoyed the sounds of the traveling,

the footfals

and the rhythmic song of her mother and father chatting

adult things, their voices drifting back and forth as she

faded in and out.

The journey became a haze of foggy recolections. She

awoke to the squealing of pigs through an open door,

was vaguely aware of a garden they toured, woke fuly

to the smel of something sweet and ate a meal—lunch

or dinner, she wasn't sure. She hardly stirred that night

as she slid from her father's arms into a dark bed. She

awoke the next morning beside a cousin she didn't

know in an apartment nearly identical to her own. It

was a weekend. She could tel by the older kids playing

loudly in the halway instead of getting

ready for school.

After a cold breakfast, she returned to the stairs with

her parents and the sensation that they'd been traveling

al their lives instead of just one day. And then the naps

returned with their gentle erasure of time.

What took two days and felt like a week or a month to

young Juliette, finaly brought them to the hundredth

landing of the silo's unfathomable depths. She took the

last steps herself, her mom and dad holding a hand

each, teling her the significance. She was now in a

place caled the "down deep," they told her. The

bottom third. They steadied her sleepy legs as she

wobbled from the last tread of the ninety-ninth stairway

to the landing of the hundredth. Her

father pointed

above the open and busy doors to a large painted

number with an incredible third digit:

100

The two circles captivated Juliette. They were like wide

open eyes peering out at the world for the first time.

She told her father that she could already count that

high.

“I know you can,” he said. “It’s because you’re so

smart.”

She folowed her mother into the bazaar while clutching

one of her father’s strong and rough hands with both of

her own. There were people everywhere. It was loud,

but in a good way. A happy noise filed the air as

people lifted their voices to be heard—just like a

classroom once the teacher was gone.

Juliette felt afraid of getting lost, and so she clung to her

father. They waited while her mom bartered for lunch. It

required stopping at what felt like a dozen stals to get

the handful of things she needed. Her dad talked a man

into letting her lean through a fence to touch a rabbit.

The fur was so soft it was like it wasn’t there. Juliette

snapped her hand back in fear when the animal turned

its head, but it just chewed something invisible and

looked at her like it was bored.

The bazaar seemed to go on forever. It wound around

and out of sight, even when al the many-colored adult

legs were clear enough for her to see to the end. Off to

the sides, narrower passages ful of more stals and tents

twisted in a maze of colors and sounds, but Juliette

wasn't alowed to go down any of these. She stuck with

her parents until they arrived at the first set of square

steps she'd ever seen in her young life.

"Easy now," her mother told her, helping her up the

steps.

"I can do it," she said stubbornly, but took her mom's

hand anyway.

“Two and one child,” her father said to someone at the

top of the steps. She heard the clatter of chits going into

a box that sounded ful of them. As her father passed

through the gate, she saw the man by the box was

dressed in al colors, a funny hat on his head that

flopped much too big. She tried to get a better look as

her mom guided her through the gates, a hand on her

back and whispers in her ear to keep up with her father.

The gentleman turned his head, bels jangling on his hat,

and made a funny face at her, his tongue poking out to

the side.

Juliette laughed, but stil felt half afraid of the strange

man as they found a spot to sit and eat. Her dad dug a

thin bed sheet out of his pack and spread it across one

of the wide benches. Juliette's mom made her take her

shoes off before she stood on the sheet. She held her

father's shoulder and looked down the slope of

benches and seats toward the wide open room below.

Her father told her the open room was caled a "stage."

Everything in the down deep had

different names.

“What’re they doing?” she asked her father. Several

men on the stage, dressed as colorful as the gatesman,

were throwing bals up into the air—an impossible

number of them—keeping them al from hitting the

ground.

Her father laughed. “They’re juggling. They’re here to

entertain us until the play starts."

Juliette wasn't sure she wanted the play to start. This

was it, the thing she wanted to see. The jugglers tossed

bals and hoops between each other, and Juliette could

feel her own arms windmiling as she watched. She tried

counting the hoops, but they wouldn't stay in one place

long enough.

“Eat your lunch,” her mother reminded her, passing her

bites of a fruit sandwich.

Juliette was mesmerized. When the jugglers put the bals

and hoops away and started chasing one another, faling

down and acting sily, she laughed as loudly as the other

kids. She looked constantly to her mom and dad to see

if they were watching. She tugged on their sleeves, but

they just nodded and continued to talk, eat, and drink.

When another family sat close and a boy older than her

laughed at the jugglers as wel, Juliette felt suddenly like

she had company. She began to squeal even louder.

The jugglers were the brightest things she had ever

seen. She could’ve watched them forever.

But then the lights were dimmed and the

play began,

and it was boring by comparison. It started off nice with

a rousing sword fight, but then it was a lot of strange

words and a man and woman looking at each other the

way her parents did, talking in some funny language.

Juliette fel asleep. She dreamed of flying through the

silo with one hundred colorful bals and hoops soaring

al around her, always out of reach, the hoops round

like the numbers at the end of the bazaar's level—and

then she woke up to whistles and applause.

Her parents were standing and yeling while the people

on the stage in the funny costumes took several bows.

Juliette yawned and looked over at the boy on the

bench beside her. He was sleeping with

his mouth open,

his head in his mom's lap, his shoulders shaking while

she clapped and clapped.

They gathered up the sheet and her father carried her

down to the stage where the swordfighters and strange

talkers were speaking to the audience and shaking

hands. Juliette wanted to meet the jugglers. She wanted

to learn how to make the hoops float in the air. But her

parents waited instead until they could speak to one of

the ladies, the one who had her hair braided and twisted

into drooping curves.

“Juliette,” her father told her, lifting her onto the stage.

“I want you to meet . . . Juliette.” He gestured to the

woman in the fluffy dress with the strange hair.

“Is that your real name?” the lady asked, kneeling

down and reaching for Juliette’s hand.

Juliette puled it back like it was another rabbit about to

bite her, but nodded.

“You were wonderful,” her mom told the lady. They

shook hands and introduced themselves.

“Did you like the play?” the lady with the funny hair

asked.

Juliette nodded. She could sense that she was supposed

to and that this made it okay to lie.

“Her father and I came to this show years ago when

we first started dating,” her mother said. She rubbed

Juliette’s hair. “We were going to name our first child

either Romeus or Juliette.”

“Wel, be glad you had a girl, then,” the lady said,

smiling.

Her parents laughed, and Juliette was beginning to be

less afraid of this woman with the same name as her.

“Do you think we could get your autograph?” Her

father let go of her shoulder and rummaged in his pack.

“I have a program in here somewhere.”

“Why not a script for this young Juliette?” The lady

smiled at her. “Are you learning your letters?”

“I can count to a hundred,” Juliette said proudly.

The woman paused, then smiled. Juliette watched her

as she stood and crossed the stage, her dress flowing in

a way that coverals never could. The lady returned

from behind a curtain with a tiny book of papers held

fast with brass pins. She accepted a

charcoal from

Juliette's father and wrote her name large and curly

across the cover.

The woman pressed the colection of papers into her

smal hands. "I want you to have this, Juliette of the

silo."

Her mother protested. "Oh, we couldn't. That's too

much paper—"

“She’s only five,” her father said.

“I have another,” the lady assured them. “We make our

own. I want her to have it.”

She reached out and touched Juliette’s cheek, and this

time Juliette didn’t pul away. She was too busy flipping

through the papers, looking at al the curly notes

handwritten along the sides beside the printed words.

One word, she noticed, was circled over and over

among al the others. She couldn't make out many of

them, but this one she could read. It was her name. It

was at the beginning of so many sentences:

Juliette. Juliette.

This was her. She looked up at the lady, understanding

at once why her parents had brought her there, why

they had walked so far and for so long.

“Thank you,” she said, remembering her manners.

And then, after some consideration:

“I’m sorry I fel asleep.

1

“*A glooming peace this morning with it brings;*

The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head.

Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;

Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished.”

It was the morning of the worst cleaning of Lukas’s life

—and for once he considered going into work, to

ignore the paid holiday, to pretend it was a day like any

other. He sat at the foot of his bed as he worked up the

courage to move, one of his many star charts in his lap.

Lightly with his fingers, so as to not

smear the marks

away, he caressed the charcoal outline of one star in

particular.

It wasn’t a star like the others. Those were simple dots

on a meticulous grid with details of date sighted,

location, and intensity. This wasn’t that kind of star—

not one that lasted nearly so long. It was the five

pointed kind, the outline of a sheriff's badge. He

remembered drawing the shape while she was talking to

him one night, the steel on her chest glowing faintly as it

caught the weak light from the stairwel. He

remembered her voice being magical, the way she

carried herself mesmerizing, and her arrival into his

boring routine had been as unexpected as

the parting of

clouds.

He also remembered how she had turned away from

him in her cel two nights ago, had tried to save his

feelings by pushing him away—

Lukas had no more tears. He had spent most of the

night shedding them for this woman he hardly knew.

And now he wondered what he would

do with his day,

with his life. The thought of her out there, doing anything

for them—cleaning—made him sick. He wondered if

that was why he'd had no appetite for two days. Some

deep part of his gut must know he'd never keep

anything down, even if he forced himself to eat.

He set the star chart aside and dropped his face into his

palms. He rested there, so tired, trying to convince

himself to just get up and go to work. If he went to

work, at least he'd be distracted. He tried to remember

where he'd left off in the server room last week. Was it

the number eight tower that had gone down again?

Sammi had suggested he swap out the control board,

but Lukas had suspected a bad cable.

That’s what he’d

been doing—he remembered now—toning out the

Ethernet runs. It’s what he should be doing right then,

that very day. Anything but sitting around on a holiday,

feeling like he could be physicaly il over a woman he’d

done little more than tel his mother about.

Lukas stood and shrugged on the same pair of coverals

he’d worn the day before. He remained there a

moment, staring at his bare feet, wondering why he’d

gotten up. Where was he going? His mind was

completely blank, his body numb. He wondered if he

could stand there, unmoving, his stomach twisted in

knots, for the rest of his life. Someone would eventualy

find him, wouldn’t they? Dead and stiff,

standing

upright, a statue of a corpse.

He shook his head and these black thoughts loose and

looked for his boots.

He found them; it was an accomplishment. Lukas had

done something by getting himself dressed.

He left his room and ambled toward the landing,

weaving around kids squealing from

another day off

school, parents trying to corral them and get their boots

and coverals on. The commotion was little more than

background noise for Lukas. It was a hum, like the

aches in his legs from gathering signatures the days

before. He stepped out onto the apartment's landing

and felt a habitual tug upwards toward the cafeteria. Al

he could think about was al he had thought of for the

past week: making it through another day so he could

go up-top for the chance to see her.

It suddenly occurred to Lukas that he stil could. He

wasn't one for sunrises—he much preferred the twilight

and the stars—but if he wanted to see her, al he had to

do was climb to the cafeteria and scan the landscape.

There would be a new body there, a new suit with the

shine stil on it glimmering in whatever weak rays the sun

dribbled through those blasted clouds.

He could see the image clearly in his head: her

uncomfortable sprawl—legs twisted, arm pinned,

helmet turned to the side, gazing back at the silo.

Sadder stil, he saw himself decades later, a lonely old

man sitting in front of that gray walscreen and drawing

not star charts but landscapes. The same landscapes

over and over, looking up at a wasting might-have-

been, sketching that same stil pose while weeping old-

man tears that dripped and turned charcoal to mud.

He would be like Marnes, that poor man. And thinking

of the Deputy, who died with no one to

bury him, it

reminded Lukas of the last thing Juliette had told him.

She had begged him to find someone, to not be like her,

to never be alone.

He gripped landing fifty's cool steel railing and leaned

over. Looking down, he could watch the stairwel dril

its way deep into the earth. The landing for fifty-six was

visible below, the several landings between jutting off in

unseen angles. It was hard to gauge the distance—

Lukas was used to the much larger scale of stars—but

he figured it was more than enough. No need to walk

down to eighty-two, which most jumpers preferred for

its long clear path down to ninety-nine.

Suddenly, he saw himself in flight, tumbling down, arms

and legs splayed. He reckoned he would just miss the

landing. One of the railings would catch him and saw

him near in half. Or maybe if he jumped out a little

further, maybe if he aimed his head, he could make it

quick.

He straightened, feeling a twinge of fear and a rush of

adrenaline from picturing the fal, the end, so vividly. He

glanced around and checked the morning traffic to see if

anyone was watching him. He had seen other adults

peer over railings after things they'd lost. He'd always

assumed bad thoughts were going through their heads.

Because he knew, growing up in the silo, that only

children dropped physical things from the landings. By

the time you got older, you knew to keep

a grip on al

that you could. Eventualy, it was something else that

slipped away, something else you lost that tumbled

down through the heart of the silo, that made you

ponder leaping after—

The landing shivered with the beat of a hurrying porter;

the sound of bare feet slapping against steel treads

came next and spiraled closer. Lukas slid away from

the railing and tried to focus on what he was doing that

day. Maybe he should just crawl back in bed and sleep,

kil some hours with unconsciousness.

As he attempted to summon some sliver of motivation,

the speeding porter flew past, and Lukas caught a

glimpse of the boy's face twisted in consternation. Even

as he sped out of sight—his pace swift and reckless—

the image of his worry remained vividly lodged in

Lukas's mind.

And Lukas knew. As the rapid patter of the boy's feet

wound deeper into the earth, he knew something had

happened that morning, something up-top, something

newsworthy about the cleaning.

A seed of hope caught a taste of moisture. Some

wishful kernel buried deep, where he was loathe to

acknowledge it lest it poison or choke him, began to

sprout. Maybe the cleaning never happened. Was it

possible his petition had been reconsidered? Had the

weight of al those signatures gathered over a spread of

a hundred levels finaly worn the judges

down? What if

Bernard had actualy come through for him, had swayed

the presiding judge to lower Juliette's offense?

Lukas recaled his appeals to Bernard, begging him as a

friend, as his boss, to intervene on her behalf. He had

asked him to add his own signature to the petition,

which he finaly had. But Bernard had warned him that

her fate was out of his hands, that the judges would

decide, that his authority as interim mayor made him

practicaly powerless.

And yet, if a porter had dire news on a day of cleaning,

could it be that his friend had kept at it al night and had

finaly come through?

That tiny seed of hope sprang roots. It grew vine-like

through Lukas's chest, filing him with an urgency to run

up and see for himself. He left the railing, and the dream

of leaping after his worries, and pushed his way through

the morning crowd. Whispers, he noticed, were already

foaming in the porter's wake. He wasn't the only one

who had noticed.

As he joined the upbound traffic, he realized the aches

in his legs from the days before had vanished. He

prepared to pass the slow-moving family in front of him

—when he heard the loud squawk of a radio behind.

Lukas turned to find Deputy Marsh a few treads back

fumbling for the radio on his hip, a smal cardboard box

clutched to his chest, a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Lukas stopped and held the railing,

waiting for the mids

deputy to reach him.

“Marsh!”

The deputy finaly got the volume down on his radio and

glanced up. He nodded to Lukas. The both of them

squeezed against the railing as a worker and his shadow

passed heading upbound.

“What’s the news?” Lukas asked. He knew the deputy

wel, and he knew he might spil it for free.

Marsh swiped his forehead and moved the box into the

crook of his other arm. “That Bernard is whoopin’ my

ass this mornin’,” he complained. “Done climbed

enough this week!”

“No, what of the *cleaning*?” Lukas asked. “A porter

just hurried by like he’d seen a ghost—”

Deputy Marsh glanced up the steps. “I was told to

bring her things to thirty-four as quick as grease. Hank

nearly kiled himself bringing ‘em partway up to me—”

He started up the stairs around Lukas as if he couldn’t

afford to stay. “Look, I’ve gotta keep movin’ if I wanna

keep my job—”

Lukas held his arm, and traffic sweled below them as

annoyed climbers squeezed past and against the

occasional traveler heading down. “Did the cleaning go

through or not?” Lukas demanded to know.

Marsh sagged against the railing. Quiet chatter popped

through his radio.

“No,” he whispered, and Lukas felt as though he could

fly. He could fly straight up the space between the stairs

and the concrete heart of the silo, could soar around the

landings, could go fifty levels at a leap —

“She went out, but she didn’t clean,” Marsh said, his

voice low but laced with words sharp enough to pierce

Lukas’s dreams. “She wandered over them hils—”

“Wait. What?”

Marsh nodded, and sweat dripped from the Deputy’s

nose. “Plum out of sight,” he hissed, like a radio turned

down low. “Now I’ve got to get her things up to Bernar

__”

“I’l do it,” Lukas said, reaching out his hands. “I’m

going to thirty-four anyway.”

Marsh shifted the box. The poor Deputy seemed liable

to colapse at any moment. Lukas begged him, just as

he had two days earlier in order to see Juliette in her

cel. “Let me take them up for you,” he said. “You

know Bernard won’t mind. He and I are good friends,

just like you and me have always been __”

Deputy Marsh wiped his lip and nodded ever so

slightly, thinking on this.

“Look, I’m going up anyway,” Lukas said. He found

himself slowly taking the box from an exhausted Marsh,

even though the waves of emotion surging through his

own body made it difficult to focus. The traffic on the

stairs had become background noise. The idea that

Juliette may stil be in the silo had slipped away, but the

news that she hadn’t cleaned, that she had made it over

the hils—this filed him with something

else. It touched

the part of him that yearned to map the stars. It meant

no one would ever have to watch her waste away—

“You’l be careful with that,” Marsh said. His eyes

were on the box, now tucked into Lukas’s arms.

“I’l guard it with my life,” Lukas told him. “Trust me.”

Marsh nodded to let him know he did. And Lukas

hurried up the stairs, ahead of those rising to celebrate

the cleaning, the weight of Juliette's belongings rattling

softly in a box tucked tightly against his chest.

2

"*Thy old groans ring yet in my ancient ears.*"

Walker the electrician bent over a cluttered workbench

and adjusted his magnifier. The great bulbous lens was

attached to his head with a hoop that might've been

uncomfortable had he not been wearing it for most of

his sixty two years. As he pushed the glass into position,

the smal black chip on the green electronics board

came into crystal focus. He could see each of the silver

metal legs bent out from its body like knees on a spider,

the tiny feet seemingly trapped in silver

puddles of

frozen steel.

With the tip of his finest soldering iron, Walker prodded

a spot of silver while he worked the suction bulb with

his foot. The metal around the chip's tiny foot melted

and was puled through a straw, one little leg of sixteen

free.

He was about to move to the other—he

had stayed up

al night puling fried chips to occupy his mind from

other things—when he heard the recognizable patter of

that new porter skittering down his hal.

Walker dropped the board and hot iron to the

workbench and hurried to his door. He held the jamb

and leaned out as the kid ran past.

“Porter!” he yeled, and the boy

reluctantly stopped.

“What news, boy?”

The kid smiled, revealing the whites of youth. “I’ve got

big news,” he said. “Cost you a chit, though.”

Walker grunted with disgust, but dug into his coverals.

He waved the kid over. “You’re that Sampson boy,

right?”

He bobbed his head, his hair dancing

around his

youthful face.

“Shadowed under Gloria, didn’t you?”

The kid nodded again as his eyes folowed the silver

chit drawn from Walker’s rattling pockets.

“You know, Gloria used to take pity on an old man

with no family and no life. Trusted me with news, she

did.”

“Gloria’s dead,” the boy said, lifting his palm.

“That she is,” Walker said with a sigh. He dropped the

chit into the child’s outstretched and youthful palm, then

waved his aged and spotted own for the news. He was

dying to know everything and would have gladly payed

ten chits. “The details, child. Don’t skip a one.”

“No cleaning, Mr. Walker!”

Walker's heart missed a beat. The boy turned his

shoulder to run on.

"Stay, boy! What do you mean, no cleaning? She's

been set free?"

The porter shook his head. His hair was long, wild, and

seemingly built for flying up and down the staircase.

"Nossir. She *refused*!"

The child's eyes were electric, his grin

huge with the

possession of such knowledge. No one had ever

refused to clean in his lifetime. In Walker's, neither.

Maybe not ever. Walker felt a surge of pride in his

Juliette.

The boy waited a moment. He seemed eager to run off.

"Anything else?" Walker asked.

Samson nodded and glanced at Walker's

pockets.

Walker let out a long sigh of disgust for what had

become of this generation. He dug into his pocket with

one hand and waved impatiently with the other.

“She’s *gone*, Mr. Walker!”

He snatched the chit from Walker’s palm.

“Gone? As in dead? Speak up, son!”

Samson’s teeth flashed as the chit

disappeared into his

coverals. “Nossir. Gone as in over the hil. No cleaning,

Mr. Walker, just strode right over and out of view.

Gone to the city, and Mr. Bernard witnessed the whole

thing!”

The young porter slapped Walker on the arm, needing,

obviously, to strike something with his enthusiasm. He

swiped his hair off his face, smiled large, and turned to

run along his route, his feet lighter and pockets heavier

from the tale.

Walker was left, stunned, in the doorway. He gripped

the jamb with an iron claw lest he tumble out into the

world. He stood there, swaying, looking down at the

pile of dishes he'd slipped outside the night before. He

glanced over his shoulder at the disheveled cot that had

been caling his name al night. Smoke stil rose from the

soldering iron. He turned away from the hal, which

would soon be pattering and clinking with the sounds of

first shift, and unplugged the iron before he started

another fire.

He remained there a moment, thinking on Jules, thinking

on this news. He wondered if she'd gotten his note in

time, if it had lessened the awful fear he'd felt in his gut

for her.

Walker returned to the doorway. The down deep was

stirring. He felt a powerful tug to go out there, to cross

that threshold, to be a part of the unprecedented.

Shirly would probably be by soon with his breakfast

and to take away his dishes. He could wait for her,

maybe talk a bit. Perhaps this spel of insanity would

pass.

But the thought of waiting, of the minutes stacking up

like work orders, of not knowing how far Juliette had

gotten or what reaction the others might be having to

her not cleaning—

Walker lifted his foot and leaned it out past his

doorway, his boot hovering over untrammeled ground.

He took a deep breath, fel forward, and caught himself

on it. And suddenly, he felt like some intrepid explorer

himself. There he was, forty something years later,

teetering down a familiar halway, one hand brushing the

steel wals, a corner coming up around

which his eyes

could remember nothing.

And Walker became one more old soul pushing into the

great unknown—his brain dizzy with what he might find

out there.

3

"Is there no pity sitting in the clouds

that sees into the bottom of my grief?

O sweet my mother, cast me not away!"

The heavy steel doors of the silo parted, and a great

cloud of argon bilowed out with an angry hiss. The

cloud seemed to materialize from nowhere, the

compressed gas blossoming into a whipped froth as it

met the warmer, less dense air beyond.

Juliette Nichols stuck one boot through that narrow

gap. The doors only opened partway to hold back the

deadly toxins, to force the argon through with pent-up

pressure, so she had to turn sideways to squeeze

through, her bulky suit rubbing against the thick doors.

Al she could think of was the raging fire that would

soon fil the airlock. Its flames seemed to lick at her

back, forcing her to flee.

She puled her other boot through—and Juliette was

suddenly outside.

Outside.

There was nothing above her helmeted head but clouds,

sky, and the unseen stars.

She lumbered forward, emerging through the fog of

hissing argon to find herself on a sloping ramp, the

corners by the wals caked high with wind-trapped dirt.

It was easy to forget that the top floor of

the silo was

belowground. The view from her old office and the

cafeteria created an ilusion of standing on the surface of

the earth, head up in the wild air, but that was because

the sensors were located there.

Juliette looked down at the numbers on her chest and

remembered what she was supposed to be doing. She

trudged up the ramp, head down, focusing on her

boots. She wasn't sure how she even moved, if it was

the numbness one succumbed to in the face of

execution—or if it was just automated self-preservation,

simply a move away from the coming inferno in the

airlock, her body delaying the inevitable because it

couldn't think or plan beyond the next

fistful of seconds.

As Juliette reached the top of the ramp, her head

emerged into a lie, a grand and gorgeous untruth. Green

grass covered the hils like newly painted carpet. The

skies were intoxicatingly blue, the clouds bleached

white like fancy linen, the air peppered with soaring

things.

She spun in place and took in the spectacular

fabrication. It was as if she'd been dropped into a book

from her youth, a book where animals talked and

children flew and grays were never found.

Even knowing it wasn't real, knowing that she was

looking through an eight by two inch fib, the temptation

was overwhelming to *believe*. She

wanted to. She

wanted to forget what she knew of IT's devious

program, to forget everything she and Walker had

discussed, and to fal instead to the soft grasses that

weren't there, to rol around in the life that wasn't, to

strip off the ridiculous suit and go screaming happily

across the lying landscape.

She looked down at her hands, clenched and

unclenched them as much as the thick gloves would

alow. This was her coffin. Her thoughts scattered as

she fought to remember what was real. Her death was

real. The ugly world she had always known was real.

And then, for just a moment, she remembered that she

was supposed to be doing something.

She was

supposed to be cleaning.

She turned and gazed at the sensor tower, seeing it for

the first time. It was a sturdy block of steel and

concrete with a rusted and pitted ladder running up one

side. The bulge of sensor pods were stuck like warts on

the faces of the tower. Juliette reached for her chest,

grabbed one of the scrubbing pads, and tore it loose.

The note from Walker continued to stream through her

mind: *Don't be afraid*.

She took the course wool pad and rubbed it against the

arm of her suit. The heat tape wrapping did not peel,

did not flake away like the stuff she had once stolen

from IT, the tape they had engineered to fail. This was

the brand of heat tape Juliette was used to working

with, Mechanical's design.

They are good in Supply, Walker's note had said. The

good had referred to the *people* of Supply. After years

of helping Juliette score spares when she needed them

most, they had done something extraordinary for her.

While she had spent three days climbing stairs and three

lonely nights in three different holding cels on her way

to banishment, they had replaced IT's materials with

those from Mechanical. They had fulfiled their orders

for parts in a most devious way, and it must've been at

Walker's behest. IT had then—unwittingly and for once

—built a suit designed to *last*, not disintegrate.

Juliette smiled. Her death, however

certain, was

delayed. She took a long look at the sensors, relaxed

her fingers, and dropped the wool pad into the fake

grass. Turning for the nearest hil, she tried her best to

ignore the false colors and the layers of life projected on

top of what was truly there. Rather than give in to the

euphoria, she concentrated on the way her boots

clomped to packed earth, noted the feel of the angry

wind buffeting against her suit, listened for the faint hiss

as grains of sand pelted her helmet from al sides. There

was a terrifying world around her, one she could be

dimly aware of if she concentrated hard enough, a

world she knew but could no longer see.

She started up the steep slope and headed vaguely

toward the gleaming metropolis over the horizon. There

was little thought of making it there. Al she wanted was

to die beyond the hils where no one would have to

watch her rot away, so that Lukas the starhunter would

not be afraid to come up at twilight for fear of seeing

her stil form.

And suddenly, it felt good to simply be walking, to have

some purpose. She would take herself out of sight. It

was a more solid goal than that false city, which she

knew to be crumbling.

Partway up the hil, she came to a pair of large rocks.

Juliette started to dodge around them before she

realized where she was, that she had folowed the most

gentle path up the crook of two coliding slopes, and

here lay the most horrible lie of them al.

Holston and Alison. Hidden from her by the magic of

the visor. Covered in a mirage of stone.

There were no words. Nothing to see, nothing to say.

She glanced down the hil and spotted sporadic other

boulders resting in the grasses, their arrangement not

random at al but where cleaners of old had colapsed.

She turned away, leaving such sad things behind. It was

impossible to know how much time she had, how long

in order to hide her body from those who might gloat—

and the few who might mourn.

Climbing toward the crest of the hil, her legs stil sore

from ascending the silo, Juliette witnessed the first rips

in IT's deceitful veil. New portions of the sky and the

distant city came into view, parts that had been

obscured by the hil from down below. There seemed

to be a break in the program, a limit to its lies. While the

upper levels of the distant monoliths appeared whole

and gleamed in the false sunlight, below these sharp

panes of glass and bright steel lay the rotted dinginess of

an abandoned world. She could see

straight through the

bottom levels of many of the buildings, and with their

heavy tops projected onto them, they seemed liable to

topple at any moment.

To the side, the extra and unfamiliar buildings had no

supports at al, no foundations. They hung in the air with

dark sky beneath them. This same dark vista of gray

clouds and lifeless hils stretched out across the low

horizon, a hard line of painted blue where the visor's

program met its end.

Juliette puzzled over the incompleteness of IT's deceit.

Was it because they themselves had no idea what lay

beyond the hils, and so couldn't guess what to modify?

Or did they deem it not worth the effort, knowing

nobody would ever make it this far? Whatever the

reason, the jarring and ilogical nature of the view left

her dizzy if she studied it too closely. She concentrated

instead on her feet, taking those last dozen steps up the

painted green hil until she reached the crest.

At the top, she paused while heavy gusts of wind

buffeting against her, causing her to lean

into their

turbulence. She scanned the horizon and saw that she

stood on the divide between two worlds. Down the

slope before her, on a landscape her eyes had never

before seen, lay a bare world of dust and parched

earth, of wind flurries and smal tornadoes, of air that

could kil. Here was new land, and yet it looked more

familiar to her than anything she'd encountered thus far.

She turned and peered back along the path she had just

climbed, at the tal grasses blowing in the gentle breeze,

at occasional flowers dipping their heads at her, at the

bright blue and briliant white overhead. It was an evil

concoction, inviting but false.

Juliette took one last admiring gaze at this ilusion. She

noted how the round depression in the center of the hils

seemed to mark the outline of her silo's flat roof, the

rest of her habitable home nestled deep in the bely of

the soil. The way the land rose up al around made it

look as though a hungry God had spooned out a large

bite of the earth. With a heavy heart, she realized that

the world she had grown up in was now

closed off to

her, that her home and her people were safe behind

bolted doors, and she must be resigned to her fate. She

had been cast off. Her time was short. And so she

turned her back on the aluring view and bright colors to

face the dusty, the dead, and the real.

••••

As she started down the hil, Juliette

puled cautiously

on the air in her suit. She knew Walker had given her

the gift of time, time no cleaner before her ever had, but

how much? And for what? She had already reached her

goal, had managed to haul herself out of the sensors'

sight, so why was she was stil walking, stil staggering

down this foreign hil? Was it inertia? The pul of

gravity? The sight of the unknown?

She was barely down the slope, heading in the general

direction of the crumbling city, when she stopped to

survey the foreign landscape before her. The elevation

made it possible to choose a path for her final walk, this

maiden walk, across the tal dunes of dry earth. And

that’s when she saw, gazing out toward the rusting city

beyond, that the holow in which her silo resided was no

accident. The hils bore a clear pattern as they stretched

into the distance. It was one circular bowl after another,

the earth rising up between them as if to shield each

spooned-out bite from the caustic wind.

Juliette descended into the next bowl, pondering this,

watching her footing as she went. She kicked aside the

larger rocks and controled her breathing. She knew

from working deep in the flooded basins, swimming

beneath the muck that burly men cringed from as she

unclogged the drains, that air could be conserved

through calmness. She glanced up, wondering if she had

enough in the suit to cross this bowl and make it up the

next great hil.

And that’s when she saw the slender tower rising from

the center of the bowl, its exposed metal glinting in the

sparse sunlight. The landscape here was untouched by

the program in her visor; reality passed through her

helmet untarnished. And seeing this, the familiar sensor

tower, she wondered if perhaps she’d gotten turned

around, if she had surveyed the world

once too many

times from the crest of the hil, if she was in fact trudging

back toward her silo, crossing ground already crossed

once before.

The sight of a dead cleaner wasting away in the dirt

seemed to confirm this. It was a bare outline, ribbons of

an old suit, the husk of a helmet.

She stopped and touched the dome of the

helmet with

the toe of her boot, and the shel crumbled and caved

in. Whatever flesh and bone had been inside had long

ago drifted off on the winds.

Juliette looked down the hil for the sleeping couple, but

the crook of those two dunes was nowhere in sight. She

suddenly felt bewildered and lost. She wondered if the

air had finaly worked past the seals and heat tape, if

her brain was succumbing to noxious fumes, but no.

She was nearer the city, stil walking toward that

skyline, the tops of which were stil rendered whole and

gleaming, the sky above them blue and spotted with

bright clouds.

It meant this tower below her . . . was not hers. And

these dunes, these great mounds of dead earth, were

not meant to block out the winds or hold back the air.

They were meant to shield curious eyes. To block this

sight, this view, of some *other*.

4

"*One, two, and the third in your bosom.*"

Lukas held the smal box tightly against his chest as he

hiked up to the landing on thirty-eight. Here was a

mixed-use level of offices, shops, a plastics factory, and

one of the smal water treatment plants. He pushed

through the doors and hurried down corridors quiet

from the day’s cleaning until he reached the main pump

control room. His IT master key alowed him inside.

The room housed a tal and familiar

computer cabinet

from his Tuesday maintenance schedule. Lukas left the

overhead light off to keep the smal window in the door

darkened to passersby. He slid behind the tal server

rack and the wal, scooted to the ground, and fished his

flashlight out of his coverals.

In the soft red glow of his night light, Lukas gently

peeled the flaps of the box apart, revealing the contents

inside.

The guilt was immediate. It punctured the anticipation,

the thril of discovery, of intimacy. It wasn't guilt from

defying his boss or lying to Deputy Marsh, nor of

delaying the delivery of items he had been told were

important. It was the violation of her things. The

reminder of her fate. Here were Juliette's remains. Not

her body, which was lost and gone, but the remnants of

the life she had lived.

He took a heavy breath, considered closing the flaps

and forgetting the contents, and then thought of what

would become of them anyway. His friends in IT would

probably be the ones to paw through them. They would

tear open the box and trade items like kids swapping

candy. They would desecrate her.

He bent the flaps open further and decided to honor her

instead.

He adjusted his light and saw a stack of silo vouchers

on top, wrapped in a piece of wire. He puled these out

and flipped through them. They were vacation

vouchers. Dozens of them. He lifted them to his nose

and puzzled over the tangy scent of grease emanating

from the box.

A few expired meal cards lay underneath these

vouchers, the corner of an ID badge poking out. Lukas

reached for the badge, coded silver from her job as

sheriff. He searched for another ID among the various

scattered cards, but it appeared it had not yet been

replaced with whatever color Mechanical used. There

hadn’t been that much time between her being fired for

one offense and being put to death for another.

He took a moment to study the picture on the badge. It

looked recent, just as he remembered her. Her hair was

tied back tight, leaving it flat on her

head. He could see

loose curls sticking out to either side of her neck and

remembered the first night he had watched her work,

how she had braided her long hair herself while she sat

alone in a pool of light, peering at page after page in

those folders of hers.

He ran his finger over the picture and laughed when he

saw her expression. Her forehead was wrinkled, her

eyes narrowed, as if trying to determine what the

photographer was attempting or why in the heavens it

was taking so long. He covered his mouth to prevent

the laugh from becoming a sob.

The vouchers went back into the box, but the ID slid

into the breast pocket of his coverals as if by Juliette's

own stubborn accord. The next thing that caught his eye

was a silver multi-tool, new-looking, a slightly different

model from his own. He grabbed this and leaned

forward to pul his own tool out of his back pocket. He

compared the two, opening a few of the tools on hers

and admiring the smooth motion and neat click as each

attachment locked into place. Taking a

moment to first

clean his, wiping his prints off and removing a bit of

melted rubber wire casing, he switched the tools out.

He decided he would rather carry this reminder of her

and have his own tool disappear into storage or be

pawned off to a stranger who wouldn’t appreciate—

Lukas froze at the sound of footsteps and laughter. He

held his breath and waited for someone to come in, for

the overhead lights to burst on. The server clicked and

whirred beside him. The noise in the halway receded,

the laughter fading.

He was pushing his luck, he knew, but there was more

in the box to see. He rummaged inside again and found

an ornate wooden box, a valuable antique. It was just

slightly bigger than his palm and took a moment to

figure out how to open. The first thing he saw as the top

slid away was a ring, a woman's wedding ring. It

could've been solid gold, but it was difficult to tel. The

red glow from his flashlight tended to wash out colors,

causing everything to appear dul and lifeless.

He checked for an inscription, but found

none. It was a

curious artifact, this ring. He was certain Juliette hadn't

been wearing it when he'd known her and wondered if

it was a relative's, or a thing passed down from before

the uprising. He placed it back in the wooden box and

reached for the other item inside, a bracelet of some

sort. No, not a bracelet. As he puled it out, he realized

it was a watch, the face so tiny it melded with the design

of the jeweled strap. Lukas studied the face, and after a

moment he realized his eyes or the red flashlight were

playing tricks on him. Or were they? He looked closely

to be sure—and saw that one of the impossibly thin

hands was ticking away the time. The thing worked.

Before he could contemplate the

chalenge of

concealing such an item or the consequences of being

discovered with it, Lukas slid the watch into his chest

pocket. He looked at the ring sitting alone in the box,

and after a moment’s hesitation, palmed this and

stashed it away as wel. He fished through the

cardboard box and gathered some of the loose chits at

the bottom and placed these into the antique before

sealing it shut and returning it.

What was he doing? He could feel a trickle of sweat

work its way from his scalp and run the length of his

jawline. The heat from the rear of the busy computer

seemed to intensify. He dipped his head and lifted his

shoulder to dab the itchy run of sweat away. There was

more in the box, and he couldn’t help himself: he had to

keep looking.

He found a smal notepad and flipped through it. It

contained one to-do list after another, al of the items

neatly crossed out. He replaced this and reached for a

folded piece of paper at the bottom of the box, then

realized it was more than a piece. He puled out a thick

colection of papers held together with brass fasteners.

Across the top, in handwriting similar to that in the

notebook, was printed:

Main Generator Control Room Operation Manual.

He flipped it open and found inscrutable diagrams and

buleted notes lining the margins. It looked like

something she'd put together herself, either as a

reminder from piecing the room's operation together

over time, or perhaps a helpful guide for others. The

paper was recycled without being pulped, he saw. She

had just written on the back. He flipped the manual

over and checked the lines and lines of printed text on

the opposite side. There were notes in the margins and

a name circled over and over:

Juliette. Juliette. Juliette.

He flipped the manual over and surveyed the rear, only

to find it was the original front. *"The Tragic Historye*

of Romeus and Juliette," it said. It was a play. One

Lukas had heard of. In front of him, a fan kicked on in

the heart of the server, blowing air over warm chips of

silicone and wire. He wiped the sweat from his

forehead and tucked the bound play back into the box.

He neatly arranged the other items on top and folded

the cardboard flaps together. Wiggling back to his feet,

Lukas doused his light and shoved it back into his

pocket where it nestled against Juliette's multi-tool.

With the box secured under one arm, he patted his

chest with his other hand and felt her

watch, her ring,

and her ID there with its picture of her. Al tight against

his bosom.

Lukas shook his head. He wondered what the hel he

was thinking as he stole out the smal and dark room, a

tal panel of winking and blinking lights watching him go.

5

"*Eyes, look your last!*

Arms, take your last embrace! And, lips,

O you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss

a dateless bargain to engrossing death!"

The bodies were everywhere. Covered in dust and

dirt, suits worn down by the toxic eaters that lived in the

winds, Juliette found herself stumbling over more and

more of them. And then, they were constant, a mass of

boulders jumbled together. A few were in suits similar

to her own, but most wore rags that had been eaten

away into streamers. When the wind blew past her

boots and across the bodies, strips of clothing waved

like kelp in the down deep's fish farms. Unable to pick

her way around them al, she found herself stepping

over the remains, working her way

closer and closer to

the sensor tower, the bodies easily in the hundreds,

possibly the thousands.

These weren't people from her silo, she realized.

However obvious, the sensation was startling. *Other*

people. That they were dead did nothing to diminish the

soul-shattering reality that people had lived so close and

she had never known. Juliette had somehow crossed an

uninhabitable void, had gone from one universe to

another, was possibly the first ever to have done so,

and here was a graveyard of foreign souls, of people

just like her having lived and died in a world so similar

and so near to her own.

She made her way through dead bodies thick as

crumbling rock, the forms becoming indistinguishable

from one another. They were piled high in places, and

she had to choose her path carefuly. As she neared the

ramp leading down to this *other* silo, she found herself

needing to step on a body or two in order to pass. It

looked as though they'd been trying to get away and

had scampered over one another,

creating their own

smal hils in a mad attempt to reach the real ones. But

then, when she reached the ramp leading down, she

saw the crush of bodies at the steel airlock door and

realized they had been trying to get *back in.*

Her own imminent death loomed large—a constant

awareness, a new sense worn on her skin and felt

keenly in every pore. She would soon join these bodies,

and somehow she was not afraid. She had passed

through that fear on the crest of the hil and was now in

new lands, seeing new things, a terrible gift for which

she had to be grateful. Curiosity drove her forward, or

maybe it was the mentality of this frozen crowd, al in

scrambling repose, bodies swimming

over each other

and reaching toward the doors below.

She swam among them. Waded, where she had to. She

stepped through broken and holow bodies, kicked

aside bones and tattered remains, and fought her way to

the partly cracked doors. There was a figure there

frozen between its iron teeth, one arm in, one out, a

scream trapped on a gray and withered face, two eye

sockets empty and staring.

Juliette was one of them, one of these others. She was

dead, or nearly so. But while they were frozen in

motion, she was stil pushing ahead. Shown the way.

She tugged the body out of the gap, her breathing loud

in her helmet, her exhalations misting on the screen

before her nose. Half the body puled free—the other

half colapsed inside the door. A mist of powdered flesh

drifted down in-between.

She wiggled one of her arms inside and tried to push

through sideways. Her shoulder slipped through, then

her leg, but her helmet caught. She turned her head and

tried again—and the helmet wedging tightly between the

doors. There was a moment of panic as she could feel

the steel jaws gripping her head, supporting the weight

of her helmet, leaving her semi-dangling from its grasp.

She swam her arm al the way through, trying to reach

around the door for purchase, to pul herself the rest of

the way, but her torso was stuck. One leg was in, the

other out. There was nothing to push

against or pul in

order to go the rest of the way. She was trapped, an

arm useless on the inside, waving franticaly, her rapid

breathing using up what remained of her air.

Juliette tried to fit her other arm through. She couldn’t

turn her waist, but she could bend her elbow and slide

her fingers across her bely through the tight space

between her stomach and the door. She curled her

fingers around the edge of the steel and puled. There

was no leverage in those confines. It was just the

strength in her fingers, in her grip. Juliette suddenly

didn’t want to die, not there. She curled her hand as if

to make a fist, her fingers bent around the edge of those

steel jaws, her knuckles singing out from

the strain.

Jerking her head against her helmet, trying to bang her

face against the damned screen, twisting and shoving

and yanking—she suddenly popped free.

She stumbled forward, a boot catching briefly on the

gap behind her, arms windmiling for balance as she

kicked through a pile of charred bones and sent a cloud

of black ash into the air. It was the remains of those

who had been caught in the cleansing fire of the airlock.

Juliette found herself in a burnt room eerily similar to the

one she had recently left. Her exhausted and

bewildered mind spun with outrageous delusions.

Perhaps she was already dead, and these were the

ghosts awaiting her. Maybe she had

burned alive inside

the airlock of her own silo, and these were her mad

dreams, her escape from the pain, and now she would

haunt this place forever.

She stumbled through the scattered remains toward the

inner door and pressed her head against the thick glass

porthole. She looked for Peter Bilings beyond, sitting at

his desk. Or perhaps a glimpse of Holston wandering

the halways, a specter searching for his ghostly wife.

But this was not the same airlock. She tried to calm

herself. She wondered if her air was running low, if

sucking on her own exhaust was like breathing the

fumes of a hot motor, choking off her brain.

The door was sealed. It was real. The

thousands were

dead, but she wasn’t. Not yet.

She tried to spin the large wheel, but it was either frozen

in place or locked from the inside. Juliette banged on

the glass, hoping the silo sheriff would hear her, or

maybe a cafeteria worker. It was dark inside, but the

thought lingered that someone must be there. People

lived *inside* silos. They didn't belong piled up around

them.

There was no answer. No light flicked on. She leaned

on the large wheel that secured the door, remembered

Marnes's instructions, how al the mechanisms worked,

but those lessons felt like so long ago and she hadn't

thought them important at the time. But she

remembered something: After the argon bath and the

fire, didn't the inner door unlock? Automaticaly? So

the airlock could be scrubbed? This seemed like

something she remembered Marnes saying. He had

joked that it wasn't as if anyone could come back

inside once the fire had run its course. Was she

remembering this or making it up? Was

it the wishful

thinking of an oxygen-starved mind?

Either way, the wheel on the door wouldn’t budge.

Juliette pushed down with al her weight —and it felt

locked to her. She stepped back. The bench hanging

from the wal where cleaners got suited up before their

deaths looked inviting. She was tired from the walk,

from the struggle to get inside. And why was she trying

to get inside? She spun in place, indecisive. What was

she doing?

She needed air. For some reason, she thought the silo

might have some. She looked around at al the scattered

bones of an uncountable number of bodies. How many

dead? They were too jumbled to know. The skuls, she

thought. She could count those and know. She shook

this nonsense from her head. She was definitely losing

her senses.

"*The wheel on the door is a stuck nut,*" some

receding part of her said. *"It's a frozen bolt."*

And hadn't she made a reputation as a young shadow

for working them free?

Juliette told herself that this could be done. Grease,

heat, leverage. Those were the secrets to a piece of

metal that wouldn’t budge. She didn’t have any of the

three, but she looked around anyway. There was no

squeezing back through the outer door, she knew she

wouldn’t make it a second time, not that kind of

straining. So she had this room. The

bench was secured

to the wal along the back edge and hung from two

chains. Juliette wiggled the chains, but didn’t see how

they could come free, or what good they would do her

anyway.

In the corner, there was a pipe snaking up that led into

a series of vents. It must be what delivered the argon,

she thought. She wrapped her hands around the pipe,

put her feet on the wal, and tugged.

The connection to the vent wiggled; the toxic air had

corroded and weakened it. Juliette smiled, set her teeth,

and yanked back ferociously.

The pipe came free of the vent and bent at its base. She

felt a sudden thril, like a wild rat standing over a large

crumb. She grabbed the free end of the pipe and

worked it back and forth, bending and wrenching the

fastened end. Metal would snap if you could wiggle it

even a little bit, if you did it long enough. She had felt

the heat of weakened steel countless times while

bending it over and over until it broke.

Sweat beaded on her brow and twinkled in the dim light

alowed by her visor screen. It dripped down her nose,

fogged the screen, and stil she yanked and pushed,

back and forth, growing frantic and desperate—

The pipe snapped, taking her by surprise. Just a faint

pop bled through her helmet, and then the long piece of

holow metal was free. One end was crushed and

twisted, the other whole and round.

Juliette turned to

the door, a tool now in hand. She slid the pipe through

the wheel, leaving as much as she could hanging out the

side, just long enough that it wouldn’t brush the wal.

With both gloved hands wrapped around the pipe, she

lifted herself to her waist, bending over the pipe, her

helmet touching the door. She bounced her weight on

the lever, knowing it was a jerking motion that freed a

bolt, not a steady force. She wiggled her way toward

the end of the pipe, watching it bend a little, worried it

might snap in half long before the door budged.

When she got toward the end—maximum leverage—

she threw her weight up and down with al her strength,

and she cursed as the pipe snapped.

There was a loud

clang, barely muffled by her suit, and then she colapsed

to the floor, landing painfuly on her elbow.

The pipe was at an angle beneath her, digging into her

ribs. Juliette tried to catch her breath. Her sweat

dripped against the visor screen, blurring her view. She

got up and saw that the pipe was unbroken. She

wondered if it had slipped free, but it was stil threaded

through the spokes of the large wheel.

Disbelieving, excited, she slid the pipe out the other

side. She wrapped her hands around the spokes and

leaned into it.

And the wheel.

It budged.

6

“*For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.”*

Walker made it to the end of the halway and found

himself leaving the comforting confines of a tight

corridor to enter the wider entrance hal to Mechanical.

The room, he saw, was ful of young shadows. They

hung out in groups, whispering to themselves. Three

boys crouched near one wal, throwing

stones for chits.

Walker could hear a dozen interwoven voices spiling

out of the mess hal across the room. The casters had

sent these young ears away while they discussed adult

things. He took a deep breath and hurried through that

damned open space, focusing on each step, moving one

foot ahead of him at a time, each smal patch of floor a

thing to conquer—

After a short lifetime, he finaly crashed into the wal on

the other side and hugged the steel panels in relief.

Behind him, the shadows laughed, but he was too

frightened to care. Sliding across the riveted steel, he

grabbed the edge of the mess hal door and puled

himself inside. The relief was enormous. Even though

the mess hal was several times the size of his

workshop, it was at least ful of crowding furniture and

people he knew. With his back to the wal, his shoulder

against the open door, he could almost pretend it was

smaler. He slumped to the ground and rested, the men

and women of Mechanical arguing amongst themselves,

voices rising, agitated, competing.

“She’d be out of air by now, anyway,” Rick was

saying.

“You don’t know that,” Shirly said. She was standing

on a chair so she could be at least as tal as the others.

She surveyed the room. “We don’t know what

advances they’ve made.”

“That’s because they won’t tel us!”

“Maybe it’s gotten better out there.”

The room quieted with this last. Waiting, perhaps, to

see if the voice would dare speak again and break its

anonymity. Walker studied the eyes of those facing his

way. They were wide with a mixture of fear and

excitement. A double cleaning had removed some

taboos. Shadows had been sent away. The adults were

feeling frisky and free to speak

forbidden thoughts.

“What if it *has* gotten better?” someone else asked.

“Since two weeks ago? I’m teling you guys, it’s the

suits! They figured out the suits!” Marck, an oilman,

looked around at the others, anger in his eyes. “I’m sure

of it,” he said. “They’ve sorted the suits and now we

have a chance!”

“A chance to what?” Knox growled. The grizzled head

of Mechanical sat at one of the tables, digging into a

breakfast bowl. “A chance to send more of our people

out to wander the hils until they run out of air?” He

shook his head and took another bite, then jabbed at

the lot of them with his spoon. “What we need to be

talking about,” he said, chewing, “is this

sham of an

election, this rat-ass Mayor, and us kept in the dark

down here—!”

“They didn’t figure out the suits,” Walker hissed, stil

breathless from his ordeal.

“*We’re* the ones who keep this place humming,” Knox

continued, wiping at his beard. “And what do we get?

Busted fingers and ratshit pay. And

now? Now they

come and take our people and send them out for a view

we don’t care about!” He slammed the table with his

mighty fist, sending his bowl hopping.

Walker cleared his throat. He remained crouched on

the floor, his back against the wal. No one had seen

him enter or had heard him the first time. Now, while

the room was scared quiet by Knox, he tried again.

“They did *not* figure out the suits,” he said, a little

louder this time.

Shirly saw him from her perch. Her chin dropped, her

mouth hinging open. She pointed, and a dozen other

heads turned to folow.

They gaped at him. Walker was stil trying to catch his

breath and must've looked near death. Courtnee, one

of the young plumbers who was always kind to him

whenever she stopped by his workshop, left her seat

and hurried to his side. She whispered his name in

surprise and helped him to his feet, urging him to come

to the table and take her chair.

Knox slid his bowl away from himself and slapped the

table. “Wel, people are just wandering al over the

damned place now, aren’t they?”

Walker looked up sheepishly to see the old foreman

chief smiling through his beard at him. There were two

dozen other people staring at him, al at once. Walker

half waved, then stared down at the table. It was

suddenly too many people.

“Al this shouting rouse you, old man? You setting off

over the hils, too?”

Shirly jumped down from her chair. “Oh, God, I’m so

sorry. I forgot to take him his breakfast.” She hurried

toward the kitchen to fetch him some food even as

Walker tried to wave her off. He wasn’t hungry.

“It isn’t—” His voice cracked. He tried again. “I came

because I *heard*," he whispered. "Jules. Out of sight."

He made a gesture with his hand, arching it over some

imaginary hil running across the table. "But it wasn't

them in IT that figured *nothing*," he said. He made eye

contact with Marck and tapped his own chest. "I did

it."

A whispered conversation in the corner fel quiet. No

one sipped their juice, no one moved. They were stil

half stunned to see Walker out of his workshop, much

less among the crowd of them. Not a one of them had

been old enough to remember the last time he'd roamed

about. They knew him as the crazy electrical man who

lived in a cave and refused to cast shadows anymore.

"What're you *sayin'*?" Knox asked.

Walker took a deep breath. He was about to speak

when Shirly returned and placed a bowl of hot oats in

front of him, the spoon standing off the rim the

concoction was so thick. Just how he liked it. He

pressed his hands against either side of the bowl, feeling

the heat in his palms. He was suddenly very tired from

lack of sleep.

“Walk?” Shirly asked. “You okay?”

He nodded and waved her away, lifted his head and

met Knox’s gaze.

“Jules came to me the other day.” He bobbed his head,

gaining confidence. He tried to ignore how many people

were watching him speak, or the way the overhead

lights twinkled in his watering eyes. “She had a theory

about these suits, about IT.” With one hand, he stirred

his oats, steeling his resolve to say the unthinkable. But

then, how old was he? Why did he care for taboos?

“You remember the heat tape?” He turned to Rachele,

who worked first shift and knew Juliette wel. She

nodded. “Jules sorted that it weren’t no accident, the

way the tape broke down.” He nodded to

himself. “She

sorted it al, she did.”

He took a bite of his food, not hungry but enjoying the

burn of the hot spoon on his old tongue. The room was

silent, waiting. The whispers and quiet play of the

shadows outside could just barely be heard.

“I’ve built up favors and favors with Supply over the

years," he explained. "Favors and favors. So I caled

them al in. Told them we'd be even." He looked at this

group of men and women from Mechanical, could hear

more standing in the halway who'd arrived late but

could read from the frozen demeanors in the room to

stay put. "We've taken stuff out if IT's supply chain

before. I know I have. Al the best

electronics and wire

go to them that make the suits—”

“The ratshit bastards,” someone muttered, which got

more than a few of them bobbing their heads.

“So I told Supply to return the favor. Soon as I heard

they took her—” Walker paused and swiped at his

eyes. “Soon as I heard, I wired in those favors, said to

replace anything them bastards asked for with some of

our own. Best of the best. And don't let 'em be the

wiser."

"You did *what*?" Knox asked.

Walker dipped his head over and over, feeling good to

let out the truth. "They've been making those suits to

fail. Not 'cause it ain't bad out there, that's not what I

figure. But they don't want your body wandering out of

sight, no sir." He stirred his oats. "They want us al right

here where they can see us."

"So she's okay?" Shirly asked.

Walker frowned and slowly shook his head.

"I *told* you guys," someone said. "She'd run out of air

by now."

"She was dead *anyway*," someone else

countered, and

the argument began to build again. “This just proves

they’re ful of shit!”

Walker had to agree with that.

“Everybody, hey, let’s stay calm,” Knox roared. But he

appeared the least calm of them al. More workers filed

in now that the moment of silence appeared to be over.

They gathered around the table, faces ful

of worry.

“This is it,” Walker said to himself, seeing what was

happening, what he had started. He watched his friends

and co-workers get al riled up, barking at the empty air

for answers, their passions stirred. “This is it,” he said

again, and he could feel it brewing, ready to burst out.

“Thisisit thisisit—”

Courtnee, stil hovering over him, tending to him like he

was an invalid, held his wrist with those delicate hands

of hers.

“What is it?” she asked. She waved down the others

so she could hear. She leaned close to Walker.

“Walk, tel me, what is it? What is this? What’re you

trying to say?”

“This is how it starts,” he whispered, the room quiet

once more. He looked up at al the faces, scanned

them, seeing in their fury, in al the exploded taboos,

that he was right to worry.

“This is how the uprising begins—”

7

“*Sharp misery had worn him to the bones;*

And about his shelves, a beggarly

account of empty boxes.”

Lukas arrived at thirty-four breathless and clutching

the smal box, more exhausted from the laws he had

broken than this habitual climb to work. He could stil

taste the metalic tang of adrenaline in his mouth from

hiding behind the servers and rummaging through

Juliette’s things. He patted his chest, feeling the items

there, and also his racing heart.

Once he was better composed, he reached for the

doors to IT and nearly cracked a knuckle as they flew

outward toward him. Sammi, a tech he knew, burst out

in a hurry and stormed past. Lukas caled his name, but

the older tech was already gone, storming up the stairs

and out of sight.

There was more commotion in the entrance hal. Voices

yeling over one another. Lukas entered warily,

wondering what the fuss was about. He held open the

door with his elbow and slid into the room, the box tight

against his chest.

Most of the yeling, it seemed, was coming from

Bernard. The head of IT stood outside the security

gates and barked at one tech after the other. Nearby,

Sims, the head of IT security, similarly lit into three men

in gray coverals. Lukas remained frozen by the door,

intimidated by the angry duo.

When Bernard spotted him there, he snapped shut and

waded through the trembling techs to greet him. Lukas

opened his mouth to say something, but his boss was

fixated less on him and more on what was in his hands.

“This is it?” Bernard asked, snatching the box from

him.

“It—?”

“Everything that greaser owned fits in this little damn

box?” Bernard tugged the flaps open. “Is this

everything?”

“Uh . . . that’s what I was given,” Lukas

stammered.

“Marsh said—”

“Yeah, the Deputy wired about his cramps. I swear,

the Pact should stipulate an age limit for their kind.

Sims!” Bernard turned to his security chief.

“Conference room. Now.”

Lukas pointed toward the security gate and the server

room beyond. “I suppose I should get to

—”

“Come with me,” Bernard said, wrapping his arm

around Lukas’s back and squeezing his shoulder. “I

want you in on this. There seems to be fewer and fewer

ratshit techs I can trust around here.”

“Unless y-you want me on the servers. We had that

thing with tower thirteen—”

“That can wait. This is more important.”

Bernard

ushered him toward the conference room, the hulking

mass of Sims preceding them.

The security guard grabbed the door and held it open,

frowning at Lukas as he went by. Lukas shivered as he

crossed the threshold. He could feel the sweat running

down his chest, could feel guilty heat in his armpits and

around his neck. He had a sudden image of being

thrown against the table, pinned down, contraband

yanked from his pockets and waved in his face—

“Sit,” Bernard said. He put the box down on the table,

and he and Sims began disgorging its contents while

Lukas lowered himself into a chair.

“Vacation chits,” Sims said, puling out the stack of

paper coupons. Lukas watched the way the man's arms

rippled with muscle with even the slightest movement.

Sims had been a tech once, until his body kept growing

and made him too obviously suited for other, less

cerebral, endeavors. He lifted the chits to his nose, took

a sniff, and recoiled. "Smels like sweaty greaser," he

said.

“Counterfeit?” Bernard asked.

Sims shook his head. Bernard was inspecting the smal

wooden box. He shook it and rapped it with his

knuckles, listening to the rattle of chits inside. He

searched the exterior for a hinge or clasp.

Lukas almost blurted out that the top slid, that it was so

finely crafted you could barely see the joints and that it

took a bit of effort. Bernard muttered something and set

the box aside.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Lukas asked. He

leaned forward and grabbed the box, pretended to be

inspecting it for the first time.

“Anything. A fucking clue,” Bernard barked. He glared

at Lukas. “How did this greaser make it over the hil?

Was it something she did? One of my techs? What?”

Lukas stil couldn’t figure the anger. So what if she

hadn’t cleaned—it would’ve been a double anyway.

Was Bernard pissed because he didn’t know *why*

she’d survived so long? This made sense to Lukas.

Whenever he fixed something by accident, it drove him

nearly as nuts as having something

break. And he'd

seen Bernard angry before, but this was something

different. The man was livid. He was *manic*. It's just

how Lukas would feel if he'd had such an

unprecedented piece of success with no cause to pin it

on.

Sims, meanwhile, found the notebook and began

flipping through it. “Hey boss—”

Bernard snatched it from him and tore through the

pages, reading. “Someone’l have to go through al this,”

he said. He pushed his glasses up his nose. “There

might be some sign of colusion in here —”

“Hey look,” Lukas said, holding out the box. “It

opens.” He showed them the sliding lid.

“Lemme see that.” Bernard dropped the notebook to

the table and snatched the wooden box away. He

wrinkled his nose. “Just chits,” he said disgustingly.

He dumped them on the table and was about to toss the

box aside, but Sims grabbed it from him. “That’s an

antique,” the large man said. “You think it’s a clue, or

can I—?”

“Yes, keep it, by al means.” Bernard waved his arms

out toward the window with its view of the entrance

hal. “Because nothing of greater fucking importance is

going on around here, is it, shit-for-brains?”

Sims shrugged noncommittaly and slid the wooden box

into his pocket. Lukas desperately wanted to be

somewhere else, anywhere in the silo

but there.

“Maybe she just got lucky,” Sims offered.

Bernard began dumping the rest of the box onto the

table, shaking it to loosen the manual that Lukas knew

was tightly wedged in the bottom. He paused from his

efforts and squinted at Sims over the rims of his glasses.

“Lucky,” Bernard repeated.

Sims tilted his head.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Bernard told him.

Sims nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“No, I mean get out!” Bernard pointed at the door.

“Getthefuckout!”

The head of security smiled like this was funny, but

lumbered for the door. He slid out of the room and

gently clicked the door shut behind him.

“I’m surrounded by morons,” Bernard said, once they

were alone.

Lukas tried to imagine this was not meant as an insult

directed at him.

“Present company excluded,” Bernard added, as if

reading his mind.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, you at least can fix a goddamn server. What the

hel do I pay these other ratshit techs to do?”

He pressed his glasses up the bridge of his nose again,

and Lukas tried to remember if the IT head had always

cursed this much. He didn’t think so. Was it the strain

of being interim mayor that was getting to him?

Something had changed. It felt strange to even consider

Bernard his friend anymore. The man

was so much

more important now, so much busier. Perhaps he was

cracking under the stress that came with the extra

responsibility, the pain of being the one to send good

people to cleaning—

“You know why I’ve never taken a shadow?” Bernard

asked. He flipped through the manual, saw the play on

the reverse side, and turned the bound sheets of paper

around. He glanced up at Lukas, who lifted his palms

and shrugged.

“It’s because I shudder to think of anyone else ever

running this place.”

Lukas assumed he meant IT, not the silo. Bernard

hadn’t been mayor very long.

Bernard set the play down and gazed out

the window

where muffled voices argued once more.

“But I’l have to, one of these days. I’m at that age

where your friends, the people you grew up with, are

dropping like flies, but you’re stil young enough to

pretend it won’t happen to you.”

His eyes fel to Lukas. The young tech felt

uncomfortable being alone with Bernard.

He’d never

felt that before.

“Silos have burned to the ground before because of

one man’s hubris,” Bernard told him. “Al it takes is

improper planning, thinking you’l be around forever,

but because one man disappears—” He snapped his

fingers. “—and leaves a sucking void behind, that can

be enough to bring it al down."

Lukas was dying to ask his boss what the hel he was

talking about.

"Today is that day, I think." Bernard walked around

the long conference table, leaving behind him the

scattered remnants of Juliette's life. Lukas's gaze drifted

over the items. The guilt of going through them vanished

to see how they'd been treated. He wished instead that

he'd stashed away more of them.

"What I need is someone who already has access to

the servers," Bernard said. Lukas turned to the side and

realized the short, ful-belied head of IT was standing

right beside him. He moved his hand up to his chest

pocket, making sure it didn't bulge open where Bernard

could see.

“Sammi is a good tech. I trust him, but he’s nearly as

old as I am.”

“You aren’t that old,” Lukas said, trying to be polite, to

gather his wits. He wasn’t sure what was going on—

“There’s not many I consider a friend,” Bernard said.

“I appreciate that—”

“You’re probably the closest thing—”

“I feel the same—”

“I knew your father. He was a good man.”

Lukas swalowed and nodded. He looked up at

Bernard and realized the man was holding out his hand.

Had been for a while. He reached out his own to

accept, stil not sure what was being offered.

“I need a shadow, Lukas.” Bernard’s hand felt smal in

Lukas's own. He watched as his arm was pumped up

and down. "I want you to be that man."

8

"Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast"

Juliette forced her way through the inner airlock door

and scrambled to get it closed. Darkness overwhelmed

her as the heavy door squealed on its hinges and settled

against its dry seals. She groped for the large locking

wheel and leaned on the spokes, spinning it and sealing

the door tight.

The air in her suit was growing stale; she could feel the

dizziness overtaking her. Turning around, keeping one

hand on the wal, she stumbled forward through the

darkness. The puff of outside air that she’d alowed

inside seemed to claw at her back like a horde of mad

insects. Juliette staggered blindly down the halway,

trying to put distance between herself and the dead

she'd left behind.

There were no lights on, no glow from the walscreens

with their view of the outside world. She prayed the

layout was the same, that she could find her way. She

prayed the air in her suit would hold out a moment

longer, prayed the air in the silo weren't as foul and

toxic as the wind outside. Or—and just as bad—that

the air in the silo wasn't as devoid of oxygen as what

little remained in her suit.

Her hand brushed the bars of a cel just where they

should be, giving her hope that she could navigate the

darkness. She wasn't sure what she hoped to find in the

pitch black—she had no plan for salvation—she was

simply stumbling away from the horrors outside. It

hardly registered for her that she had been there, had

gone *outside*, and now was in some place new.

As she fumbled through the office, sucking on the last

breaths of air in her helmet, her feet

knocked into

something and Juliette went sprawling forward. She

landed roughly on a soft mound, groped with her hand,

and felt an arm. A body. Several bodies. Juliette

crawled over them, the spongy flesh feeling more human

and solid than the husks and bones outside—and more

difficult to move across. She felt someone's chin. The

weight of her body caused their neck to turn, and she

nearly lost her balance. Her body recoiled at the

sensation of what she was doing, the reflex to

apologize, to pul her limbs away, but she forced herself

forward over a pile of them, through the darkness, until

her helmet slammed into the office door.

The blow was hard enough and so without warning, that

Juliette saw stars and feared blacking out. She reached

up and fumbled for the handle. Her eyes might as wel

have been sealed shut, the utter darkness was so

complete. Even the bowels of Mechanical had never

seen such deep and perfect shadow.

She found the latch and pushed. The door was

unlocked, but wouldn’t budge. Juliette scrambled to her

feet, her boots digging into lifeless bodies, and threw

her shoulder against the door. She wanted out.

The door moved. A little. She could feel something slide

on the other side and imagined more bodies piled up.

She threw herself again and again into the door, grunts

of effort and frustrated tiny screams echoing in her

helmet. Her hair was loose, sweaty, and

matting to her

face. She couldn’t see. Couldn’t breathe. Was growing

more faint as she poisoned her own internal

atmosphere.

When the door slid open a crack, she tried to force her

way through, one shoulder first, squeezing her helmet

past, then puling her other arm and leg after. She fel to

the floor, scrambled around and shoved herself against

the door, sealing it tight.

There was a dim light, almost impossible to notice at

first. A barricade of tables and chairs were pressed in

against her, scattered from her efforts to get through.

Their hard edges and spindly legs seemed intent on

ensnaring her.

Juliette heard herself wheezing for air and knew her time

had run out. She imagined the poison al over her like

grease. The toxic air that she'd let in was a cloud of

vermin just waiting for her to crawl out of her shel so

they could eat away at her.

She considered lying down and letting her air supply run

out instead. She would be preserved in this chrysalis of

a suit, a wel-built suit, a gift from Walker and the

people of Supply. Her body would lie forever in this

dim silo that shouldn’t exist—but so much better than to

rot on a lifeless hil and fly away, piece by piece, on a

fickle breeze. It would be a good death. She panted,

proud of herself for making it somewhere of her own

choosing, for conquering these last few

obstacles.

Slumping against the door, she very nearly laid down

and closed her eyes—but for the nagging of her

curiosity.

Juliette held up her hands and studied them in the dim

glow from the stairwel. The shiny gloves —wrapped in

heat tape and melted to form a bright skin—made her

look like a machine of sorts. She ran her hands over the

dome of her helmet, realizing she was like a walking

toaster. When she had been a mere shadow in

Mechanical, she'd had a bad habit of taking things

apart, even those that already worked. What had

Walker said of her? That she liked nothing more than

peering inside of toasters.

Juliette sat up and tried to focus. She was losing

sensation, and with it the wil to live. She shook her

head and puled herself to her feet, sent a pile of chairs

crashing to the floor. She was the toaster, she realized.

Her curiosity wanted it open. This time, to see what

w a s *outside*. To take one breath and know.

She swam through the tables and chairs,

wanting more

and more distance between herself and any bad air she

had let in. The bodies she had crawled over in the

sheriff's office had felt whole. Naturaly dead. Trapped

inside and starved or asphyxiated, perhaps. But not

rotten. Stil, and despite her lightheadedness and need

to breathe, she wanted to somehow douse herself

before cracking the helmet.

She escaped the barrier of tables and chairs and made

her way across the open cafeteria floor. The emergency

lights in the stairwel leaked a green glow to dimly show

the way. She passed through the serving door and into

the kitchen, and tried the taps on the large sink. The

handles turned, but the spout didn’t leak a drop, didn’t

knock with even a futile try from distant pumps. She

went to the dangling hose over the dish station and

puled that lever—and was similarly rewarded. There

was no water.

Her next thought was the walk-ins, to maybe freeze the

nastiness she could feel crawling al over her suit. She

staggered around the cooking stations and puled the

large silver handle on the door, her breath wheezy in her

helmet. The light in the back reaches of the kitchen was

already so dim she could barely see. She couldn’t feel

any cold through her suit, but wasn’t sure if she’d be

able to. It was built to shield her and built wel. The

overhead light didn’t come on, so she assumed the

freezer was dead. With the door open,

she peered

inside, looking for anything fluid, and saw what looked

like vats of soup.

She was desperate enough to try anything. Juliette

moved inside the walk-in, letting the door swing slowly

shut behind her. She seized one of the large plastic

containers, a bucket the size of the largest cooking pots,

and tore the top off. The door clicked shut, returning

her to solid darkness. Juliette knelt beneath the shelf

and tipped the massive bucket over. She could feel the

liquid soup splatter over her suit, crinkling it and

splashing to the floor. Her knees slipped in the stuff.

She felt for the next one and did the same, ran her

fingers into the puddles and coated

herself in it. There

was no way of knowing if she was being crazy, if she

was making things worse, or if any of it mattered. Her

boot slipped, sending her flat onto her back, her helmet

cracking against the floor.

Juliette lay there in a puddle of tepid soup, unable to

see, her breath raspy and stale. Her time had run out.

She was dizzy and could think of nothing else to try,

didn’t have the breath or energy, anyway. The helmet

had to come off.

She fumbled for the latches, could barely feel them

through her gloves. Her gloves were too thick. They

were going to kil her.

She roled to her bely and crawled through the soup,

her hands and knees slipping. She reached the door,

gasping, and fumbled for the handle, found it, threw the

door open. There was a rack of knives gleaming behind

the counter. She lurched to her feet and grabbed one,

held the blade in her thick mitts, and slumped to the

floor, exhausted and dizzy.

Turning the blade toward her own neck, Juliette groped

for the latch. She slid the point along her colar until it

caught in the crack of the button. Steadying herself, her

arm shaking, she moved the knife and pressed in,

shoving it toward her body against al physical revulsion

at the act.

There was a faint click. Juliette gasped and groped

along the rim with the blade for the other button until

she found it. She repeated the maneuver.

Another click, and her helmet popped off.

Juliette's body took over for her, urging deep gulps of

foul air. The stench was unbearable, but she couldn't

stop gasping for more. Rotted food, biological decay, a

tepid filth of stenches invaded her mouth, tongue, nose.

She turned to the side and wretched, but nothing came

out. Her hands were stil slippery with soup. Breathing

was painful; she imagined a burning sensation on her

skin, but it could've been her fevered state. She

crawled away from the walk-in, toward the cafeteria,

out of the fog of rotting soup before she managed a gulp

of air.

Air.

She took another lungful, the odor stil overpowering,

the soup coating her. But beyond the stench, something

else was there. Something faint. Something *breathable*

that began to force away the dizziness and the panic. It

was *oxygen*. Life.

Juliette was stil alive.

She laughed a mad laugh and stumbled toward the

stairwel, drawn to the green glow of light, breathing

deeply and too exhausted to appreciate this, the

impossible life stil in her.

9

“*For you and I are past our dancing days.”*

Knox saw the uproar in Mechanical as just another

emergency to overcome. Like the time the basement

subwal sprung a leak, or when the oil rig hit that pocket

of methane and they had to evacuate eight levels until

the air handlers made it safe to return. Against the

inevitable flow of commotion, what he needed to do

was push for order. To assign tasks. He had to break a

huge undertaking down to discrete bits and make sure

they fel to the right hands. Only this time,

he and his

people wouldn’t be setting out to repair something.

There were things the good people of Mechanical

meant to *break*.

“Supply is the key,” he told his foremen, pointing to the

large scale blueprint hanging on the wal. He traced the

stairwel up the thirty flights to Supply’s main

manufacturing floor. “Our greatest advantage is that IT

doesn’t know we’re coming.” He turned to his shift

leaders. “Shirly, Marck, and Courtnee, you’l come

with me. We’l load up with supplies and take your

shadows with us. Walker, you can wire ahead to let

‘em know we’re coming. Be discrete, though. Assume

IT has ears. Say we have a load of your

repairs to

deliver.”

He turned to Jenkins, who had shadowed under Knox

for six years before he grew his own beard and moved

to third shift. The assumption everywhere was that

Knox’s job was his in waiting. “Jinks, I want you to

take over down here. There are no days off for a while.

Keep the place running, but get ready for the worst. I

want as much food stockpiled as possible. And water.

Make sure the cistern is topped up. Divert from the

hydroponics feed if you have to, but be discrete. Think

of an excuse, like a leak or something, in case they

notice. Meanwhile, have someone make the rounds and

check every lock and hinge, just in case

the fighting

comes to us. And stockpile whatever weapons you can

make up. Pipes, hammers, whatever."

Some eyebrows were lifted at this, but Jenkins nodded

at the list as if it al made sense and was doable. Knox

turned to his foremen. "What? You know where this is

heading, right?"

"But what's the larger picture?"

Courtnee asked,

glancing at the tal blueprint of their buried home.

“Storm IT, and then what? Take over running this

place?”

“We already run this place,” Knox growled. He

slapped his hand across the floors of the mid-thirties.

“We just do it in the dark. Like these levels here are

dark to us. But now I mean to shine a light in their rat

hole and scare them out, see what else they're hiding."

"You understand what they've been doing, right?"

Marck turned to Courtnee. "They've been sending

people out to die. On purpose. Not because it *had* to

happen, but because they wanted it to!"

Courtnee bit her lip and didn't say anything, just stared

at the blueprint.

“We need to get going,” Knox said. “Walker, get that

wire out. Let’s load up. And think of something

pleasant to chat about while we’re on the move. No

grumbling about this where some porter can hear and

make a chit or two ratting us out.”

They nodded. Knox slapped Jenkins on the back and

dipped his chin at the younger man. “I’l send word

when we need everyone. Keep the bare bones you

think you’ve gotta have down here and send the rest.

Timing is everything, okay?”

“I know what to do,” Jenkins said. He wasn’t trying to

be uppity, just reassuring his elder.

“Alright,” Knox said. “Then let’s get to it.”

••••

They made it up ten flights with little complaint, but

Knox could begin to feel the burn in his legs from the

heavy load. He had a canvas sack stuffed ful of welding

smocks on his wide shoulders, plus a bundle of helmets.

A rope had been strung through their chin straps, and

they clattered down his wide back. Marck struggled

with his load of pipe stock as they kept trying to slide

against one another and slip out of his arms. The

shadows brought up the rear, behind the women, with

heavy sacks of blasting powder tied together so they

hung around their necks. Professional porters with

similarly ful loads breezed past them in both directions,

their glances signaling a mix of curiosity

and competitive

anger. When one porter—a woman Knox recognized

from deliveries to the down deep—stopped and offered

to help, he gruffly sent her on her way. She hurried up

the steps, looking back over her shoulder before

spiraling out of view, and Knox regretted taking his

exhaustion out on her.

“Keep it up,” he told the others. Even with the smal

group, they were making a spectacle. And it was

growing ever more tiresome to hold their tongues as

news of Juliette’s amazing disappearance gyred al

around them. At almost every landing, a group of

people, often younger people, stood around and

gossiped about what it al meant. The

taboo had moved

from thought to whisper. Forbidden notions were

birthed on tongues and swam through the air. Knox

ignored the pain in his back and lumbered up and up,

each step driving them closer to Supply, feeling more

and more like they needed to get there in a hurry.

As they left the one-thirties, the grumblings were fuly in

the air. They were nearing the upper half of the down

deep, where people who worked, shopped, and ate in

the mids mingled with those who would rather they

didn’t. Deputy Hank was on the stairwel of one-

twenty-eight, trying to mediate between two arguing

crowds. Knox squeezed past, hoping the officer

wouldn’t turn and see his heavily loaded

train and ask

them what they were doing up this far. As he ascended

past the ruckus, Knox glanced back to watch the

shadows slink past, hugging the inner rail. Deputy Hank

was stil asking a woman to please calm down as the

landing sunk out of sight.

They passed the dirt farm on one-twenty-six, and Knox

figured this to be a key asset. The thirties of IT were a

long hike up, but if they had to fal back, they would

need to hold at Supply. Between their manufacturing,

the food on this level, and the machinery of Mechanical,

they might be self-sufficient. He could think of a few

weak links, but many more for IT. They could always

shut off their power or stop treating their

water—but he

realy hoped, as they approached Supply on weary

legs, that it wouldn’t come to any of that.

They were greeted on the landing of one-ten by frowns.

McLain, the elder woman and head of Supply, stood

with her arms crossed over her yelow coverals, her

affect screaming unwelcome.

“Helo, Jove.” Knox fixed her with a

wide smile.

“Don’t *Jove* me,” McLain said. “What’s this nonsense

you’re after?”

Knox glanced up and down the stairwel, shrugged his

heavy load higher up his shoulder. “Mind if we step in

and talk about it?”

“I don’t want any trouble here,” she said, her eyes

blazing beneath her lowered brow.

“Let’s go inside,” Knox said. “We haven’t stopped

once on the way up. Unless you want us colapsing out

here.”

McLain seemed to consider this. Her arms loosened

across her chest. She turned to three of her workers,

who formed an imposing wal behind her, and nodded.

While they puled open the gleaming doors of Supply,

she turned and grabbed Knox's arm. "Don't get

comfortable," she told him.

Inside the front room of Supply, Knox found a smal

army of men and women in their yelow coverals,

waiting. Most of them stood behind the low, long

counter where the people of the silo normaly waited for

whatever parts they needed, whether newly fabricated

or recently repaired. The paralel and deep aisles of

shelves beyond ran into the gloomy distance, boxes and

bins bulging off of them. The room was noticeably quiet.

Usualy, the mechanical thrumming and clanking sounds

of fabrication could be heard worming their way

through the space. Or one might hear workers chatting

unseen back in the stacks while they

sorted newly

fashioned bolts and nuts into hungry bins.

Now it was just silence and distrustful glares. Knox

stood with his people, their sacks and loads slumping

exhaustedly to the floor, sweat on their brows, while the

men and women of Supply watched, unmoving.

He had expected a more amicable welcome.

Mechanical and Supply had a long history together.

They jointly ran the smal mine beneath the lowest levels

of Mechanical that supplemented the silo’s stockpile of

ores.

But now, as McLain folowed her boys back inside, she

graced Knox with a look of scorn he hadn’t seen since

his mother passed away.

“What in the hel is the meaning of this?” she hissed at

Knox.

He was taken aback by the language, especialy in front

of his people. He thought of himself and McLain as

equals, but now he was being snapped at as if by one of

Supply’s dogs.

McLain ranged down the exhausted line of mechanics

and their shadows before turning back to him.

“Before we discuss how we’re cleaning this problem

up, I want to hear how you’re handling your employees,

whoever was responsible.” Her eyes bore through him.

“ I *am* correct in assuming you had nothing to do with

this, right? That you’ve come to apologize and shower

me with bribes?”

Shirly started to say something, but Knox waved her

off. There were a lot of people in the room just waiting

for this to go undiplomaticaly.

“Yes, I do apologize,” Knox said, grinding his teeth

together and bowing his head. “And no, I just learned

of this earlier today. After I found out about the

cleaning, in fact.”

“So it was al your electrician,” McLain said, her thin

arms crossed tightly over her chest. “One man.”

“That’s right. But—”

“I’ve meted out punishment to those involved here, let

me tel you. And I suppose you’l have to do more than

banish that old fart to his room—”

There was laughter behind the counter. Knox put a

hand on Shirly's shoulder to keep her in place. He

looked past McLain to the men and women arranged

behind McLain.

"They came and took one of our workers," he said.

His chest may have been heavy, but his voice stil

boomed. "You know how it happens. When they want

a body for cleaning, they *take* it." He thumped his

chest. “And I *let* them. I stood there because I trust this

system. I *fear* it, just as any of you.”

“Wel—” McLain began, but Knox continued in that

voice that routinely gave calm commands over the

racket of machines run amok.

“One of my people was taken, and it was the oldest of

us, the wisest of us, who intervened on her behalf. It

was the weakest and most scared of us who braved

their neck. And whoever of you he turned to for help,

and who gave it, I owe you my life." Knox blinked

away the blur and continued. "You gave her more than

a chance to walk over that hil, to die in peace and out

of sight. You gave *me* the courage to open my eyes. To

see this veil of lies we live behind—"

“That’s quite enough,” McLain barked. “Someone

could be sent to cleaning for even *listening* to such

nonsense, to such *drivel*—”

“It’s not nonsense,” Marck cried down the line.

“Juliette is dead because of—”

“She’s dead because she broke these very laws!”

McLain snapped, her voice high and shril. “And now

you march up here to break even more? On *my* level?”

“We aim to break heads!” Shirly said.

“Leave it!” Knox told them both. He saw the anger in

McLain’s eyes, but he also saw something else: The

sporadic nods and raised brows among the rank and

file behind her.

A porter entered the room with empty sacks in each

hand and looked around at the tense silence. One of the

large Supply workers by the door ushered him back

onto the landing with apologies, teling him to return

later. Knox composed his words carefuly during the

interruption.

“No person has ever been sent to cleaning for

listening, however great the taboo.” He alowed that to

sink in. He glared at McLain as she moved to interrupt,

but she seemed to decide against it. “So let me be sent

to cleaning by any of you for what I’m about to say. I

wil welcome it if these facts do not move you to instead

push forward with me and my men. For this is what

Walker and a few of you brave souls have shown us

this morning. We have cause for more

hope than they'l

dare give us. There's more at our disposal to broaden

our horizons than they'l alow. We have been raised on

a pack of lies, made to fear by the sight of our kinsmen

rotting on the hils, but now one of us has crossed over

that! They have seen new horizons! We have been

given seals and washers and told that they should

suffice, but what are they?”

He stared down the men and women behind the

counter. McLain’s arms seemed to loosen across her

chest.

“Designed to fail, that’s what! Fake. And who knows

what other lies there are. What if we’d taken any

cleaner back and done our best by them? Cleaned and

disinfected them? Tried whatever we could? Would

they survive? We can no longer trust IT to tel us they

wouldn’t!”

Knox saw chins rise and fal. He knew his own people

were ready to storm the room if need be; they were as

amped up and driven mad by al this as he was.

“We are not here to cause trouble,” he said, “we are

here to bring *order*! The uprising has already

happened." He turned to McLain. "Don't you see?

We've been *living* the uprising. Our parents were the

children of it, and now we feed our own children to the

same machine. This wil *not* be the start of something

new, but the end of something old. And if Supply is with

us, we stand a chance. If not, then may

our bodies

haunt your view of the *outside*, which I now see as far

less rotten than this blasted silo!”

Knox belowed this last in open defiance of al taboo.

He threw it out and savored the taste of it, the

admission that anything beyond those curved wals

might be better than what’s inside them. The whisper

that had kiled so many became a throaty roar shouted

from his broad chest.

And it felt good.

McLain cringed. She took a step away, something like

fear in her eyes. She turned her back on Knox and

made to return to her people, and he knew he had

failed. That there had been a chance, however slim, in

this silent and stil crowd to inspire action, but the

moment had slipped him by or he had scared it off.

And then McLain did something. Knox could see the

tendons in her slender neck bulge. She lifted her chin to

her people, her white hair in its tight knot high on her

head, and she said, quietly, “What say you, Supply?”

It was a question, not a command. Knox

would later

wonder if it had been asked in sadness; he would

wonder if she had taken poor stock of her people, who

had listened patiently during his madness. He would

also wonder if she were just curious, or if she were

chalenging them to cast him and his mechanics out.

He would finaly wonder, tears streaming down his face,

thoughts of Juliette sweling inside his heart, if he could

even *hear* his handful of compatriots shouting, so

drowned out were they by the angry war cries of the

good men and women of Supply.

10

"*And too soon marr'd are those so early made.*

The earth hath swallow'd all my hopes but she."

Lukas folowed Bernard through the hals of IT,

nervous techs scattering before them like night bugs

startled by the light. Bernard didn’t seem to notice the

techs ducking into offices and peering through windows.

Lukas hurried to keep up, his eyes darting side to side,

feeling conspicuous with al these hidden others

watching.

“Aren’t I a little old to be shadowing for another job?”

he asked. He was pretty sure he hadn’t accepted the

offer, not verbaly anyway, but Bernard spoke as if the

deal was done.

“Nonsense,” he said. “And this won’t be shadowing in

the traditional sense.” He waved his hand in the air.

“You’l continue your duties as before. I just need

someone who can step in, who knows what to do in

case something happens to me. My wil __”

He stopped at the heavy door to the server room and

turned to face Lukas. “If it came to it, in an emergency,

my wil would explain everything to the next Head, but

—” He gazed over Lukas’s shoulder and down the hal.

“Sims is my executor, which we’l have

to change. I just

don’t see that ever going smoothly—”

Bernard rubbed his chin and lost himself in his thoughts.

Lukas waited a moment, then stepped beside him and

entered his code on the panel by the door, fished his ID

out of his pocket—made sure it was *his* ID and not

Juliette’s—and swiped it through the reader. The door

clicked open, snapping Bernard out of his thoughts.

“Yes, wel, this wil be much better. Not that I expect

to go anywhere, mind you.” He adjusted his glasses and

stepped through the heavy steel doorway. Lukas

folowed, pushing the monstrous enclosure shut behind

them and waiting for the locks to engage.

“But if something did happen to you, I would oversee

the cleanings?” Lukas couldn’t imagine. He suspected

there was more to learn about those suits than the

servers. Sammi would be better at this, would actualy

want this job. Also—would he have to abandon his

star charts?

“That’s a smal part of the job, but yes.” Bernard

guided Lukas through the servers, past number thirteen

with its blank face and stil fans, al the way to the back

of the room.

“These are the keys to the true heart of the silo,”

Bernard said, fishing a jangling set out of his coverals.

They were strung on a cord of leather that hung around

his neck. Lukas had never noticed them before.

“There are other features to this cabinet that you’l learn

about in time. For now, you simply need to know how

to get downstairs.” He inserted the key into several

locks on the back of the server, locks designed to look

like recessed screws. What server was this? Twenty-

eight? Lukas glanced around the room and tried to

count its position, and realized he’d never been

assigned to maintain this tower.

There was a gentle clang as the back came off. Bernard

set it aside, and Lukas saw why he'd never worked on

the machine. It was practicaly empty, just a shel, like it

had been scrapped for parts over the long years.

"It's crucial that you lock this after coming back up—"

Lukas watched Bernard grab a handle in the bottom of

the empty chassis. He puled up, and

there was a soft

grinding noise nearby. “When the grate’s back in place,

you simply press this down to secure it.”

He was about to ask “what grate” when Bernard

stepped aside and dug his fingers into the metal slats of

the floor. With a grunt, he puled the heavy surface of

the flooring up and began sliding it over. Lukas jumped

around to the other side and bent down to help.

“Wouldn’t the stairs—?” he started to ask.

“They don’t access this part of thirty-five.” Bernard

waved at a ladder leading down through the floor. “You

go first.”

Lukas’s head spun from the day’s sudden turn. As he

bent to grab the ladder, he felt the contents of his breast

pocket shift and shot a hand up to hold the watch, ring,

and ID steady. What had he been thinking? What was

he thinking now? He lowered himself down the long

ladder feeling like someone had initiated an automated

routine in his brain, a rote program that had taken over

his actions. From the bottom of the ladder, he watched

as Bernard lowered himself down the

first rungs before

sliding the grate into place, sealing them both inside the

dark dungeon beneath the already fortressed server

room.

“You are about to receive a great gift,” Bernard said in

the darkness. “Just as I was once granted the same.”

He flicked on a light, and Lukas saw that his boss was

grinning maniacaly, the anger from before gone. Here

was a new man before him, a confident and eager man.

“Al the silo and everyone in it hinges on what I’m

about to show you,” Bernard said. He waved Lukas

down the brightly lit but tight corridor and toward a

wider room beyond. The servers felt very far above.

They felt closed off from every other

soul in the silo.

Lukas was curious, but also afraid. He wasn't sure he

wanted such responsibility and cursed himself for going

along with this.

And yet, his feet moved. They carried him down that

hidden passageway and into a room ful of the strange

and curious, a place that made the charting of stars

seem insignificant, a den where the sense of the world's

scale, of *size*, took on wholy new proportions.

11

"*I'll bury thee in a triumphant grave; A grave?*

O no! a lantern, slaughter'd youth, For here lies Juliet,

and her beauty makes this vault a feasting presence full of

light."

Juliette left her soup-slathered helmet on the floor and

moved toward the pale green glow of light. It seemed

brighter than before. She wondered how much of the

darkness had been her helmet. As her senses returned,

she remembered that it wasn’t a piece of glass she’d

been looking through, but some infernal screen that

took the world as she saw it and

overlaid it with half a

lie. Maybe it had dimmed her view in the process.

She noticed the stench from her drenched suit folowed

her, the smel of rotten vegetables and mold—or

possibly the toxic fumes from the outside world. Her

throat burned a little as she crossed the cafeteria toward

the stairwel. Her skin began to itch, and she couldn’t

tel if it was from fear, from her imagination, or truly

something in the air. She didn't dare risk finding out, so

she held her breath and hurried as fast as her weary legs

would take her, around the corner to where she knew

the stairs would be.

This world is the same as my world, she thought to

herself, stumbling down the first flight of stairs in the

wan glow of emergency light strips. *The Gods built*

more than one.

Her heavy boots, stil dripping with soup, felt unsteady

on the metal treads. At the landing on two, she paused

and took in a few gulps of air, less painful gulps, and

considered how best to remove the infernal and bulky

outfit that made every movement awkward, that reeked

of the fetid smel of rot and outside air. She looked

down at her arms. The thing had required help to don.

There were double zippers in the back, layers of velcro,

miles of heat tape. She looked at the knife in her hand,

suddenly grateful that she had never dropped it after

using it to remove her helmet.

Gripping the knife with one clumsy glove, she carefuly

inserted the tip through the other sleeve, right above the

top of her wrist. She forced the point through, pushing

the blade over the top of her arm so it wouldn’t jab her

even if it pierced al the way. The fabric was difficult to

cut, but a tear finaly formed as she augured the handle

in smal circles. She slid the knife into this tiny rip, the

dul side of the blade facing her skin, and

slid it down

her arm and toward her knuckles. When the tip of the

blade ripped through the fabric between her fingers, she

was able to free her hand from the long gash she'd

made, the sleeve flopping from her elbow.

Juliette sat down on the grating, moved the knife to her

newly freed hand, and worked on the other side. She

freed it as wel while soup dripped from her shoulders

and down her arms. She next started a tear at her chest,

better control of the knife now without the thick gloves

on. She ripped the metal foil exterior away, peeling

herself like an orange. The solid colar for her helmet

had to stay—it was attached to her charcoal fabric

undersuit as wel as the reinforced

zippers up her back

—but piece by piece she removed the shiny outer coat

which was slathered with a nastiness she attributed

partly to the soup and partly to her trek over the hils.

Next came her boots, which were cut free around the

ankles until she was able to work them off, sawing a slit

down the outside edge and popping one foot free, then

the other.

Before she cleaned up the hanging tatters of fabric any

further, or worried about the material stil attached to

the zipper at her back, she got up from the landing and

hurried down the steps, putting more distance between

herself and the air above that seemed to scratch at her

throat. She was another two flights down, swimming

through the green glow of the stairwel, before she

appreciated the fact that she was alive.

She was alive.

For however much longer, this was a brutal, beautiful,

and brand new fact for Juliette. She had spent three

days climbing long stairs similar to these as she came to

grips with her fate. Another day and night had been

spent in a cel made for the future corpses who dotted

the landscape. And then— *this*. An impossible trek

through the wilderness of the forbidden, breaking in to

the impenetrable and the unknown. Surviving.

Whatever happened next, for this moment, Juliette flew

down foreign steps in bare feet, the steel cool against

her tingling skin, the air burning her

throat less and less

with each gulp of new air, the raw stench and memory

of death receding further and further above her. Soon, it

was just the patter of her joyous descent ringing out and

drifting down a lonely and empty darkness like a

muffled bel that rang not for the dead, but for the living.

••••

She stopped on six and rested while she worked on

what remained of her protective suit. With care, she

sliced her black undersuit by her shoulders and

colarbone, working the tear al the way around and

clawing at her back as it ripped free, strips of heat tape

stil attached. Once the helmet colar was detached from

the fabric—just the zipper hanging like a

second spine

along her back—she could finaly remove it from her

neck. She puled it off and dropped it to the ground,

then stripped off the rest of the black carbon fabric,

peeling away the arms and legs and leaving al the

material in a rough pile outside the double doors to level

six.

Six should be an apartment level, she thought. She

considered going inside and yeling out for help or

looking for clothes and supplies in the many rooms, but

her greater impulse was to descend. The up-top felt

poisoned and too close. It didn’t matter if it was al in

her imagination—or if it was from her miserable

experiences living in the up-top of her

own silo—her

body felt a revulsion for the place. Safe was the down

deep. It had always felt this way.

One hopeful image did linger from the upper kitchen:

The rows and rows of canned and jarred food for the

lean harvests. Juliette figured there would be more in the

lower mess hals as wel. And the air in the silo seemed

decent as she regained her breath; the sting in her lungs

and on her tongue had faded. Either the vast silo held a

lot of air that was now being consumed by no one, or

there was stil a source. Al these thoughts gave her

hope, these talies of resources. So she left her spoiled

and tattered clothing behind and armed with only a large

chef’s knife, she stole down the curved

stairs naked,

her body becoming more and more alive with every

step taken, her mind becoming more determined to

keep the rest of her that way.

••••

On thirteen, she stopped and checked inside the doors.

There was always the chance that this silo was laid out

completely differently, floor to floor, so

it made little

sense to plan ahead if she didn't know what to expect.

There were only a handful of areas in the up-top that

she was intimately familiar with, and every bit of overlap

so far had seemed a perfect copy. Thirteen, she would

definitely know. There were certain things, learned so

young and remembered so deep that they felt like little

stones in the center of her mind. These would be the

parts of her that rotted last, the bits left over once the

rest skittered off on the wind or was drunk deep by the

roots. In her mind, as she pushed the door open a

crack, she wasn’t in a different silo, an abandoned husk

of a silo, but in her past, pushing open a door on her

youth.

It was dark inside, none of the security or emergency

lights on. There was a different smel. The air was

stagnant and had a tinge of decay.

Juliette shouted down the halway.

“Helo?”

She listened to her voice echo back from the empty

wals. The voice that returned sounded distant, weaker,

higher than her own. She imagined

herself at age nine,

running through these very hals, crying out to her older

self across the years. She tried to picture her mother

chasing behind that girl, attempting to scoop her up and

force her to be stil, but the ghosts evaporated in the

darkness. The last of the echoes faded, leaving her

alone and naked in the doorway.

As her eyes adjusted, she could just barely make out a

reception desk at the end of the hal. Light reflected off

glass windows just where they should be. It was the

exact same layout as her father's nursery in the mids,

the place where she had been not just born, but raised.

It was hard to believe that this was some place

different. That *other* people had lived

here, other

children had been born, had played and had been

raised just over a hil and down a dip, had given chase

or chalenged each other to Hop or whatever games

they had invented, al of them unaware of the other.

Maybe it was from standing in the doorway of a

nursery, but she couldn’t help but think of al the lives

this place had contained. People growing up, faling in

love, burying their dead.

Al those people *outside*. People she had desecrated

with her boots, scattering their bones and ashes as she

kicked her way into the very place they had fled.

Juliette wondered how long ago it had happened, how

long since the silo had been abandoned. What *had*

happened here? The stairwel was stil lit, which meant

the battery room stil held juice. She needed paper to

do the math, to figure how recently or how long ago al

this life had turned to death. There were practical

reasons for wanting to know, beyond the mere itch of

curiosity.

With one last look inside, one final shudder of regret for

not stopping to see her father the last few times she'd

passed his nursery, Juliette shut the door on the

darkness and the ghosts and considered her

predicament. She could very wel be perfectly alone in a

dying silo. The thril of being alive at al was quickly

draining away, replaced with the reality of her solitude

and the tenuousness of her survival. Her

stomach

grumbled its agreement. She could somehow stil smel

the fetid soup on her, could taste the stomach acid from

her retching. She needed water. She needed clothes.

These primal urges were pushed to the forefront,

drowning out the severity of her situation, the daunting

tasks before her, leaving the regrets of the past behind.

If the layout was the same, the first hydroponic farm

would be four floors below. The larger of the two upper

dirt farms would lie just below that. Juliette shivered

from an updraft of cold air. The stairwel was creating

its own thermal cycle, and it would only be colder the

further down she went. But she went anyway—lower

was better. At the next level, she tried

the door. It was

too dark to see past the first interior halway, but it

seemed like offices or workrooms. She tried to

remember what would be on the fourteenth in her own

silo, but didn’t know. Was it incredible to not know?

The up-top of her own home had somehow been

strange to her. That made this silo something completely

alien.

She held the door to fourteen open and stuck the blade

of her knife between the slits of metal that formed every

landing's grating. The handle was left sticking up to

form a stop. She alowed the door to close on its

sprung hinges until it rested on the handle, holding it

open. This let in enough light for her to steal inside and

grope around the first handful of rooms.

There were no coverals hanging on the backs of the

doors, but one room was set up for conferences. The

water in the pitchers had long evaporated out, but the

purple tablecloth looked warm enough. Warmer than

being naked. Juliette moved the assortment of cups,

plates, and pitchers and grabbed the cloth. She

wrapped it around her shoulders, but it was going to

slip off when she moved, so she tried knotting the

corners in front of her. Giving up on this, she ran back

to the landing, out into the welcomed light, and removed

the fabric completely. Grabbing the knife —the door

squealing eerily shut behind her—she pushed the blade

through the center of the tablecloth and

cut a long gash.

Her head went through this, the cloth faling past her

feet in front and behind her. A few minutes with the

blade and she'd cut away the excess, forming a belt out

of a long strip and from another shock of fabric, enough

to tie over her head and keep it warm.

It felt good to be making something, to be engineering

her way through one particular problem. She had a tool,

a weapon if need be, and clothes. The impossible list of

tasks had been whittled down a few shavings. She

descended further, her feet cold on the stairs, dreaming

of boots, thirsty for water, very much aware of al that

remained for her to do.

On fifteen, she was reminded of another necessity as

her weary legs nearly gave way. Her knees buckled,

she grabbed the railing, and she realized, as the

adrenaline evaporated from her veins, that she was

deathly tired. She paused on the landing, hands on her

knees, and took a few deep breaths. How long had she

been going? How much further could she push herself?

She checked her reflection in the blade

of the knife, saw

how horrible she looked, and decided she needed rest

before she went any further. Rest now, while it was stil

warm enough to not shiver to pieces.

It was tempting to explore that level for a bed, but she

decided against it—there would be little comfort in the

pitch black behind those doors. So she curled up on the

steel grating of landing fifteen, tucked her arms under

her head, and adjusted the tablecloth so every patch of

bare skin was covered. And before she could go over

the long list forming in her head, exhaustion took over.

She drifted off to sleep with only a moment's panic that

she shouldn't be so tired, that this might be the sort of

nap one never woke up from, that she

was destined to

join the residents of this strange place, curled up and

unmoving, frozen and lifeless, rotting and wasting away

—

12

“*But old folks — many feign as they were dead;*

Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead.”

“Do you understand what you’re

proposing we do?”

Knox looked up at McLain, met her wrinkled and

wizened eyes with as much confidence as he could

muster. The tiny woman who controled al the silo’s

spares and fabrication cast an oddly imposing figure.

She didn’t have Knox’s barrel chest or thick beard, had

wrists barely bigger than two of his fingers, but she

possessed a wizened gray gaze and the weight of hard

years that made him feel but a shadow in her presence.

“It’s not an uprising,” he said, the forbidden words

moving easily with the grease of habit and time. “We’re

setting things to right.”

McLain sniffed. “I’m sure that’s what my great

grandparents said.” She pushed back loose strands of

silver hair and peered down at the blueprint spread out

between them. It was as if she knew this was wrong,

but had resigned herself to helping rather than hinder it.

Maybe it was her age, Knox thought, peering at her

pink scalp through hair so thin and white as to be like

filaments of glass. Perhaps, with enough time in these

wals, one could become resigned to

things never

getting better, or even changing al that much. Or maybe

a person eventualy lost hope that there was anything

worth preserving at al.

He looked down at the blueprint and smoothed the

sharp creases in the fine paper. He was suddenly aware

of his hands, how thick and grease-limned his fingers

appeared. He wondered if McLain saw him as a brute,

storming up here with delusions of justice. She was old

enough to see him as young, he realized. Young and hot

tempered, while he thought of himself as being old and

wise.

One of the dozens of dogs that lived among Supply's

stacks grunted discontentedly under the table as if al

this war planning were spoiling its nap.

“I think it’s safe to assume IT knows something is

coming,” McLain said, running her smal hands across

the many floors between them and thirty four.

“Why? You don’t think we were discrete coming up?”

She smiled up at him. “I’m sure you were, but it’s safe

to assume this because it would be dangerous to

assume otherwise.”

He nodded and chewed on the part of his beard below

his lower lip.

“How long wil the rest of your mechanics take to get

here?” McLain asked.

“They’l leave around ten, when the stairwel is

dimmed, and be here by two, three at the latest. They’l

be loaded down.”

“And you think a dozen of your men is sufficient to

keep things running down below?”

“As long as nothing major breaks, yeah.” He scratched

the back of his neck. “Where d’ya think the porters wil

fal? Or the people from the mids?”

She shrugged. “The mids see themselves as toppers

mostly. I know, I spent my childhood up there. They go

for the view and eat at the cafe as much as they can,

justifying the climb. The toppers are another question. I

think we have more hope among them."

Knox wasn't sure he heard her correctly. "Say again?"

She looked up at him, and Knox felt the dog nuzzling

against his boots, looking for company or warmth.

"Think about it," McLain said. "Why are you so riled

up? Because you lost a good friend? That happens al

the time. No, it's because you were *lied* to. And the

toppers wil feel this ever more keenly, trust me. They

live in sight of those who've been lied to. It's the mids,

the people who aspire upward without knowing and

who look down on us without compassion that wil be

the most reluctant."

“So you think we have alies up top?”

“That we can’t get to, yeah. And they would take some

convincing. A fine speech like you poisoned my people

with.”

She gifted him with a rare grin, and Knox felt himself

beaming in return. And right then he knew, instantly,

why her people were devoted to her. It was similar to

the pul he had on others, but for different reasons.

People feared him and wanted to feel safe. But they

respected McLain and wanted to feel loved.

“The problem we’re gonna have is that the mids are

what separate us from IT.” She drew her hand across

the blueprint. “So we need to get through there quick

but without starting a fight.”

“I thought we’d just storm up before dawn,” Knox

grumbled. He leaned back and peered under the table

at the dog, who was half sitting on one of his boots and

looking up at him with its foolish tongue hanging out, tail

wagging. Al Knox saw in the animal was a machine that

ate food and left shit behind. A furry bal of meat he

wasn’t alowed to eat. He nudged the

filthy thing off his

boot. “Scram,” he said.

“Jackson, get over here.” McLain snapped her fingers.

“I don’t know why you keep those things around,

much less breed more of ‘em.”

“You wouldn’t,” McLain snapped back. “They’re

good for the soul, for those of us who have them.”

He checked to see if she was serious and

found her

smiling a little more easily now.

“Wel, after we set this place right, I’m gonna push for

a lottery for them, too. Get their numbers under

control.” He returned her sarcastic smile. Jackson

whined until McLain reached down to pet him.

“If we were al as loyal as this to each other, there’d

never need *be* an uprising," she said, peering up at him.

He dipped his head, unable to agree. There had been a

few dogs in Mechanical over the years, enough for him

to know that some people felt this way, even if he

didn't. He always shook his head at those who spent

hard-earned chits on food that would fatten a thing that

would never fatten him in return. When

Jackson

crossed under the table and rubbed against his knee,

whining to be petted, he left his hands spread out on the

blueprint, defiant.

“What we need for the trip up is a diversion,” McLain

said. “Something to thin the numbers in the mids. It’d be

nice if we could get more of them to go up-top,

because we're going to make a racket moving this

many people up the stairs—"

"We? Wait, you don't think you're coming—"

"If my people are, then of course I am." She inclined

her head. "I've been climbing ladders in the stockroom

for over fifty years. You think a few flights of stairs wil

give me grief?"

Knox wasn't sure *anything* could give her grief.

Jackson's tail thumped the leg of the table as the mutt

stood there, looking up at him with that dumb grin his

breed habitualy wore.

"What about welding doors shut on the way up?"

Knox asked. "Keep them in until al this is al over."

"And do what afterwards? Just apologize? What if this

takes weeks?”

“Weeks?”

“You don’t think it’l be that easy, do you? Just march

up and take the reins?”

“I’m under no delusions about what comes next.” He

pointed at her office door, which led out to the

workshops ful of clacking machinery. “Our people are

building the implements of war, and I

aim to use them if

it comes to that. I wil gladly take a peaceful transfer,

would be satisfied pushing Bernard and a few others

out to clean, but I have never shied from getting dirty,

either."

McLain nodded. "Just so we're both clear—"

"Clear as glass," he said.

He clapped his hands, an idea forming.

Jackson ducked

away from the sudden noise.

“I’ve got it,” he told her. “A diversion.” He pointed to

the lower floors of Mechanical on the blueprint. “What

if we have Jenkins cascade a power outage? We could

start a few levels above this, or even better, with the

farms and the mess hals. Blame it on the recent

generator work—”

“And you think the mids’l clear out?” She narrowed

her eyes.

“If they want a warm meal. Or they’l hunker down in

the dark.”

“I think they’l be in the stairwel gossiping, wondering

what al the fuss is about. Even more in our way.”

“Then we’l tel them we’re going up to

fix the

problem!" Knox felt himself getting frustrated. The

damn dog was sitting on his boot again.

"*Up* to fix a problem?" McLain laughed. "When's the

last time *that* made any sense?"

Knox puled on his beard. He wasn't sure what was so

complicated. There were a lot of them. They worked

with tools al day. They were going to go

beat in tech

heads, little men like Bernard who sat on their butts and

clacked on keyboards like secretaries. They just

needed to go up there and *do* it.

“You got any better ideas?” he asked.

“We need to keep in mind the *after*,” McLain said.

“After you’ve bludgeoned some people to death and

the blood is dripping through the grates,

what then? Do

you want people living in fear of that happening again?

Or of whatever you put them through to get there?”

“I only want to hurt those that lied,” he said. “That’s al

any of us want. We’ve *all* lived in fear. Fear of the

outside. Fear of cleaning. Afraid to even talk about a

better world. And none of it was true. The system was

rigged, and in a way to make us hang our heads and

take it—”

Jackson barked up at him and began to whine, his tail

swishing the floor like a dropped air hose with a stuck

nozzle that had gone out of control.

“I think when we’re done,” he said, “and we start

talking about using our know-how to explore a world

we’ve only ever looked out at, I think that’s gonna

inspire some people. Hel, it gives me hope. Don’t you

feel anything?”

He reached down and rubbed Jackson’s head, which

stopped the animal from making so much noise. McLain

looked at him for a while. She finaly bobbed her head

in agreement.

“We’l go with the power outage,” she said with finality.

“Tonight, before any who went to see the cleaning

return disappointed. I’l lead up a squad with candles

and flashlights, make it look like a goodwil mission

headed by Supply. You’l folow a few hours later with

the rest. We’l see how far the repair story gets us

before we run into trouble. Hopefuly, a

good number

wil be staying in the up-top, or back in their beds in the

mids, too exhausted from climbing for a meal to care

about the commotion."

"There'l be less traffic those early hours," Knox

agreed, "so maybe we won't run into too much

trouble."

"The goal wil be to hit IT and contain it.

Bernard is stil

playing Mayor, so he probably won't be there. But he'l

either come to us or we'l push up after him once the

thirties are secure. I don't think he'l put up much of a

fight, not once his floors are ours."

"Agreed," Knox said, and it felt good to have a plan.

To have an aly. "And hey, thanks for this."

McLain smiled. “You give a good speech for a

greaser,” she said. “And besides—” She nodded

toward the dog. “Jackson likes you, and he’s hardly

ever wrong. Not about men.”

Knox looked down and realized he was stil scratching

the mutt. He puled his hand away and watched the

animal pant, staring up at him. In the next room,

someone laughed at a joke, the voices of his mechanics

mixing with the members of Supply, al gently muffled

by the wal and door. This laughter was joined by the

sounds of steel rods bending into shape, flat pieces

hammered sharp, machines for making rivets turned

instead into making bulets. And Knox knew what

McLain meant about loyalty. He saw it

in that dumb

dog’s eyes, that it would do anything for him if only he

would ask. And this weight bearing down on his chest,

of the many who felt that way for him and for McLain

—Knox decided that *this* was the heaviest burden of

them al.

13

“*Death's pale flag is not advanced*

there.”

The dirt farm below filed the stairwel with the rich

smel of fresh rot. Juliette was stil waking up as she

descended another level and began noticing the scent.

She had no idea how long she’d slept—it had felt like

days but could’ve been hours. She had woken with her

face pressed to the grating, a pattern of red lines

marking her cheek, and had gotten underway

immediately. Her stomach was gnawing at her, the odor

from the farm hurrying her along. By twenty-eight, the

pungency hung in the air so thick it felt like she was

swimming *through* the scents. It was the smel of death,

she decided. Of funerals. Of loamy soil turned over,

releasing al those tangy molecules into

the air.

She stopped on thirty—the hydroponic farms—and

tried the doors. It was dark inside. There was a sound

down the halway, the whir of a fan or a motor. It was a

strange encounter, this smal noise. For over a day, she

had heard nothing but the sounds she made herself. The

green glow of the emergency lights were no company;

they were like the heat of a dying body, of batteries

draining with the leak of photons. But this was

something *moving*, some sound beyond her own

breathing and footfals, and it lurked deep in the dark

corridors of the hydroponic farms.

Once again, she left her only tool and defense behind as

a doorstop to alow in a trickle of light. She stole inside,

the smel of vegetation not as strong as in the stairwel,

and padded down the halway with one hand on the

wal. The offices and reception area were dark and

lifeless, the air dry. There was no blinking light on the

turnstile, and she had no card or chit to feed it. She

placed her hands on the supports and vaulted over, this

smal act of defiance somehow powerful,

as though she

had come to accept the lawlessness of this dead place,

the complete lack of civilization, of rules.

The light spiling from the stairwel barely reached the

first of the growing rooms. She waited while her eyes

adjusted, thankful of this ability honed by the down

deeps of Mechanical and the dark interiors of broken

machines. What she saw, barely, when she was finaly

able, did not inspire her. The hydroponic gardens had

rotted away. Thick stalks, like ropes, hung here and

there from a network of suspended pipes. It gave her

an idea of how long ago these farms had succumbed, if

not the silo. It hadn’t been hundreds of years, and it

hadn’t been days. Even a window that

wide felt like a

treasure of information, the first crumb toward an

answer to this mysterious place.

She rapped one of the pipes with her knuckles and

heard the solid thud of fulness.

No plants, but water! Her mouth seemed to dry out

with just the prospect. Juliette leaned over the railing

and into the growing room. She pressed

her mouth to

one of the holes in the top of a pipe where the stalk of a

plant should be growing. She created a tight seal and

sucked. The fluid that met her tongue was brackish and

foul—but wet. And the taste was not of anything

chemical or toxic, but stale organics. Dirt. It was only

slightly more distasteful than the grease and oil she had

practicaly been drenched in for two decades.

So she drank until she was ful. And she realized, now

that she had water, that if there were more crumbs to

find, more clues, she might just live long enough to

gather them.

Before she left, Juliette snapped a section of pipe off the

end of a run, keeping the cap intact on one side. It was

only a little over an inch in diameter and no more than

two feet long, but it would work as a thermos. She

gently bent the broken pipe that remained down,

alowing water to flow from the remaining loop. While

she topped up her pipe, she splashed some water on

her hands and arms, stil fearful of contamination from

the outside.

Once her pipe was ful, Juliette stole back toward the lit

doorway at the end of the hal. There were three

hydroponic farms, al with closed loops that wound

through long and twisting corridors. She tried to do a

rough calculation in her head, but al she could come up

with was enough to drink for a very long time. The

aftertaste was awful, and she wouldn’t

be surprised if

her stomach cramped from the contents, but if she

could get a fire going, find enough fabric or leftover

paper to burn, even that could be helped with a good

boil.

Back in the stairwel, she returned to the rich odors she

had left behind. She retrieved her knife and hurried

down another thick slice of the silo, almost two times

around the stairwel to the next landing, and checked

the door.

The smel was definitely coming from the dirt farms.

And Juliette could hear that whirring again, louder now.

She stopped the door and propped her thermos against

the railing and checked inside.

The smel of vegetation was overpowering. Ahead, in

the dim green glow, she could see bushy arms reaching

over the railings and into the pathway. She vaulted the

security gate and explored the edge, one hand on the

wal while her eyes adjusted again. There was definitely

a pump running somewhere. She could also hear water

dripping, either from a leak or a

functioning tap. Juliette

felt chils from the leaves brushing her arms. The smel

of rot was distinguishable now: it was the odor of fruit

and vegetables decaying in the soil and withering on the

vine. She heard the buzz of flies, the sounds of life.

She reached into a thick stand of green and felt around

until her hand hit something smooth. Juliette gave it a tug

and held a plump tomato up to the light. Her timeline

estimate suddenly shrank. How long could the dirt

farms sustain themselves? Did tomatoes require

seeding, or did they come back every year like the

weeds? She couldn’t remember. She took a bite, the

tomato not yet fuly ripe, and heard a noise behind her.

Another pump clicking on?

She turned just in time to see the door to the stairwel

slamming closed, plunging the dirt farm into absolute

darkness.

Juliette froze. She waited for the sound of her knife

rattling down through the staircase. She tried to imagine

that it could’ve slipped and falen on its own. With the

light extinguished, her ears seemed to hijack the unused

portion of her brain. Her breathing, even her pulse,

seemed audible, the whirring of the pump louder now.

Tomato in hand, she crouched down and moved

toward the other wal, arms stretched out to feel her

way. She slid toward the exit, staying low to avoid the

plants, trying to calm herself. There were no ghosts

here, nothing to be spooked about. She

repeated this to

herself as she slowly crept forward.

And then an arm was on her, reaching over her

shoulder. Juliette cried out and dropped the tomato.

The arm grabbed her shoulder, pinning her down in a

crouch as she tried to stand. She slapped at this

intruder, tried to pul away from it, the tablecloth bonnet

yanked from her head—until finaly she felt the hard

steel of the turnstile, one of the waist bars jutting out in

the halway, and felt the fool.

“You ‘bout gave me a heart attack,” she told the

machine. She reached for its sides and lifted herself

over. She would come back for more food once she

had light. Leaving the turnstile and heading for the exit,

one hand on the wal and another groping ahead of

herself, Juliette wondered if she would start talking to

objects, now. Start going crazy. As the darkness

absorbed her, she realized her mindset was changing by

the minute. Resigned to her death the day before, now

she was frightened of mere insanity.

It was an improvement.

Her hand finaly bumped into the door, and Juliette

pushed it open. She cursed the loss of the knife; it was

certainly missing from the grating. She wondered how

far it might have falen, if she'd ever find it again or

maybe a replacement. She turned to grab her thermos

—

And saw that it was missing as wel.

Juliette felt her vision narrow, her heart quicken. She

wondered if the closing of the door could have toppled

her thermos. She wondered how the knife had slipped

through a gap in the grating narrower than its handle.

And as the pounding in her temples receded, she heard

something else:

Footsteps.

Ringing out on the stairwel below her.

Running.

14

"*These violent delights have violent ends.*"

The countertop in Supply rattled with the implements

of war. Guns, freshly miled and wholy forbidden, were

lined up like so many sticks of steel. Knox picked one

up—could felt the heat in a barrel

recently bored and

rifled—and hinged the stock to expose the firing

chamber. He reached into one of the buckets of shiny

bulets, the casings chopped from thin tubes of pipe and

packed with blasting powder, and slotted one into the

brand new gun. The operation of the machine seemed

simple enough. Point and pul the lever.

“Careful where you aim that,” one of the men of Supply

said, leaning out of the way.

Knox raised the barrel toward the ceiling and tried to

picture in his mind what one of these could do. He’d

only ever seen a gun once, a smaler one on the hip of

that old deputy, a gun he’d always figured was more for

show. He stuffed a fistful of deadly rounds in his

pocket, thinking how each one could end an individual

life, and understanding why such things were forbidden.

Kiling a man should be harder than waving a length of

pipe in their direction. It should take long enough for

one’s conscience to get in the way.

One of the Supply workers emerged from the stacks

with a tub in his hands. The bend of his back and sag of

his shoulders told Knox the thing was heavy. “Just two

dozen of these so far,” the man said, hoisting the bin to

the counter.

Knox reached inside and puled out one of the heavy

cylinders. His mechanics and even some of the men and

women in yelow eyed the bin nervously.

“Slam that end on something hard—” the man behind

the counter said, just as calmly as if he were doling out

an electrical relay to a customer and giving some last-

minute instalation advice. “—like a wal, the floor, the

butt of your gun—anything like that. And then get rid of

it.”

“Are they safe to carry?” Shirly asked as Knox stuffed

one into his hip pocket.

“Oh yeah, it takes some force.”

Several people reached their arms in and clattered

around for one. Knox caught McLain’s eyes as she

took one for herself and slotted it into a pocket on her

chest. The look on her face was one of cool defiance.

She must see how disappointed he was in her coming,

and he could tel at a glance that there would be no

reasoning with her.

“Alright,” she said, turning her gray-blue eyes toward

the men and women gathered around the counter.

“Listen up. We’ve got to get back open for business, so

if you’re carrying a gun, grab some ammo. There are

strips of canvas over there. Wrap these things up as

best you can to keep them out of sight. My group is

leaving in five minutes, got that? Those of you in the

second wave can wait in the back, out of sight."

Knox nodded. He glanced over at Marck and Shirly,

both of whom would join him in the second wave; the

slower climbers would go first and act casual. The

stouter legs would folow and make a strong push,

hopefuly converging on thirty-four at the

same time.

Each group would be conspicuous enough—combined,

and they might as wel sing their intentions while they

marched.

“You okay, Boss?” Shirly rested her rifle on her

shoulder and frowned at him. He rubbed his beard and

wondered how much of his stress and fear was shining

through.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Yeah.”

Marck grabbed a bomb, stashed it away, and rested a

hand on his wife’s shoulder. Knox felt a pang of doubt.

He wished the women didn’t have to get involved. At

least the wives. He continued to hope that none of this

violence would be necessary, but it was getting harder

and harder to pretend as eager hands took up arms.

They were, al of them, now capable of taking lives, and

he reckoned they were angry enough to do so.

McLain stepped through the opening in the counter and

sized him up. “This is it, then.” She reached out a hand.

Knox accepted it. He admired the strength in the

woman. “We’l see you on thirty-five and

go up the last

level together," he said. "Don't have al the fun without

us."

She smiled. "We won't."

"And good climbing." He looked to the men and

women gathering up behind her. "Al of you. Good luck

and see you soon."

There were stern nods and clenched jaws. The smal

army in yelow began to file for the door, but Knox held

McLain back.

“Hey,” he said. “No trouble until we catch up, okay?”

She slapped his shoulder and smiled.

“And when this does go down,” Knox said, “I expect

you at the very back, behind the—”

McLain stepped closer, a hand gripping Knox’s sleeve.

Her wrinkled face had suddenly

hardened.

“And tel me, where wil you be, Knox of Mechanical,

when the bombs fly? When these men and women who

look up to us are facing their gravest test, where wil

you be?”

Knox was taken aback by the sudden attack, this quiet

hiss that landed with al the force of a shout.

“You know where I’l—” he started to answer.

“Damn straight,” McLain said, releasing his arm. “And

you’d better wel know that I’l see you there.”

15

"I dreamt my lady came and found me dead"

Juliette stood perfectly stil and listened to the sound of

footsteps retreating down the stairwel. She could feel

the vibrations in the railing. Goose bumps rushed up her

legs and down her arms. She wanted to cal out, to yel

for the person to stop, but the sudden rush of adrenaline

made her chest feel cold and empty. It was like a chil

wind had forced itself deep into her lungs, crowding out

her voice. People were alive and in the silo with her.

And they were running away.

She pushed away from the railing and dashed across

the landing, hit the curved steps at a dead run and took

them as fast as her legs could take her. A flight down,

as the adrenaline subsided, she found the lungs to yel,

“Stop!,” but the racket of her bare feet on the metal

stairs likely drowned out her voice. She could no longer

hear the person running, dared not stop

and listen for

fear they would get too far ahead, but as she passed the

doorway on thirty-one, she felt the panic that they might

slip inside some level and get away. And if there were

only a handful of them hiding in the vast silo, she may

never find them. Not if they didn’t want to be found.

Somehow, this was more terrifying than anything else:

that she might live the rest of her days foraging and

surviving in a dilapidated silo, talking to inanimate

objects, while a group of people did the same and

stayed out of sight. It so stressed her that it took a while

to consider the opposite: that this might instead be a

group who *would* seek her out, and not have the best

intentions.

They wouldn't have the best intentions, but they *would*

have her *knife*.

She stopped on thirty-two to listen. Holding her breath

to keep quiet was almost impossible—her lungs were

crying out for deep gulps of air. But she remained stil,

the pulse in her palms beating against the cool railing,

the distinct sound of footsteps stil below her and louder

now. She was catching up! She took off again,

emboldened, taking the steps three at a time, her body

sideways as she danced down the stairs as she had in

youth, one hand on the curving railing, the other held out

in front of her for balance, the bals of her feet just

barely touching a tread before she was flying down to

the next, concentrating lest she slip. A

spil could be

deadly at such speeds. Images of casts on arms and

legs and stories of the unfortunate elderly with broken

hips came to mind. Stil, she pushed her limits, positively

flying. Thirty three went by in a blaze. Half a spiral later,

over her footfals, she heard a door slam. She stopped

and looked up. She leaned over the railing and peered

down. The footfals were gone, leaving just the sound of

her panting for air.

Juliette hurried down another rotation of the steps and

checked the door on thirty-four. It wouldn’t open. It

wasn’t locked, though. The handle clicked down and

the door moved, but caught on something. Juliette

tugged as hard as she could—but to no avail. She

yanked again and heard something crack. With a foot

braced on the other door, she tried a third time, yanking

sharply, snapping her head back, puling her arms

toward her chest and kicking with her foot—

Something snapped. The door flew open, and she lost

her grip on the handle. There was an explosion of light

from inside, a bright burst of ilumination

spiling out the

door before it slammed shut again.

Juliette scrambled across the landing and grabbed the

handle. She puled the door open and struggled to her

feet. One broken half of a broom stick lay inside the

halway—the other half hung from the handle of the

neighboring door. Both stood out in the blinding light al

around her. The overhead lamps inside the room were

fuly lit, the bright rectangles in the ceiling marching

down the hal and out of sight. Juliette listened for

footsteps, but heard little more than the buzzing of the

bulbs. The turnstile ahead of her winked its red eye

over and over, like it knew secrets but wouldn’t tel.

She got up and approached the machine,

looked to the

right where a glass wal peeked into a conference room,

the lights ful-on in there as wel. She hopped over the

stile, the motion a habit already, and caled out another

helo. Her voice echoed back, but it sounded different

in the lit air, if that were possible. There was life in here,

electricity, other ears to hear her voice, which made the

echoes somehow fainter.

She passed offices, peeking in each one to look for

signs of life. The place was a mess. Drawers dumped

on the floor, metal filing cabinets tipped over, precious

paper everywhere. One of the desks faced her, and

Juliette could see that the computer was on, the screen

ful of green text. It felt as though she'd entered a

dreamworld. In two days—assuming she'd slept that

long—her brain had gradualy acclimated to the pale

green glow of the emergency lights, had grown used to

a life in the wilderness, a life without power. She stil

had the taste of brackish water on her tongue, and now

she stroled through a disheveled but otherwise normal

workplace. She imagined the next shift

—did offices like

these have shifts?—returning, laughing, from the

stairwel, shuffling papers and righting furniture and

getting back to work.

The thought of work had her wondering what they did

here. She had never seen such a layout. She almost

forgot about her flight down the stairs as she poked

about, as curious about the rooms and power as the

footsteps that had brought her there. Around a bend

she came to a wide metal door that, unlike the others,

wouldn’t open. Juliette heaved on it and felt it barely

budge. She pressed her shoulder against the metal door

and pushed it, a few inches at a time, until she could

squeeze through. She had to step over a

tal metal filing

cabinet that had been yanked down in front of the

heavy door in an attempt to hold it closed.

The room was massive, at least as big as the generator

room and far larger than the cafeteria. It was ful of tal

pieces of furniture bigger than filing cabinets but with no

drawers. Instead, their fronts were covered with

blinking lights, red, green, and amber.

Juliette shuffled through paper that had spiled from the

filing cabinet. And she realized, as she did so, that she

couldn’t be alone in the room. Someone had puled the

cabinet across the door, and they had to have done this

from *inside*.

“Helo?”

She passed through the rows of tal

machines, for that's

what she figured they were. They hummed with

electricity, and now and then seemed to whir or clack

like their innards were busy. She wondered if this were

some sort of exotic power plant—providing the lighting

perhaps? Or did these have stacks of batteries inside?

Seeing al the cords and cables at the backs of the units

had her leaning toward batteries. No wonder the lights

were blaring. This was like twenty of Mechanical's

battery rooms combined.

"Is anyone here?" she caled out. "I mean you no

harm."

She worked her way through the room, listening for any

movement, until she came across one of the machines

with its door hinged open. Peering inside, she saw not

batteries but boards like the kind Walker was forever

soldering on. In fact, the guts of this machine looked

eerily similar to the inside of the dispatch room's

computer—

Juliette stepped back, realizing what these were. "The

servers," she whispered. She was in this silo's IT. Level

thirty-four. Of course.

There was a scraping sound near the far wal, the sound

of metal sliding on metal. Juliette ran in that direction,

darting between the tal units, wondering who the hel

this was running from her, and where they planned to

hide.

She rounded the last row of servers to see a portion of

the floor moving, a section of metal grate sliding to

cover a hole. Juliette dove for the floor, her tablecloth

garb wrapping up her legs, her hands seizing the edge of

the cover before it could close. Right in front of her, she

saw the knuckles and fingers of a man's hands gripping

the edge of the grate. There was a startled scream, a

grunt of effort. Juliette tried to yank back

on the grate,

but had no leverage. One of the hands disappeared. A

knife took its place, snicking against the grate, hunting

for her fingers.

Juliette swung her feet beneath her and sat up for

leverage. She yanked on the grate and felt the knife bite

into her finger as she did so.

She screamed. The man below her

screamed. He

emerged and held the knife between them, his hand

shaking, the blade catching and reflecting the overhead

lights. Juliette tossed the metal hatch away and clutched

her hand, which was dripping blood.

“Easy!” she said, scooting out of reach.

The man ducked his head down, then poked it back up.

He looked past Juliette as if others were

coming up

behind her. She fought the urge to check —but decided

to trust the silence just in case he was trying to fool her.

“Who are you?” she asked. She wrapped part of her

garment around her hand to bandage it. She noticed the

man, his beard thick and unkempt, was wearing gray

coverals. They could’ve been made in her silo, with just

slight differences. He stared at her, his dark hair wild

and hanging shaggy over his face. He grunted, coughed

into his hand, seemed prepared to duck down under the

floor and disappear.

“Stay,” Juliette said. “I mean you no harm.”

The man looked at her wounded hand and at the knife.

Juliette glanced down to see a thin trace of blood

snaking toward her elbow. The wound ached, but she'd

had worse in her time as a Mechanic.

"S-s-sorry," the man muttered. He licked his mouth

and swalowed. The knife was trembling uncontrolably.

"My name's Jules," she said, realizing this man was

much more frightened of her than the other way around.

"What's yours?"

He glanced at the knife blade held sideways between

them, almost as if checking a mirror. He shook his

head.

“No name,” he whispered, his voice a dry rasp. “No

need.”

“Are you alone?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Solo,” he said. “Years.” He looked up at

her. “Where did—” He licked his lips

again, cleared his

throat. His eyes watered and glinted in the light. “—you

come from? What level?”

“You’ve been by yourself for *years*?” Juliette said in

wonder. She couldn’t imagine. “I didn’t come from any

level,” she told him. “I came from another silo.” She

enunciated this last softly and slowly, worried what this

news might do to such a seemingly fragile man.

But Solo nodded as if this made sense. It was not the

reaction Juliette had expected.

“The outside—” Solo looked again at the knife. He

reached out of the hole and set it on the grating, slid it

away from both of them. “—is it safe?”

Juliette shook her head. “No,” she said. “I had a suit. It

wasn’t a far walk. But stil, I shouldn’t be alive.”

Solo bobbed his head. He looked up at her, wet tracks

running from the corners of his eyes and disappearing

into his beard. “None of us should,” he said. “Not a

one.”

16

“*Give leave awhile,*

we must talk in secret.”

“What is this place?” Lukas asked Bernard. The two

of them stood before a large chart hanging on the wal

like a tapestry. The diagrams were precise, the lettering

ornate. It showed a grid of circles evenly spaced with

lines between them and intricacies inside each. Several

of the circles were crossed out with thick red marks of

ink. It was just the sort of majestic

diagramming he

hoped to one day achieve with his star charts.

“This is our legacy,” Bernard said simply.

Lukas had often heard him speak similarly of the

mainframes upstairs.

“Are these supposed to be the servers?” he asked,

daring to rub his hands across a continuous piece of

paper the size of a smal bed sheet. “They’re laid out

like the servers.”

Bernard stepped beside him and rubbed his chin.

“Hmm. Interesting. So they are. I never noticed that

before.”

“What are they?” Lukas looked closer and saw each

was numbered. There was also a jumble of squares and

rectangles in one corner with paralel lines spaced

between them, keeping the blocky shapes separate and

apart. These figures contained no detail within them, but

the word “Atlanta” was written large beneath.

“We’l get to that. Come, let me show you something.”

At the end of the room was a door. Bernard led him

through this, turning on more lights as he

went.

“Who else comes down here?” Lukas asked, folowing

along.

Bernard glanced back over his shoulder. “No one.”

Lukas didn’t like that answer. He glanced back over his

own shoulder, feeling like he was descending into

something people didn’t return from.

“I know this must seem sudden,”

Bernard said. He

waited on Lukas to join him, threw his smal arm around

Lukas's shoulder. "But things changed this morning.

The world is changing. And she rarely does it

pleasantly."

"Is this about . . . the cleaning?" He nearly said

"Juliette." The picture of her felt hot against his

breastbone.

Bernard's face grew stern. "There was no cleaning," he

said abruptly. "And now al hel wil break loose, and

people wil die. And the silos, you see, were designed

from the ground down to prevent this."

"Designed—" Lukas repeated. His heart beat once,

twice. His brain whirred its old circuits and finaly

computed something Bernard had said that had made

no sense.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Did you say *silos*?”

“You’l want to familiarize yourself with this.” Bernard

gestured toward a smal desk which had a fragile-

looking wooden chair tucked up against it. There was a

book on the desk unlike any Lukas had ever seen, or

even heard of. It stood nearly as high as it was wide.

Bernard patted the cover, then inspected his palm for

dust. “I’l give you the spare key, which you are to

never remove from your neck. Come down when you

can and read. Our history is in here, as wel as every

action you are to take in any emergency.”

Lukas approached the book, a lifetime’s worth of

paper, and hinged open the cover. The contents were

machine printed, the ink pitch-black. He flipped through

a dozen pages of listed contents until he found the first

page of the body. Oddly, he recognized the opening

lines immediately.

“It’s the Pact,” he said, looking up at Bernard. “I

already know quite a bit of—”

“This is the pact,” Bernard told him, pinching the first

half inch of the thick book. “The rest is the Order.”

He stepped back.

Lukas hesitated, digesting this, then reached forward

and flopped the tome open near its middle.

• In the event of an earthquake:

• For casement cracking and outside seepage,

turn to AIRLOCK BREACH (p.2180)

• For colapse of one or more levels, see

SUPORT COLUMNS under SABOTAGE

(p.751)

• For fire outbreak, see—

“Sabotage?” Lukas flipped a few pages and read

something about air handling and asphyxiation. “Who

came up with al this stuff?”

“People who have experienced many bad things.”

“Like . . . ?” He wasn’t sure if he was alowed to say

this, but it felt like taboos weren’t alowed down there.

“Like the people before the uprising?”

“The people before *those* people,” Bernard said. “The

one people.”

Lukas closed the book. He shook his head, wondering

if this was al a gag, some kind of initiation. The priests

usualy made more sense than this. The children's

books, too.

"I'm not *really* supposed to learn al this, am I?"

Bernard laughed. His countenance had fuly transformed

from earlier. "You just need to know what's in there so

you can access it when you need to."

“What does it say about this morning?” He turned to

Bernard, and it dawned on him suddenly that no one

knew of his fascination, his enchantment, with Juliette.

The tears had evaporated from his cheeks, the guilt of

possessing her forbidden things had overpowered his

shame for faling so hard for someone he hardly knew.

And now this secret had wandered out of

sight. It could

only be betrayed by the flush he felt on his cheeks as

Bernard studied him and pondered his question.

“Page seventy-two,” Bernard said, the humor draining

from his face and replaced with the frustration from

earlier.

Lukas turned back to the book. This was a test. A

shadowing rite. It had been a long time since he'd

performed under a caster's glare. He began flipping

through the pages and saw at once that the section he

was looking for came right after the Pact, was at the

very beginning of this new Order.

He found the page. At the very top, in bold print, it said:

• In Case of a Failed Cleaning:

And below this rested terrible words strung into awful

meaning. Lukas read the instructions several times, just

to make sure. He glanced over at Bernard, who

nodded sadly, before Lukas turned back to the print.

• In Case of a Failed Cleaning:

• Prepare for War.

17

"*Poor living corpse, closed in a dead*

man's tomb!"

Juliette folowed Solo through the hole in the server

room floor. There was a long ladder there and a

passageway that led to thirty-five, a part of thirty-five

she suspected was not accessible from the stairwel.

Solo confirmed this as they ducked through the narrow

passageway and folowed a twisting and brightly lit

corridor. A blockage seemed to have come unstuck

from the man's throat, releasing a lone-stricken torrent.

He talked about the servers above them, saying things

that made little sense to Juliette, until the passageway

opened into a cluttered room.

"My home," Solo said, spreading his hands. There was

a mattress in one corner resting directly on the floor, a

tangled mess of sheets and pilows trailing off. A

makeshift kitchen had been arranged across two

shelving units: jugs of water, canned food, empty jars

and boxes. The place was a wreck and smeled foul,

but Juliette figured Solo couldn’t see or smel any of

that. There was a wal of shelves on the other side of

the room stocked with metal canisters

the size of large

ratchet sets, some of them partialy open.

“You live here alone?” Juliette asked. “Is there no one

else?” She couldn’t help but hear the thin hope in her

voice.

Solo shook his head.

“What about further down?” Juliette inspected her

wound. The bleeding had almost stopped.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Sometimes I do. I’l find a

tomato missing, but I figure it’s the rats.” He stared at

the corner of the room. “Can’t catch them al,” he said.

“More and more of them—”

“Sometimes you think there’s more of you, though?

More survivors?” She wished he would focus.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his beard, looked around the room

like there was something he should be doing for her,

something you offered guests. “I find things moved

sometimes. Find things left out. The grow lights left on.

Then I remember *I* did them.”

He laughed to himself. It was the first natural thing she’d

seen him do, and Jules figured he’d been doing a lot of

it over the years. You either laughed to keep yourself

sane or you laughed because you'd given up on staying

that way. Either way, you laughed.

"Thought the knife in the door was something I did.

Then I found the pipe. Wondered if it was left behind

by a realy, realy big rat."

Juliette smiled. "I'm no rat," she said. She adjusted her

tablecloth, patted her head and wondered what had

happened to her other scrap of cloth.

Solo seemed to consider this.

“So how many years has it been?” she asked.

“Thirty four,” he said, no pause.

“Thirty four *years*? Since you’ve been *alone*?”

He nodded, and the floor seemed to fal away from her.

Her head spun with the concept of that much time with

no other person around.

“How *old* are you?” she asked. He didn’t seem al that

much older than her.

“Fifty,” he said. “Next month, I’m pretty sure.” He

smiled. “This is fun, talking.” He pointed around the

room. “I talk to things sometimes, and whistle.” He

looked straight at her. “I’m a good whistler.”

Juliette realized she probably wasn’t even *born* when

whatever happened here took place. “How exactly

have you *survived* al these years?” she asked.

“I dunno. Didn’t set out to survive for years. Tried to

last hours. They stack up. I eat. I sleep. And I—” He

looked away, went to one of the shelves and sorted

through some cans, many of them empty. He found one

with the lid hinged open, no label, and

held it out

toward her. “Bean?” he asked.

Her impulse was to decline, but the eager look on his

poor face made it impossible. “Sure,” she said, and she

realized how hungry she was. She could stil taste the

brackish water from earlier, the tang of stomach acid,

the unripe tomato. He stepped closer, and she dug into

the wet juice in the can and came out with a raw green

bean. She popped it into her mouth and chewed.

“And I poop,” he said bashfuly while she was

swalowing. “Not pretty.” He shook his head and fished

for a bean. “I’m by myself, so I just go in apartment

bathrooms until I can’t stand the smel.”

“In *apartments*?” Juliette asked.

Solo looked for a place to set down the beans. He

finaly did, on the floor, among a smal pile of other

garbage and bachelor debris.

“Nothing flushes. No water. I’m by myself.” He looked

embarrassed.

“Since you were sixteen,” Juliette said, having done the

math. “What happened here thirty four years ago?”

He lifted his arms. “What always happens. People go

crazy. It only takes once.” He smiled. “We get no credit

for being sane, do we? I get no credit. Even from me.

From myself. I hold it together and hold it together and

I make it another day, another year, and there’s no

reward. Nothing great about me being normal. About

not being crazy.” He frowned. “Then you

have one bad

day, and you worry for yourself, you know? It only

takes one.”

He suddenly sat down on the floor, crossed his legs,

and twisted the fabric of his coverals where they

bunched up at his knees. “Our silo had one bad day.

Was al it took.” He looked up at Juliette. “No credit

for al the years before that. Nope. You wanna sit?”

He waved at the floor. Again, she couldn’t say no. She

sat down, away from the reeking bed, and rested her

back against the wal. There was so much to digest.

“How did you survive?” she asked. “That bad day, I

mean. And since.”

She immediately regretted asking. It wasn’t important to

know. But she felt some need, maybe to glimpse what

awaited her, maybe because she feared that surviving in

this place could be worse than dying on the outside.

“Staying scared,” he said. “My dad’s caster was the

head of IT. Of this place.” He nodded. “My dad was a

big shadow. Knew about these rooms, one of maybe

two or three who did. In just the first

few minutes of

fighting, he showed me this place, gave me his keys. He

made a diversion, and suddenly I became the only one

who knew about this place." He looked down at his lap

a moment, then back up. Juliette realized why he

seemed so much younger. It wasn't just the fear, the

shyness, that made him seem that way—it was in his

eyes. He was locked in the perpetual terror of his

teenage ordeal. His body was simply growing old

around the frozen husk of a frightened little boy.

He licked his lips. “None of them made it, did they?

The ones who got out?” Solo searched her face for

answers. She could feel the dire hope leaking out of his

pores.

“No,” she said sadly, remembering what it felt like to

wade through them, to crawl over them. It felt like

weeks ago rather than days.

“So you saw them out there? Dead?”

She nodded.

He dipped his chin. “The view didn’t stay on for long. I

only snuck up once in the early days. There was stil a

lot of fighting going on. As time went by,

I went out

more often and further. I found a lot of the mess they

made. But I haven't found a body in—" He thought

carefuly. "—maybe twenty years?"

"So there were others in here for a while?"

He pointed toward the ceiling. "Sometimes they would

come in here. With the servers. And fight. They fought

everywhere. Got worse as it went along, you know?

Fight over food, fight over women, fight over fighting."

He twisted at the waist and pointed back through

another door. "These rooms are like a silo in a silo.

Made to last ten years. But it lasts longer if you're

solo." He smiled.

"What do you mean? A silo in a silo?"

He nodded. “Of course,” he said. “Sorry. I’m used to

talking with someone who knows everything I know.”

He winked at her, and Juliette realized he meant himself.

“You don’t know what a silo is.”

“Of course I do,” she said. “I was born and raised in a

place just like this. Only, I guess you could say that

we’re stil having good days and not giving ourselves

credit for them.”

Solo smiled. “Then what’s a silo?” he asked, that

teenage defiance bubbling to the surface.

“It’s—” Juliette searched for the words. “It’s our

home. A building like those over the hil, but

underground. The silo is the part of the world you can

live in. The *inside*,” she said, realizing it was harder to

define than she thought.

Solo laughed.

“That’s what the word means to *you*. But we use

words al the time without realy knowing them.” He

pointed toward the shelf with al the metal canisters. “Al

the real knowing is in those. Everything that ever

happened.” He shot her a look. “You’ve heard the term

‘raging bul?’ Or someone being ‘bul-headed?’”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“But what’s a bul?” he asked.

“Someone who’s careless. Or mean, like a buly.”

Solo laughed. “So much we don’t know,” he said. He

studied his fingernails. “A silo isn’t the world. It’s

nothing. The term, this word, comes from a long time

ago, back when crops grew in the outside farther than

you could see—" He waved his hand over the floor like

it was some vast terrain. "—back when there were

more people than you could count, back when

everyone had lots of kids—" He glanced up at her. His

hands came together and kneaded one another, almost

as if embarrassed to bring up the making

of kids around

a woman.

“They grew so much food,” he continued, “that even

for al these people they couldn’t eat it al, not at once.

So they stored it away in case times got bad. They took

more seeds of grain than you could count and they

would pour them into these great silos that stood

aboveground—”

“Aboveground,” Juliette said. “Silos.” She felt as

though he must be making this up, some delusion he’d

concocted over the lonely decades.

“I can show you pictures,” he said petulantly, as if

upset by her doubt. He got up and hurried to the shelf

with the metal canisters. He read the smal white labels

on the bottom, running his fingers across them.

“Ah!” He grabbed one—it looked heavy—and brought

it to her. The clasp on the side released the lid, revealing

a thick object inside.

“Let me,” he said, even though she hadn’t moved a

muscle to help. He tilted the box and let the heavy

object fal onto his palm, where it balanced expertly. It

was the size of a children's book, but ten or twenty

times as thick. Stil, it was a book. She could see the

edges of miraculously fine-cut paper.

"I'l find it," he said. He flipped pages in large chunks,

each flap a fortune in pressed paper clapping solidly

against more fortunes. Then he whittled his search down

more finely, a pinch at a time, before moving to a single

page at a time.

“Here.” He pointed.

Juliette moved closer and looked. It was like a drawing,

but so exact as to almost seem real. It was like looking

at the view of the outside from the cafeteria, or the

picture of someone’s face on an ID, but in color. She

wondered if this book had batteries in it.

“It’s so real,” she whispered, rubbing it

with her fingers.

“It *is* real,” he said. “It’s a picture. A photograph.”

Juliette marveled at the colors, the green field and blue

sky reminding her of the lie she had seen in her visor’s

false video. She wondered if this was false as wel. It

looked nothing like the rough and smeared photos

she’d ever seen.

“These buildings,” he pointed to what looked like large

white cans sitting on the ground. “These are silos. They

hold seed for during the bad times. For when the times

get good again.”

He looked up at her. They were just a few feet apart,

Juliette and him. She could see the wrinkles around his

eyes, could see how much the beard concealed his age.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say,” she told him.

He pointed at her. Pointed at his own chest. “We are

the seeds,” he said. “This is a silo. They put us here for

the bad times.”

“Who? Who put us here? And what bad times?”

He shrugged. “But it won’t work.” He shook his head,

then sat back on the floor and peered at the pictures in

the massive book. “You can’t leave seeds this long,” he

said. “Not in the dark like this. Nope.”

He glanced up from the book and bit his lip, water

weling up in his eyes. “Seeds don’t go crazy,” he told

her. “They don’t. They have bad days and lots of good

ones, but it doesn’t matter. You leave them and leave

them, however many you bury, and they do what seeds

do when they're left alone too long—"

He stopped. Closed the book and held it to his chest.

Juliette watched as he rocked back and forth, ever so

slightly.

"What do seeds do when they're left too long?" she

asked him.

He frowned.

"We rot," he said. "Al of us. We go bad down here,

and we rot so deep that we won't grow anymore." He

blinked and looked up at her. "We'l never grow

again."

18

"*If you had the strength of twenty men,*

it would dispatch you straight."

The waiting beyond the stacks of Supply was the

worst. Those who could, napped. Most engaged in

nervous banter. Knox kept checking the time on the

wal, picturing al the pieces moving throughout the silo.

Now that his people were armed, al he could hope for

was a smooth and bloodless transfer of power. He

hoped they could get their answers, find out what's

been going on in IT—those secretive bastards—and

maybe vindicate Jules. But he knew bad

things could

happen.

He saw it on Marck's face, the way he kept looking at

Shirly. The worry there was evident in the man's frown,

the tilt of his eyebrows, the wrinkles above the bridge of

his nose. Knox's shift leader wasn't hiding the concern

for his wife as wel as he probably thought he was.

Knox puled out his multi-tool and checked the blade.

He flashed his teeth in the reflection to see if anything

from his last meal was stuck there. As he was putting it

away, one of Supply's shadows emerged from behind

the stacks to let them know they had visitors.

"What color visitors?" Shirly asked, as the group

gathered their guns and lurched to their

feet.

The young girl pointed at Knox. “Blue. Same as you.”

Knox rubbed the girl’s head as he slipped between the

shelving units. This was a good sign. The rest of his

people from Mechanical were running ahead of

schedule. He made his way to the counter while Marck

gathered the others, waking a few, the extra rifles

clattering as they were gathered up.

As Knox rounded the counter, he saw Pieter enter

through the front door, the two Supply workers

guarding the landing having alowed him past.

Pieter smiled as he and Knox clasped hands. Members

of Pieter’s refinery crew filed in behind, their customary

black coverals replaced with the more discrete blue.

“How goes it?” Knox asked.

“The stairs sing with traffic,” Pieter said. His chest

sweled as he took in and held a deep breath, then blew

it out. Knox imagined the pace they’d maintained to

shave off so much time.

“Everyone’s underway?” He and Pieter slid to the side

while their two groups merged, members of Supply

introducing themselves or embracing those they already

knew.

“They are.” He nodded. “I’d give the last of them

another half hour. Though I fear the whispers on

porters’ lips travel even faster than we do.” He looked

toward the ceiling. “I’d wager they echo above our

heads even now.”

“Suspicions?” Knox asked.

“Oh, aye. We had a run-in by the lower market.

People wanted to know the fuss. Georgie gave them lip,

and I thought it’d come to blows.”

“God, and not in the mids yet.”

“Aye. Can’t help but think a smaler incursion would’ve

had a greater chance of success.”

Knox frowned, but he understood Pieter thinking so.

The man was used to doing a great deal with only a

handful of strong backs. But it was too late for them to

argue over plans already in action. “Wel, the blackouts

have likely begun,” Knox said. “There’s nothing to it but

for us to chase them up.”

Pieter nodded gravely. He looked around the room at

the men and women arming themselves and re-packing

their gear for another quick climb. “And I suppose we

mean to bludgeon our way up.”

“Our plan is to be heard,” Knox said. “Which means

making some noise.”

Pieter patted his boss on the arm. “Wel then, we are

already winning.”

He left to pick out a gun and top up his canteen. Knox

joined Marck and Shirly by the door.

Those without

guns had armed themselves with fearsome shanks of

flattened iron, the edges bright silver from the shril

work of the grinder. It was amazing to Knox that they

al knew, instinctively, how to build implements of pain.

It was something even shadows knew how to do at

young ages, knowledge somehow dredged up from the

brutal depths of their imagination, this ability to deal

harm to one another.

“Are the others running behind?” Marck asked Knox.

“Not too bad,” Knox said. “More that these guys

made good time. The rest’l catch up. You guys ready?”

Shirly nodded. “Let’s get moving,” she said.

“Alright, then. Onward and upward, as they say.”

Knox scanned the room and watched his mechanics

meld with members of Supply. More than a few faces

were turned his way, waiting for some sign, maybe

another speech. But Knox didn't have another one in

him. Al he had was the fear that he was leading good

people to their slaughter, that the taboos were faling in

some runaway cascade, and it was al

happening much

too quickly. Once guns were made, who would unmake

them? Barrels rested on shoulders and bristled like

pincushions above the crowd. There were things, like

spoken ideas, that were almost impossible to take

back. And he reckoned his people were about to make

many more of them.

“On me,” he growled, and the chatter began to die

down. Packs rustled into place, pockets jangling with

danger. “On me,” he said again to the quieting room,

and his soldiers began to form up in columns. Knox

turned to the door, thinking this was certainly al *on*

him. He made sure his rifle was covered, tucked it

under his arm, and squeezed Shirly’s

shoulder as she

puled the door open for him.

Outside, two workers from Supply stood by the railing.

They had been turning the sparse traffic away with a

made-up power outage. With the doors open, bright

light and the noise of Supply's machinery leaked out

into the stairwel, and Knox saw what Pieter meant by

whispers traveling swifter than feet. He adjusted his

pack of supplies—the tools, candles, and flashlights that

made it seem as if he were marching to aid rather than

war. Beneath this beguiling layer hid more bulets and an

extra bomb, bandages and pain salve for just in case.

His rifle was wrapped in a strip of cloth and remained

tucked under his arm. Knowing what it

was, he found

the concealment ridiculous. Looking at the others

marching with him, some in welding smocks, some

holding construction helmets, he saw their intentions

were al too obvious.

They left the landing and the light spiling from Supply

behind and began their climb. Several of his people

from Mechanical had changed into yelow coverals, the

better to blend in the mids. They moved noisily up the

dimmed nighttime glow of the stairwel, the shiver of

traffic from below giving Knox hope that the rest of his

people would be catching up soon. He felt sorry for

their weary legs but reminded himself that they were

traveling light.

He tried his damnedest to picture the coming morning

as positively as he could. Perhaps the clash would

conclude before any more of his people arrived. Maybe

they would end up being nothing more than a wave of

supporters coming to join in the celebrations. Knox and

McLain would have already entered the forbidden

levels of IT, would have yanked the

cover off the

inscrutable machinery inside, exposing those evil

whirring cogs once and for al.

They made good progress while Knox dreamed of a

smooth overthrow. They passed one landing where a

group of women were hanging laundry over the metal

railing to dry. The women spotted Knox and his people

in their blue coverals and complained of the power

outages. Several of his workers stopped to hand out

supplies and to spread lies. It wasn't until after they had

left and had wound their way up to the next level that

Knox saw the cloth had come unwrapped from

Marck's barrel. He pointed this out and it was fixed

before the next landing.

The climb turned into a silent, grueling ordeal. Knox let

others take the lead while he slid back and checked on

the status of his people. Even those in yelow, he

considered his responsibility. Their lives were hanging in

the balance of decisions he’d made. It was just as

Walker had said, that crazy fool. This was it. An

uprising, just like the fables of their

youth. And Knox

suddenly felt a dire kinship with those old ghosts, those

ancestors of myth and lore. Men and women had done

this before. Maybe for different reasons, with a less

noble anger caught in their throats, but somewhen, on

some level, there had been a march like this. Similar

boots on the same treads. Maybe some of the same

boots, just with new soles. Al with the jangle of mean

machines in hands not afraid to use them.

It startled Knox, this sudden link to a mysterious past.

And it wasn't that terribly long ago, was it? Less than

two hundred years? He imagined, if someone lived as

long as Jahns had, or McLain for that matter, that three

long lives could span that distance. Three handshakes to

go from that uprising to this one. And what of the years

between? That long peace sandwiched between two

wars?

Knox lifted his boots from one step to another, thinking

on these things. Had he become the bad people he'd

learned about in youth? Or had he been lied to? It hurt

his head to consider, but here he was, leading a

recreation of something awful. And yet it felt so right.

S o *necessary*. What if that former clash had felt the

same? Had felt the same in the breasts of the men and

women who'd waged it?

19

"Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low,

As one dead in the bottom of a tomb."

"It would take ten lifetimes to read al

these.”

Juliette looked up from the pile of scattered tins and

stacks of thick books. There was more to marvel at in

their text-heavy pages than in any of the children’s

books of her youth.

Solo turned from the stove where he was heating soup

and boiling water. He waved a dripping metal spoon at

the scattered mess she'd made. "I don't think they were

meant to be read," he told her. "At least, not like I've

been reading them, front to back." He touched his

tongue to the spoon, then stuck it back in the pot and

stirred. "Everything's out of order. It's more like a

backup to the backup."

"I don't know what that means," Juliette admitted. She

looked down at her lap where pictures of animals caled

“butterflies” filed the pages. Their wings were comicaly

bright. She wondered if they were the size of her hands

or the size of people. She had yet to find any sense of

scale for the beasts.

“The servers,” Solo said. “What did you think I meant?

The backup.”

He sounded flustered. Juliette watched him busy about

the stove, his movements jerky and manic, and realized

she was the one cloistered away and ignorant, not him.

He had al these books, decades of reading history, the

company of ancestors she could only imagine. What did

she have as her experience? A life in a dark hole with

thousands of felow, ignorant savages?

She tried to remember this as she watched him dig a

finger in his ear and then inspect his fingernail.

“The backup of what exactly?” she finaly asked,

almost afraid of the cryptic answers to come.

Solo found two bowls. He began wiping one out with

the fabric in the bely of his coverals. “The backup of

everything,” he said. “Al that we know.

Al that ever

was.” He set the bowls down and adjusted a knob on

the stove. “Folow me,” he said, waving his arm. “I’l

show you.”

Juliette closed the book and slotted it into its tin. She

rose and folowed Solo out of the room and into the

next one.

“Don’t mind the mess,” he said,

gesturing at a smal hil

of trash and debris piled up against one wal. It looked

like a thousand empty cans of food, and smeled like ten

thousand. Juliette wrinkled her nose and fought the

reflex to gag. Solo seemed unaffected. He stood beside

a smal wooden desk and flipped through diagrams

hanging from the wal on enormous sheets of paper.

“Where’s the one I want?” he wondered aloud.

“What are these?” Juliette asked, entranced. She saw

one that looked like a schematic of the silo, but unlike

any they’d had in Mechanical.

Solo turned. He had several sheets flopped over one

shoulder, his body practicaly disappearing between the

layers of them. “Maps,” he said. “I want to show you

how much is out there. You'l shit yourself."

He shook his head and muttered something to himself.

"Sorry, didn't mean to say that."

Juliette told him it was fine. She held the back of her

hand to her nose, the stench of rotting food intolerable.

"Here it is. Hold this end." Solo held out the corner of

a half dozen sheets of paper. He took the other side

and they lifted them away from the wal. Juliette felt like

pointing out the grommets at the bottom of the maps

and how there were probably sticks or hooks around

here somewhere for propping them up, but held her

tongue. Opening her mouth just made the smel of the

rotting cans worse.

“This is us,” Solo said. He pointed to a spot on the

paper. Dark, squiggly lines were everywhere. It didn't

look like a map or schematic of anything Juliette had

ever seen. It looked like children had drawn it. Hardly a

straight line existed anywhere.

"What's this supposed to show?" she asked.

"Borders. Land!" Solo ran his hands over one

uninterrupted shape that took up nearly a third of the

drawing. “This is al water,” he told her.

“Where?” Juliette’s arm was getting tired of holding up

her end of the sheet. The smel and the riddles were

getting to her. She felt a long way from home. The thril

of survival was in danger of being replaced with the

depression of a long and miserable existence looming

for years and years before her.

“Out there! Covering the land.” Solo pointed vaguely at

the wals. He narrowed his eyes at Juliette’s confusion.

“The silo, *this silo*, would be as big around as a single

hair on your head.” He patted the map. “Right here. Al

of them. Maybe al of us left. No bigger than my

thumb.” He placed a finger in a knot of lines. Juliette

thought he seemed so sincere. She

leaned closer to see

better, but he pushed her back.

“Let those go,” he said. He slapped at her hand holding

the corners of paper. He smoothed the maps against the

wal. “This is us.” He indicated one of the circles on the

top sheet. Juliette eyebaled the columns and rows,

figured there were four dozen or so of them. “Silo

seventeen.” He slid his hand up. “Number twelve. This

is eight. And silo one up here.”

“No.”

Juliette shook her head and reached for the desk, her

legs weak.

“Yes. Silo one. You’re probably from sixteen or

eighteen. Do you remember how far you walked?”

She grabbed the smal chair and puled it

out. Sat down

heavily.

“How many hils did you cross?”

Juliette didn’t answer. She was thinking about the *other*

map and comparing the scales. What if Solo was right?

What if there were fifty or so silos and al of them could

be covered by a thumb? What if Lukas had been right

about how far away the stars were? She

needed

something to crawl inside, something to cover her. She

needed some sleep.

“I once heard from silo one,” Solo said. “A long time

ago. Not sure how wel any of these others are doing

___”

“Wait.” Juliette sat up straight. “What do you mean,

you *heard* from them?”

Solo didn’t turn from the map. He ran his hands from

one circle to another, a childlike expression on his face.

“They caled. Checking in.” He looked away from the

map and her, toward the far corner of the room. “We

didn’t talk for long. I didn’t know al the procedures.

They weren’t happy.”

“Okay, but how did you do this? Can we cal someone

now? Was it a radio? Did it have a little antennae, a

smal black pointy thing—” Juliette stood and crossed

to him, grabbed his shoulder and turned him around.

How much did this man know that could help her but

that she couldn’t get out of him? “Solo, how did you

talk to them?”

“Through the wire,” he said. He cupped his hands and

covered his ears with them. “You just talk in it.”

“You need to show me,” she said.

Solo shrugged. He flipped up a few of the maps again,

found the one he wanted and pressed the others against

the wal. It was the schematic of the silo she had seen

earlier, a side-on view of it divided into thirds, each

third side by side. She helped him hold the other sheets

out of the way.

“Here are the wires. They run every which way.” He

traced thick branches of lines that ran from the exterior

wals and off the edges of the paper. They were labeled

with minuscule print. Juliette leaned closer to read; she

recognized many of the engineering marks.

“These are for power,” she said, pointing at the lines

with the jagged symbols above them.

“Yup.” Solo nodded. “We don’t get our own power

anymore. Borrow it from others, I think. Al automatic.”

“You get it from others?” Juliette felt her frustration

rise. How many crucial things did this man know that he

considered trifling? “Anything else you want to add?”

she asked him. “Do you have a flying suit that can whisk

me back to my silo? Or are there secret passages

beneath al the floors so we can just strol there as easy

as we like?”

Solo laughed and looked at her like she was crazy.

“No,” he said. “Then it would be *one* seed, not many.

One bad day would ruin us al. Besides, the diggers are

dead. They buried them.” He pointed at a nook, a

rectangular room jutting off from the edge of

Mechanical. Juliette peered closer. She recognized

every floor of the down deep at a glance, but this room

wasn't supposed to exist.

"What do you mean, *the diggers*?"

"The machines that removed the dirt. You know, that

made this place." He ran his hand down the length of

the silo. “Too heavy to move, I guess, so they poured

the wals right over them.”

“Do they work?” Juliette asked. An idea formed. She

thought of the mines, of how she’d helped excavate

rock by hand. She thought of the sort of machine that

could dig out an entire silo, wondered if it could be used

to dig *between* them.

Solo clicked his tongue. “No way. Nothing down there

does. Al toast. Besides—” he chopped his hand

partway up the down deep. “There’s flooding up to—”

He turned to Juliette. “Wait. Are you wanting *out*? To

go somewhere?” He shook his head in disbelief.

“I want to go *home*,” Juliette said.

His eyes widened. “Why would you go *back*? They

sent you away, didn't they? You'l stay here. We don't

want to leave." He scratched his beard and shook his

head side to side.

"Someone has to know about al of this," Juliette told

him. "Al these other people out there. Al that space

beyond. The people in my silo need to know."

"People in your silo already *do*," he said.

He studied her quizzicaly, and it dawned on Juliette that

he was right. She pictured where they currently stood in

this silo. They were in the heart of IT, deep inside the

fortress room of the mythical servers, below the servers

in a hidden passage, hidden probably even from the

people who had access to the innermost kernels of the

silo’s mysteries.

Someone in her own silo *did* know. He had helped

keep these secrets for generations. Had decided, alone

and without input from anyone, what they should and

should not know. It was the same man who had sent

Juliette to her death, a man who had kiled who knew

how many more—

“Tel me about these wires,” Juliette said. “How did

you talk to the other silo? Give me every detail.”

“Why?” Solo asked, seemingly shrinking before her.

His eyes were wet with fear.

“Because,” she said. “I have someone I very much

wish to cal.”

20

"This day's black fate on more days doth depend:

This but begins the woe others must

end."

The waiting was interminable. It was the long silence of

itchy scalps and trickling sweat, the discomfort of

weight on elbows, of backs bent, of belies flat against

an unforgiving conference table. Lukas peered down

the length of his fearsome rifle and through the

conference room's shattered glass window. Little

fragment jewels remained in the side of the jamb like

transparent teeth. Lukas could stil hear, ringing in his

ears, the incredible bang from Sims's gun that had taken

out the glass. He could stil smel the acrid scent of

gunpowder in the air, the looks of worry on the faces of

the other techs. The destruction had seemed so

unnecessary. Al this preparation, the

toting of massive

black guns out of storage, the interruption of his talk

with Bernard, news of people coming from the down

deep, it al made little sense.

He checked the *slide* on the side of the rifle and tried to

remember the five minutes of instruction he'd been

given hours earlier. There was a *round* in the *chamber*.

The *gun* was *cocked*. More *bullets* waited patiently in

the *clip*.

And the boys in security gave *him* a hard time for his

tech jargon. Lukas's vocabulary had exploded with

new terms. He thought about the rooms beneath the

servers, the pages and pages of the Order, the rows of

books he'd only gotten a glimpse of. His mind sagged

under the weight of it al.

He spent another minute practicing his *sighting*, looking

down the *barrel* and lining up the smal cross in the tiny

circle. He aimed at the cluster of conference chairs that

had been roled into an obstructing jumble by the door.

For al he knew, they would be waiting like this for days

and nothing would ever happen. It had been a while

since any porter had brought an update on what was

going on below.

For practice, he gently slid his finger into the guard and

against the *trigger*. He tried to get comfortable with the

idea of puling that lever, of fighting the upward kick

Sims had told them to expect.

Bobbie Milner—a shadow no more than sixteen—

made a joke beside him, and Sims told them both to

shut the fuck up. Lukas didn't protest being included in

the admonishment. He glanced over at the security gate

where a bristle of black barrels poked through the

stanchions and over the metal duty desk. Peter Bilings,

the new silo sheriff, was over there fiddling with his

smal gun. Bernard stood behind the

sheriff, doling out

instructions to his men. Bobbie Milner shifted his weight

beside Lukas and grunted, trying to get more

comfortable.

Waiting. More waiting. They were al waiting.

Of course, had Lukas known what was coming, he

wouldn't have minded.

He would've begged to wait there

forever.

••••

Knox led his group through the sixties with just a few

stops for water, a pause to secure their packs and

tighten their laces. They passed several curious porters

with overnight deliveries who prodded for details about

where they were heading, about the blackouts. Each

porter left unhappy. And hopefuly, empty headed.

Pieter had been right: The stairwel was singing. It

vibrated with the march of too many feet. Those who

lived above were generaly moving upward, away from

the blackouts and toward the promise of power, of

warm food and hot showers. Meanwhile, Knox and his

people mobilized behind them to squelch

a different

kind of power.

At fifty-six, they had their first spot of trouble. A group

of farmers stood outside the hydroponic farm lowering

a cluster of power cables over the railing, presumably

toward the smal group they had seen the last landing

down. When they spotted the blue coverals of

Mechanical, one of the farmers caled out, “Hey, we

keep you fed, why can’t you keep the juice on?”

“Talk to IT,” Marck replied from the front of the

queue. “They’re the ones blowing fuses. We’re doing

what we can.”

“Wel, do it faster,” the farmer said. “I thought we just

had a ratdamned power holiday to prevent this

nonsense.”

“We’l have it by lunchtime,” Shirly told them.

Knox and the others caught up with the head of the

group, creating a jamb by the landing.

“The faster we get up there the faster you’l get your

juice,” Knox explained. He tried to hold his concealed

gun casualy, like it was any other tool.

“Wel how about giving us a hand with

this tap, then?

They've had power on fifty-seven for most of the

morning. We'd like enough to get our pumps cranking."

He indicated the trunk of wires coiling over the railing.

Knox considered this. What the man was asking was

technicaly ilegal. Caling him out on it would mean

delays, but teling him to go ahead might look

suspicious. He could sense McLain's group several

levels up, waiting on them. Pace and timing were

everything.

"I can spare two of my men to help out. Just as a favor.

As long as it doesn't get back to me that Mechanical

had shit to do with this."

"Like I care," the farmer said. "I just want water

moving.”

“Shirly, you and Courtnee give them a hand. Catch up

when you can.”

Shirly’s mouth dropped open. She begged with her

eyes for him to reconsider.

“Get going,” he told her.

Marck came to her side. He lifted his wife’s pack and

handed her his multi-tool. She begrudgingly accepted it,

glowered at Knox a moment longer, then turned to go,

not saying a word to him or her husband.

The farmer let go of the cables and took a step toward

Knox. “Hey, I thought you said you’d lend me two of

___”

Knox leveled a glare harsh enough to make the man

pause. “Do you want the best I got?” he asked.

“Because you’ve got it.”

The farmer lifted his palms and backed away. Courtnee

and Shirly could already be heard stomping their way

below to coordinate with the men on the lower landing.

“Let’s go,” Knox said, hitching up his pack.

The men and women of Mechanical and Supply lurched

forward once more. They left behind a group of farmers

on landing fifty-six, who watched the long column wind

its way upward.

Whispers rose as the power cables were lowered.

Powerful forces were merging over these people’s

heads, bad intentions coming together and heading for

something truly awful.

And anyone with eyes and ears could tel: some kind of

reckoning was coming.

••••

There was no warning for Lukas, no countdown. Hours

of quiet anticipation, of insufferable nothingness, simply

erupted into violence. Even though he had been told to

expect the worst, Lukas felt like the waiting so long for

something to happen just made it a fiercer surprise

when it finaly did.

The double doors of landing thirty-four blew open.

Solid steel peeled back like curls of paper. The sharp

ring made Lukas jump, his hand slip off the stock of his

rifle. Gunfire erupted beside him, Bobbie Milner

shooting at nothing and screaming in fear. Maybe

excitement. Sims was yeling impossibly over the roar.

When it died down, something flew through the smoke,

a canister, bouncing toward the security gate.

There was a terrible pause—and then another explosion

like a blow to the ears. Lukas nearly dropped his gun.

The smoke by the security gate couldn't quite fog the

carnage. Pieces of people Lukas had known came to a

sick rest in the entrance hal of IT. The

people

responsible began to surge through before he could

take stock, before he could become fearful of another

explosion occurring right in front of him.

The rifle beside him barked again, and this time Sims

didn't yel. This time, several other barrels partook. The

people trying to push through the chairs tumbled into

them instead, their bodies shaking as if puled by

invisible strings, arcs of red like hurled paint flying from

their bodies.

More came. A large man with a throaty roar.

Everything moved so slowly. Lukas could see his mouth

part, a yel in the center of a burly beard, a chest as

wide as two men. He held a rifle at his waist. He fired at

the ruined security station. Lukas watched Peter Bilings

spin to the floor, clutching his shoulder. Bits of glass

shivered from the window frame in front of Lukas as

barrel after barrel erupted across the conference table,

the shattered window seeming insignificant now. A

prudent move.

The hail of bulets hit the man unseen. The conference

room was an ambush, a side-on attack. The large man

shook as some of the wild fire got lucky. His beard

sagged open. His rifle was cracked in half, a shiny bulet

between his fingers. He tried to reload.

The guns of IT loosed their own bulets too fast to

count. Levers were held, and springs and gunpowder

did the rest. The giant man fumbled with his rifle, but

never got it reloaded. He tumbled into the chairs,

sending them crashing across the floor. Another figure

appeared through the door, a tiny woman. Lukas

watched her down the length of his barrel, saw her turn

and look right at him, the smoke from the explosion

drifting toward her, her gray hair flowing like more of it

wrapped in a halo around her.

He could see her eyes. He had yet to shoot his gun, had

watched, jaw slack, as the fighting took place.

The woman bent her arm back and made to throw

something his way.

Lukas puled the trigger. His rifle flashed and lurched. In

the time it took, the long and terrible time it took for the

bulet to cross the room, he realized it was just an old

woman. Holding something. A bomb.

Her torso spun and her chest blossomed red. The

object fel. There was another awful wait, more

attackers appearing, screaming in anger, until an

explosion blew the chairs and the people among them

apart.

Lukas wept while a second surge made a futile attempt.

He wept until his clip was empty, wept as he fumbled

for the clasp, shoved a spare into the butt, the salt bitter

on his lips as he drew back that bolt and let loose with

another menacing hail of metal—so much stouter and

quicker than the flesh it met.

21

"*I have seen the day*

that I have worn a visor

and could tell a whispering tale."

Bernard woke to shouting, to his eyes burning from

the smoke, his ears ringing with a long-ago blast.

Peter Bilings was shaking his shoulders, yeling at him, a

look of fright in his wide eyes and soot-stained brow.

Blood stained his coverals in a wide rust-colored pool.

"Hrm?"

“Sir! Can you hear me?”

Bernard pushed Peter’s hands away and tried to sit up.

He groped about his body, looking for anything

bleeding or broken. His head throbbed. His hand came

away from his nose wet with blood.

“What happened?” he groaned.

Peter crouched by his side. Bernard saw Lukas

standing just behind the sheriff, rifle on

his shoulder,

peering toward the stairwel. There was shouting in the

distance, and then the patter of gunfire.

“We’ve got three men dead,” Peter said. “A few

wounded. Sims led a half dozen into the stairwel. They

got it a lot worse than us. A *lot* worse.”

Bernard nodded. He checked his ears, was surprised

they weren’t bleeding as wel. He dotted

his sleeve with

blood from his nose and patted Peter on the arm. He

nodded over his shoulder. “Get Lukas,” he said.

Peter frowned but nodded. He spoke with Lukas, and

the young man knelt by Bernard.

“Are you okay?” Lukas asked.

Bernard nodded. “Stupid,” he said. “Didn’t know

they’d have guns. Should’ve guessed

about the

bombs.”

“Take it easy.”

He shook his head. “Shouldn’t have had you here.

Dumb. Could have been us both—”

“Wel it was *neither* of us, sir. We’ve got ‘em running

down the stairwel. I think it’s over.”

Bernard patted his arm. “Get me to the server,” he said.

“We’l need to report this.”

Lukas nodded. He seemed to know just the server

Bernard meant. He helped Bernard to his feet, an arm

around his back, Peter Bilings frowning as the two of

them staggered down the smoky halway together.

“Not good,” Bernard told Lukas, once they were away

from the others.

“But we won, right?”

“Not yet. The damage won’t be contained here. Not

today. You’l have to stay below a while.” Bernard

grimaced and tried to walk alone. “Can’t risk something

happening to us both.”

Lukas seemed unhappy about this. He entered his code

into the great door, puled out his ID, wiped someone

else's blood off it and his hand, then swiped it through

the reader.

"I understand," he finaly said.

Bernard knew he'd picked the right man. He left Lukas

to close the heavy door while he made his way to the

rearmost server. He staggered once and fel against

number eight, catching himself and resting a moment

until the wooziness went away. Lukas caught up before

he got to the back of the room, was puling his copy of

the master key out of his coverals.

Bernard rested against the wal while Lukas opened the

server. He was stil too shaken up to notice the flashing

code on the server’s front panel. His ears were too ful

of a false ringing to notice the real one.

“What’s that mean?” Lukas asked. “That noise?”

Bernard looked at him quizzicaly.

“Fire alarm?” Lukas pointed up at the ceiling. Bernard

finaly heard it as wel. He swam toward the back of the

server as Lukas opened the last lock, pushed the young

man out of the way.

What were the chances? Did they already know?

Bernard's life had become unhinged in two short days.

He reached inside the cloth pouch, grabbed the

headset, and puled it over his tender ears. He pushed

the jack into the slot labeled "1" and was surprised to

hear a beep. The line was *ringing*. He was making a

cal.

He puled the jack out hurriedly, canceling the cal, and

saw that the light above “1” wasn’t blinking. The light

above “17” *was*.

Bernard felt the room spin. A dead silo was caling him.

A survivor? After al these years? With access to the

servers? His hand trembled as he guided the jack into

the slot. Lukas was asking something behind him, but

Bernard couldn’t hear anything through the headphones.

“Helo?” he croaked. “Helo? Is anyone there?”

“Helo,” a voice said.

Bernard adjusted his headphones. He waved for Lukas

to shut the fuck up. His ears were stil ringing, his nose

bleeding into his mouth.

“Who is this?” he asked. “Can you hear me?”

“I hear you,” the voice said. “Is this who I think it is?”

“Who the fuck is this?” Bernard sputtered. “How do

you have access to—?”

“You sent me out,” the voice said. “Is this Bernard?

You sent me to die—”

Bernard slumped down, his legs numb. The cord on the

headphones uncoiled and nearly puled the cups from

his head. He clutched the phones and fought to place

this voice. Lukas was holding him by the armpits,

keeping him from colapsing to his back.

“Are you there?” the voice asked. “Do you know who

this is?”

“No,” he said. But he knew. It was impossible, but he

knew.

“You sent me to die, you fuck.”

“You knew the rules—!” Bernard cried, yeling at a

ghost. “You *knew*—!”

“Shut up and listen, Bernard. Just shut the fuck up and

listen to me very carefuly.”

Bernard waited. He could taste the copper of his own

blood in his mouth.

“I’m coming for you. I’m coming home, and I’m

coming to *clean*.”

•

"The world is not thy friend nor the world's law.

Villain and he be many miles asunder.

And all these woes shall serve

for sweet discourses in our time to come.

He that is strucken blind cannot forget

the precious treasure of his eyesight lost.

One fire burns out another's burning,

one pain is lessen'd by another's anguish."

- The Tragic Historye of Romeus and Juliet.

Wool 5 – The Stranded

1

• Silo 18 •

Marck stumbled down the great stairway, his hand

sliding against the cool railing, a rifle tucked under his

arm, his boots slipping in blood. He could barely hear

the screams al around him: the wails

from the wounded

as they were half-dragged down the steps, the horrified

cries from the curious crowds on every landing who

witnessed their passage, or the shouts of promised

violence from the men chasing him and the rest of his

mechanics from level to level.

The ringing in his ears drowned out most of the noise. It

was the blast, the god-awful blast. Not the one that had

peeled open the doors of IT—he had been ready for

that one, had hunkered down with the rest. And it

wasn't the second bomb, the one Knox had lobbed

deep into the heart of their enemy's den. It was the *last*

one, the one he didn't see coming, the one that spiled

from the hands of that smal gray woman

from Supply.

McLain's bomb. It had gone off right in front of him,

had taken his hearing as it took her *life*.

And Knox, that stout and unmovable head of

Mechanical—his boss, his good friend —gone.

Marck hurried down the steps, wounded and afraid. He

was a long way from the safety of the down deep—and

he desperately wanted to find his wife. He concentrated

on this rather than the past, tried not to think of the

explosion that had taken his friends, had wrecked their

plans, had engulfed any chance at justice.

Muffled shots rang out from above, folowed by the

piercing zing of bulets striking steel—only steel, thank

God. Marck stayed away from the outer

railing, away

from the aim of the shooters who hounded them from

the landings above with their smoothly firing rifles. The

good people of Mechanical and Supply had been

running and fighting for over a dozen levels; Marck

silently begged the men above to stop, to give them a

chance to rest, but the boots and the bulets kept

coming.

Half a level later, he caught up to three members of

Supply, the one in the middle wounded and being

ported, arms draped over shoulders, blood dotting the

backs of their yelow coverals. He yeled at them to

keep moving, couldn’t hear his own voice, could just

feel it in his chest. Some of the blood he was slipping in

was his own.

With his injured arm tight against his chest, his rifle

cradled in the crook of his elbow, Marck kept his other

hand on the railing to keep from tumbling headfirst

down the steep stairwel. There were no alies behind

him, none stil alive. After the last shootout, he had sent

the others ahead, had barely gotten away himself. And

yet they kept coming, tireless. Marck would pause now

and then, fumble with the unreliable ammunition,

chamber a shot, and fire wildly up the stairwel. Just to

do something. To slow them down.

He stopped to take a breath, leaned out over the railing,

and swung his rifle toward the sky. The next round was

a dud. The bulets buzzing back at him *weren't*.

Huddling against the stairwel's central post, he took the

time to reload. His rifle wasn't like theirs. One shot at a

time and difficult to aim. They had modern things he'd

never heard of, shots coming as fast as a frightened

pulse. He moved toward the railing and checked the

landing below, could see curious faces through a

cracked doorway, fingers curled around

the edge of the

steel jamb. This was it. Landing forty-two. The last

place he'd seen his wife.

"Shirly!"

Caling her name, he staggered down a quarter turn until

he was level with the landing. He kept close to the

interior, out of sight from his pursuers, and searched the

shadowed faces.

“My wife!” he yeled across the landing, a hand cupped

to his cheeks, forgetting that the incredible ringing was

only in *his* ears, not theirs. “Where is she?”

A mouth moved in the dark crowd. The voice was a

dul and distant drone.

Someone else pointed down. The faces cringed; the

cracked door twitched shut as another ricochet

screamed out; the stairway shook with al the frightened

boots below and the chasing ones above. Marck eyed

the ilicit power cables draped over the railing and

remembered the farmers attempting to steal electricity

from the level below. He hurried down the stairs,

folowing the thick cords, desperate to find Shirly.

One level down, positive that his wife

would be inside,

Marck braved the open space of the landing and rushed

across. He threw himself against the doors. Shots rang

out. Marck grabbed the handle and tugged, shouting

her name to ears as deaf as his own. The door budged,

was being held fast with the sinewy restraint of unseen

arms. He slapped the glass window, leaving a pink palm

print, and yeled for them to open up, to let him in.

Eager bulets rattled by his feet—one of them left a scar

down the face of the door. Crouching and covering his

head, he scurried back to the stairwel.

Marck forced himself to move downward. If Shirly was

inside, she might be better off. She could strip herself of

incriminating gear, blend in until things settled down. If

she were below—he needed to hurry after her. Either

way, *down* was the only direction.

At the next landing, he caught up with the same three

members of Supply. The wounded man was sitting on

the decking, eyes wide. The other two were tending to

him, blood on their sides from supporting his weight.

One of the Supply workers was a woman Marck

vaguely recognized from the march up. There was a

cold fire in her eyes as Marck paused to see if they

needed help.

“I can carry him,” he shouted, kneeling by the wounded

man.

The woman said something. Marck shook his head and

pointed to his ears.

She repeated herself, lips moving in

exaggeration, but

Marck wasn’t able to piece it together. She gave up

and shoved at his arm, pushing him away. The wounded

man clutched his stomach, a red stain balooning out

from his abdomen al the way to his crotch. His hands

clasped something protruding there, a smal wheel

spinning on the end of a steel post. The leg of a chair.

The woman puled a bomb from her satchel, one of

those pipes that promised so much violence. It was

solemnly passed to the wounded man, who accepted it,

his knuckles white, his hands trembling.

The two members of Supply puled Marck away—

away from the man with the large piece of office

furniture sprouting from his oozing stomach. The shouts

sounded distant, but he knew they were nearby. They

were practicaly in his ear. He found himself yanked

backwards, transfixed by the vacant stare on the face of

this doomed and wounded man. His eyes locked onto

Marck's. The man held the bomb away from himself,

fingers curled around that terrible cylinder of steel, a

grim clench of teeth jutting along his

jawline.

Marck glanced up the stairwel where the boots were

finaly gaining on them, coming into view, black and

bloodless, this tireless and superior enemy. They came

down the dripping trail Marck and the others had left

behind, coming for them with their ammo that never

failed.

He stumbled down the stairwel backwards, half-

dragged by the others, one hand on the railing, eyes

drifting to the swinging door opening behind the man

they'd left behind.

A young face appeared there, a curious boy, rushing

out to see. A tangle of adult hands scrambled to pul

him back.

Marck was hauled down the stairs, too far down the

curving stairs to see what happened next. But his ears,

as deadened as they were, caught the popping and

zinging of gunfire, and then a blast, a roaring explosion

that shook the great stairwel, that knocked him and the

others down, slamming him against the railing. His rifle

clattered toward the edge—Marck

lunged for it. He

grabbed it before it could escape and go tumbling into

space.

Shaking his head, stunned, he pushed himself up to his

hands and knees and managed to rise slowly to his feet.

Senseless, he staggered forward down the shuddering

steps, the treads beneath his feet ringing and vibrating as

the silo around them al continued its spiral into dark

madness.

2

• Silo 18 •

The first moment of true rest came hours later at

Supply, on the upper edge of the down deep. There

was talk of holding there, of setting up some kind of

barrier, but it wasn’t clear how the

entire stairway could

be blocked to include the open space between the

railing and the concrete cylinder beyond. This was the

gap where the singing bulets lived, a place where

jumpers were known to meet their ends, and where

their enemy could surely find some way to scamper

down.

Marck's hearing had improved during the last leg of his

run. Enough to grow weary of the rhythmic clomp of his

own boots, the sound of his pained grunts, the noise of

his exhausted pants for air. He heard someone say that

the last explosion had wrecked the stairway, had

impeded the chase. But for how long? What was the

damage? No one knew.

Tensions ran high on the landing; the news of McLain's

death had unsettled the people of Supply. The wounded

in yelow coverals were taken inside, but it was

suggested—and not gently—that Mechanical's injured

would be better off receiving treatment further below.

Where they belonged.

Marck waded through these arguments, the voices stil

somewhat muffled and distant. He asked everyone

about Shirly, several in yelow shrugging as if they didn’t

know her. One guy said she’d already gone down with

some of the other wounded. He said it a second time,

louder, before Marck was sure he’d heard him.

It was good news, and he figured as much. He was

about to leave when his wife emerged

without warning

from the anxious crowd, startling him.

Her eyes widened as she recognized him. And then her

gaze fel to his wounded arm.

“Oh, God!”

She threw her arms around him, pressed her face

against his neck. Marck hugged her with one arm, his

rifle between them, the barrel cold against his quivering

cheek.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She latched to his neck, her forehead finding his

shoulder, and said something he couldn’t hear but could

feel against his skin. She made room to inspect his arm.

“I can’t hear,” he told her.

“I’m fine,” she said, louder. She shook her head, her

eyes wide and wet. “I wasn’t there. I

wasn’t there for

any of it. Is it true about Knox? What happened? How

bad was it?”

She focused on his wound, and her hands felt good on

his arm. Strong and confident. The crowd was thinning

as members of Mechanical retreated further down the

stairwel. Several in Supply yelow treated Marck to

cold stares, eyeing his wound as if worried it would

soon be *their* problem.

“Knox is dead,” he told her. “McLain, too. A few

others. I was right there when the blast went off—”

He looked down at his arm, which she had exposed by

tearing away his ripped and stained undershirt.

“Were you shot?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. It happened so

fast.” He looked over his shoulder. “Where’s everyone

going? Why aren’t we holding up here?”

Shirly set her teeth and jerked her head at the door,

which was two-deep with yelow coverals. “Don’t

think we’re wanted,” she said, her voice raised so he

could hear. “I’ve got to clean this wound. I think some

of the bomb is in you.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted. “I’ve just been looking for you.

I’ve been worried sick.”

He saw that his wife was crying, unbroken tear tracks

standing out amid the beads of sweat.

“I thought you were gone,” she said. He had to read

her lips to make it out. “I thought they had—that you

were—”

She bit her lip and stared at him with uncharacteristic

fear. Marck had never seen his wife phased, not by a

sprung casement leak, not by a cave-in deep in the mine

that trapped several of their close friends, not even

when Juliette was sent to cleaning. But heaps of dread

were locked up in her expression now. And that scared

him in a way the bombs and bulets

couldn’t.

“Let’s hurry after the others,” he said, taking her hand.

He could feel the exposed nerves on the landing, the

gazes begging them to be off.

When shouts rang down from above once more and the

members of Supply retreated to the safety of their

doorway, Marck knew this brief moment of respite was

over. But it was okay. He'd found his wife. She was

unharmed. There was little anyone could do to him

now.

••••

When they reached one-thirty-nine together, Marck

knew they'd made it. His legs had somehow held out.

His blood loss hadn't stopped him. With his wife

helping him along, they passed the last landing before

Mechanical, and al he could think about was holding

the line against those bastards who were taking shots at

them from above. Inside Mechanical, they would have

power, safety in numbers, the advantage of home turf.

More importantly, they would be able to bandage

wounds and get some rest. That’s what

he sorely

needed: Rest.

He nearly tripped and fel down the last few steps, his

legs not used to an end to the descent, a flat piece of

ground rather than one more tread to sink to. As his

knees buckled, and Shirly caught him, he finaly noticed

the jam of people at the security station leading into

Mechanical.

The crew that had stayed behind while the rest marched

up to fight had been busy. Steel plates had been welded

solid across the wide security entrance. The diamond-

studded sheeting stood from floor to ceiling, wal to

wal. Sparks hissed along one edge as someone

worked to complete the job from the inside. The

sudden flurry of refugees and wounded amassed in a

crowd desperate to get in. Mechanics shoved and

jostled against the barrier. They screamed and beat on

the steel plates, mad with fear.

“What the hel?” Marck cried. He folowed Shirly as

she pressed into the back of the crowd. At the front,

someone was crawling on the floor, wiggling on their

bely through the tightest of gaps, a rectangle left open

below the security turnstile wide enough to slide

through, easy enough to defend.

“Easy! Wait your turn,” someone ahead of them

shouted.

Yelow coverals were mixed in with the others. Some

were mechanics who had donned disguises—some

seemed to be from Supply, helping the wounded, mixed

up in the wrong crowd or not trusting their own level for

safety.

As Marck attempted to usher Shirly toward the front, a

shot rang out, the thwack and clatter of a hot bal of

lead striking nearby. He changed directions and puled

her back toward the stairs. The crush around the

impossibly smal entrance grew frantic. There was a lot

of yeling back and forth through the hole, people on

this side shouting that they were being shot at, those on

the other side yeling “One at a time!”

Several were on their belies, scrambling for the tiny

hole. One got his arms inside and was puled through,

sliding across the steel grating and disappearing into the

dark space. Two others tried to be next, jostling for

position. They were al exposed to the open stairwel

above. Another shot rang out, and someone fel,

clutching a shoulder and screaming “I’m hit!” The

throng dispersed. Several ran back to the stairs where

the overhang of the treads protected them from the

gunfire. The rest were in chaos, al trying

to fit through a

space expressly designed to alow no more than one at

a time.

Shirly screamed and squeezed Marck's arm as another

person was shot. A mechanic fel to the ground and

doubled over in pain. She yeled at her husband, asking

him what they should do.

Marck dropped his rucksack, kissed her

cheek, and

ran with his rifle back up the stairs. He tried to take

them two at a time, but his legs were too sore. Another

shot rang out, the ricochet of a miss. His body felt

incredibly heavy, slow like in a bad dream. He

approached the landing of one-thirty-nine with his gun

level, but the shooters were further up, peppering the

crowd from higher above.

He checked that he had a fresh round in the homebuilt

gun, cocked it, and edged out onto the landing. Several

men in the silver of security were leaning out over the

railing above, barrels trained down toward the ground

floor of Mechanical. One of the men tapped his

neighbor and pointed toward Marck. Marck watched

al this down the length of his own barrel.

He fired a shot, and a black rifle tumbled toward him

from above, the arms of its wielder slumping over the

railing before sagging down and disappearing.

Gunfire erupted, but he was already diving back toward

the stairs. The shouting grew furious both above and

below him. Marck went to the other side of the stairs,

away from where he'd last been seen, and peered

down. The crowd was thinning by the security barrier.

More and more people were being puled through. He

could see Shirly looking up, shielding her eyes against

the stairway lights above.

Boots rang out behind him. Marck reloaded, turned,

and aimed at the highest step he could see along the

upward spiral. He waited for whatever was heading

down toward him.

When the first boot appeared, he steadied himself,

alowed more of the man to sink before his barrel, and

then he puled the trigger.

Another black rifle clattered against the steps and

bounced through the railing; another man sagged to his

knees.

Marck turned and ran. He lost his grip on his own gun,

felt it bang against his shins as it skittered away from

him, and he didn’t stop to retrieve it. He slid down the

steps, lost his footing, landed on his ass and bounced

back up. He tried taking the steps two at a time, was

running as if in a dream, not fast enough, legs like rusted

steel—

There was a bang, a muffled roar behind him, and

somehow, someone had caught up, had punched him in

the back, had hit him.

Marck sprawled forward and bounced down the steps,

his chin striking the steel treads. Blood was in his

mouth. He tried to crawl, got his feet beneath him, and

stumbled forward.

Another roar, another punch to the back, the feeling

that he'd been bit and kicked at the same time.

This is what it feels like to be shot, he thought

numbly. He spiled down the last few steps, lost

sensation in his legs, crashed to the grating.

The bottom floor was nearly empty. One person stood

beside the tiny hole. Another was half in and half out,

boots kicking.

Marck saw that it was Shirly, on her bely, looking back

at him. They were both lying on the floor. So

comfortable on the floor. The steel was cool against his

cheek. There were no more steps to run down, no

bulets to load, nothing to shoot.

Shirly was screaming, not as happy as he was to be

lying there.

One of her arms extended back out of that smal black

rectangle, reached for him past the rough cuts in the

steel plates. Her body slid forward, puled by some

force beyond, pushed by this nice person in yelow stil

standing by the strange wal of steel where the entrance

to his home used to be.

“Go,” Marck told her, wishing she wouldn’t scream.

Blood flecked the floor before him, marking his words.

“I love you—”

And as if by command, her feet slid into the darkness,

her screams swalowed by that rectangular, shadowy

maw.

And the person in yelow turned. The

nice man’s eyes

grew wide, his mouth fel open, and then his body

jerked from the violence of gunfire.

It was the last thing Marck saw, this man’s deathly

dance.

And he only distantly felt, but for a tremble of time, the

end of him that came next.

3

Three weeks later

• **Silo 18** •

Walker remained in his cot and listened to the sounds

of distant violence. Shouts echoed down his halway,

emanating from the entrance to Mechanical. The familiar

patter of gunfire came next, the *pop pop pop* of the

good guys folowed by the *ratatatat* of the bad.

There was an incredible bang, the roar of blasting

powder against steel, and the back and forth crackle

ended for a moment. More shouting. Boots clomping

down his halway, past his door. The boots were the

constant beat to the music of this new world, music

Walker could hear from his cot. He could hear

everything from his cot, even with the

blankets drawn

over his head, even with his pilow on top, even as he

begged, out loud, over and over, for it to please stop.

The boots in the halway carried with them more

shouting. Walker curled up into a tight bal, knees

against his chest, wondering what time it was, dreading

that it was morning, time to get up.

A brief respite of silence formed, that quiet of tending to

the wounded, their groans too faint to penetrate his

sealed door.

Walker tried to fal asleep before the music was turned

back up. But as always: the quiet was worse. During

the quiet, he grew anxious as he waited for the next

patter to erupt. His impatience for sleep often frightened

that very sleep away. And he would grow terrified that

the resistance was finaly over, that the bad guys had

won and were coming for him—

Someone banged on his door—a smal and angry fist

unmistakable to his expert ears. Four harsh knocks, and

then she was gone.

Shirly. She would have left his breakfast rations in the

usual place and taken away last night's picked-over and

mostly uneaten dinner. Walker grunted and roled his

old bones over to the other side. Boots clomped.

Always rushing, always anxious, forever warring. And

his once quiet halway, so far from the machines and

pumps that realy needed tending to, was now a busy

thoroughfare. It was the entrance hal that

mattered

now, the funnel into which al the hate was poured.

Screw the silo, the people above and the machines

below, just fight over this worthless patch of ground,

pile the bodies on either side until one gives, do it

because it was yesterday's cause, and because nobody

wanted to remember back any further than yesterday.

But Walker did. He remembered—

The door to his workshop burst open. Through a gap in

his filthy cocoon, Walker could see Jenkins, a boy in his

twenties but with a beard that made him appear older, a

boy who had inherited this mess the moment Knox

died. The lad stormed through the maze of

workbenches and scattered parts, aiming straight for

Walker's cot.

"I'm *up*," Walker groaned, hoping Jenkins would go

away.

"No you're not." Jenkins reached the cot and prodded

Walker in the ribs with the barrel of his gun. "C'mon,

old man, up!"

Walker tensed away from him. He wiggled an arm

loose to wave the boy away.

Jenkins peered down gravely, a frown buried in his

beard, his young eyes wrinkled with worry. “We need

that radio fixed, Walk. We’re getting battered out there.

And if I can’t listen in, I don’t think I can defend this

place.”

Walker tried to push himself upright. Jenkins grabbed

the strap of his coverals and gave him some rough

assistance.

“I was up al night on it,” Walker told him. He rubbed

his face. His breath was awful.

“Is it fixed? We need that radio, Walk. You do know

Hank risked his life to get that thing to us, right?”

“Wel, he should’ve risked a bit more and sent a

manual,” Walker complained. He pressed his hands to

his knees, and with much complaint from his joints, he

stood and staggered toward the workbench, his

blankets spiling to the floor in a heap. His legs were stil

half asleep, his hands tingling with the weak sensation of

not being able to form a proper fist.

“I got the battery sorted,” he told Jenkins. “Turns out

that wasn’t the problem.” Walker glanced toward his

open door and saw Harper, a refinery worker turned

soldier, standing in the halway. Harper had become

Jenk's number two when Pieter was kiled. Now he

was peering down at Walker's breakfast, practicaly

salivating into it.

"Help yourself," Walker caled out. He waved

dismissively at the steaming bowl.

Harper glanced up, eyes wide, but that was as long as

he hesitated. He leaned his rifle against the wal and sat

down in the workshop doorway, shoveling food into his

mouth.

Jenkins grunted disapprovingly but didn’t say anything.

“So, see here?” Walker showed him the arrangement

on the workbench where various pieces of the smal

radio unit had been separated and were now wired

together so everything was accessible. “I’ve got

constant power.” He patted the transformer he had built

to bypass the battery. “And the speakers work.” He

keyed the transmit button, and there was a pop and hiss

of static from his bench speakers. “But nothing comes

through. They aren’t *saying* anything.”

He turned to

Jenkins. “I’ve had it on al night, and I’m not a deep

sleeper.”

Jenkins studied him.

“I would’ve heard,” he insisted. “They aren’t talking.”

Jenkins rubbed his face, made a fist. He kept his eyes

closed, his forehead resting in one palm, a weariness in

his voice. “You think maybe something

broke when you

tore it apart?”

“Disassembled,” Walker said with a sigh. “I didn’t *tear*

it apart. ”

Jenkins gazed up at the ceiling and relaxed his fist. “So

you think they aren’t using them anymore, is that it? Do

you reckon they know we have one? I swear, I think

this damn priest they sent is a spy. Shit’s

been falin’

apart since we let him in here to give last rites.”

“I don’t *know* what they’re doing,” Walker admitted.

“I think they’re stil using the radios, they’ve just

excluded this one somehow. Look, I made another

antenna, a stronger one.”

He showed him the wires snaking up from the

workbench and spiraling around the steel beam rafters

overhead.

Jenkins folowed his finger, then snapped his head

toward the door. There was more shouting down the

halway. Harper stopped eating for a moment and

listened. But only for a moment. He dug his spoon back

into the cornmush.

“I just need to know when I’l be able to listen in

again.” Jenkins tapped the workbench with his finger,

then picked his rifle back up. “I don’t need to know

about al this—” He waved a hand at Walker’s work.

“—al this *wizardry*.”

Walker plopped down on his favorite stool and peered

at the myriad circuits that once had been jammed into

the radio's cramped innards. "It's not wizardry," he

said. "It's electrics." He pointed at two of the boards,

connected by wires he had lengthened and re-soldered

so he could analyze al the bits more closely. "I know

what most of these do, but you've gotta remember that

nothing about these devices are known, not outside of

IT, anyway. I'm havin' to theorize while

I tinker.”

Jenkins rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Just let me

know when you’ve got something. Al your other work

orders can wait. This is the only thing that matters. Got

that?”

Walker nodded. Jenkins turned and barked at Harper

to get the hel off the floor.

They left Walker on his stool, their boots

picking up the

beat of the music again.

Alone, he stared down at the machine strung out across

his workbench, its little green lights on its mysterious

boards lit up and taunting him. His hand drifted to his

magnifiers as if by their own accord, as if by decades of

habit, when al Walker realy wanted was to crawl back

into his cot, to wrap his cocoon around himself, to

disappear.

He needed help, he thought. He looked around at al

that required doing and as ever, his thoughts turned to

Scottie, his little shadow. There had been a slice of

time, somewhere sliding away from him now and fading

into the slippery past, where Walker had been a happy

man. Where his life should've ended to keep him from

enduring any of the suffering beyond. But he had made

it through that brief bliss and now could hardly recal it.

He couldn't imagine what it felt like to rise with

anticipation in the morning, to fal asleep with

contentment at the end of every day.

It was only fear and dread anymore. And between:

regret.

He had started al of this, al the noise and violence.

Walker was convinced of that. Every life lost was on his

wrinkled hands. Every tear shed was by his actions.

Nobody said it, but he could feel them thinking it. One

little message to Supply, one favor for Juliette, just a

chance at dignity, an opportunity to test her wild and

horrible theory, to bury herself out of sight—and now

look at the cascade of events, the eruption of anger, the

senseless violence.

It wasn't worth it, he decided. This was how the math

always added up: not worth it. Nothing seemed worth it

anymore.

He bent over his workbench and set his old hands to

tinkering. This was what he did, what he had always

done. There was no escaping it now, no stopping those

fingers with their papery skin, those palms with their

deep lines that seemed to never end, not when they

should. He folowed those lines down to his bony wrists

where weak little veins ran like buried wire with blue

insulation.

One snip, and off he goes to see Scottie, to see Juliette.

It was tempting.

Especialy since Walker figured, wherever they were,

whether the priests were onto something or simply

ratshit mad, he figured both of his old friends were in far

better places than he . . .

4

• Silo 17 •

A tiny strand of copper wire stood at right angles to

the rest. It was like a silo landing shooting off the great

stairway, a bit of flat amid the twisted spiral. As Juliette

wrapped the pads of her fingers around the wire and

worked the splice into place, this jutting barb sank into

her finger, stinging her like some angry insect.

Juliette cursed and shook her hand. She

very nearly

dropped the other end of the wire, which would’ve sent

it tumbling several levels down.

She wiped the weling spot of blood onto her gray

coverals, then finished the splice and secured the wires

to the railing to keep the strain off. She stil didn’t see

how they had come loose, but everything in this cursed

and dilapidated silo seemed to be coming apart. Her

senses were the least of it.

She leaned far out over the railing and placed her hand

on the hodgepodge of pipes and tubing fastened to the

concrete wal of the stairwel. She tried to discern, with

hands chiled by the cool air of the deep, any vibration

from water gurgling through the pipe.

“Anything?” she caled down to Solo. There seemed to

be the slightest tremor in the plastic tubing, but it

could’ve been *her* pulse rather than its.

“I think so!”

Solo’s thin voice echoed from far below.

Juliette frowned and peered down the dimly lit shaft,

down that gap between steel step and thick concrete.

She would have to go see for herself.

Leaving her smal tool bag on the steps—no danger of

anyone coming along to trip over it—she took the

treads two at a time and spiraled her way deeper into

the silo. The electrical wiring and the long snake of

pipes spun into view with each rotation, drips of purple

adhesive marking every laborious joint she'd cut and

fastened by hand.

Other wiring ran alongside hers, electrical cables

snaking from IT far above to power the grow lights of

the lower farms. Juliette wondered who had rigged this

stuff up. It hadn’t been Solo; this wiring had been strung

during the early days of silo 17’s downfal. Solo had

simply become the lucky beneficiary of someone else’s

hard and desperate work. Grow lights now obeyed

their timers, the greenery obeyed the urge to blossom,

and beyond the stale stench of oil and gas, of floods

and unmoving air, the ripe tinge of plants growing out of

control could be nosed from several landings away.

Juliette stopped at the landing of one-thirty-six, the last

dry landing before the flood. Solo had

tried to warn her,

had tried to tel her even as she lusted over the image of

the massive diggers on the wal-sized schematic. Hel,

she should’ve known about the flood without being

told. Groundwater was forever seeping into her own

silo, a hazard of living below the water table. Without

power to the pumps, the water would naturaly make its

way in and rise.

Out on the landing, she leaned on the steel railing and

caught her breath. A dozen steps below, Solo stood on

the single dry tread their efforts had exposed. Nearly

three weeks of wiring and plumbing, of scrapping a

good section of the lower hydroponics farm, of finding a

pump and routing the overflow to the water treatment

facility tanks, and they had uncovered a single step.

Solo turned and smiled up at her. “It’s working, right?”

He scratched his head, his wild hair jutting at al angles,

his beard flecked with gray that his youthful jubilance

denied. The hopeful question hung in the air, a cloud

visible from the cold of the down deep.

“It’s not working *enough*,” Juliette told him, annoyed

with the progress. She peered over the railing, past the

jutting toes of borrowed boots and to the colorful slick

of water below. The mirrored surface of oil and gas

stood perfectly stil. Beneath this coat of slime, the

emergency lights of the stairwel glowed eerily green,

lending the depths a haunting look that matched the rest

of the empty silo.

In that silence, Juliette heard a faint gurgle in the pipe

beside her. She even thought she could hear the distant

buzz of the submerged pump a dozen or so feet below

the oil and gas. She tried to *will* the water up that tube,

up twenty levels and hundreds of joints to the vast and

empty treatment tanks above.

Solo coughed into his fist. “What if we instal another

—?”

Juliette raised her hand to quiet him. She was doing the

math.

The volume of the eight levels of Mechanical were

difficult to figure, so many corridors and rooms that may

or may not be flooded, but she could guess the height of

the cylindrical shaft from Solo’s feet to the security

station. The lone pump had moved the level of the flood

a little less than a foot in two weeks. Eighty or ninety

feet to go. With another pump, say a year to get to the

entrance of Mechanical. Depending on how watertight

the intervening levels were, it could be much more.

Mechanical itself could take three or four times as long

to clear.

“What about another pump?” Solo insisted.

Juliette felt nauseous. Even with three more of the smal

pumps from the hydroponic farms, and with three more

runs of pipe and wiring to go with them, she was

looking at a year, possibly two, before the silo was

perfectly dry. She wasn’t sure if she had a year. Just a

few weeks of being in that abandoned

place, alone with

a half-sane man, and she was already starting to hear

whispers, to forget where she was leaving things, finding

lights on she swore she'd turned off. Either she was

going crazy, or Solo found humor in making her feel that

way. Two years of this life, of her home so close but so

impossibly far away—

She leaned over the railing, feeling like she realy might

be sick. As she gazed down at the water and through

her reflection cast in that film of oil, she suddenly

considered risks even crazier than two years of near-

solitude.

“Two years,” she told Solo. It felt like voicing a death

sentence. “Two years. That’s how long this’l take if we

add three more pumps. Six months at least on the

stairwel, but the rest wil go slower."

"Two years!" Solo sung. "Two years two years!" He

tapped his boot twice against the water on the step

below, sending her reflection into sickening waves of

distortion. He spun in place, peering up at her. "That's

no time!"

Juliette fought to control her frustration. Two years

would feel like forever. And what would they find down

there, anyway? What condition would the main

generator be in? Or the diggers? A machine submerged

under fresh water might be preserved as long as air

didn’t get to it, but as soon as any of it was exposed by

the pumps, the corrosion would begin. It

was the

nastiness of oxygen working on wet metal that speled

doom for anything useful down there. Machines and

tools would need to be dried immediately and then

oiled. And with only two of them—

Juliette watched, horrified, as Solo bent down, waved

away the film of grease at his feet, and scooped up two

palms of the brackish filth below. He slurped noisily and

happily.

—okay, with only *one* of them working diligently at

salvaging the machines, it wouldn’t be enough.

Maybe she’d be able to salvage the backup generator.

It would require less work and stil provide plenty of

power.

“What to do for two years?” Solo asked, wiping his

beard with the back of his hand and looking up at her.

Juliette shook her head. “We’re not waiting two years,”

she told him. The last three *weeks* in silo 17 had been

too much. This, she didn’t say.

“Okay,” he said, shrugging. He clomped up the

stairwel in his too-big boots. His gray coverals were

also baggy, like he was stil trying to wear clothing

tailored for his father. He joined Juliette on the landing,

smiled at her through his glistening beard. “You look

like you have more projects,” he said happily.

She nodded silently. Anything the two of them worked

on, whether it was fixing the sloppy wiring of the long-

ago dead, or improving the farms, or

repairing a light

fixture's balast, Solo referred to as a "project." And he

professed to *love* projects. She decided it was

something from his youth, some sort of survival

mechanism he'd concocted over the years that alowed

him to tackle whatever needed doing with a smile

instead of horror or loneliness.

“Oh, we’ve got quite a project ahead of us,” Juliette

told him, already dreading the job. She started making a

mental list of al the tools and spares they’d need to

scrounge on their way back up.

Solo laughed and clapped his hands. “Good,” he said.

“Back to the workshop!” He twirled his finger over his

head, pointing up at the long climb ahead of them.

“Not yet,” she said. “First, some lunch at the farms.

Then we need to stop by Supply for some more things.

And *then* I need some time alone in the server room.”

Juliette turned away from the railing and that deep shaft

of silver-green water below. “Before we get started in

the workshop,” she said, “I’d like to make a cal—”

“A cal!” Solo pouted. “Not a cal. You

spend al your

time on that stupid thing—”

Juliette ignored him and hit the stairs. She began the

long slog up, her fifth in three weeks. And she knew

Solo was right: she *was* spending too much time making

cals, too much time with those headphones puled

down over her ears, listening to them beep. She knew it

was crazy, that she was going slowly mad in that place,

but sitting at the back of that empty server with her

microphone close to her lips and the world made quiet

by the cups over her ears—just having that wire linking

her from a dead world to one that harbored life—it was

the closest she could get in silo 17 to making herself feel

sane.

5

• Silo 18 •

“ —was the year the Civil War consumed the

thirty-three states. More American lives were lost in

this conflict than in all the subsequent ones

combined, for any death was a death among kin.

For four years, the land was ravaged, smoke

clearing over battlefields of ruin to reveal brother

heaped upon brother. More than half a million lives

were lost. Some estimates range to almost twice

that. Disease, hunger, and heartbreak ruled the life

of man—”

The pages of the book flashed crimson just as Lukas

was getting to the descriptions of the battlefields. He

stopped reading and glanced up at the overhead lights.

Their steady white had been replaced with the

throbbing red, which meant someone was in the server

room above him. He retrieved the loose silver thread

curled up on the knee of his coverals and laid it

carefuly into the spine of the book. Closing the old

tome, he returned it to its tin case with

care, then slid it

into the gap on the bookshelf, completing the vast wal

of silvery spines. Padding silently across the room, he

bent down in front of the computer and shook the

mouse to wake the screen.

A window popped up with live views of the servers,

only distorted from such wide angles. It was another

secret in a room overflowing with them, this ability to

see distant places. Lukas searched through the

cameras, wondering if it was Sammi or another tech

coming to make a repair. His grumbling stomach,

meanwhile, hoped it was someone bringing him lunch.

In camera four, he finaly spotted his visitor: A short

figure in gray coverals sporting a

mustache and glasses.

He was slightly stooped, a tray in his hands dancing

with silverware, a sloshing glass of water, and a

covered plate, al of it partly supported by his

protruding bely. Bernard glanced up at the camera as

he walked by, his eyes piercing Lukas from a level

away, a tight smile curling below his mustache.

Lukas left the computer and hurried down the halway

to get the hatch for him, his bare feet slapping softly on

the cool steel grating. He scrambled up the ladder with

practiced ease and slid the worn red locking handle to

the side. Just as he lifted the grate, Bernard’s shadow

threw the ladderway into darkness. The tray came to a

clattering rest as Lukas shifted the

section of flooring

out of the way.

“I’m spoiling you today,” Bernard said. He sniffed and

uncovered the plate. A fog of trapped steam bilowed

out of the metal hood—two stacks of pork ribs

revealing themselves underneath.

“Wow.” Lukas felt his stomach rumble at the sight of

the meat. He lifted himself out of the

hatch and sat on

the floor, feet dangling down by the ladder. He puled

the tray into his lap and picked up the silverware. “I

thought we had the silo on strict rations, at least until the

resistance was over.”

He cut a piece of tender meat free and popped it in his

mouth. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you.” He

chewed and savored the rush of proteins, reminded

himself to be thankful for the animal's sacrifice.

"The rations haven't been lifted," Bernard said. He

crouched down and waved at the plate. "We had a

pocket of resistance flare up in the bazaar, and this

poor guy found himself in the crossfire. I wasn't about

to let him go to waste. Most of the meat,

of course,

went to the wives and husbands of those we've lost—"

"Mmm?" Lukas swalowed. "How many?"

"Five, plus the three from that first attack."

Lukas shook his head.

"It's not bad, considering." Bernard brushed his

mustache with his hand and watched Lukas eat. Lukas

gestured with his fork while he chewed, offering him

some, but Bernard waved him away. The older man

leaned back on the empty server that housed the uplink

and the locking handle for the ladderway. Lukas tried

not to react.

“So how long wil I need to stay in here?” He tried to

sound calm, like any answer would do. “It’s been three

weeks, right?" He cut off another bite, ignoring the

vegetables. "You think a few more days?"

Bernard rubbed his cheeks and ran his fingers up

through his thinning hair. "I hope, but I don't know. I've

left it up to Sims, who's convinced the threat isn't over.

Mechanical has themselves barricaded pretty good

down there. They've threatened to cut

the power, but I

don’t think they wil. I think they finaly get that they

don’t control the juice up here on our levels. They

probably tried to cut it before they stormed in, and then

were surprised to see us al lit up.”

“You don’t think they’l cut the power to the farms, do

you?” He was thinking of the rations, his fear of the silo

being starved.

Bernard frowned. “Eventualy. Maybe. If they get

desperate enough. But that’l just erode whatever

support those greasers have up here. Don’t worry,

they’l get hungry enough and give in. It’s al going by

the book.”

Lukas nodded and took a sip of water. The pork was

the best he thought he'd ever had.

"Speaking of the book," Bernard asked, "are you

catching up with your studies?"

"Yeah," Lukas lied. He nodded. In truth, he had hardly

touched the book of Order. The more interesting details

were found elsewhere.

"Good. When this annoyance is over, we'l schedule

you some extra shifts in the server room.

You can

spend that time shadowing. Once we reschedule the

election, and I don’t think anyone else wil run,

especialy not after al this, I’l be up-top a lot more. IT

wil be *yours* to run.”

Lukas set down the glass and picked up the cloth

napkin. He wiped his mouth and thought about this.

“Wel, I hope you’re not talking weeks from now. I feel

like I’ve got years of—”

A buzzing noise cut him off. Lukas froze, the napkin

faling out of his hand and flopping to the tray.

Bernard startled away from the server like it had

physicaly shocked him, or as if its black metalic skin

had grown suddenly warm.

“Goddammit!” he said, banging the server with his fist.

He fumbled inside his coverals for his master key.

Lukas forced himself to take a bite of food, to act

normal. Bernard had grown more and more agitated by

the constant ringing of the server. It made him irrational.

It was like living with his father again, back before the

tub-gin finaly bore him a hole beneath

the potatoes.

“I fucking swear,” Bernard grumbled, working the

series of locks in sequence. He glanced over at Lukas,

who slowly chewed a piece of meat, unable suddenly to

even taste it.

“I’ve got a project for you,” he said, wiggling the last

lock free—which Lukas knew could stick a bit. “I want

you to add a panel on the back here, just a simple LED

array. Figure out some code so we can see who's

caling us. I wanna know if it's important or if we can

safely ignore it."

He yanked the back panel off the server and set it

noisily against the front of server forty, behind him.

Lukas took another sip of water while Bernard peered

into the machine's dark and cavernous interior, studying

the blinking lights above the little communication jacks.

The black guts of the server tower and its frantic

buzzing drowned out Bernard's whispered curses.

He puled his head out, which was bright red with

anger, and turned to Lukas, who set his cup on his tray.

"In fact, what I want right here is *two*

lights.” Bernard

pointed to the side of the tower. “A red light if it’s silo

17 caling. Green if it’s *anyone else*. You got that?”

Lukas nodded. He looked down at his tray and started

cutting a potato in half, thinking suddenly of his father.

Bernard turned and grabbed the server’s rear panel.

“I can pop that back on.” Lukas mumbled this around

a hot mouthful of potatoes; he breathed out steam to

keep his tongue from burning, swalowed, and chased it

with water.

Bernard left the panel where it was. He turned and

glared angrily into the pit of the machine, which

continued to buzz and buzz, the overhead lights winking

in alarm. “Good idea,” he said. “Maybe you can knock

this project out first thing."

Finaly, the server quit its frantic cals, and the room fel

silent save for the clinking of Lukas's fork on his plate.

This was like the moments of rye-stench quiet from his

youth. Soon—just like his father passing out on the

kitchen floor or in the bathroom—Bernard would leave.

As if on cue, his caster and boss stood, the head of IT

again throwing Lukas into darkness as he blocked the

overhead lights.

“Enjoy your dinner,” he said. “I’l have Peter come by

later for the dishes.”

Lukas jabbed a row of beans with his fork. “Seriously?

I thought this was lunch.” He popped them into his

mouth.

“It’s after eight,” Bernard said. He

adjusted his

coverals. “Oh, and I spoke with your mother today.”

Lukas set his fork down. “Yeah?”

“I reminded her that you were doing important work

for the silo, but she realy wants to see you. I’ve talked

with Sims about alowing her in here—”

“Into the server room?”

“Just inside. So she can see that you’re okay. I’d set it

up elsewhere, but Sims thinks it's a bad idea. He's not

so sure how strong the alegiance is among the techs.

He's stil trying to ferret out any source of leaks—"

Lukas scoffed. "Sims is paranoid. None of our techs

are gonna side with those greasers. They're not going to

betray the silo, much less you." He picked up a bone

and picked the remaining meat with his

teeth.

“Stil, he has me convinced to keep you as safe as

possible. I’l let you know if I can set something up so

you can see her.”

Bernard leaned forward and squeezed Lukas’s

shoulder. “Thanks for being patient. I’m glad to have

someone under me who understands how important this

job is."

"Oh, I understand completely," Lukas said. "Anything

for the silo."

"Good." Another squeeze of his hand, and Bernard

stood. "Keep reading the Order. Especialy the sections

on insurrections and uprisings. I want you to learn from

this one just in case, God forbid, it ever happens on

your watch.”

“I wil,” Lukas said. He set down the clean bone and

wiped his fingers on the napkin. Bernard turned to go.

“Oh—” Bernard stopped and turned back to him. “I

know you don’t need me to remind you, but under no

circumstances are you to answer this server.” He

jabbed his finger at the front of the machine. If his hand

had been a gun like Peter Bilings carried, Lukas could

imagine him emptying it into the thing. “I haven’t cleared

you with the other IT heads yet, so your position could

be in . . . wel, *grave* danger if you were to speak with

any of them before the induction.”

“Are you kidding?” Lukas shook his head. “Like I

want to talk with anyone who makes *you* nervous. No

frickin' thanks."

Bernard smiled and wiped at his forehead. "You're a

good man, Lukas. I'm glad I've got you."

"And I'm glad to serve," Lukas said. He reached for

another rib and smiled up at his caster while Bernard

beamed down at him. Finaly, the older man turned to

go, his boots ringing across the steel grates and fading

toward that massive door that held Lukas prisoner

among the machines and al their secrets.

Lukas ate and listened as Bernard's new code was

keyed into the lock, a cadence of familiar but unknown

beeps—a code Lukas no longer possessed.

For your own good, Bernard had told him. He chewed

a piece of fat as the heavy door clanged shut, the red

lights below his feet and down the ladderway blinking

off.

Lukas dropped the bone onto his plate. He pushed the

potatoes aside, fighting the urge to gag at the sight of

them. Setting the tray on the grating, he puled his feet

out of the ladderway and moved to the back of the

open and quiet server.

The headphones slid easily out of their pouch. He puled

them down over his ears, his palms brushing the three-

week growth of beard on his face. Grabbing the cord,

he slotted it into the jack labeled “17.”

There was a series of beeps as the cal was placed. He

imagined the buzzing on the other side, the flashing

lights.

Lukas waited, unable to breathe.

“Helo?”

The voice sang in his earphones. Lukas smiled.

“Hey,” he said.

He sat down, leaned back against server 40, and got

more comfortable.

“How’s everything going over there?”

6

• Silo 18 •

Walker waved his arms over his head as he attempted

to explain his new theory for how the radio probably

worked.

“So the sound, these transmissions, they’re like ripples

in the air, you see?” He chased the invisible voices with

his fingers. Above him, the third large antenna he’d built

in two days hung suspended from the rafters. “These

ripples run up and down the wire, up and down—" He

gesticulated the length of antenna. "—which is why

longer is better. It snags more of them out of the air."

But if these ripples are everywhere, then why aren't

we catching any?

Walker bobbed his head and wagged his finger in

appreciation. It was a good question. A damn good

question. “We’l catch them this time,” he said. “We’re

getting close.” He adjusted the new amplifier he’d built,

one much more powerful than the tiny thing in Hank’s

old hip radio. “Listen,” he said.

A crackling hiss filed the room, like someone twisting

fistfuls of plastic sheeting.

I don’t hear it.

“That’s because you aren’t being quiet.

Listen.”

There. It was faint, but a crunch of transmitted noise

emerged from the hiss.

I heard it!

Walker nodded with pride. Less from the thing he was

building and more for his bright understudy. He glanced

at the door, made sure it was stil closed. He only

spoke with Scottie when it was closed.

“What I don’t get is why I can’t make it clearer.” He

scratched his chin. “Unless it’s because we’re too deep

in the earth—”

We’ve always been this deep, Scottie pointed out.

That sheriff we met years ago, he was always

talking on his radio just fine.

Walker scratched the stubble on his cheek. His little

shadow, as usual, had a good point.

“Wel, there *is* this one little circuit board I can’t figure

out. I think it’s supposed to clean up the signal.

Everything seems to pass through it.” Walker spun

around on his stool to face the workbench, which had

become dominated by al the green boards and colorful

tangles of wires needed for this most singular project.

He lowered his magnifier and peered at the board in

question. He imagined Scottie leaning in for a closer

inspection.

What's this sticker?

Scottie pointed to the tiny dot of a white sticker with the

number "18" printed on it. Walker was the one who

had taught Scottie that it's always okay to admit when

you didn't know something. If you couldn't do this, you

would never truly know *anything*.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "But you see how this little

board slotted into the radio with ribbon cables?"

Scottie nodded.

"It's like it was meant to be swapped out. Like maybe

it burns up easy. I'm thinking this is the part that's

holding us up, like a blown fuse."

Can we bypass it?

"Bypass it?" Walker wasn't sure what he meant.

Go around it. In case it's burned out. Short it.

"We might blow something else. I mean, it wouldn't be

in here if it weren't truly needed." Walker thought for a

minute. He wanted to add that the same could be said

of Scottie, of the boy's calming voice. But then, he

never was good at teling his shadow how he felt. Only

what he knew.

Well, that's what I would try—

There was a knock at the door folowed by the squeal

of hinges left purposefuly loud. Scottie melted into the

shadows beneath the workbench, his voice trailing off in

the hiss of static from the speakers.

“Walk, what the hel’s going on here?”

He swiveled around on his stool, the lovely voice and

harsh words soldered together as only Shirly could fuse

them. She came into his workshop with a covered tray,

a thin-lipped frown of disappointment on her face.

Walker lowered the volume on the static. “I’m trying to

fix the—”

“No, what’s this nonsense I hear about you not

eating?” She set the tray in front of him and puled off

the cover, releasing the steam off a plate of corn. “Did

you eat your breakfast this morning, or did you give it to

someone else?”

“That’s too much,” he said, looking down at three or

four rations of food.

“Not when you’ve been giving yours away it isn’t.” She

slapped a fork into his hand. “Eat. You’re about to fal

out of your coverals.”

Walker stared at the corn. He stirred the food with his

fork, but his stomach was cramped beyond hunger. He

felt like he’d gone long enough that he’d never be

hungry again. The cramp would just tighten and tighten

into a little fist and then he'd be just fine forever—

"Eat, dammit."

He blew on a bite of the stuff, had no desire to consume

it, but put some in his mouth to make Shirly happy.

"And I don't want to hear that any of my men are

hanging around your door sweet-talking you, okay?

You are *not* to give them your rations. Got that? Take

another bite."

Walker swalowed. He had to admit, the burn of the

food felt good going down. He gathered up another

smal bite. "I'l be sick if I eat al this," he said.

"And I'l murder you if you don't."

He glanced over at her, expecting to see her smiling.

But Shirly didn't smile anymore. Nobody did.

"What the hel is that *noise*?" She turned and surveyed

the workshop, hunting for the source of it.

Walker set down his fork and adjusted the volume. The

knob was soldered onto a series of resistors; the knob

itself was caled a potentiometer. He had a sudden

impulse to explain al of this, anything to

keep from

eating. He could explain how he had figured out the

amplifier, how the potentiometer was realy just an

adjustable resistor, how each little twist of the dial could

hone the volume to whatever he—

Walker stopped. He picked up his fork and stirred his

corn. He could hear Scottie whispering from the

shadows.

“That’s better,” Shirly said, referring to the reduced

hiss. “That’s a worse sound than the old generator used

to make. Hel, if you *can* turn that down, why ever have

it up so loud?”

Walker took a bite. While he chewed, he set down his

fork and grabbed his soldering iron from its stand. He

rummaged in a smal parts bin for another scrap

potentiometer.

“Hold these,” he told Shirly around his food. He

showed her the wires hanging off the potentiometer and

lined them up with the sharp silver prods from his

multimeter.

“If it means you’l keep eating.” She pinched the wires

and the prods together between her fingers and thumbs.

Walker scooped up another bite, forgetting to blow on

it. The corn burned his tongue. He swalowed without

chewing, the fire melting its way through his chest. Shirly

told him to slow down, to take it easy. He ignored her

and twisted the knob of the potentiometer. The needle

on his multimeter danced, letting him

know the part was

good.

“Why don’t you take a break from this stuff and eat

while I’m here to watch?” Shirly slid a stool away from

the workbench and plopped down on it.

“Because it’s too hot,” he said, waving his hand at his

mouth. He grabbed a spool of solder and touched it to

the tip of the hot soldering iron, coating

it with bright

silver. “I need you to hold the black wire to this.” He

lightly touched the iron to the tiny leg of a resistor on the

board labeled “18.” Shirly leaned over the bench and

squinted at the one he was indicating.

“And then you’l finish your dinner?”

“Swear.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as if to say that she took

this promise seriously, then did as he had shown her.

Her hands weren't as steady as Scottie's, but he

lowered his magnifier and made quick work of the

connection. He showed her where the red wire went

and tacked that one on as wel. Even if none of this

worked, he could always remove it and tinker with

something else.

“Now don’t let it get cold,” Shirly told him. “I know

you won’t eat it if it cools, and I’m not going back to

the mess hal to warm it up for you.”

Walker stared at the little board with the numbered

sticker on it. He grudgingly took up the fork and

scooped a sizable bite.

“How’re things out there?” he asked, blowing on the

corn.

“Things are shit,” Shirly said. “Jenkins and Harper are

arguing over whether or not they should kil the power

to the entire silo. But then some of the guys who were

there, you know, when Knox and—”

She looked away, left the sentence unfinished.

Walker nodded and chewed his food.

“Some of them say the power in IT was

on to the max

that morning, even though we had it shut down from

here.”

“Maybe it was rerouted,” Walker said. “Or battery

backups. They have those, you know.” He took

another bite, but was dying to spin the potentiometer.

He was pretty sure the static had changed when he’d

made the second connection.

“I keep teling them it’l do us more harm than good to

screw with the silo like that. It’l just turn the rest of

them against us.”

“Yeah. Hey, can you adjust this? You know, while I

eat?”

He turned the volume up on the static, needing two

hands to work the loose knob as it

dangled from its

bright wires. Shirly seemed to shrink from the noise

crackling out of his homebuilt speakers. She reached

for the volume knob as if to turn it down —

“No, I want you to spin the one we just instaled.”

“What the hel, Walk? Just eat your damn food

already.”

He took another bite. And for al her cussing and

protests, Shirly began adjusting the knob.

“Slowly,” he said around his food.

And sure enough, the static from the speakers

modulated. It was as if the crunching plastic had begun

to move and bounce around the room.

“What am I even doing?”

“Helping an old man—”

“*— yeah, I might need you up here on this one—”*

Walker dropped his fork and held out his hand for her

to stop. She had gone past it though, into the static once

more. Shirly seemed to intuit this. She bit her lip and

wiggled the knob the other way until the voices

returned.

“*Sounds good. It’s quiet down here anyway. You*

need me to bring my kit?"

"You did it," Shirly whispered to Walker, as if these

people could hear her if she spoke too loudly. "You

fixed—"

Walker held up his hand. The chatter continued.

"*Negative. You can leave the kit. Deputy Roberts is*

already here with hers. She's sweeping for clues as I

speak—”

“*What I’m doing is working while he does nothing!”*

a faint voice caled out in the background.

Walker turned to Shirly while laughter roled through the

radio, more than one person enjoying the joke. It had

been a long time since he’d heard anyone laugh. But *he*

wasn’t laughing. Walker felt his brows furrow in

confusion.

“What’s wrong?” Shirly asked. “We did it! We fixed

it!” She got off her stool and turned as if to run and tel

Jenkins.

“Wait!” Walker wiped his beard with his palm and

jabbed his fork toward the strewn colection of radio

parts. Shirly stood a pace away, looking back at him,

smiling.

“Deputy *Roberts*?” Walker asked. “Who in al the

levels is *that*?”

7

• Silo 17 •

Juliette flicked the lights on in the Suit Lab as she

hauled in her latest load from Supply. Unlike Solo, she

didn’t take the constant source of power for granted.

Not knowing where it came from made her nervous that

it wouldn't last. So while he had the habit, the

compulsion even, of turning every light on to ful and

leaving it there, she tried to conserve the mysterious

energy as much as possible.

She dropped her recent scavenges on her cot, thinking

of Walker as she did so. Is this how he ended up living

amongst his work? Was it the obsession, the drive, the

need to keep hammering away at a series of never-

ending problems until he couldn't sleep more than a few

paces from them?

The more she understood the old man, the farther away

from him she felt, the lonelier. She sat down and rubbed

her legs, her thighs and calves tight from the most recent

hike up. She may've been gaining her porter legs these

last weeks, but they were stil sore al the time, the ache

in them a constant new sensation. Squeezing the

muscles transformed that ache into pain, which she

somehow preferred. The sharp and definable sensations

were better than the dul and nameless kind. She liked

feelings she could understand.

Juliette kicked her boots off—strange to think of these

scavenged things as *hers*—and stood up. That was

enough rest. It was as much rest as she could alow

herself to have. She carried her canvas sacks to one of

the fancy workbenches, everything in the Suit Lab nicer

than what she'd had in Mechanical. Even the parts

engineered to fail were constructed with

a level of

chemical and engineering sophistication she could only

begin to appreciate now that she understood their evil

intent. She had amassed piles of washers and seals, the

good from Supply and the leftover bad from the Lab, to

see how the system worked. They sat along the back of

her main workbench, a reminder of the diabolical

murderousness with which she'd been sent away.

She dumped out the parts from Supply and thought

about how strange it was to have access to, to *live* in

this forbidden heart of some *other* silo. It was stranger

stil to appreciate these workbenches, these immaculate

tools, al arranged for the purpose of sending people

like her to their death.

Looking around at the wals, at the dozen or so cleaning

suits hanging from racks in various states of repair, it

was like living and working in a room ful of ghostly

apparitions. If one of those suits jumped down and

started moving about on its own, it wouldn’t surprise

her. The arms and legs on each one was puffy as if ful,

the mirrored visors easily concealing

curious faces. It

was like having company, these hanging forms. They

watched her impassively while she sorted her finds into

two piles: one of items she needed for her next big

project, the other of useful tidbits she had snagged with

no specific idea of what she might use them for.

A valuable rechargeable battery went in this second

group, some blood stil on it that she hadn’t been able

to wipe off. Images flashed through her mind of some of

the scenes she’d found while scrounging for materials:

like the two men who had committed suicide in the head

office of Supply, their hands interlocked, opposite

wrists slit, a rust-colored stain al around them. This was

one of the worst scenes, a memory she

couldn’t shake.

There were other evidences of violence scattered about

the silo. The entire place was haunted and marred. She

completely understood why Solo limited his rounds to

the gardens. She also empathized with his habit of

blocking off the server room every night with the filing

cabinet, even though he had been alone for years. If

someone hadn’t long ago fried the electronic keypad

that activated the locks on that door, he would

probably be employing it to come and go. Juliette didn’t

blame him. She slid the deadbolts on the Suit Lab every

night before she went to sleep. She didn’t realy believe

in ghosts, but that conviction was being sorely tested by

the constant feeling of being watched by

—if not actual

people—the silo itself.

She began her work on the air compressor, and as

always, it felt good to be doing something with her

h a n d s . *Fixing* something. Staying distracted. The first

few nights, after surviving the horrible ordeal of being

sent to clean, of fighting her way inside this carcass of a

silo, she had searched long and hard for some place

that she could actualy sleep. It was never going to be

below the server room, not with the stench of Solo’s

debris piles pervading the place. She tried the

apartment for IT’s head, but thoughts of Bernard made

it impossible to even sit stil. The couches in the various

offices weren’t long enough. The pad

she’d tried to put

together on the warm server room floor was nice, but

the clicking and whirring of al those tal cabinets nearly

drove her insane.

The Suit Lab, strangely enough, with the specters and

ghouls hanging about, was the only spot where she’d

won a decent night of sleep. It was probably the tools

everywhere, the welders and wrenches, the wals of

drawers ful of every socket and driver imaginable. If

she was going to fix anything, even herself, it was there

in that room. The only other place she'd felt at home in

silo 17 was in the two jail cels she sometimes slept in

on trips up and down. There, and sitting behind that

empty server, talking to Lukas.

She thought about him as she crossed the room to grab

the right size tap from one of the expansive metal tool

chests. She pocketed this and puled down one of the

complete cleaning suits, admiring the heft of the outfit,

remembering how bulky it had felt when she'd worn

one just like it. She lifted it onto a clear workbench and

puled off the helmet's locking colar,

took this to the

dril press and carefuly bored a starter hole. With the

colar in a vise, she began working the tap into the hole,

creating new threads for the air hose. She was wrestling

with this and thinking about her last conversation with

Lukas when the smel of fresh bread preceded Solo into

the lab.

“Helo!” he caled from the doorway. Juliette looked up

and jerked her chin for him to enter. Turning the tap

required effort, the metal handle digging into her palms,

sweat forming on her brow.

“I baked more bread.”

“Smels great,” she grunted.

Ever since she’d taught Solo how to bake flatbread, she

couldn’t get him to stop. The large tins

of flour that had

been holding up his canned goods shelves were being

removed one at a time while he experimented with

recipes. She reminded herself to teach him more things

to cook, to put this industriousness of his to good use

by having him mix it up a little.

“And I sliced cucumbers,” he said, proud as if it were a

feast beyond compare. In so many ways, Solo was

stuck with the mind of a teenager. Culinary habits

included.

“I’l have some in a bit,” she told him. With effort, she

finaly got the tap al the way through the pilot hole,

creating a threaded connection as neat as if it had come

from Supply. The tap backed out easily, just like a fitted

bolt would.

Solo placed the plate of bread and vegetables on the

workbench and grabbed a stool. “Whatcha working

on? Another pump?” He peered at the large wheeled

air compressor with the hoses trailing off it.

“No. That was going to take too long. I’m working on

a way to breathe underwater.”

Solo laughed. He started munching on a piece of bread

until he realized she was serious.

“You’re serious.”

“I am. The pumps we *really* need are in the sump

basins at the very bottom of the silo. I just need to get

some of this electricity from IT *down* to them. We’l

have the place dry in weeks or months instead of

years.”

“Breathe underwater,” he said. He looked at her like

she was the one losing her mind.

“It’s no different than how I got here from my silo.”

She wrapped the male end of the air hose coupler with

silicone tape, then began threading it into the colar.

“These suits are airtight, which makes them watertight.

Al I need is a constant supply of air to breathe, and I

can work down there as long as I like. Long enough to

get the pumps going, anyway."

"You think they'l stil work?"

"They should." She grabbed a wrench and tightened

the coupler as hard as she dared. "They're designed to

be submerged, and they're simple. They just need

power, which we've got plenty of up here."

"What wil *I* do?" Solo wiped his hands, sprinkling

breadcrumbs on her workbench. He reached for

another piece.

"You'l be watching the compressor. I'l show you how

to crank it, how to top it up with fuel. I'm going to

instal one of the portable deputy radios in the helmet

here so we can talk back and forth. There'l be a whole

mess of hose and electrical wire to play out." She

smiled up at him. "Don't worry, I'l keep you busy."

"I'm not worried," Solo said. He puffed out his chest

and crunched on a cucumber, his eyes drifting to the

compressor.

And Juliette saw—just like a teenager with little practice

but great need—that Solo had not yet mastered the art

of lying convincingly.

8

• Silo 18 •

“ *— boys from the other side of the camp. These*

results were closely observed by the experimenters,

who were posing as camp counselors. When the

violence got out of hand, the

experiment was halted

before it could run its full course. What began at

Robber Cave as two sets of boys, all with nearly

identical backgrounds and values, had turned into

what became known in the field of psychology as an

in-grouping and out-grouping scenario. Small

perceived differences, the way one wore a hat, the

inflections in speech, turned into unforgivable

transgressions. When stones started flying, and the

raids on each other's camps turned bloody, there

was no recourse for the experimenters but to put an

end to—"

Lukas couldn't read any more. He closed the book

and leaned back against the tal shelves. He smeled

something foul, brought the spine of the old book to his

nose and sniffed. It was *him*, he finaly decided. When

was the last time he'd showered? His routine was al

out of whack. There were no screaming kids to wake

him in the morning, no evenings hunting for stars, no

dimmed stairwel to guide him back to his bed so he

could repeat it al the folowing day.

Instead, it was fitful

periods of tossing and turning in the hidden bunkroom

of level thirty-five. A dozen bunks, but him al alone. It

was flashing red lights to signal that he had company,

conversations with Bernard and Peter Bilings when

they brought him food, long talks with Juliette whenever

she caled and he was free to answer. Between it al, the

books. Books of history out of order, of bilions of

people, of even more stars. Stories of violence, of the

madness of crowds, of the staggering timeline of life, of

orbited suns that would one day burn out, of weapons

that could end it al, of diseases that nearly had.

How long could he go on like this? Reading and

sleeping and eating? The weeks already

felt like months.

There was no keeping track of the days, no way to

remember how long he'd had on this pair of coverals, if

it was time to change out of them and into the pair in the

dryer. Sometimes he felt like he changed and washed

his clothes three times a day. It could easily have been

twice a week. It smeled like longer.

He leaned his head back against the tins of books and

closed his eyes. The things he was reading couldn't al

be true. It made no sense, a world so crowded and

strange. When he considered the scale of it al, the idea

of this life burrowed beneath the earth, sending people

to clean, getting worked up over who stole what from

whom—he sometimes felt a sort of

mental vertigo, this

frightening terror of standing over some abyss, seeing a

dark truth far below, but unable to make it out before

his senses returned and reality snatched him back from

the edge.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat like that, dreaming of a

different time and place, before he realized the

throbbing red lights had returned.

Lukas returned the book to its tin and struggled to his

feet. The computer screen showed Peter Bilings at the

server door, as deep as he was alowed into the room.

A tray with Lukas's dinner sat on top of the work log

filing cabinet inside the door.

He turned away from the computer, hurried down the

corridor, and scrambled up the ladder. After removing

the grate, he carefuly dropped it back into place and

picked a circuitous path through the tal humming

servers.

“Ah, here’s our little protégé.” Peter smiled, but his

eyes narrowed at the sight of Lukas.

Lukas dipped his chin. “Sheriff,” he said. He always

had this sense that Peter was silently mocking him,

looking down on him, even though they were about the

same age. Whenever he showed up with Bernard,

especialy the day Bernard had explained the need to

keep Lukas safe, there had seemed some sort of

competitive tension between them. A tension Lukas

was aware of, even if he didn’t share. In

private,

Bernard had committed Lukas to secrecy and told him

that he was grooming Peter for the eventual job of

Mayor, that he and Lukas would one day work hand in

hand. Lukas tried to remember this as he slid the tray

off the cabinet. Peter watched him, his brow lowered in

thought.

Lukas turned to go.

“Why don’t you sit and eat here?” Peter asked, not

budging from where he leaned against the thick server

room door.

Lukas froze.

“I see you sitting here with Bernard while you eat, but

you’re always in a hurry to scurry off when I come by.”

Peter leaned out and peered into the

stacks of servers.

“What is it you do in here al day, anyway?”

Lukas felt trapped. In truth, he wasn’t even al that

hungry, had thought about saving it for later, but eating

his food to completion was usualy the fastest way out

of these conversations. He shrugged and sat down on

the floor, leaned against the work log cabinet, and

stretched his legs out in front of him. Uncovering the

tray revealed a bowl of unidentifiable soup, two slices

of tomato, and a piece of cornbread.

“I work on the servers mostly, just like before.” He

started with a bite of the bread, something bland. “Only

difference is I don’t have to walk home at the end of the

day.” He smiled at Peter while he chewed the dry

bread.

“That’s right, you live down in the mids, don’t you?”

Peter crossed his arms and seemed to get even more

comfortable against the thick door. Lukas leaned to the

side and gazed past him and down the halway. Voices

could be heard around the corner. He had a sudden

impulse to get up and run, just for the sake of running.

“Barely,” he answered. “My apartment’s practicaly in

the up-top.”

“Al the mids are,” Peter laughed, “to those who live

there.”

Lukas worked on the cornbread to keep his mouth

occupied. He eyed the soup warily while he chewed.

“Did Bernard tel you about the big assault we’ve got

planned? I was thinking of going down to take part."

Lukas shook his head. He dipped his spoon into the

soup.

"You know that wal Mechanical built, how those idiots

boxed themselves in? Wel, Sims and his boys are

gonna blast it to smithereens. They've had al the time in

the world to work on it from our side, so this little

rebelion nonsense should be over in a few days, max.”

Slurping the hot soup, al Lukas could think about was

the men and women of Mechanical trapped behind that

wal of steel, and how he knew precisely what they

were going through.

“Does that mean I’l be out of here soon?” He pressed

the edge of his spoon into an underripe tomato rather

than use the knife and fork. “There can’t be any threat

out there for me, can there? Nobody even knows who I

am.”

“That’s up to Bernard. He’s been acting strange lately.

A lot of stress, I suppose.” Peter slid down the door

and rested on his heels. It was nice for Lukas to not

have to crane his neck to look up at him.

“He did say something about bringing your mother up

for a visit. I took that to mean you might be in here at

least a week longer.”

“Great.” Lukas pushed his food around some more.

When the distant server started buzzing, his body

practicaly jerked as if tugged by some string. The

overhead lights winked faintly, meaningful to those in the

know.

“What’s that?” Peter peered into the server room,

rising on his toes a little.

“That means I need to get back to work.” Lukas

handed him the tray. “Thanks for bringing this.” He

turned to go.

“Hey, the Mayor said to make sure you ate everything

___”

Lukas waved over his shoulder. He disappeared

around the first tal server and began to jog toward the

back of the room, wiping his mouth with his hand,

knowing Peter couldn’t folow.

“Lukas—!”

But he was gone. He hurried toward the far wal,

digging his keys out of his colar as he went.

While he worked on the locks, he saw the overhead

lights stop their flashing. Peter had closed the door. He

removed the back panel and dug the headphones out of

their pouch, plugged them in.

“Helo?” He adjusted his microphone, made sure it

wasn’t too close.

“Hey.” Her voice filed him up in a way mere food

couldn't. "Did I make you run?"

Lukas took a deep breath. He was getting out of shape

living in such confinement, not walking to and from

work every day. "No," he lied. "But maybe you should

go easy with the caling. At least during the day. You-

know-who is in here al the time. Yesterday, when you

let it ring so long, we were sitting *right beside* the

server while it buzzed and buzzed. It realy pissed him

off—”

“You think I care if he gets angry?” Juliette laughed.

“And I *want* him to answer. I’d love to talk to him

some more. Besides, what would you suggest? I want

to talk to you, I need to talk to *someone*. And you’re

always right there. It’s not like you can cal me and

expect me to be here waiting. Hel, I'm al over the

damn place over here. You know how many times I've

been from the thirties to Supply in the last week?

Guess."

"I don't want to guess." Lukas rubbed his eyelids.

"Probably a half dozen times. And you know, if he's in

there al the time, you could just do me a favor and kil

him for me. Save me al this trouble—”

“*Kill* him?” Lukas waved his arm. “What, just

bludgeon him to death?”

“Do you realy want some pointers? Because I’ve

dreamt up a number of—”

“No, I don’t want pointers. And I don’t want to *kill*

anybody! I never *did*—”

Lukas dug his index finger into his temple and rubbed in

tiny, forceful circles. These headaches were forever

popping up. They had been ever since—

“Forget it,” Juliette said, the disgust in her voice zipping

through the wires at the speed of light.

“Look—” Lukas readjusted his mic. He hated these

conversations. He preferred it when they just talked

about nothing. “I’m sorry, it’s just that . . . things are

crazy over here. I don't know who's doing what. I'm in

this box with al this information, I've got this radio that

just blares people fighting al the time, and yet I seem to

know ratshit compared to everyone else."

"But you know you can trust me, right? That I'm one of

the good guys? I didn't do anything wrong to be sent

away, Lukas. I need you to know that."

He listened as Juliette took in a deep breath and let it

out with a sigh. He imagined her sitting over there, alone

in that silo with a crazy man, the mic pressed close to

her lips, her chest heaving with exasperation, her mind

ful of al these expectations of him—

“Lukas, you do know that I’m on the right side here,

don’t you? And that you’re working for an insane

man?”

“Everything’s crazy,” he said. “Everyone is. I do know

this: We were sitting here in IT, hoping nothing bad

would happen, and the worst things we could think of

came to *us*.”

Juliette released another deep breath, and Lukas

thought about what he had told her of the uprising, the

things he had omitted.

“I know what you say my people did, but do you

understand why they came? Do you? Something

needed to be done, Luke. It *still* needs doing—”

Lukas shrugged, forgetting she couldn’t see him. As

often as they chatted, he stil wasn’t used to conversing

with someone like this.

“You’re in a position to help,” she told him.

“I didn’t *ask* to be here.” He felt himself growing

frustrated. Why did their conversations have to drift off

to bad places? Why couldn’t they go back to talking

about the best meals they’d ever had, their favorite

books as kids, the likes and annoyances they had in

common?

“None of us asked to be where we are,” she reminded

him cooly.

This gave Lukas pause, thinking of where she was,

what she’d been through to get there.

“What we control,” Juliette said, “is our actions once

fate puts us there.”

“I probably need to get off.” Lukas took a shalow

breath. He didn’t want to think of actions

and fate. He

didn’t want to have this conversation. “Pete’l be

bringing me my dinner soon,” he lied.

There was silence. He could hear her breathing. It was

almost like listening to someone think.

“Okay,” she said. “I understand. I need to go test this

suit anyway. And hey, I might be gone a while if this

thing works. So if you don’t hear from

me for a day or

so—”

“Just be careful,” Lukas said.

“I wil. And remember what I said, Luke. What we do

going forward defines who we are. You aren’t one of

them. You don’t belong there. Please don’t forget this.”

Lukas mumbled his agreement, and Juliette said

goodbye, her voice stil in his ears as he

reached in and

unplugged the jack.

Rather than slot the headphones into their pouch, he

slumped back against the server behind him, wringing

the ear pads in his hands, thinking about what he had

done, about who he was.

He felt like curling up into a bal and crying, just closing

his eyes and making the world go away.

But he knew if

he closed them, if he alowed himself to sink into

darkness, al he would see there is *her*. That smal

woman with the gray hair, her body jumping from the

impacts of the bulets, *Lukas's* bulets. He would feel

his finger on the trigger, his cheeks wet with salt, the

stench of spent powder, the table ringing with the clink

of empty brass and with the jubilant and victorious cries

of the men and women he had aligned himself with.

9

• Silo 18 •

“— *said Thursday that I’d get it to you in two*

days.”

“*Well, dammit, it’s been two days, Carl. You do*

realize the cleaning’s tomorrow

morning, right?”

“*And you realize that today is still today, don’t*

you?”

“*Don’t be a smartass. Get me that file and get it up*

here, pronto. I swear, if this shit falls through

because you were—”

“*I’ll bring it. C’mon, man. I’m busting your balls.*

Relax.”

“*Relax. Screw you, I’ll relax tomorrow. I’m getting*

off the line. Now don’t dick around.”

“*I’m coming right now—”*

Shirly held the sides of her head, her fingers tangled in

her hair, elbows digging into Walker’s workbench.

“What in the depths is going on?” she asked him.

“Walk, what is this? Who *are* these people?”

Walker peered through his magnifiers. He dipped the

single bristle plucked from the cleaning brush into the

white paint on the wet lid of primer. With utmost care,

his other hand steadying his wrist, he dragged the bristle

across the outside of the potentiometer directly

opposite the fixed mark he'd painted on the knob itself.

Satisfied, he counted the ticks he'd made

so far, each

one marking the position of another strong signal.

“Eleven,” he said. He turned to Shirly, who had been

saying something, he wasn’t sure what. “And I don’t

think we’ve found ours yet.”

“*Ours*? Walk, this is freaking me out. Where are these

voices *coming* from?”

He shrugged. “The city? Over the hils?

How should I

know?” He started spinning the knob slowly, listening

for more chatter. “Eleven besides us. What if there’s

more? There has to be more, right? What’re the

chances we’ve found them al already?”

“That last one was talking about a cleaning. Do you

think they meant? Like—?”

Walker nodded, sending his magnifiers

out of whack.

He readjusted them, then went back to tuning the dial.

“So they’re in silos. Like us.”

He pointed to the tiny green board she’d helped him

wire the potentiometer to. “It must be what this circuit

does, modulates the wave frequency, maybe.” Shirly

was freaking out over the voices; he was more

fascinated in these other mysteries. There was a crackle

of static; he paused in turning the knob, scrubbed back

and forth across it, but found nothing. He moved on.

“You mean the little board with the number *eighteen*

on it?”

Walker looked at her dumbly. His fingers stopped their

searching. He nodded.

“So there’s at least *that* many,” she said, putting it

together quicker than he had. “I’ve got to find Jenkins.

We’ve got to tel him about this.” Shirly left her stool

and headed for the door. Walker bobbed his head. The

implications made him dizzy, the bench and wals

seeming to slide sideways. The idea of *people* beyond

these wals—

A violent roar rattled his teeth and shook the thought

loose. His feet slipped out from underneath him as the

ground trembled, decades of dust raining down from

the tangle of pipes and wires crisscrossing overhead.

Walker roled to his side, coughing, breathing the musky

mildew drifting in the air. His ears were ringing from the

blast. He patted his head, groped for his

magnifiers,

when he saw the frame lying on the steel decking before

him, the lens broken into gravel-sized shards.

“Oh, no. I need—” He tried to get his hands

underneath him, felt a twinge in his hip, a powerful ache

where bone had smacked steel. He couldn’t think. He

waved his hand, begging Scottie to come out of the

shadows and help him.

A heavy boot crunched what remained of his

magnifiers. Strong, young hands gripped his coverals,

puling him to his feet. There was shouting everywhere.

The pop and rattle of gunfire.

“Walk! You okay?”

Jenkins held him by his coverals. Walker was pretty

sure he would colapse if the boy let go.

“My magni—”

“Sir! We’ve gotta go! They’re inside!”

Walker turned toward the door, saw Harper helping

Shirly to her feet. Her eyes were wide, stunned, a film

of gray dust on her shoulders and in her dark hair. She

was looking toward Walker, appearing as senseless as

he felt.

“Get your things,” Jenkins said. “We’re

faling back.”

He scanned the room, his eyes drifting to the

workbench.

“I fixed it,” Walker said, coughing into his fist. “It

works.”

“A little too late, I think.”

Jenkins let go of his coverals, and Walker had to catch

himself on his stool to not go tumbling back to the

ground. The gunfire outside drew nearer. Boots

thundered by, more shouting, another loud blast that

could be felt through the floor. Jenkins and Harper were

at the doorway shouting orders and waving their arms

at the people running past. Shirly joined Walker at his

workbench. Her eyes were on the radio.

“We need this,” she said, breathing hard.

Walker looked down at the glittering jewels on the

floor. Two month's wages for those magnifiers—

"Walk! What do I grab? Help me."

He turned to find Shirly gathering up the radio parts, the

wires between the boards folded up, tangled. There

was a single loud pop from one of the good guns right

outside his door, causing him to cower, his mind to

wander.

“Walk!”

“The antenna,” he whispered, pointing to where the

dust was stil drifting from the rafters. Shirly nodded and

jumped up on his workbench. Walker looked around

the room, a room he promised himself he would never

leave again, a promise he realy had meant to keep this

time. What to grab? Stupid mementos. Junk. Dirty

clothes. A pile of schematics. He grabbed his parts bin

and dumped it out on the floor. The radio components

were swept in, the transformer unplugged from its outlet

and added. Shirly was yanking down the antenna, the

wires and metal rods bundled against her chest. He

snatched his soldering iron, a few tools;

Harper yeled

that it was now or never.

Shirly grabbed Walker by the arm and puled him along,

toward the door.

And Walker realized it wasn’t going to be *never*.

10

• Silo 17 •

The panic she felt from donning the suit was

unexpected.

Juliette had anticipated some degree of fear from

slipping into the water, but it was the simple act of

putting on the cleaning suit that filed her with a holow

dread, that gave her a cold and empty ache in the pit of

her stomach. She fought to control her breathing while

Solo zipped up the back and pressed the layers of

velcro into place.

“Where’s my knife?” she asked him, patting the

pockets on the front and searching among her tools.

“It’s over here,” he said. He bent down and fished it

out of her gear bag, out from under a towel and change

of clothes. He passed her the knife handle first, and

Juliette slotted it into the thick pocket she’d added on

the suit's bely. It was easier to breathe, just having it

within reach. This tool from the upper café was like a

security blanket of sorts. She found herself checking for

it the way she used to check her wrist for that old

watch.

"Let's wait on the helmet," she told Solo as he lifted the

clear dome from the landing. "Grab that rope first." She

pointed with her puffy mitts. The thick material and the

two layers of undersuit were making her warm. She

hoped that boded wel for not freezing to death in the

deep water.

Solo lifted the coils of spliced rope, a large adjustable

wrench the length of his forearm knotted at the end.

“Which side?” he asked.

She pointed to where the gracefuly curving steps

plunged into the green-lit water. “Lower it over steady.

And hold it out so it doesn’t get caught on the steps

below.”

He nodded. Juliette checked her tools while he

dropped the wrench into the water, the weight of the

hunk of metal tugging the rope straight down to the very

bottom of the great stairwel. In one pocket, she had a

range of drivers. Each one was tied off with a few feet

of string. She had a spanner in another pocket, cutters

behind pocket number 4. Looking down at herself,

more memories flooded back from her walk outside.

She could hear the sound of fine grit pelting her helmet,

could sense her air supply running thin,

could feel the

clomp of her heavy boots on the packed earth—

She gripped the railing ahead of her and tried to think of

something else. Anything else. Wire for power and hose

for air. Concentrate. She would need a lot of both. She

took a deep breath and checked the tal coils of tubing

and electrical wire laid out on the deck. She had flaked

them in figure-eights so they would be impossible to

tangle. Good. The compressor was ready; al Solo had

to do was make sure everything fed down to her, didn't

get caught up—

"It's on the bottom," Solo said. She watched him knot

the line to the stairway railing. He was in good spirits

today. Lucid and energetic. This would be a good time

to get it over with. Shifting the flood to the treatment

plant would've been an inelegant, temporary solution. It

was time to get those big pumps down below churning

through that water properly, pumping it through the

concrete wals and back into the earth beyond.

Juliette shuffled to the edge of the landing and looked

down at the silvery surface of the foul

water. Was this

plan of hers crazy? Shouldn't she be afraid? Or was it

the years of waiting and doing this safely that was more

terrifying to her? The prospect of going mad, inch by

inch, seemed the greater risk. This would be just like

going outside, she reminded herself, which she had

already done and had survived. Except —this was safer.

She was taking an unlimited supply of air, and there was

nothing toxic down there, nothing to eat away at her.

She gazed at her reflection in the stil water, the bulky

suit making her look enormous. If Lukas were standing

there with her, if he could see what she was about to

do, would he try to talk her out of it? She thought he

might. How wel did they realy know

each other? They

had what, two, three encounters in person?

But then there were the dozens of talks since. Could

she know someone from just their voice? From stories

about his childhood? From his intoxicating laughter

when everything else in her day made her want to cry?

Was this why wires and emails were made expensive,

to prevent this kind of life, this kind of relationship?

How could she be standing there, thinking of a man she

hardly knew rather than the insanity of the task before

her?

Maybe Lukas had become her lifeline, some slender

thread of hope connecting her to home. Or was he

more like a tiny spot of light seen occasionaly through

the murk, a beacon guiding her return?

“Helmet?” Solo stood beside her, watching her, the

clear plastic dome in his hands, a single flashlight

strapped to its top.

Juliette reached for it. She made sure the flashlight was

securely fastened and tried to clear her head of

pointless ruminations.

“Hook up my air first,” she said. “And

turn on the

radio.”

He nodded. She held the dome while he clicked the air

hose into the adapter she’d threaded through the colar.

There was a hiss and spit of residual air from the line as

it locked into place. His hand brushed the back of her

neck as he reached in to flick on the radio. Juliette

dipped her chin, squeezing the handmade switch sewn

into her undersuit. “Helo, helo,” she said. There was a

strange squeal from the unit on Solo’s hip as her voice

blared out of it.

“Little loud,” he said, adjusting his volume.

She lifted the dome into place. It had been stripped of

its screen and al the plastic linings. Once she’d scraped

the paint off the exterior, she was left with an almost

completely transparent half sphere of tough plastic. It

felt good to know, clicking it into the colar, that

whatever she saw out of it was realy there.

“You good?”

Solo’s voice was deadened by the airtight connection

between the helmet and the suit. She lifted her glove

and gave him a thumbs up. She pointed to the

compressor.

He nodded, knelt down by the unit, and scratched his

beard. She watched him flick the portable unit's main

power, push the priming bulb five times, then yank the

starting cord. The little unit spat out a breath of smoke

and whirred to life. Even with its rubber tires, it danced

and rattled the landing, sending vibrations up through

her boots. Juliette could hear the awful acoustics

through her helmet, could imagine the violent racket

echoing up through the abandoned silo.

Solo held the choke an extra second, just like she'd

shown him, and then pushed it al the way in. While the

machine pattered and chugged, he looked up at her,

smiling through his beard, looking like one of the dogs in

Supply staring up at its faithful owner.

She pointed to the red can of extra gas and gave him

another thumbs up. He returned the gesture. Juliette

shuffled toward the steps, her gloved hand on the railing

for balance. Solo squeezed past and went to the railing

and the knotted rope. He held out a hand to steady her

while she lumbered down the slippery treads in the

suit's clunky boots.

Her hope was that it would be easier to move once she

was in the water, but she had no way of knowing, just

an intuitive feel for the physics of it al, the way she

could gauge a machine's intent simply by poring over it.

She took the last dry steps, and then her boots broke

the oily surface of the water and found the step below.

She waded down two more, anticipating the frigid cold

to seep through, but it never came. The suit and her

undergarments kept her toasty. Almost too warm, in

fact—she could see a humid mist forming on the inside

of her helmet. She dipped her chin into the radio switch

and told Solo to open her valve to let the

air in.

He fumbled at her colar and twisted the lever to alow

the flow of air. It hissed by her ear, quite noisily, and

she could feel the suit puff out around her. The overflow

valve she’d screwed into the other side of the colar

squealed as it opened and let out the excess pressure,

preventing her suit—and her head, she suspected—

from bursting.

“Weights,” she said, clicking the radio.

He ran back to the landing and returned with the round

exercise weights. Kneeling on the last dry step, he

strapped these below her knees with heavy velcro, then

looked up to see what was next.

Juliette struggled to lift one foot, then the other, making

sure that the weights were secure.

“Wire,” she said, getting the hang of working the radio.

This was the most important part: the power from IT

would run the lifeless pumps below. Twenty four volts

of juice. She had instaled a switch on the landing so

Solo could test it while she was down there. She didn’t

want to travel with the wires live.

Solo unspooled a dozen feet of the two-connector wire

and tied a loop around her wrist. His knots were good,

both with the rope and the wire. Her confidence in the

endeavor was growing by the minute, her discomfort in

the suit lessening.

Solo smiled down through her clear plastic dome from

two steps above, yelow teeth flashing in his scraggly

beard. Juliette returned the smile. She stood stil while

he fumbled with the flashlight strapped to her helmet,

clicking it on. The battery was freshly charged and

would last a ful day, much longer than she possibly

needed.

“Okay,” she said. “Help me over.”

Releasing the radio contact with her chin, she turned

and leaned against the railing, worked her bely up onto

it, then eased her head over. It was an incredible

sensation, throwing herself over that rail. It felt suicidal.

This was the great stairwel; this was her silo; she was

four levels up from Mechanical; al that space below

her, that long plummet only madmen dove into, and she

was going just as wilingly.

Solo helped with her weighted feet. He splashed down

onto the first wet step to assist her. Juliette threw her leg

over the railing as he lifted. Suddenly, she was

straddling that narrow bar of slippery steel, wondering if

the water would truly hold her, if it would catch and

slow her fal. And there was a moment of raw panic, the

taste of metal in her mouth, the sinking of her stomach

and the dire need to urinate, al while

Solo heaved her

other foot over the railing, her gloved hands clawing

madly for the rope he'd tied, her boots splashing noisily

and violently into the silvery skin of the flooded waters.

"Shit!"

She blew her breath out into the helmet, gasping from

the shock of splashing in so quickly, her hands and

knees wrapping around the twisting rope, her body

moving inside the puffy suit like a layer of too-large skin

had become detached.

“You okay?” Solo shouted, his hands cupped around

his beard.

She nodded, her helmet unmoving. She could feel the

tug of the weights on her shins, trying to drag her down.

There were a dozen things she wanted to say to Solo,

reminders and tips, words of luck, but her mind was

racing too fast to think of using the radio. Instead, she

loosened her grip with her gloves and knees, felt the

rope slide against her body with a distant squeak, and

she began her long plummet down.

11

• Silo 18 •

Lukas sat at the little desk constructed from an

embarrassment of wood and stared down at a book

stuffed with a fortune in crisp paper. The chair beneath

him was probably worth more than he'd make in a

lifetime, and he was *sitting* on it. If he moved, the joints

of the dainty thing twisted and squeaked, like it could

come apart at any moment.

He kept his boots firmly planted on either side, his

weight on his toes, just in case.

Lukas flipped a page, pretending to read. It wasn't that

he didn't want to be reading, he just didn't want to be

reading *this*. Entire shelves of more interesting works

seemed to mock him from within their tin boxes. They

sang out to be perused, for him to put away the Order

with its rigid writing, buleted lists, and internal labyrinth

of page references that lead in more circles than the

great stairwel itself.

Each entry in the Order pointed to another page, every

page another entry. Lukas flipped through a few and

wondered if Bernard was keeping tabs on him. The

head of IT sat on the other side of the smal study, just

one room of many in the wel-stocked hideaway

beneath the servers. While Lukas pretended to shadow

for his new job, Bernard alternated between fiddling

with the smal computer on the other desk and going

over to the radio mounted on the wal to give

instructions to the security forces in the

down deep.

Lukas pinched a thick chunk of the Order and flopped

it to the side. He skipped past al the recipes for

averting silo disasters and checked out some of the

more academic reference material toward the back.

This stuff was even *more* frightening: chapters on group

persuasion, on mind-control, on the effects of fear on

upbringing, graphs and tables dealing with population

growth—

He couldn’t take it. He adjusted his chair and watched

Bernard for a while as the head of IT and acting Mayor

scroled through screen after screen of text, his head

notching back and forth as he scanned the words there.

After a moment, Lukas dared to break the silence:

“Hey, Bernard?”

“Hm?”

“Hey, why isn’t there anything in here about how al this

came to be?”

Bernard’s office chair squealed as he swiveled it around

to face Lukas. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The people who made al this, the people who wrote

these books. Why isn’t there anything in the Order

about them? Like how they built al this stuff in the first

place.”

“Why would there be?” Bernard half turned back to his

computer.

“So we would *know*. I dunno, like al the stuff in the

other books—”

“I don’t want you reading those other books. Not yet.”

Bernard pointed to the wooden desk.

“Learn the Order

first. If you can’t keep the silo together, the Legacy

books are pulp. They’re as good as processed wood if

no one’s around to read them.”

“Nobody *can* read them but the two of us if they stay

locked up down here—”

“No one *alive*. Not today. But one day, there’l be

plenty of people who’l read them. But

only if you

study.” Bernard nodded toward the thick and dreadful

book before turning back to his keyboard and reaching

for his mouse.

Lukas sat there a while, staring at Bernard’s back, the

knotted cord of his master keys sticking out of the top

of his undershirt.

“I figure they must’ve known it was

coming," Lukas

said, unable to stop himself from perseverating about it.

He had always wondered about these things, had

suppressed them, had found his thrils in piecing

together the distant stars that were so far away as to be

immune to the hilside taboos. And now he lived in this

vacuum, this holow of the silo no one knew about

where forbidden topics didn’t dare tread and he had

access to a man who seemed to know the precious

truth.

“You aren’t studying,” Bernard said. His head

remained bent over his keyboard, but he seemed to

know Lukas was watching him.

“But they had to’ve seen it coming, right?” Lukas lifted

his chair and turned it around a little more. “I mean, to

have built al these silos before it got so bad out there

___”

Bernard turned his head to the side, his jaw clenching

and unclenching. His hand fel away from the mouse and

came up to smooth his mustache. “These are the things

you want to know? How it happened?”

“Yes.” Lukas nodded. He leaned forward, elbows on

his knees. “I want to know.”

“Do you think it matters? What happened out there?”

Bernard turned and looked up at the schematics on the

wal, then at Lukas. “Why would it matter?”

“Because it *happened*. And it only happened one way,

and it kils me not to know. I mean, they saw it coming,

right? It would take years to build al—”

“Decades,” Bernard said.

“And then move al this stuff in, al the people—”

“That took much less time.”

“So you know?”

Bernard nodded. “The information is stored here, but

not in any of the books. And you’re wrong. It *doesn’t*

matter. That’s the past, and the past is not the same

thing as our legacy. You'l need to learn the difference."

"The difference between our past and our legacy."

"Hm." Bernard nodded. He seemed to be waiting on

something.

Lukas thought about the difference. For some reason, a

conversation with Juliette sprang to mind, something she

was forever teling him—

“I think I know,” he said.

“Oh?” Bernard pushed his glasses up his nose and

stared at him. “Tel me what you *think* you know.”

“Al our hope, the accomplishments of those before us,

what the world *can* be like, that’s our Legacy.”

Bernard’s lips broke into a smile. He waved his hand to

continue.

“And the bad things that can’t be stopped, the mistakes

that got us here, that’s the past.”

“And what does this difference mean? What do *you*

think it means?”

“It means we can’t change what’s already happened,

but we can have an impact on what happens next.”

Bernard clapped his smal hands together. “Very good.”

“And this—” Lukas turned and rested one hand on the

thick book. He continued, unbidden, “—the Order.

This is a roadmap for how to get through al the bad

that’s piled up between our past and the future’s hope.

This is the stuff we can prevent, that we can fix.”

Bernard raised his eyebrows at this last, as if it were a

new way of looking at an old truth.

Finaly, he smiled,

his mustache curling up, his glasses rising on the

wrinkled bridge of his nose.

“I think you’re almost ready,” he said. “Soon.” Bernard

turned back to his computer, his hand faling to his

mouse. “Very soon.”

12

• Silo 17 •

The descent to Mechanical was oddly tranquil, almost

mesmerizing. Juliette slid through the green flood,

fending herself off the curved railing each time the

staircase spiraled around beneath her feet. The only

sounds anywhere were the hiss of air entering her

helmet and the excess gurgling out the other side. A

never-ending stream of bubbles roled up

her visor like

beads of solder, drifting up in defiance of gravity.

Juliette watched these silver spheres chase one another

and play like children through the metal stairs. They

broke up where they touched the railing, leaving just

minuscule dots of gas stuck to the surface, roling and

coliding. Others marched in wavy lines inside the

stairway. They gathered in crowds beneath the holow

steps, bubbles becoming pockets of air that wobbled

and caught the light radiating from the top of her helmet.

It was easy to forget where she was, what she was

doing. The familiar had become distorted and strange.

Everything seemed magnified by the plastic dome of her

visor, and it was easy to imagine that she

wasn’t sinking

at al, but that the great stairway was rising, pushing up

through the deep earth and heading toward the clouds.

Even the sensation of the rope sliding through her

gloved hands and across her padded bely felt more like

something tugged inexorably from above rather than a

line she was descending.

It wasn’t until she arched her back and looked straight

up that Juliette remembered how much water was

stacking up above her. The green glow of the

emergency lights faded to an eerie black in the space of

a landing or two. The light from her flashlight barely

dented it. Juliette inhaled sharply and reminded herself

that she had al the air in the silo. She

tried to ignore the

sensation of so much liquid piled up on her shoulders, of

being buried alive. If she had to, if she panicked, she

could just cut the weights free. One flick with the chef's

knife and she would bob right back to the surface. She

told herself this as she continued to sink. Letting go of

the rope with one hand, she patted for the knife, making

sure it was stil there.

“SLOWER!” her radio barked.

Juliette grabbed the rope with both hands and squeezed

until she came to a stop. She reminded herself that Solo

was up there, watching the air hose and electrical wires

as they spooled off their neat coils. She imagined him

tangled up in the lines, hopping around on one foot.

Bubbles raced out of her overflow valve and jiggled

through the lime water back toward the surface. She

leaned her head back and watched them swirl around

the taut rope, wondering what was taking him so long.

In the undersides of the helical steps, the air pockets

danced mercury silver, wavering in the turbulence of her

passing—

“OKAY.” The radio speaker behind her neck

crackled. “GOOD HERE.”

Juliette cringed from the volume of Solo’s voice and

wished she’d checked that before closing up her

helmet. There was no fixing it now.

With ears ringing and the silence and majesty of the

tranquil descent broken, she slid down another level,

keeping her pace steady and slow as she studied the

slack in the wire and the air hose for any sign of their

puling taut. As she passed close to the landing of one-

thirty-nine, she saw that one of the doors was missing;

the other door had been wrenched violently on its

hinges. The entire level must be flooded, which meant

more water for the pumps to move. Just

before the

landing rose out of sight, she saw dark forms down the

corridor, shadows floating in the water. The flashlight on

her helmet barely iluminated a pale and bloated face

before she drifted past, leaving the long dead to rise out

of sight.

It hadn’t occurred to Juliette that she might come across

more bodies. Not the drowned of course —the flood

would've risen too slowly to take anyone by surprise—

but any violence that occurred in the down deep would

now be preserved in its icy depths. The chil of the

water around her seemed to finaly penetrate the layers

of her suit. Or perhaps it was just her imagination.

Her boots thumped to the lowermost

floor of the

stairwel while she was stil looking up, keeping an eye

on the slack in the lines. Her knees were jarred by the

startling end to her descent. It had taken her far less

time than a dry hike would have.

With a grip on the rope for balance, Juliette let go with

her other hand and waved it through the thick

atmosphere of green groundwater. She dipped her chin

against the radio switch. “I’m down,” she transmitted to

Solo.

She took a few lumbering and tentative steps, waving

her arms and half-swimming toward the entrance to

Mechanical. The light from the stairwel barely

penetrated past the security gates. Beyond, the oily

depths of a home both foreign and familiar awaited her.

“I HEAR YOU,” Solo answered after some delay.

Juliette felt her muscles tense up as his voice rattled

around inside her helmet. Not being able to adjust the

volume was going to drive her mad.

After a dozen halting steps, she eventualy got the hang

of the awkward wading motion and learned to drag her

weighted boots across the steel decking. With the suit

inflated and her arms and legs brushing around on the

inside, it was like guiding a bubble by throwing oneself

against its skin. She paused once to look back at her air

hose, making sure it wasn’t getting caught on the stairs,

and she gave the rope she had descended one last

glance. Even from this distance it

appeared as an

impossibly slender thread, a thread hanging in that

submerged straw of a stairwel. It wavered slightly in the

wake she was causing, almost as if saying goodbye.

Juliette tried not to read anything into it; she turned back

to the entrance to Mechanical. *You don't have to do*

this, she reminded herself. She could hook up two,

maybe three more smal pumps plus a few additional

runs of hydroponic piping. The work might take a few

months, the water level would recede for years, but

eventualy these levels would be dry and she could

investigate those buried diggers Solo had told her

about. It could be done with minimal risk—other than

to her sanity.

And if her only reason for getting back home was

vengeance, if that was her only motivation, she might

have chosen to wait, to take that safe route. She could

feel the temptation even then to yank the weights off her

boots and float up through the stairwel, to fly past the

levels like she used to dream she could, arms out,

buoyant and free—

But Lukas had kept her apprised of the horrible mess

her friends were in, the mess her leaving had caused.

There was a radio mounted to his wal below the

servers that leaked violence day and night. Solo’s

underground apartment was equipped with an identical

radio, but it could only communicate with silo 17’s

portables. Juliette had given up fiddling

with it.

A part of her was glad she couldn't hear. She didn't

want to have to listen to the fighting—she just wanted to

get home and make it stop. This had become a

desperate compulsion: returning to her silo. It was

maddening to think that she was only a short walk

away, but those doors were only ever opened to kil

people. And what good would her return do, anyway?

Would her surviving a cleaning and revealing the truth

be enough to expose Bernard and al of IT?

As it happened, she had other, less sane plans. It was a

fantasy, maybe, but it gave her hope. She dreamed of

fixing up one of the diggers that built this place, a

machine buried and hidden at the long

end of its vertical

toil, and driving it through the earth itself to 18‘s down

deep. She dreamed of breaking that blockade, of

leading her people back to these dry corridors and

getting this dead place *working* again. She dreamed of

operating a silo without al the lies and deceptions.

Juliette waded through the heavy water toward the

security gate, dreaming these childish dreams,

discovering that they somehow steeled her resolve. She

approached the security turnstile, and saw that the

lifeless and unguarded gate would pose the first true

obstacle of her descent. Getting over it wouldn’t be

easy. Turning her back to the machine, she placed her

hands on either side and pushed,

squirming and kicking

her heavy heels against the low wal, until she was just

barely sitting on the control box.

Her legs were too heavy to lift . . . not high enough to

swing over, anyway. The weights had ended up being

more than she'd needed to counter the suit's buoyancy.

She wiggled backwards until her butt was more secure

and tried to turn sideways. With a thick glove under her

knee, she strained and leaned back until her boot was

on the edge of the wal. She rested a moment, breathing

hard and filing her helmet with muffled laughter. It felt

ridiculous, al this effort to do something so outrageously

simple, so benign. With one boot already up, the other

was easier to lift. She felt the muscles in

her abdomen

and thighs, muscles sore from weeks of a porter's

hustle, finaly help her lift her own damn foot up.

She shook her head in relief, sweat trickling down the

back of her neck, already dreading repeating the

maneuver on the return trip. Dropping to the other side

was easy: the weights did al the work. She took a

moment to make sure the wires knotted around her

wrist and the air hose attached to her colar weren't

getting tangled, and then started down the main

corridor, the flashlight on the top of her helmet her only

ilumination.

"YOU OKAY?" Solo asked, his voice startling her

again.

“I’m fine,” she said. She held her chin down against her

chest, leaving the contact open. “I’l check in if I need

you. The volume is a little high down here. Scares the

hel out of me.”

She released the contact and turned to see how her

lifeline was doing. Al along the ceiling, her overflow

bubbles danced in the glow of her flashlight like tiny

jewels—

“OKAY. GOTCHA.”

“Goddammit,” she muttered, wishing she could reach

inside her helmet to adjust the thing or to dig a finger in

her ear. It felt like his voice was stil lodged in there,

tickling her.

With her boots hardly leaving the floor, pushing forward

on them one at a time, she slowly made

her way across

the main intersection and past the mess hal. To her left,

if she made her way down the halway and took two

turns, she could reach Walker's workshop. Had it

always been a workshop? She had no idea. In this

place, it might be a storeroom. Or an apartment.

Her smal apartment would be in the opposite direction.

She turned to peer down that halway, her cone of light

brushing away the darkness to reveal a body pressed

up against the ceiling, tangled in the runs of pipe and

conduit. She looked away. It was easy to imagine that

being George or Scottie or someone else she had cared

about and lost. It was easy to imagine it being herself.

She shuffled toward the access stairs,

her body

wavering in the thick but crystal clear water, the weight

of her boots and the buoyancy of her torso keeping her

upright even though she felt on the verge of toppling.

She paused at the top of the square steps leading down.

“I’m about to descend,” she said, chin down. “Make

sure you keep everything feeding. And please don’t

respond unless there's a problem. My ears are stil

ringing from the last time."

Juliette lifted her chin from the contact switch and took

the first few steps, waiting for Solo to blare something in

her ear, but it never came. She kept a firm grip on the

wire and hose, dragging it around the sharp corners of

the square stairwel as she descended into the darkness.

The black water al around was disturbed only by her

rising bubbles and the feeble cone of her sweeping,

flash-lit gaze.

Six floors down, the hose and wire became difficult to

pul, too much friction from the steps. She stopped and

gathered more and more of it around herself, letting the

slack coil and drift in the weightlessness of the water.

Several of her careful splices in both the wire and tubing

slid through her gloves. She paused and checked the

taped and adhesed joints of the latter to see how they

were holding up. Minuscule bubbles were trailing out of

one joint—they left a perforated and wavy line of tiny

dots in the dark water. It was hardly anything.

Once she had enough slack at the bottom

of the stairs

to reach the sump basin, she turned and marched

purposefuly toward her work. The hardest part was

over. The air was flowing in, cool and fresh and hissing

by her ear. The excess streamed out through the other

valve, the bubbles shooting up in a curtain whenever she

turned her head. She had enough wire and hose to

reach her goal, and al of her tools intact. It felt like she

could finaly relax now that she knew she wouldn’t be

going any deeper. Al she had to do was hook up the

power lines, two easy connections, and make her way

out.

Being so close, she dared to think of getting free, of

rescuing this silo’s Mechanical spaces, resuscitating one

of its generators and then one of its hidden and buried

diggers. They were making progress. She was on her

way to rescuing her friends. It al seemed perfectly

attainable, practicaly in her grasp, after weeks of

frustrating setbacks.

Juliette found the sump room just where it was

supposed to be. She slid her boots to the edge of the

pit in the center. Leaning forward, her flashlight shone

down on the numbers signifying how deep the waters

had risen. They seemed comical under so many

hundreds of feet of water. Comical and sad. This silo

had failed its people.

But then Juliette corrected herself: These *people* had

failed their *silo*.

“Solo, I’m at the pump. Gonna hook up the power.”

She peered down at the bottom of the pit to make sure

the pump’s pickup was clear of debris. The water

down there was amazingly clear. Al the oil and grime

she’d worked hip-deep in at the bottom of her own

basin had been made diffuse, spread out into who knew

how many galons of groundwater

seepage. The result

was crystal clear stuff she could probably drink.

She shivered, suddenly aware that the chil of the deep

water was making its way through her layers and

wicking away her body heat. Halfway there, she told

herself. She moved toward the massive pump mounted

on the wal. Pipes as thick as her waist bent to the

ground and snaked over the edge of the pit. The

outflow ran up the wal in a similarly sized pipe and

joined the jumble of mechanical runs above. As she

stood by the large pump and worked the knotted wires

off her wrist, she remembered the last job she'd ever

performed as a mechanic. She had puled the shaft on

an identical pump and had discovered a

worn and

broken impeler. As she selected a Philips driver from

her pocket and began loosening the positive power

terminal, she took the time to pray that *this* pump had

not been in a similar condition when the power had

blown. She didn’t want to have to come down and

service it again. Not until she could do it while keeping

her boots dry.

The positive power line came free easier than she had

hoped. Juliette twisted the new one into place. The

sound of her own breathing rattled in the confines of her

helmet and provided her only company. As she was

tightening the terminal around the new wire, she realized

she could hear her breathing because the air was no

longer hissing by her cheek.

Juliette froze. She tapped the plastic dome by her ear

and saw that the overflow bubbles were stil leaking out,

but slower now. The pressure was stil inside her suit,

there just wasn’t any more air being forced inside.

She dipped her chin against the switch, could feel the

sweat form around her colar and drip down the side of

her jaw. Her feet were somehow freezing while from

the neck up she was beginning to sweat.

“Solo? This is Juliette. Can you hear me? What’s going

on up there?”

She waited, turned to aim her flashlight down the air

hose, and looked for any sign of a kink. She stil had

air, the air in her suit. Why wasn’t he responding?

“Helo? Solo? Please say something.”

The flashlight on her helmet needed to be adjusted, but

she could feel the ticking of some silent clock in her

head. How much air would she have starting *right*

then? It had probably taken her an hour to get down

there. Solo would fix the compressor before her air ran

out. She had plenty of time. Maybe he was gassing it

up. Plenty of time, she told herself as the driver slipped

off the negative terminal. The damn thing was stuck.

This, she didn't have time for, not for anything to be

corroded. The positive wire was already spliced and

locked tight. She tried to adjust the flashlight strapped

to her helmet; it was aimed too high, good for walking,

horrible for working. She was able to

twist it a little and

aim it at the large pump.

The ground wire could be connected to any part of the

main housing, right? She tried to remember. The entire

case was the ground, wasn't it? Or was it? Why

couldn't she remember? Why was it suddenly difficult

to think?

She straightened the end of the black

wire and tried to

give the loose copper strands a twist with her heavily

padded fingers. She jabbed this bundle of raw copper

into a cowling vent on the back, a piece of conducting

metal that appeared connected to the rest of the pump.

She twisted the wire around a smal bolt, knotted the

slack so it would hold, and tried to convince herself that

this would work, that it would be enough to run the

damn thing. Walker would know. Where the hel was

he when she needed him?

The radio by her neck squawked—a burst and pop of

static—what sounded like part of her name in a faraway

distance—a dead hiss—and then nothing.

Juliette wavered in the dark, cold water. Her ears were

ringing from the outburst. She dipped her chin to tel

Solo to hold the radio away from his mouth, when she

noticed through the glass window of her helmet's visor

that there were no more bubbles spiling from the

overflow valve and rising in that gentle curtain across

her vision. The pressure in her suit was gone.

A different sort of pressure quickly took

its place.

13

• Silo 18 •

Walker found himself shoved down the square stairs,

past a crew of mechanics working to weld another set

of steel plates across the narrow passage. He had most

of the homebuilt radio in a spare parts tub, which he

desperately clutched with two hands. He

watched the

electrical components rattle together as he jostled

through the crowd of mechanics fleeing from the attack

above. In front of him, Shirly carried the rest of the

radio gear against her chest, the antenna wires trailing

behind her. Walker skipped and danced on his old legs

so he wouldn’t get tangled up.

“Go! Go! Go!” someone yeled. Everyone was pushing

and shoving. The rattle of gunfire seemed to grow

louder behind him, while a golden shower of fizzling

sparks rained through the air and peppered Walker’s

face. He squinted and stormed through the glowing hail

as a team of miners in striped coverals fought their way

up from the next landing with another

large sheet of

steel.

“This way,” Shirly yeled, tugging him along. At the next

level, she puled him aside. His poor legs struggled to

keep up with the running others. A duffle bag was

dropped; a young man with a gun spun and hurried

back for it.

“The generator room,” Shirly told him,

pointing.

There was already a stream of people moving through

the double doors. Jenkins was there, managing the

traffic. Some of those with rifles took up position near

an oil pump, the counterweighted head sitting perfectly

stil like it had already succumbed to the looming battle.

“What is that?” Jenkins asked as they approached the

door. He jerked his chin at the bundle of wires in

Shirly's arms. "Is that—?"

"The radio, sir." She nodded.

"Fat lot of good it does us now." Jenkins waved two

other people inside. Shirly and Walker pressed

themselves out of the way.

"Sir—"

"Get him inside," Jenkins barked, referring to Walker.

“I don’t need him getting in the way.”

“But sir, I think you’re gonna want to hear—”

“C’mon, go!” Jenkins yeled to the stragglers bringing

up the rear. He twirled his arm at the elbow for them to

hurry. Only the mechanics who had traded their

wrenches for guns remained. They formed up like they

were used to this game, arms propped on railings, long

steel barrels trained the same direction.

“In or out,” Jenkins told Shirly, starting to close the

door.

“Go,” she told Walker, letting out a deep breath. “Let’s

get inside.”

Walker numbly obeyed, thinking al the while of the

parts and tools he should have grabbed, things a few

levels overhead now that were lost to

him, maybe for

good.

••••

“Hey, get those people out of the control room!”

Shirly ran across the generator room as soon as they

were inside, wires trailing behind her, bits of rigid

aluminum antenna bouncing across the floor. “Out!”

A mixed group of mechanics and a few

people wearing

the yelow of Supply sheepishly filed out of the smal

control room. They joined the others around a railing

that cordoned off the mighty machine that dominated

the cavernous facility and gave the room its name. At

least the noise was tolerable. Shirly imagined al those

people being stuck down there in the days when the

roar of the rattling shaft and loose engine mounts could

deafen a person.

“Al of you, out of my control room.” She waved the

last few out. Shirly knew why Jenkins had sealed off

this floor. The only power they had left was the literal

kind. She waved the last man out of the smal room

studded with sensitive knobs, dials, and readouts and

immediately checked the fuel levels.

Both tanks were topped up, so they had at least

planned *that* properly. They would have a few weeks

of power, if nothing else. She looked over al the other

knobs and dials, the jumble of cords stil held tightly

against her chest.

“Where should I—?”

Walker held his box out. The only flat

surfaces in the

room were covered with switches and the sorts of

things one didn’t want to bump. He seemed to

understand that.

“On the floor, I guess.” She set her load down and

moved to shut the door. The people she’d hurried

outside gazed longingly through the window at the few

tal stools in the climate controled space. Shirly ignored

them.

“Do we have everything? Is it al here?”

Walker puled pieces of the radio out of the box, tsking

his tongue at the twisted wires and jumbled

components. “Do we have power?” he asked, holding

up the plug of a transformer.

Shirly laughed. “Walk, you do know

where you are

right now, right? Of course we have power.” She took

the cord and plugged it into one of the feeds on the

main panel. “Do we have everything? Can we get it up

and running again? Walk, we need to let Jenkins hear

what we heard.”

“I know.” He bobbed his head and sorted the gear,

twisting some loose wires together as he went. “We

need to string that out.” He jerked his head at the

tangled antenna in her arms.

Shirly looked up. There were no rafters.

“Hang it from the railing out there,” he told her.

“Straight line, make sure that end reaches back in here.”

She moved toward the door, trailing the loops out

behind her.

“Oh, and don’t let the metal bits touch the railing!”

Walker caled after her.

Shirly recruited a few mechanics from her work shift to

help out. Once they saw what needed doing, they took

over, coordinating as a team to undo the knots while

she went back to Walker.

“It’l just be a minute,” she told him,

shutting the door

behind her, the wire fitting easily between it and the

padded jamb.

“I think we’re good,” he said. He looked up at her, his

eyes sagging, his hair a mess, sweat glistening in his

white beard. “Shit,” he said. He slapped his forehead.

“We don’t have speakers.”

Shirly felt her heart drop to hear Walker

cuss, thinking

they'd forgotten something crucial. "Wait here," she

told him, running back out and to the ear muff station.

She picked one of the sets with a dangling cord, the

kind used to talk between the control room and anyone

working on the primary or secondary generators. She

jogged past the curious and frightened-looking crowd

to the control room. It occurred to her that she should

be more afraid like they were, that a real war was

grinding closer to them. But al she could think about

were the voices that war had interrupted. Her curiosity

was much stronger than her fear. It’s how she’d always

been.

“How about these?”

She shut the door behind herself and showed him the

headphones.

“Perfect,” he said, his eyes wide with surprise. Before

she could complain, he snipped the jack off with his

multi-tool and began stripping wires. “Good thing it’s

quiet in here,” he said, laughing.

Shirly laughed as wel, and it made her wonder what the

hel was going on. What were they going to do, sit in

there and fiddle with wires while the deputies and the

security people from IT came and dragged them away?

Walker got the ear cones wired in, and a faint hiss of

static leaked out of them. Shirly hurried over to join

him; she sat down and held his wrist to steady his hand.

The earphones trembled in them.

“You might have to—” He showed her the knob with

the white marks he’d painted on.

Shirly nodded and realized they’d forgotten to grab the

paint. She held the dial and studied the various ticks.

“Which one?” she asked.

“No.” He stopped her as she began dialing back

toward one of the voices they’d found. “The other way.

I need to see how many—" He coughed into his fist.

"We need to see how many there are."

She nodded and turned the knob gradualy toward the

black unpainted portion. The two of them held their

breath, the hum of the main generator barely audible

through the thick door and double paned glass.

Shirly studied Walker while she spun the dial. She

wondered what would become of him when they were

rounded up. Would they al be put to cleaning? Or

could he and a few of the others claim to be

bystanders? It made her sad, thinking what had been

wrought of their anger, their thirst for revenge. She

thought how things could’ve gone so differently, how

they’d had al these dreams, unrealistic

perhaps, of a

real change in power, an easy fix to impossible and

intractable problems.

“A little faster,” Walker said, growing impatient with

the silence. They’d heard a few hits of crackling static,

but no one talking. Shirly very slightly increased the rate

she spun the knob.

“You think the antenna—?” she started

to ask.

Walker raised his hand. The little speakers in his lap

had popped. He jerked his thumb to the side, teling her

to go back. Shirly did. She tried to remember about

how far she had gone since the sound, using a lot of the

same skils she'd learned in that very room to adjust the

previously noisy generator—

“ — Solo? This is Juliette. Can you hear me?

What’s going on up there?”

Shirly dropped the knob. She watched it swing on its

soldered wire and crash to the floor.

Her hands felt numb. Her fingertips tingled. She turned,

gaped at Walker’s lap where the ghostly voice had

risen, and found him looking dumbly down at his own

hands.

Neither of them moved. The voice, the name, they were

unmistakable.

Tears of confused joy winked past Walker’s beard and

fel into his lap.

14

• Silo 17 •

Juliette grabbed the limp air hose with both hands and

squeezed. Her reward was a few weak bubbles roling

up her visor—the pressure inside the tube was gone.

She whispered a curse, tilted her chin against the radio,

and caled Solo's name. Something had happened to

the compressor. He was probably working on it, maybe

topping up the fuel. She told him not to turn it off for

that. He wouldn't know what to do,

wouldn’t be able

to restart it. She hadn’t thought this through clearly at

al; she was an impossible distance from breathable air,

from any hope of survival.

She took a tentative breath. She had what was trapped

in the suit and the air that remained in the hose. How

much of the air in the hose could she suck with just the

power of her lungs? She didn't think it would be much,

but she didn't know.

She took one last look at the large sump pump, her

hasty wiring job, the loose trail of wires streaming

through the water that she'd hoped to have time to

secure against vibration and accidental tugs. None of it

likely mattered anymore, not for her. She kicked away

from the pump and waved her arms through the water,

wading through the viscous fluid that seemed to both

impede her while giving her nothing to push or pul

against.

The weights were holding her back. Juliette bent to

release them, and found she couldn’t. The buoyancy of

her arms, the stiffness of the suit . . . she groped for the

velcro straps, but watched her fingers through the

magnified view of helmet and water as they waved

inches from the blasted things.

She took a deep breath, sweat dripping from her nose

and splattering the inside of her dome. She tried again

and came close, her fingertips nearly brushing the black

straps, both hands outstretched, grunting and throwing

her shoulders into the simple act of reaching her

damned shins—

But she couldn’t. She gave up and shuffled a few more

steps down the halway, folowing the wire and hose,

both visible in the faint cone of white light emanating

from above her head. She tried not to bump the wire,

thinking of what one accidental pul might do, how

tenuous the connection was that she'd made to the

pump's ground. Even as she struggled for a deep

breath, her mind was ever playing the mechanic. She

cursed herself for not taking longer to prepare.

Her knife! She remembered her knife and stopped

dragging her feet. It slid out of its homemade sheath

sewn across her bely and gleamed in the

glow from her

flashlight.

Juliette bent down and used the extra reach of the

blade; she slid the point of the knife between her suit

and one of the straps. The water was dark and thick al

around her. With the limited amount of light from her

helmet, and being at the bottom of Mechanical under al

that heap of flood, she felt more remote and alone,

more afraid, than she had in al her life.

She gripped the knife, terrified of what dropping it

could mean, and bobbed up and down, using her

stomach muscles. It was like doing sit-ups while

standing. She attacked the strap with a labored sawing

motion, cursed in her helmet from the effort, the strain,

the pain in her abdomen from lurching forward, from

throwing her head down—when finaly the exercise

weight popped free. Her calf felt suddenly naked and

light as the round hunk of iron clanged mutely to the

plate steel flooring.

Juliette tilted to the side, held down by one leg, the

other trying to rise up. She worked the knife carefuly

beneath the second strap, fearful of cutting her suit and

seeing a stream of precious bubbles leak out. With

desperate force, she shoved and puled the blade

against the black webbing just like before. Nylon

threads popped in her magnified vision; sweat spattered

her helmet; the knife burst through the fabric; the weight

was free.

Juliette screamed as her boots flew up behind her, rising

above her head. She twisted her torso and waved her

arms as much as she could, but her helmet slammed into

the runs of pipes at the top of the halway.

There was a bang—and the water al around her went

black. She fumbled for her flashlight, to turn it back on,

but it wasn’t there. Something bumped her arm in the

darkness. She fumbled for the object with one hand,

knife in the other, felt it spil through her gloved fingers,

and then it was gone. While she struggled to put the

knife away, her only source of light tumbled invisible to

the ground below.

Juliette heard nothing but her rapid breathing. She was

going to die like this, pinned to the ceiling, another

bloated body in these corridors. It was as if she were

destined to perish in one of those suits, one way or

another. She kicked against the pipes and tried to

wiggle free. Which way had she been going? Where

was she facing? The pitch black was absolute. She

couldn’t even see her own arms in front of her. It was

worse than being blind, it was some new

ability to *see*

the nothingness, to *know* her eyes were working but

somehow taking nothing in. It heightened her panic,

even as the air in her suit seemed to grow more and

more stale.

The air.

She reached for her colar and found the hose, could

just barely feel it through her gloves.

Juliette began to

gather it in, hand over hand, like puling a mining bucket

up a deep shaft.

It felt like miles of it went through her hands. The slack

gathered around her like knotted noodles, bumping and

sliding against her. Juliette’s breathing began to sound

more and more desperate. She was panicking. How

much of her shalow breaths were coming from the

adrenaline, the fear? How much because she was using

up al her precious air? She had a sudden terror that the

hose she was puling had been cut, that it had been

sawn through on the stairwel, that the free end would at

any moment slip through her fingers, that her next frantic

reach for more of the lifeline would

result in a fistful of

inky water and nothing else—

But then she grabbed a length of hose with tension, with

life. A stiff line that held no air, but led the way out.

Juliette cried out in her helmet and reached forward to

grab another handhold. She puled herself, her helmet

bumping against a pipe and bouncing her away from the

ceiling. She kept reaching, lunging one hand forward in

the black to where the line should be, finding it,

grasping, yanking, hauling herself through the midnight

soup of the drowned and the dead, wondering how far

she’d get before she joined them and breathed her very

last.

15

• Silo 18 •

Lukas sat with his mother on the thick jamb of the

open server room door. He looked down at her hands,

both of them wrapped around one of his. She let go

with one of them and picked a piece of lint off his

shoulder, then cast the offending knot of string away

from her precious son.

“And you say there’l be a promotion in this?” she

asked, smoothing the shoulder of his undershirt.

Lukas nodded. “A pretty big one, yeah.” He looked

past her to where Bernard and Sheriff Bilings were

standing in the halway, talking in low voices. Bernard

had his hands tucked inside the stretched bely of his

coverals. Bilings looked down and

inspected his gun.

“Wel, that’s great, sweetheart. It makes it easier to

bear you being away.”

“It won’t be for much longer, I don’t think.”

“Wil you be able to vote? I can’t believe my boy is

doing such important things!”

Lukas turned to her. “Vote? I thought the election was

put off.”

She shook her head. Her face seemed more wrinkled

than it had a month ago, her hair whiter. Lukas

wondered if that were possible in so brief a time.

“It’s back on,” she said. “This nasty business with

those rebels is supposed to be just about over.”

Lukas glanced toward Bernard and the Sheriff. “I’m

sure they’l figure out a way to let me

vote," he told his

mother.

"Wel, that's nice. I like to think I raised you proper."

She cleared her throat into her fist, then returned it to

the back of his hand. "And they're feeding you? With

the rationing, I mean."

"More than I can eat."

Her eyes widened. "So I suppose there'l be some sort

of a raise—?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. I’d think so. And look,

you’l be taken care of—”

“Me?” She pressed her hand to her chest, her voice

high. “Don’t you worry about me.”

“You know I do. Hey, look, Ma—I think our time’s

up.” He nodded down the halway. Bernard and Peter

were heading toward them. “Looks like

I’ve got to get

back to work.”

“Oh. Wel, of course.” She smoothed the front of her

red coverals and alowed Lukas to help her to her feet.

She puckered her lips, and he presented his cheek.

“My little boy,” she said, kissing him noisily and

squeezing his arm. She stepped back and gazed up at

him with pride. “You take good care of yourself.”

“I wil, Ma.”

“Make sure you get plenty of exercise.”

“Ma, I wil.”

Bernard stopped by their side, smiling at the exchange.

Lukas’s mother turned and looked the silo’s acting

Mayor up and down. She reached out and patted

Bernard on his chest. “Thank you,” she

said, her voice

cracking.

“It’s been great to meet you, Mrs. Kyle.” Bernard took

her hand and gestured toward Peter. “The sheriff here

wil see you out.”

“Of course.” She turned one last time and waved at

Lukas. He felt a little embarrassed but waved back.

“Sweet lady,” Bernard said, watching

them go. “She

reminds me of my mother.” He turned to Lukas. “You

ready?”

Lukas felt like voicing his reluctance, his hesitation. He

felt like saying, “I suppose,” but he straightened his

back instead, rubbed his damp palms together and

dipped his chin. “Absolutely,” he managed, feigning a

confidence he didn't feel.

"Great. Let's go make this official." He squeezed

Lukas's shoulder before heading into the server room.

Lukas walked around the edge of the thick door and

leaned into it, slowly sealing himself in as the fat hinges

groaned shut. The electric locks engaged automaticaly,

thumping into the jamb. The security panel beeped, its

happy green light flicking over to the menacing red eye

of a sentry.

Lukas took a deep breath and picked his way through

the servers. He tried not to go the same way as

Bernard, tried never to go the same way twice. He

chose a longer route just to break the monotony, to

have one less routine in that prison.

Bernard had the back of the server open by the time he

arrived. He held the familiar headphones out to Lukas.

Lukas accepted them and put them on backwards, the

microphone snaking around the rear of his neck.

“Like this?”

Bernard laughed at him and twirled his finger. “Other

way around,” he said, lifting his voice so Lukas could

hear through the muffs.

Lukas fumbled with the headphones, tangling his arm in

the cord. Bernard waited patiently.

“Are you ready?” Bernard asked, once they were in

place. He held the loose jack in one hand. Lukas

nodded. He watched Bernard turn and aim the plug at

the banks of receptacles. He pictured Bernard’s hand

swinging down and to the right, slamming the plug home

into number 17, then turning and confronting Lukas

about his favorite pastime, his secret crush—

But his boss's smal hand never wavered; it clicked into

place, Lukas knowing exactly how that felt, how the

receptacle hugged the plug tightly, seemed to welcome

it in, the pads of one's fingers getting a

jolt from the

flicking of that spring-loaded plastic retainer—

The light above the jack started blinking. A familiar

buzzing throbbed in Lukas's ears. He waited for her

voice, for Juliette to answer.

A click.

"Name."

A tril of fear ran up Lukas's back, bumps erupting

across his arms. The voice, deep and holow, impatient

and aloof, came and went like the glimpse of a star.

Lukas licked his lips.

“Lukas Kyle,” he said, trying not to stammer.

There was a pause. He imagined someone, somewhere,

writing this down or flipping through files or doing

something awful with the information. The temperature

behind the server soared. Bernard was smiling at him,

oblivious to the silence on his end.

“You shadowed in IT.”

It felt like a statement, but Lukas nodded and

answered. “Yessir.”

He wiped his palm across his forehead and then the

seat of his coverals. He desperately wanted to sit

down, to lean back against server

number 40, to relax.

But Bernard was smiling at him, his mustache lifting, his

eyes wide behind his glasses.

“What is your primary duty to the silo?”

Bernard had prepped him on likely questions.

“To maintain the Order.”

Silence. No feedback, no sense if he was right or

wrong.

“What do you protect above al?”

The voice was flat and yet powerfuly serious. Dire and

somehow calm. Lukas felt his mouth go dry.

“Life and Legacy,” he recited. But it felt wrong, this

rote façade of knowledge. He wanted to go into detail,

to let this voice, like a strong and sober father,

understand that he *knew* why this was important. He

wasn’t dumb. He had more to say than memorized facts

—

“What does it take to protect these things we hold so

dear?”

He paused.

“It takes sacrifice,” Lukas whispered. He thought of

Juliette—and the calm demeanor he was projecting for

Bernard nearly crumbled. There were

some things he

wasn't sure about, things he *didn't* understand. This

was one of them. It felt like a lie, his answer. He wasn't

sure the sacrifice was worth it, the danger so great that

they had to let people, *good* people, go to their—

"How much time have you had in the suit labs?"

The voice had changed, relaxed somewhat. Lukas

wondered if the ceremony was over. Was that *it*? Had

he passed? He blew out his held breath, hoping the

microphone didn't pick it up, and tried to relax.

"Not much, sir. Bernar— Uh, my boss, he's wanting

me to schedule time in the labs after, you know—"

He looked to Bernard, who was pinching one side of

his glasses and watching him.

“Yes. I do know. How is that problem in your lower

levels going?”

“Um, wel, I’m only kept apprised of the overal

progress, and it sounds good—” He cleared his throat

and thought of al the sounds of gunfire and violence

he’d heard through the radio in the room below. “That

is, it sounds like progress is being made, that it won’t be

much longer.”

A long pause. Lukas forced himself to breathe deeply,

to smile at Bernard.

“Would you have done anything differently, Lukas?

From the beginning?”

Lukas felt his body sway, his knees go a little numb. He

was back on that conference table, black steel pressed

against his cheek, a line from his eye

extending through

a smal cross, through a tiny hole, pointing like a laser at

a smal woman with gray hair and a bomb in her hand.

Bulets were flying down that line. His bulets.

“Nossir,” he finaly said. “It was al by the Order, sir.

Everything’s under control.”

He waited. Somewhere, he felt, his measure was being

taken.

“You are next in line for the control and operation of

silo eighteen,” the voice intoned.

“Thank you sir.”

Lukas reached for the headphones, was preparing to

take them off and hand them to Bernard in case he

needed to say something, to hear that it was official.

“Do you know the worst part of my

job?” the holow

voice asked.

Lukas dropped his hands.

“What’s that, sir?”

“Standing here, looking at a silo on this map, and

drawing a red cross through it. Can you imagine what

that feels like?”

Lukas shook his head. “I can’t, sir.”

“It feels like a parent losing thousands of

children, al at

once.”

A pause.

“You wil have to be cruel to your children to not lose

them.”

Lukas thought of his father.

“Yessir.”

“Welcome to Operation Fifty of the World Order,

Lukas Kyle. Now, if you have a question

or two, I have

the time to answer, but briefly."

Lukas wanted to say that he had no questions; he

wanted to get off the line; he wanted to cal and speak

with Juliette, to feel a puff of sanity breathed into this

crazy and suffocating room. But he remembered what

Bernard had taught him about admitting ignorance, how

this was the key to knowledge.

“Just one, sir. And I’ve been told it isn’t important, and

I understand why that’s true, but I believe it wil make

my job here easier if I know.”

He paused for a response, but the voice seemed to be

waiting for him to get to the question.

Lukas cleared his throat. “Is there—?” He pinched the

mic and moved it closer to his lips,

glanced at Bernard.

“How did this al begin?”

He wasn’t sure—it could have been a fan on the server

whirring to life—but he thought he heard the man with

the deep voice sigh.

“How badly do you wish to know?”

Lukas feared answering this question honestly. “It isn’t

crucial,” he said, “but I would appreciate a sense of

what we're accomplishing, what we survived. It feels

like it gives me—gives us a purpose, you know?"

"The reason *is* the purpose," the man said crypticaly.

"Before I tel you, I'd like to hear what you think."

Lukas swalowed. "What I think?"

"Everyone has ideas. Are you suggesting you don't?"

A hint of humor could be heard in that holow voice.

“I think it was something we saw coming,” Lukas said.

He watched Bernard, who frowned and looked away.

“That’s one possibility.”

Bernard removed his glasses and began wiping them on

the sleeve of his undershirt, his eyes at his feet.

“Consider this—” The deep voice paused. “What if I

told you that there were only fifty silos in al the world,

and that here we are in this infinitely smal corner of it."

Lukas thought about this. It felt like another test.

"I would say that we were the only ones —" He almost

said that they were the only ones with the resources, but

he'd seen enough in the Legacy to know this wasn't

true. Many parts of the world had buildings rising above

their hils. Many more could have been

prepared. “I’d

say we were the only ones who *knew*,” Lukas

suggested.

“Very good. And why might that be?”

He hated this. He didn’t want to puzzle it out, he just

wanted to be told.

And then, like a cable splicing together, like electricity

zipping through connections for the very first time, the

truth hit him.

“It’s because—” He tried to make sense of this answer

in his head, tried to imagine that such an idea could

possibly verge on truth.

“It’s not because we knew,” Lukas said, sucking in a

gasp of air. “It’s because we *did it*.”

“Yes,” the voice said. “And now you know.”

He said something else, just barely

audible, like it was

being said to someone else. “Our time is up, Lukas

Kyle. Congratulations on your assignment.”

The headphones were sticky against his head, his face

clammy with sweat.

“Thank you,” he managed.

“Oh, and Lukas?”

“Yessir?”

“Going forward, I suggest you concentrate on what’s

beneath your feet. No more of this business with the

stars, okay son? We know where most of them are.”

16

• Silo 18 •

“*Hello? Solo? Please say something.”*

There was no mistaking that voice, even through the

smal speakers in the dismantled headset.

It echoed

bodiless in the control room, the same control room that

had housed that very voice for so many years. The

location was what nailed it for Shirly; she stared at the

tiny speakers spliced into the magical radio, knowing it

could be no one else.

Neither she nor Walker dared breathe. They waited

what felt like forever before she finaly broke the

silence.

“That was Juliette,” she whispered. “How can we—?

Is her voice *trapped* down here? In the air? How long

ago would that have been?”

Shirly didn’t understand how any of the science

worked; it was al beyond her pay grade. Walker

continued to stare at the headset, unmoving, not saying

a word, tears shining in his beard.

"Are these . . . these *ripples* we're grabbing with the

antenna, are they just bouncing around down here?"

She wondered if the same was true of *all* the voices

they'd heard. Maybe they were simply picking up

conversations from the *past*. Was that possible? Like

some kind of electrical echo? Somehow, this seemed

far less shocking than the alternative.

Walker turned to her, a strange expression on his face.

His mouth hung partway open, but there was a curl at

the edges of his lips, a curl that began to rise.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he said. The curl

transformed into a smile. “This is *now*. This is

happening." He grabbed Shirly's arm. "You heard it

too, didn't you? I'm not crazy. That realy was her,

wasn't it? She's alive. She made it."

"No—" Shirly shook her head. "Walk, what're you

saying? That Juliette's *alive*? Made it where?"

"You heard." He pointed at the radio. "Before. The

conversations. The cleaning. There's more of them *out*

there. More of *us*. She's *with* them, Shirly. This is

happeningrightnow."

"Alive."

Shirly stared at the radio, processing this. Her friend

was stil *somewhere*. Stil breathing. It had been so

solid in her head, this vision of Juliette's body just over

the hils, lying in silent repose, the wind flecking away at

her. And now she was picturing her moving, breathing,

talking into a radio somewhere.

“Can we talk to her?” she asked.

She knew it was a dumb question. But Walker seemed

to startle, his old limbs jumping.

“Oh, God. God, yes.” He set the mish-mash of

components down on the floor, his hands trembling, but

with what Shirly now read as

excitement. The fear in

both of them was gone, drained from the room, the rest

of the world beyond that smal space fading to

meaninglessness.

Walker dug into the parts bin. He dumped some tools

out and pawed into the bottom of the container.

“No,” he said. He turned and scanned the parts on the

ground. “No no no.”

“What is it?” Shirly slid away from the string of

components so he could better see. “What’re we

missing? There’s a microphone right there.” She pointed

to the partialy disassembled headphones.

“The transmitter. It’s a little board. I think it’s on my

workbench.”

“I swiped everything into the bin.” Her

voice was high

and tense. She moved toward the plastic bucket.

“My *other* workbench. It wasn’t needed. Al Jenks

wanted was to *listen in.* ” He waved at the radio. “I did

what he wanted. How could I have known I’d need to

transmit—?”

“You couldn’t,” Shirly said. She rested her hand on his

arm. She could tel he was heading toward a bad place.

She had seen him go there often enough, knew he had

shortcuts he could take to get there in no time. “Is there

anything in here we can use? Think, Walk.

Concentrate.”

He shook his head, wagged his finger at the

headphones. “This mic is dumb. It just passes the sound

through. Little membranes vibrating—”

He turned and looked at her. “Wait—there *is*

something.”

“Down here? Where?”

“The mining storehouse would have them. A

transmitter.” He pretended to hold a box and twist a

switch. “For the blasting caps. I repaired one just a

month ago. It would work.”

Shirly rose to her feet. “I’l go get it,” she said. “You

stay here.”

“But the stairwel—”

“I’l be safe. I’m going *down*, not up.”

He bobbed his head.

“Don’t change anything with that.” She pointed to the

radio. “No looking for more voices. Just hers. Leave it

there.”

“Of course.”

Shirly bent down and squeezed his shoulder. “I’l be

right back.”

Outside, she found dozens of faces turning her way,

frightened and questioning looks in their wide eyes, their

slack mouths. She felt like shouting over the hum of the

generator that Juliette was alive, that they weren’t alone,

that other people lived and breathed in the forbidden

outside. She wanted to, but she didn't have the time.

She hurried to the rail and found Courtnee.

"Hey—"

"Everything okay in there?" Courtnee asked.

"Yeah, fine. Do me a favor, wil you? Keep an eye on

Walker for me."

Courtnee nodded. “Where are you—?”

But Shirly was already gone, running to the main door.

She squeezed through a group huddled in the

entranceway. Jenkins was outside with Harper. They

stopped talking as she hurried past.

“Hey!” Jenkins seized her arm. “Where the hel’re *you*

going?”

“Mine storeroom.” She twisted her arm

out of his

grasp. “I won’t be long—”

“You won’t be *going*. We’re about to blow that

stairwel. These idiots are faling right into our hands.”

“You’re *what*?”

“The stairwel,” Harper repeated. “It’s rigged to blow.

Once they get down there and start working their way

through—” He put his hands together in

a bal, then

expanded the sphere in a mock explosion.

“You don’t understand—” She faced Jenkins. “It’s for

the radio.”

He frowned. “Walk had his chance.”

“We’re picking up a *lot* of chatter,” she told him. “He

needs this one piece. I’l be right back, swear.”

Jenkins looked to Harper. “How long

before we do

this?”

“Five minutes, sir.” His chin moved back and forth,

almost imperceptibly.

“You’ve got four,” he said to Shirly. “But make sure

__”

She didn’t hear the rest. Her boots were already

pounding the steel, carrying her toward the stairwel.

She flew past the oil rig with its sad and lowered head,

past the row of confused and twitching men, their guns

al pointing the way.

She hit the top of the steps and slid around the corner.

Someone half a flight up yeled in alarm. Shirly caught a

glimpse of two miners with sticks of TNT before she

skipped down the flight of stairs.

At the next level, she turned and headed for the

mineshaft. The halways were silent, just her panting and

the clop, clop, clop of her boots.

Juliette. Alive.

A person sent to *cleaning*, alive.

She turned down the next halway and ran past the

apartments for the deep workers, the miners and the oil

men, men who now bore guns instead of

holes in the

earth, who wielded weapons rather than tools.

And this new knowledge, this impossible bit of news,

this secret, it made the fighting seem surreal. Petty. How

could anyone fight if there were places to go beyond

these wals? If her friend was stil out there? Shouldn’t

they be going as wel?

She made it to the storeroom. Probably been two

minutes. Her heart was racing. Surely Jenkins wouldn't

do anything to that stairway until she got back. She

moved down the shelves, peering in the bins and

drawers. She knew what the thing looked like. There

should be several of them floating about. Where were

they?

She checked the lockers, threw the dingy coverals

hanging inside them to the ground, tossed work helmets

out of the way. She didn’t see anything. How much time

did she have?

She tried the smal foreman’s office next, throwing the

door open and storming to the desk. Nothing in the

drawers. Nothing on the shelves mounted to the wal.

One of the big drawers on the bottom was stuck.

Locked.

Shirly stepped back and kicked the front of the metal

drawer with her boot. She slammed the steel toe into it

once, twice. The lip curled down, away from the

drawer above. She reached in, yanked the flimsy lock

off its lip, and the warped drawer opened with a groan.

Explosives. Sticks of dynamite. There were a few smal

relays that she knew went into the sticks to ignite them.

Beneath these, she found three of the transmitters

Walker was looking for.

Shirly grabbed two of them, a few relays, and put them

al in her pocket. She took two sticks of the dynamite—

just because they were there and went with everything

else—and ran out of the office, through the storeroom,

back toward the stairs.

She had used up too much time. Her chest felt cool and

empty, raspy, as she labored to breathe. She ran as fast

as she could, concentrating on throwing her boots

forward, lunging for more floor, gobbling it up.

Turning at the end of the hal, she again thought about

how ridiculous this fighting was. It was hard to

remember why it had begun. Knox was gone, so was

McLain. Would their people be fighting if these great

leaders were stil around? Would they have done

something different long ago? Something more sane?

She cursed the foly of it al as she reached the stairs.

Surely it had been five minutes. She

waited for a blast

to ring out above her, to deafen her with the concussive

ferocity trapped in that stairwel. Leaping up two treads

at a time, she made the turn at the top and saw that the

miners were gone. Anxious eyes peered at her over

homemade barrels.

“Go!” someone yeled, waving their arms to the side,

hurrying her along.

Shirly focused on Jenkins, who crouched down with his

own rifle, Harper by his side. She nearly tripped over

the wires leading away from the stairwel as she ran

toward the two men.

“Now!” Jenkins yeled.

Someone threw a switch.

The ground lurched and buckled beneath Shirly’s feet,

sending her sprawling. She landed hard on the steel

floor, her chin grazing the diamond plating, the dynamite

nearly flying from her hands.

Her ears were stil ringing as she got to her knees. Men

were moving behind the railing, guns popping into the

bank of smoke leaking from a new maw of twisted and

jagged steel. The screams of the distant wounded could

be heard on the other side.

While men fought, Shirly patted her pockets, fished

inside for the transmitters.

And again, the noise of war seemed to fade, to become

insignificant. She hurried through the door to the

generator room, back to Walker, her lip bleeding, her

mind on more important things.

17

• **Silo 17** •

Juliette puled herself through the cold, dark waters,

bumping blindly against the ceiling, a wal, no way to tel

which. She gathered the limp air hose with blind and

desperate lunges, no idea how fast she was going—until

she crashed into the stairs. Her nose crunched against

the inside of her helmet, and the darkness was

momentarily shouldered aside by a flash of light. She

floated, dazed, the air hose drifting from her hands.

Juliette groped for the precious line as her senses

gradualy returned. She hit something with her glove,

grabbed it, and was about to pul herself along when

she realized it was the smaler power line. She let go

and swept her arms in the blind murk,

her boots

bumping against something. It was impossible to know

top from bottom. She began to feel turned around,

dizzy, disoriented.

A rigid surface pressed against her; she decided she

must be floating *up*, away from the hose.

She kicked off what she assumed was the ceiling and

swam in the direction that she hoped

was down. Her

arms tangled in something—she felt it across her

padded chest—she found it with her hands, expecting

the power cord, but was rewarded with the spongy

nothingness of the empty air tube. It no longer offered

her air, but it did lead the way out.

Puling one direction gathered slack, so she tried the

other way. The hose went taut. She puled herself into

the stairs again, bounced away with a grunt, and kept

gathering line. The hose led up and around the corner—

and she found herself puling, reaching out an arm to

fend off the blind assaults from wals, ceiling, steps—

bumping and floating up six flights, a battle for every

inch, a struggle that seemed to take

forever.

By the time she reached the top, she was out of breath

and panting. And then she realized she wasn't out of

breath, she was out of *air*. She had burned through

whatever remained in the suit. Hundreds of feet of

exhausted hose lay invisible behind her, sucked dry.

She tried the radio again as she puled herself through

the corridor, her suit rising slowly toward the ceiling, not

nearly as buoyant as before.

“Solo! Can you hear me?”

The thought of how much water stil lay above her, al

those levels of it pressing down, hundreds of feet of

solid flood—it was suffocating. What did she have left

in the suit? Minutes? How long would it take to swim or

float to the top of the stairwel? Much, much longer.

There were probably oxygen bottles down one of those

pitch black halways, but how would she find them?

This wasn’t her home. She didn’t have time to look. Al

she had was a mad drive to reach the stairwel, to race

to the surface.

She puled and kicked her way around the last corner

and into the main halway, her muscles screaming from

being used in new ways, from fighting the stiff and bulky

suit, the viscous atmosphere, when she realized the inky

water had lightened to something nearer charcoal

instead of pitch black. There was a *green tint* to her

blindness.

Juliette scissored her legs and gathered in the tubing,

bumping along the ceiling, sensing the security station

and stairwel ahead. She had traveled corridors like

these thousands of times, twice in utter darkness when

main breakers had failed. She remembered staggering

through halways just like this, teling coworkers it

would be okay, to just stay stil, she'd handle it.

Now she tried to do the same for herself,

to lie and say

it would al be okay, to just keep moving, don’t panic.

The dizziness began to set in as she reached the security

gate. The water ahead glowed lime green and looked

so inviting, an end to the blind scrambling, no more of

her helmet bumping into what she couldn’t see.

Her arm briefly tangled with the power cord; she shook

it free and hauled herself toward that tal column of

water ahead, that flooded straw, that sunken stairway.

Before she got there, she had her first spasm, like a

hiccup, a violent and automatic gasp for air. She lost her

grip on the line and felt her chest nearly burst from the

effort of breathing. The temptation to shed her helmet

and take a deep inhalation of water

overpowered her.

Something in her mind insisted she could breathe the

stuff. Just give her a chance, it said. One lungful of the

water. Anything other than the toxins she had exhaled

into her suit, a suit designed to keep such things *out*.

Her throat spasmed again, and she started coughing in

her helmet as she puled her way into the stairwel. The

rope was there, held down by the wrench. She swam

for it, knowing it was too late. As she yanked down,

she felt the slack coming—the loose end of the rope

spiraled in sinking knots toward her.

She drifted slowly toward the surface, very little of the

built-up pressure inside her suit, no quick ride to the

top. Another throat spasm, and the helmet had to come

off. She was getting dizzy, would soon pass out.

Juliette fumbled for the clasps on her metal colar. The

sense of deja vu was overpowering. Only this time, she

wasn't thinking clearly. She remembered the soup, the

fetid smel, crawling out of the dark walk-in. She

remembered the knife.

Patting her chest, she felt the handle sticking out from its

sheath. Some of the other tools had wiggled out of their

pockets; they dangled from lines meant to keep them

from getting lost, lines that now just made them a

nuisance, turned them into more weights holding her

down.

She rose gently up the stairwel, her body shivering from

the cold and convulsing from the absence of breathable

air. Forgetting al reason, al sense of where she was,

she became singularly aware of the noxious fog hanging

al around her head, trapped by that dome, kiling her.

She aimed the blade into the first latch in her colar and

pressed hard.

There was a click and a fine spray of cold water against

her neck. A feeble bubble lurched out of her suit and

tumbled up her visor. Groping for the other latch, she

shoved the knife into it, and the helmet popped off,

water flooding over her face, filing her suit, shocking

her with the numbing cold and dragging her, sinking,

back down to where she'd come from.

••••

The freezing cold jolted Juliette to her senses. She

blinked her lids against the sting of the green water and

saw the knife in her hands, the dome of her helmet

spinning through the murk like a bubble heading in the

wrong direction. She was slowly sinking after it, no air

in her lungs, hundreds of feet of water pressing down.

She jabbed the knife into the wrong pocket on her

chest, saw drivers and spanners hanging

by their cords

from her struggle through the blackness, and kicked

toward the hose that stil led through four levels of water

toward the surface.

Bubbles of air leaked out of her colar and across her

neck, up through her hair. Juliette seized the hose and

stopped her plummet, puled upward, her throat

screaming for an intake of air, of water, of anything. The

urge to swalow was overpowering. She started to pul

herself up, when she saw, in the undersides of the steps,

a shimmering flash of hope.

Trapped bubbles. Maybe from her descent. They

moved like liquid solder in the holow undersides of the

spiral staircase.

Juliette made a noise in her throat, a raw cry of

desperation, of effort. She pawed through the water,

fighting the sinking of the suit, and grasped the railing of

the submerged stairway. Puling herself up and kicking

off of the railing, she made it to the nearest shimmer of

bubbles, grabbed the edge of the stairs, and pushed her

mouth right up to the metal underside of

the step.

She inhaled a desperate gasp of air and sucked in a lot

of water in the process. She dove her head below the

surface and coughed into the water, which brought the

burn of fluids invading her nose. She nearly sucked in a

lungful of water, felt her heart racing and ready to burst

out of her chest, stuck her face back up against the wet

rusty underside of the step, and with her lips pursed and

trembling, managed to take in a gentle sip of air.

The tiny flashes of light in her vision subsided. She

lowered her head and blew out, away from the step,

watching the bubbles of her exhalation rise, and then

pressed her face close for another taste.

Air.

She blinked away underwater tears of effort, of

frustration, of relief. Peering up the twisted maze of

metal steps, many of them moving like flexible mirrors

where the trapped air was stirred by her mad gyrations,

she saw a pathway like no other. She kicked off and

took a few steps at a time, puling herself hand over

hand in the gaps between, drinking tiny

bubbles of air

out of the several-inch holow beneath each tread,

praising the tight welds where the diamond plate steps

had been joined many hundreds of years ago. The steps

had been boxed in for strength, to handle the traffic of a

milion impacts of boots, and now they held the gaseous

overflow from her descent. Her lips brushed each one,

tasting metal and rust, kissing her salvation.

••••

The green emergency lights al around her remained

steady, so Juliette never noticed the landings drifting

past. She just concentrated on taking five steps with

each breath, six steps, a long stretch with hardly any air,

another mouthful of water where the bubble was too

thin to breathe, a lifetime of rising against the tug of her

flooded suit and dangling tools, no thought for stopping

and cutting things free, just kick and pul, hand over

hand, up the undersides of the steps, a deep and steady

pul of air, suck this shalow step dry, don’t exhale into

the steps above, easy now. Five more steps. It was a

game, like Hop, five squares in a leap,

don’t cheat,

mind the chalk, she was good at this, getting better.

And then a foul burn on her lips, the taste of water

growing toxic, her head coming up into the underside of

a step and breaking through a film of gas-stench and

slimy oil.

Juliette blew out her last breath and coughed, wiping at

her face, her head stil trapped below the next step. She

wheezed and laughed and pushed herself away, banging

her head on the sharp steel edge of the stairs. She was

free. She briefly bobbed below the surface as she swam

around the railing, her eyes burning from the oil and gas

floating on top. Splashing loudly, crying for Solo, she

made it over the railing. With her

padded and shivering

knees, she finaly found the steps.

She’d made it. Clinging to the dry treads above her,

neck bent, gasping and wheezing, her legs numb, she

tried to cry out that she made it, but it escaped as a

whimper. She was cold. She was freezing. Her arms

shivered as she puled herself up the quiet steps, no

rattle from the compressor, no arms reaching to assist

her.

“Solo—?”

She crawled the half dozen treads to the landing and

roled onto her back. Some of her tools were caught on

steps below, tugging at her where they were tied off to

her pockets. Water drained out of her suit and splashed

down her neck, pooled by her head, ran into her ears.

She turned her head—she needed to get the freezing

suit off—and found Solo.

He was lying on his side, eyes shut, blood running down

his face, some of it already caked dry.

“Solo?”

Her hand was a shivering blur as she reached and

shook him. What had he done to himself?

“Hey. Wakethefuckup.”

Her teeth were chattering. She grabbed his shoulder

and gave him a violent shake. “Solo! I need help!”

One of his eyes parted a little. He blinked a few times,

then bent double and coughed, blood flecking the

landing by his face.

“Help,” she said. She fumbled for the zipper at her

back, not realizing it was Solo who needed *her*.

Solo coughed into his hand, then roled over and settled

once again to his back. The blood on his head was stil

flowing from somewhere, fresh tracks trickling across

what had dried some time before.

“Solo?”

He groaned. Juliette puled herself closer, could barely

feel her body. He whispered something, his voice a rasp

on the edge of silence.

“Hey—” She brought her face close to his, could feel

her lips swolen and numb, could stil taste the gasoline.

“Not my name—”

He coughed a mist of red. One arm lifted from the

landing a few inches as if to cover his mouth, but it

never had a chance of getting there.

“Not my name,” he said again. His head loled side to

side, and Juliette finaly realized that he was badly

injured. Her mind began to clear enough to see what

state he was in.

“Hold stil,” she groaned. “Solo, I need you to be stil.”

She tried to push herself up, to wil herself the strength

to move. Solo blinked and looked at her, his eyes

glassy, blood tinting the gray in his beard the color

crimson.

“Not Solo,” he said, his voice straining. “My name’s

Jimmy—”

More coughing, his eyes roling up into the back of his

head—

“—and I don’t think—”

His eyelids sagged shut, and then squinted in pain.

“—don’t think I was—”

“Stay with me,” Juliette said, hot tears cutting down her

frozen face.

“—don’t think I ever *was* alone,” he whispered, the

lines on his face relaxing, his head sagging to the cold

steel landing.

18

The pot on the stove bubbled noisily, steam rising off

the surface, tiny drops of water leaping to their hissing

freedom over the edge. Lukas shook a pinch of tea

leaves out of the resealable tin and into the tiny strainer.

His hands were shaking as he lowered the little basket

into his mug. As he lifted the pot, some water spiled

directly on the burner; the drops made spitting sounds

and gave off a burnt odor. He watched Bernard out of

the corner of his eye as he tilted the boiling water

through the leaves.

“I just don’t understand,” he said, holding the mug with

both hands, alowing the heat to penetrate his palms.

“How could anybody—? How could you *do* something

like this on *purpose*?" He shook his head and peered

into his mug where a few intrepid shreds of leaf had

already gotten free and swam outside the basket. He

looked up at Bernard. "And you knew about this? How

—? How could you *know* about this?"

Bernard frowned. He rubbed his mustache with one

hand, the other resting in the bely of his coverals. "I

wish I *didn't* know it," he told Lukas. "And now you

see why some facts, some bits of knowledge have to be

snuffed out as soon as they form. Curiosity would blow

across such embers and burn this silo to the ground."

He looked down at his boots. "I pieced it together

much as you did, just knowing what we have to know

to do this job. This is why I chose you,

Lukas. You and

a few others have some idea what's stored on these

servers. You're already prepped for learning more. Can

you imagine if you told any of this to someone who

wears red or green to work every day?"

Lukas shook his head.

"It's happened before, you know. Silo ten went down

like that. I sat back there—" He pointed

toward the

smal study with the books, the computer, the hissing

radio. “—and I listened to it happen. I listened to a

coleague’s shadow broadcast his insanity to anyone

who would listen—”

Lukas studied his steeping tea. A handful of leaves

swam about on hot currents of darkening water; the rest

remained in the grip of the imprisoning basket. “That’s

why the radio controls are locked up,” he said.

“And it’s why *you* are locked up.”

Lukas nodded. He’d already suspected as much.

“How long were you kept in here?” He glanced up at

Bernard, and an image flashed in his mind, one of

Sheriff Bilings inspecting his gun while he visited with

his mother. Had they been listening in? Would he have

been shot, his mother too, if he'd said anything?

"I spent just over two months down here until my

caster knew I was ready, that I had accepted and

understood everything I'd learned." He crossed his

arms over his bely. "I realy wish you hadn't asked the

question, hadn't put it together so soon.

It’s much

better to find out when you’re older.”

Lukas pursed his lips and nodded. It was strange to talk

like this with someone his senior, someone who knew

so much more, was so much wiser. He imagined this

was the sort of conversation a man had with his father

—only not about the planned and carried out

destruction of the entire world.

Lukas bent his head and breathed in the smel of the

steeping leaves. The mint was like a direct line through

the trembling stress, a strike to the calm pleasure center

in the deep regions of his brain. He inhaled and held it,

finaly let it out. Bernard crossed to the smal stove in

the corner of the storeroom and started making his own

mug.

“How did they do it?” Lukas asked. “To kil so many.

Do you know how they did it?”

Bernard shrugged. He tapped the tin with one finger,

shaking out a precise amount of tea into another basket.

“They might stil be doing it for al I know. Nobody

talks about how long it’s supposed to go on. There’s

fear that smal pockets of survivors might be holed up

elsewhere around the globe. Operation fifty is

completely pointless if anyone else survives. The

population has to be homogenous—”

“The man I spoke to, he said we were *it*. Just the fifty

silos—”

“Forty-seven,” Bernard said. “And we *are* it, as far as

we know. It's difficult to imagine anyone else being so

wel prepared. But there's always a chance. It's only

been a few hundred years."

"A few *hundred*?" Lukas leaned back against the

counter. He lifted his tea, but the mint was losing its

power to reach him. "So hundreds of years ago, we

decided—"

“*They*.” Bernard filed his mug with the stil-steaming

water. “They decided. Don’t include yourself. Certainly

don’t include me.”

“Okay, *they* decided to destroy the world. Wipe

everything out. Why?”

Bernard set his mug down on the stove to let it steep.

He puled off his glasses, wiped the steam off them, then

pointed them toward the study, toward the wal with the

massive shelves of books. “Because of the worst parts

of our Legacy, that’s why. At least, that’s what I *think*

they would say if they were stil alive.” He lowered his

voice and muttered: “Which they aren’t, thank God.”

Lukas shuddered. He stil didn’t believe anyone would

make that decision, no matter what the

conditions were

like. He thought of the bilions of people who

supposedly lived beneath the stars al those hundreds of

years ago. Nobody could kil so many. How could

anyone take that much life for granted?

“And now we *work* for them,” Lukas spat. He crossed

to the sink and puled the basket out of his mug, set it

on the stainless steel to drain. He cautioned a sip,

slurping lest it burn him. “You tel me not to include us,

but we’re a part of this now.”

“No.” Bernard walked away from the stove and stood

in front of the smal map of the world hanging above the

dinette. “We weren’t any part of what those crazy fucks

did. If I had those guys, the men who did this, if I had

them in a room with me, I'd kil every last goddamned

one of them." Bernard smacked the map with his palm.

"I'd kil them with my bare hands."

Lukas didn't say anything. He didn't move.

"They didn't give us a *chance*. That's not what this is."

He waved at the room around him. "These are prisons.

Cages, not homes. Not meant to protect us, but meant

to force us, by pain of death, to bring about *their*

vision."

"Their vision for *what*?"

"For a world where we're too much the same, where

we're too tightly invested in each other to waste our

time fighting, to waste our resources guarding those

same limited resources." He lifted his mug and took a

noisy sip. “That’s my theory, at least. From decades of

reading. The people who did this, they were in charge

of a powerful country that was beginning to crumble.

They could see the end, *their* end, and it scared them

suicidal. As the time began to run out—over decades

keep in mind—they figured they had *one* chance to

preserve themselves, to preserve what

they saw as their

way of life. And so, before they lost the only

opportunity they might ever have, they put a plan into

motion.”

“Without anybody knowing? How?”

Bernard took another sip. He smacked his lips and

wiped his mustache. “Who knows? Maybe nobody

could believe it anyway. Maybe the

reward for secrecy

was inclusion. They built other things in factories bigger

than you can imagine that nobody knew about. They

built bombs in factories like these that I suspect played

a part in al this. Al without anyone knowing. And there

are stories in the Legacy about men from a long time

ago in a land with great kings, like mayors but with

many more people to rule. When these men died,

elaborate chambers were built below the earth and filed

with treasure. It required the work of hundreds of men.

Do you know how they kept the locations of these

chambers a secret?”

Lukas lifted his shoulders. “They paid the workers a ton

of chits?”

Bernard laughed. He pinched a stray tea leaf off his

tongue. “They didn’t have chits. And no, they made

perfectly sure these men would keep quiet. They kiled

them.”

“Their own men?” Lukas glanced toward the room

with the books, wondering which tin this story was in.

“It is not beyond us to kil to keep secrets.” Bernard’s

face hardened as he said this. “It’l be a part of your job

one day, when you take over.”

Lukas felt a sharp pain in his gut as the truth of this hit.

He caught the first glimmer of what he’d truly signed on

for. It made shooting people with rifles seem an honest

affair.

“We are not the people who made this world, Lukas,

but it's up to us to survive it. You need to understand

that."

"We can't control where we are right now," he

mumbled, "just what we do going forward."

"Wise words." Bernard took another sip of tea.

"Yeah. I'm just beginning to appreciate them."

Bernard set his cup in the sink and tucked a hand in the

round bely of his coverals. He stared at Lukas a

moment, then looked again to the smal map of the

world.

“Evil men did this, but they’re gone. Forget them. Just

know this: They locked up their brood as a fucked-up

form of their own survival. They put us in this game, a

game where breaking the rules means we al die, every

single one of us. But *living* by those rules, obeying

them, means we al suffer."

He adjusted his glasses and walked over to Lukas,

patted him on the shoulder as he went past. "I'm proud

of you, son. You're absorbing this much better than I

ever did. Now get some rest. Make some room in your

head and heart. Tomorrow, more studies." He headed

toward the study, the corridor, the distant ladder.

Lukas nodded and remained silent. He waited until

Bernard was gone, the muted clang of distant metal

teling him that the grate was back in place, before

walking through to the study to gaze up at the big

schematic, the one with the silos crossed out. He

peered at the roof of silo 1, wondering

just who in the

hel was in charge of al this and whether they too could

rationalize their actions as having been foisted upon

them, as not realy being culpable but just going along

with something they'd inherited, a crooked game with

ratshit rules and most everyone kept ignorant and

locked up.

Who the fuck were these people? Could he see himself

being *one* of them?

How did Bernard not see that *he* was one of them?

19

• Silo 18 •

The door to the generator room slammed shut behind

her, duling the patter of gunfire to a distant hammering.

Shirly ran toward the control room on

sore legs,

ignoring her friends and coworkers asking her what was

going on outside. They cowered along the wals and

behind the railing from the loud blast and the sporadic

gunfire. Just before she reached the control room, she

noticed some workers from second shift on top of the

main generator toying with the rumbling machine’s

massive exhaust system.

“I got it,” Shirly wheezed, slamming the control room

door shut behind her. Courtnee and Walker looked up

from the floor. The wide eyes and slack jaw on

Courtnee’s face told Shirly she’d missed something.

“What?” she asked. She handed the two transmitters to

Walker. “Did you hear? Walk, does she know?”

“How is this *possible*?” Courtnee asked. “How did she

survive? And what happened to your *face*?”

Shirly touched her lip, her sore chin. Her fingers came

away wet with blood. She used the sleeve of her

undershirt to dab at her mouth.

“If this works,” Walker grumbled, fiddling with one of

the transmitters, “we can ask Jules herself.”

Shirly turned and peered through the control room's

observation window. She lowered her sleeve away

from her face. "What's Karl and them doing with the

exhaust feed?" she asked.

"They've got some plan to reroute it," Courtnee said.

She got up from the floor while Walker started

soldering something, the smel reminding her of his

workshop. He grumbled about his eyesight while

Courtnee joined her by the glass.

“Reroute it where?”

“IT. That’s what Heline said, anyway. The cooling feed

for their server room runs through the ceiling here

before shooting up the mechanical shaft. Someone

spotted the proximity on a schematic, thought of a way

to fight back from here."

"So, we choke them out with our fumes?" Shirly felt

uneasy with the plan. She wondered what Knox would

say if he were stil alive, stil in charge. Surely al the men

and women riding desks up there weren't the problem.

"Walk, how long before we can talk? Before we can

try and contact her?"

“Almost there. Blasted *magnifiers*—”

Courtnee rested her hand on Shirly’s arm. “Are you

okay? How’re you holding up?”

“Me?” Shirly laughed and shook her head. She

checked the bloodstains on her sleeve, felt the sweat

trickling down her chest. “I’m walking around in shock.

I have no idea what the hel’s going on anymore. My

ears are stil ringing from whatever they did to the

stairwel. I think I screwed up my ankle. And I’m

starving. Oh, and did I mention my friend isn’t as dead

as I thought she was?”

She took a deep breath.

Courtnee continued to stare at her worryingly. Shirly

knew none of this was what her friend was asking her

about.

“And yeah, I miss Marck,” she said quietly.

Courtnee put her arm around her friend and puled her

close. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to—”

Shirly waved her off. The two of them stood quietly and

watched through the window as a smal crew from

second shift worked on the generator, trying to reroute

the outpouring of noxious fumes from the apartment-

sized machine to the floors of the thirties high above.

“You know what, though? There are times when I’m

glad he’s not here. Times when I know I won’t be

around much longer either, not once they get to us, and

I’m glad he’s not here to stress about it, to worry about

what they’l do to us. To me. And I’m

glad I haven’t

had to watch him do al this fighting, living on rations,

this sort of craziness.” She dipped her chin at the crew

outside. She knew Marck would either be up there

leading that terrible work or outside with a gun pressed

to his cheek.

“Helo. Testing. Helo, helo.”

The two women turned around to see

Walker clicking

the red detonate switch, the microphone from the

headset held beneath his chin, furrows of concentration

across his brow.

“Juliette?” he asked. “Can you hear me? Helo?”

Shirly moved to Walker’s side, squatted down, rested a

hand on his shoulder. The three of them stared at the

headphones, waiting for a reply.

"*Hello?*"

A quiet voice leaked out of the tiny speakers. Shirly

clapped a hand to her chest, her breath stolen from the

miracle of a reply. It was a fraction of a second later,

after this surge of desperate hope, that she realized this

wasn't Juliette. The voice was different.

"That's not her," Courtnee whispered,

dejected.

Walker waved his hand to silence her. The red switch

clicked noisily as he prepared to transmit.

“Helo. My name is Walker. We received a

transmission from a friend. Is there anyone else there?”

“Ask them where they are,” Courtnee hissed.

“Where exactly are you?” Walker added, before

releasing the switch.

The tiny speakers popped.

“We are nowhere. You’l never find us. Stay away.”

There was a pause, a hiss of static.

“And your friend is dead. We kiled him.”

20

• Silo 17 •

The water inside the suit was freezing, the air cold, the

combination lethal. Juliette's teeth chattered noisily

while she worked the knife. She slid the blade into the

soggy skin of the suit, the feeling of having been here

before, having done al this once, unmistakable.

The gloves came off first, the suit destroyed, water

pouring out of every cut. Juliette rubbed her hands

together, could barely feel them. She

hacked away at

the material over her chest, her eyes faling to Solo, who

had gone deathly stil. His large wrench was missing,

she saw. Their supply bag was gone as wel. The

compressor was on its side, the hose kinked beneath it,

fuel leaking from the loose filing cap.

Juliette was freezing. She could hardly breathe. Once

the chest of the suit was cut open, she wiggled her

knees and feet through the hole, spun the material

around in front of herself, then tried to pry the velcro

apart.

Her fingers were too senseless to do even this. She ran

the knife down the joint instead, sawing the velcro apart

until she could find the zipper.

Finaly, squeezing her fingers until they were white, she

puled the smal tab until it was free of the colar. The

colar off, she threw the suit away from herself. The

thing weighed double with al the water in it. She was

left in two layers of black undersuit, stil soaking wet

and shivering, a knife in her trembling hand, the body of

a good man lying beside her, a man who

had survived

everything this nasty world could throw at him except

for her arrival.

Juliette moved to Solo's side and reached for his neck.

Her hands were icy; she couldn't feel a pulse, wasn't

sure if she would be *able* to. She could barely feel his

neck with her frozen fingers.

She struggled to her feet, nearly

colapsed, hugged the

landing's railing. She teetered toward the compressor,

knowing she needed to warm up. She felt the powerful

urge to go to sleep but knew she'd never wake up if

she did.

The gas can was stil ful. She tried to work the cap, but

her hands were useless. They were numb and vibrating

from the cold. Her breath fogged in front of her, a chily

reminder of the heat she was losing, what little heat she

had left.

She grabbed the knife. Holding it in both hands, she

pressed the tip into the cap. The flat handle was easier

to grasp than the plastic cap; she spun the knife and

cracked the lid on the jug of gas. Once the cap was

loose, she puled the blade out and did the rest with her

palms, the knife resting in her lap.

She tilted the can over the compressor, soaking the

large rubber wheels, the carriage, the entire motor. She

would never want to use it again anyway, never rely on

it or anything else for her air. She put the can down, stil

half ful, and slid it away from the compressor with her

foot. Gas dripped through the metal grating and made

musical impacts in the water below, drips that echoed

off the concrete wals of the stairwel, that added to the

flood’s toxic and colorful slick.

Wielding the knife with the blade down, the dul side

away from her, she smacked it against the metal fins of

the heat exchanger. She yanked her arm back with each

strike, expecting the whoosh of an immediate flame. But

there was no spark. She hit it harder, hating to abuse

her precious tool, her only defense. Solo's stilness

nearby was a reminder that she might need it if she were

able to survive the deadly cold—

The knife struck with a snick, there was a pop, heat

traveling up her arm, a wash of it against her face.

Juliette dropped the knife and waved her hand, but it

wasn't on fire. The compressor *was*. Part of the grating,

too.

As it began to die down, she grabbed the can and

sloshed some more, large bals of orange flame

rewarding her, leaping up in the air with a hiss. The

wheels crackled as they burned. Juliette colapsed close

to the fire, felt the heat from the dancing flame as it

burned al across the metal machine. She began to strip,

her eyes returning now and then to Solo, promising

herself that she wouldn’t leave his body there, that she

would come back for him.

Feeling slowly returned to her extremities. Gradualy,

but then with a tingling pain. Naked, she curled into a

bal next to the smal and feeble fire and rubbed her

hands together, breathing her warm and visible breath

into her palms. Twice, she had to feed the hungry and

stingy fire. Only the wheels burned reliably, but they

kept her from needing another spark. The glorious heat

traveled somewhat through the landing's grated

decking, warming her bare skin where it

touched the

metal.

Her teeth chattered violently. Juliette eyed the stairs, this

new fear coursing through her that boots could rumble

down at any moment, that she was trapped between

these other survivors and the freezing water. She

retrieved her knife, held it in front of her with both

hands, tried to wil herself to not shiver so violently.

Glimpses of her face in the blade caused her to worry

more. She looked as pale as a ghost. Lips purple, eyes

ringed dark and seeming holow. She nearly laughed at

the sight of her lips vibrating, the clacking blur of her

teeth. She scooted closer to the fire. The orange light

danced on the blade. The unburnt fuel

dripped and

formed silvery splashes of color below.

As the last of the gas burned and the flames dwindled,

Juliette decided to move. She was stil shaking, but it

was cold in the depths of the shaft so far from the

electricity of IT. She patted the black underlinings she’d

stripped off. One of them had been left baled up and

was stil soaked. The other she'd been lucky to have

dropped flat, hadn't been thinking clearly or she

would've hung it up. It was damp, but better to wear it

and heat it up than alow the cold air to wick her body

temperature away. She worked her legs in, struggled to

get her arms through the sleeves, zipped up the front.

On bare, numb, and unsteady feet, she

returned to

Solo. She could feel his neck this time. He felt warm.

She couldn't remember how long a body stayed that

way. And then she felt a weak and slow thrumming in

his neck. A beat.

"Solo!" She shook his shoulders. "Hey —" What name

had he whispered? She remembered: "Jimmy!"

His head loled from side to side while she shook his

shoulder. She checked his scalp beneath al that crazy

hair, saw lots of blood. Most of it was dry. She looked

around again for her bag—they had brought food,

water, and dry clothes for when she got back up—but

the satchel was gone. She grabbed her other undersuit

instead. She wasn’t sure about the

quality of the water

in the fabric, but it had to be better than nothing.

Wrenching the material in a tight bal, she dripped what

she could against his lips. She squeezed more on his

head, brushed his hair back to inspect the wound,

probed the nasty cut with her fingers. As soon as the

water hit the open gash, it was like pushing a button.

Solo lurched to the side, away from her hand and the

drip from the undersuit. His teeth flashed yelow in his

beard as he hissed in pain, his hands rising from the

landing and hovering there, arms tensed, stil senseless.

“Solo. Hey, it’s okay.”

She held him as he came to, his eyes roling around, lids

blinking.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You’re gonna be okay.”

She used the baled-up undersuit to dab at his wound.

Solo grunted and held her wrist but didn’t pul away.

“Stings,” he said. He blinked and looked around.

“Where am I?”

“The down deep,” she reminded him, happy to hear

him talking. She felt like crying with relief. “I think you

were attacked—”

He tried to sit up, hissing between his teeth, a powerful

grip pinching her wrist.

“Easy,” she said, trying to hold him down. “You’ve got

a nasty cut on your head. A lot of sweling.”

His body relaxed.

“Where are they?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Juliette said. “What do you remember?

How many were there?”

He closed his eyes. She continued to dab at his wound.

“Just one. I think.” He opened his eyes wide as if

shocked by the memory of the attack. “He was *my*

age.”

“We need to get up top,” she told him. “We need to

get where it’s warm, get you cleaned up, get me dry.

Do you think you can move?”

“I’m not crazy,” Solo said.

“I know you’re not.”

“The things that moved, the lights, it wasn’t me. I’m not

crazy.”

“No,” Juliette agreed. She remembered al the times

she had thought the same thing of herself, always in the

down deep of this place, usualy while rummaging

around Supply. “You aren’t crazy,” she said,

comforting him. “You aren’t crazy at al.”

21

• Silo 18 •

Lukas couldn’t force himself to study, not what he was

supposed to be studying. The Order sat flopped open

on the wooden desk, the little lamp on its thousand-

jointed-neck bent over and warming it in

a pool of light.

But Lukas stood before the wal schematics instead. He

stared at the arrangement of silos, spaced out like the

servers in the room above him, and listened to the radio

crackle with the sounds of distant warring.

The final push was being made. Sims's team had lost a

few men in an awful explosion, something about a

stairwel—but not the great stairwel—and now they

were in a fight they hoped would be the last. The little

speakers by the radio hissed with static as the men

coordinated themselves, as Bernard shouted orders

from his office one level up, always with the crackle of

gunfire erupting behind the voices.

Lukas knew he shouldn’t listen, and yet he couldn’t

stop. Juliette would cal him anytime now and ask him

for an update. She would want to know what had

happened, how the end had come, and the only thing

worse than teling her would be admitting he didn’t

know, that he couldn’t bear to listen.

He reached out and touched the round roof of silo 17.

It was as though he were a god surveying the structures

from up high. He pictured his hand piercing the dark

clouds above Juliette and spanning a roof built for

thousands. He rubbed his fingers over the red X drawn

across the silo, those two slashes that admitted to such

a great loss. The marks felt waxy beneath his fingers

like they'd been drawn with crayon or something

similar. He tried to imagine getting the

news one day

that an entire people were gone, wiped out. He would

have to dig in Bernard's desk— *his* desk —and find the

red stick, lash out another chance at their Legacy,

another pod of buried hope.

Lukas looked up at the overhead lights, steady and

constant, unblinking. Why hadn't she caled?

His fingernail caught on one of the red marks and flaked

a piece of it away. The wax stuck under his fingernail,

the paper beneath stil stained blood red. There was no

taking it back, no cleaning it off, no making it whole

again—

Gunfire erupted from the radio. Lukas went to the shelf

where the little unit was mounted and listened to orders

being barked, men being kiled. His forehead went

clammy with sweat. He knew how that felt, to pul that

trigger, to end a life. He felt an emptiness in his chest

and a weakness in his knees. Lukas steadied himself

with the shelf, palms slick, and looked at the transmitter

hanging there inside its locked cage. How he longed to

cal those men and tel them not to do it, to

stop al the

insanity, the violence, the pointless kiling. There could

be a red X on them al. *This* was what they should fear,

not each other.

He touched the metal cage that kept the radio controls

locked away from him, feeling the truth of this and the

siliness of broadcasting it to everyone else. It was

naive. It wouldn’t change anything. The short-term rage

to be sated at the end of a barrel was too easy to act

on. Staving off extinction required something else,

something with more vision, something impossibly

patient.

His hand drifted across the metal grating. He peered

inside at one of the dials, the arrow pointing to the

number “18.” There were fifty numbers in a dizzying

circle, one for each silo. Lukas gave the cage a futile

tug, wishing he could listen to something else. What was

going on in al those other distant lands? Harmless

things, probably. Jokes and chatter. Gossip. He could

imagine the thril of breaking in on one of those

conversations and introducing himself to

people who

weren't in the know. "I am Lukas from silo eighteen,"

he might say. And they would want to know why silos

had numbers. And Lukas would tel them to be good to

each other, that there were only so many of them left,

and that al the books and al the stars in the universe

were pointless with no one to read them, no one to peer

through the parting clouds for them.

He left the radio alone, left it to its war, and walked

past the desk and its eager pool of light spiling across

that dreary book. He checked the tins for something

that might hold his attention. He felt restless, pacing like

a pig in its pen. He should go for another jog among the

servers, but that would mean showering, and somehow

showering had begun to feel like an insufferable chore.

Crouching down at the far end of the shelves, he sorted

through the loose, un-tinned stacks of paper there. Here

was where the handwritten notes and the additions to

the Legacy had amassed over the years. Notes to future

silo leaders, instructions, manuals, mementos. He puled

out the generator control room manual,

the one Juliette

had written. He had watched Bernard shelve the papers

weeks ago, saying it might come in handy if the

problems in the down deep went from bad to worse.

And the radio was blasting the worse.

Lukas went to his desk and bent the neck of the lamp

so he could read the handwriting inside. There were

days that he dreaded her caling, dreaded getting caught

or Bernard answering or her asking him to do things he

couldn’t, things he would never do again. And now,

with the lights steady overhead and nothing buzzing, al

he wanted was a cal. His chest ached for it. Some part

of him knew that what she was doing was dangerous,

that something bad could’ve happened.

She was living

beneath a red X, after al, a mark that meant death for

anyone below it.

The pages of the manual were ful of notes she'd made

with sharp lead. He rubbed one of them, feeling the

grooves with his fingers. The actual content was

inscrutable. Settings for dials in every conceivable

order, valve positions, electrical diagrams. Riffling the

pages, he saw the manual as a project not unlike his star

charts, created by a mind not unlike his own. This

awareness made the distance between them worse.

Why couldn’t they go back? Back to before the

cleaning, before the string of burials. She would get off

work every night and come sit with him

while he gazed

into the darkness, thinking and watching, chatting and

waiting.

He turned the manual around and read some of the

printed words from the play, which were nearly as

indecipherable. In the margins sat notes from a different

hand. Lukas assumed Juliette's mother, or maybe one

of the actors. There were diagrams on some pages, little

arrows showing movement. An actor's notes, he

decided. Directions on a stage. The play must've been

a souvenir to Juliette, this woman he had feelings for

whose name was in the title.

He scanned the lines, looking for something poetic to

capture his dark mood. As the text went by, his eyes

caught a brief flash of familiar scrawl, not the actor's.

He flipped back, looking for it a page at a time until he

found it.

It was Juliette's hand, no mistaking. He moved the play

into the light so he could read the faded marks:

George:

There you lay, so serene. The wrinkles in your brow

and by your eyes, nowhere seen.

A touch when others look away, look for a clue,

but only I know what happened to you.

Wait for me. Wait for me. Wait there, my dear.

Let these gentle pleas find your ear,

and bury them there, so this stolen kiss can grow

on the quiet love that no other shall know.

Lukas felt a cold rod pierce his chest.

He felt his longing

replaced by a flash of temper. Who was this George? A

childhood fling? Juliette was never in a sanctioned

relationship; he had checked the official records the day

after they'd met. Access to the servers afforded certain

guilty powers. A crush, perhaps? Some man in

Mechanical who was already in love with another? To

Lukas, this would be even worse. A man she longed for

in a way she never would feel for him. Was that why

she'd taken a job so far from home? To get away from

the sight of this George she couldn't have, these feelings

she'd hidden in the margins of a play about forbidden

love?

He turned and plopped down in front of Bernard's

computer. Shaking the mouse, he logged into the

upstairs servers remotely, his cheeks feeling flush with

this sick feeling, this new feeling, knowing it was caled

jealousy but unfamiliar with the heady rush that came

with it. He navigated to the personnel files and searched

the down deep for “George.” There were four hits. He

copied the ID numbers of each and put

them in a text

file, then fed them to the ID department. While the

pictures of each popped up, he skimmed their records,

feeling a little guilty for the abuse of power, a little

worried about this discovery, and a lot less agonizingly

bored having found something to do.

Only one of the Georges worked in Mechanical. Older

guy. As the radio crackled behind him, Lukas

wondered what would become of this man if he was stil

down there. There was a chance that he was no longer

alive, that the records were a few weeks out of date,

the blockade a barrier to the truth.

A couple of the hits were too young. One wasn’t even a

year old yet. The other was shadowing with a porter. It

left one man, thirty two years old. He worked in the

bazaar, occupation listed as “other,” married with two

kids. Lukas studied the blurry image of him from the ID

office. Mustache. Receding hair. A sideways smirk. His

eyes were too far apart, Lukas decided, his brows too

dark and much too bushy.

Lukas held up the manual and read the poem again.

The man was dead, he decided. *Bury these words*.

He did another search, this time a global one that

included the closed records. Hundreds of hits

throughout the silo popped up, names from al the way

back to the uprising. This did not dissuade Lukas. He

knew Juliette was thirty six, and so he gave her a twenty

year window, figured if she were

younger than sixteen

when she'd had this crush, he wouldn't stress, he would

let the envious and shameful burn inside him go.

From the list of Georges, there were only three deaths

in the down deep for the twenty year period. One was

in his fifties, the other in his sixties. Both died of natural

causes. Lukas thought to cross reference them with

Juliette, see if there had been any work relations, if they

shared a family tree perhaps.

And then he saw the third file. *This* was his George.

Her George. Lukas knew it. Doing the math, Lukas

saw he would be thirty eight if he were stil alive. He

had died just over three years earlier, had worked in

Mechanical, had *never married.*

He ran the ID search, and the picture confirmed his

fears. He was a handsome man, a square jaw, a wide

nose, dark eyes. He was smiling at the camera, calm,

relaxed. It was hard to hate the man. Difficult,

especialy, since he was dead.

Lukas checked the cause and saw that it was

investigated and then listed as an industrial accident.

Investigated. He remembered hearing something about

Jules when the up top got its new sheriff. Her

qualifications had been a source of debate and tension,

a wind of whispers. Especialy around IT. But there had

been chatter that she'd helped out on a case a long time

ago, that this was why she'd been chosen.

This was the case. Was she in love with

him before he

died? Or did she fal for the memory of the man after?

He decided it had to be the former. Lukas searched the

desk for a charcoal, found one, and jotted down the

man’s ID and case number. Here was something to

occupy his time, some way of getting to know her

better. It would distract him, at least, until she finaly got

around to caling him back. He relaxed, puled the

keyboard into his lap, and started digging.

22

• **Silo 17** •

Juliette shivered from the cold as she helped Solo to his

feet. He wobbled and steadied himself, both hands on

the railing.

“Do you think you can walk?” she asked.

She kept an

eye on the empty stairs spiraling down toward them,

wary of whoever else was out there, whoever had

attacked him and nearly gotten her kiled.

“I think so,” he said. He dabbed at his forehead with

his palm, studied the smear of blood he came away

with. “Don’t know how far.”

She guided him toward the stairs, the

smel of melted

rubber and gasoline stinging her nose. The black

undersuit was stil damp against her skin; her breath

bilowed out before her; and whenever she stopped

talking, her teeth chattered uncontrolably. She bent to

retrieve her knife while Solo clutched the curved outer

railing. Looking up, she considered the task before

them. A straight run to IT seemed impossible. Her lungs

were exhausted from the swim, her muscles cramped

from the shivering and cold. And Solo looked even

worse. His mouth was slack, his eyes drifting to and fro.

He seemed barely cognizant of where he was.

“Can you make it to the deputy station?” she asked.

Juliette had spent nights there on supply

runs. The

holding cel made for an oddly comfortable place to

sleep. The keys were stil in the box—maybe they could

rest easy if they locked themselves inside and kept the

key with them.

“That’s how many levels?” Solo asked.

He didn’t know the down deep of his own silo as wel

as Jules. He rarely risked venturing so

far.

“A dozen or so. Can you make it?”

He lifted his boot to the first step, leaned into it. “I can

try.”

They set off with only a knife between them, which

Juliette was lucky to have at al. How it had survived

her dark pul through Mechanical was a mystery. She

held it tightly, the handle cold, her hand

colder. The

simple cooking utensil had become her security totem,

had replaced her watch as a necessary thing she must

always have with her. As they made their way up the

stairs, its handle clinked against the inner railing each

time she reached over to steady herself. She kept her

other arm around Solo, who struggled up each step

with grunts and groans.

“How many of them do you think there are?” she

asked, watching his footing and then glancing nervously

up the stairway.

Solo grunted. “Shouldn’t be any.” He wobbled a little,

but Juliette steadied him. “Al dead. Everyone.”

They stopped to rest at the next landing. “*You* made it,”

she pointed out. “Al these years, and you survived.”

He frowned, wiped his beard with the back of his hand.

He was breathing hard. “But I’m Solo,” he said. He

shook his head sadly. “They were al gone. Al of

them.”

Juliette peered up the shaft, up the gap between the

stairs and the concrete. The dim green straw of the

stairwel rose into a tight darkness. She pinned her teeth

together to keep them from chattering while she listened

for a sound, for any sign of life. Solo staggered ahead

for the next flight of stairs. Juliette hurried beside him.

“How wel did you see him? What do you remember?”

“I remember— I remember thinking he was just like

me.”

Juliette thought she heard him sob, but maybe it was the

exertion from tackling more of the steps. She looked

back at the door they were passing, the interior dark,

no power being leached from IT. Were they passing

Solo’s assailant? Were they leaving some living ghost

behind?

She powerfuly hoped so. They had so much further to

go, even to the deputy station, much less to anyplace

she might cal home.

They trudged in silence for a level and a half, Juliette

shivering and Solo grunting and wincing. She rubbed

her arms now and then, could feel the sweat from the

climb and from helping to steady Solo. It was nearly

enough to warm her but for the damp undersuit, and she

was so hungry by the time they cleared three levels that

she thought her body was going to simply give out. It

needed fuel, something to burn and keep itself warm.

“One more level and I’m going to need to stop,” she

told Solo. He grumbled his agreement. It felt good to

have the reward of a rest to climb toward—the steps

went easier knowing they were

countable, finite. At the

landing of one-thirty-two, Solo used the railing to lower

himself to the ground, hand over hand like the bars of a

ladder. When his butt hit the decking, he laid out supine

and folded his hands over his face.

Juliette hoped it was nothing more than a concussion.

She’d seen her fair share of them working around men

who were too tough to wear helmets—but not so tough

when a tool or a steel beam caught them on the head.

There was nothing for Solo but to rest.

The problem with resting was that it made her colder.

Juliette stomped her feet to keep the blood circulating.

The slight sweat she'd worked up from the hike was

working against her. She could feel a draft cycling

through the stairwel, cold air from below passing over

the chiled waters like a natural air conditioning unit. Her

shoulders shook, the knife vibrating in her hand until her

reflection became a silvery blur. Moving was difficult—

staying in one place would kil her. And she stil didn’t

know where this attacker was, could only hope he was

below them.

“We should get going,” she told Solo. She looked to

the doors beyond him, the windows dark. What would

she do if someone burst out at that very moment and

attacked them? What kind of fight could she hope to

put up?

Solo lifted his arm and waved it at her. “Go,” he said.

“I’l stay.”

“No, you’re coming with me.” She rubbed her hands

together, blew on them, summoned the strength to

continue. She went to Solo and tried to grab his hand,

but he withdrew it.

“More rest,” he said. “I’l catch up.”

“I’l be damned if I’m—” Her teeth clacked

uncontrolably. She shivered and turned the involuntary

spasm into an excuse to shake her arms, waggling them

and forcing the blood to her extremities. “—damned if

I’m leaving you alone,” she finished.

“So thirsty,” he told her.

Despite seeing quite enough water for a lifetime, Juliette

was as wel. She glanced up. “One more level and

we’re at the lower farms. C’mon. That’l be far enough

for today. Food and water, find me something dry.

C’mon Solo, up. I don’t care if it takes us a week to

get home, we aren’t giving up right here.”

She grabbed his wrist. This time he didn’t pul away.

The next flight took forever to climb. Solo stopped

several times to lean on the railing and gaze senselessly

at the next step. There was fresh blood

trickling down

his neck. Juliette stomped her frozen feet some more

and cursed to herself. This was al stupid. She'd been

so damned stupid.

A few steps from the next landing, she left Solo behind

and went to check the doors to the farms. The jury-

rigged power cables descending from IT and snaking

their way inside were a legacy from decades ago, a time

when the survivors, like Solo, were cobbling together

what they could to stave off their demise. Juliette

peeked inside and saw that the grow lights were off.

“Solo? I’m gonna go hit the timers. You rest here.”

He didn’t answer. Juliette held the door open and tried

to slot her knife into the metal grating by

her feet,

leaving the handle to prop it open. Her arm shook so

violently, it took her considerable effort just to aim it

into a gap. Her undersuit, she noticed, smeled like

burning rubber, like the smoke from the fire.

“Here,” Solo said. He held the door open and slumped

down against it, pinning it to the railing.

Juliette clutched the knife against her chest. “Thanks.”

He nodded and waved his hand. His eyes drooped

shut. “Water,” he said, licking his lips.

She patted his shoulder. “I’l be right back.”

••••

The farm’s entrance hal gobbled up the emergency

lights from the stairway, the dim green quickly fading to

pitch black. A circulating pump whirred in the distance,

the same noise that had greeted her in the upper farms

so many weeks ago. But now she knew what the sound

was, knew there would be water available. Water and

food, perhaps a change of clothes. She just needed to

get the lights on so she could see. She cursed herself for

not bringing a spare flashlight, for the

loss of her pack

and their gear.

The darkness accepted her as she climbed over the

security gate. She knew her way. These farms had been

nourishing Solo and her for weeks while they worked

on the pathetic hydroponics pump and al that plumbing.

Juliette thought of the new pump she'd wired; the

mechanic in her was curious about the connection,

wondered whether the thing would work, if she

should've thrown the switch on the landing before they

left. It was a crazy thought, but even if she didn't live to

see it, some part of her wanted that silo dry, that flood

removed. Her ordeal in its depths already seemed so

oddly distant, like something she had

seen in a dream

but hadn’t realy gone through, and yet she wanted it to

h a v e *mattered* for something. She wanted Solo’s

wounds to have mattered for something.

Her undersuit swished noisily while she walked, her legs

rubbing together, her damp feet squeaking as she lifted

them from the floor. She kept one hand on the wal, her

knife comforting her in the other. Already, she could

feel the residual warmth in the air from the last burn of

the grow lights. She was thankful to be out of that frigid

stairwel. In fact, she felt *better*. Her eyes began to

adjust to the darkness. She would get some food, some

water, find them a safe place to sleep. Tomorrow, they

would aim for the mids deputy station.

They could arm

themselves, gather their strength. Solo would be

stronger by then. She would need him to be.

At the end of the hal, Juliette groped for the doorway

to the control room. Her hand habitualy went to the

switch inside, but it was already up. It hadn’t worked in

over three decades.

She fumbled blindly through the room, arms out in front

of her, expecting to hit the wal long before she did. The

tip of the knife scraped one of the control boxes.

Juliette reached up to find the wire hanging from the

ceiling, tacked up by someone long ago. She traced the

wire to the timer it had been rigged to, felt for the

programmable knob and slowly turned it

until it clicked.

A series of loud pops from the relays outside rattled

down the growing hals. A dim glow appeared. It would

take a few minutes for them to warm al the way up.

Juliette left the control room and headed down one of

the overgrown walkways railed off between the long

plots of dirt. The nearest plots were picked clean. She

pushed through the greenery, plants from either side of

the hal shaking hands in the middle, and made her way

to the circulation pump.

Water for Solo, warmth for herself. She repeated this

mantra, begging the lights to heat up faster. The air

around her remained dim and hazy like the view of an

outside morning beneath the heavy clouds.

She made her way through the pea plants, long

neglected. Popping a few pods off their vines, she gave

her stomach something to do besides ache. The pump

whirred louder as it worked to push water through the

drip pipes. Juliette chewed a pea, swalowed, slipped

through the railing and made her way to the smal

clearing around the pump.

The soil beneath the pump was dark and packed flat

from weeks of her and Solo drinking there and refiling

their containers. A few cups were scattered on the

ground. Juliette knelt beside the pump and chose a tal

glass. The lights above her were slowly brightening. She

already imagined she could feel their warmth.

With a bit of effort, she managed to

loosen the drain

plug at the bottom of the pump a few turns. The water

was under pressure and jetted out in a fine spray. She

held the cup tightly against the pump to minimize the

spilage. The cup hissed as it was filed.

She drank out of one cup while filing another, some

loose dirt crunching between her teeth.

Once both were ful, she screwed them

into the wet dirt

so they wouldn't tip over, and then twisted the plug until

the spray stopped. Juliette tucked the knife under her

arm and grabbed the two cups. She went to the railing,

passed everything through, then threw her leg over the

lowermost bar and scrambled out.

Now she needed warmth. She left the cups where they

were and grabbed the knife. There were offices around

the corner, a dining room. She remembered her first

outfit in silo 17: a tablecloth with a slit in the middle. She

laughed to herself as she turned the corner, feeling like

she was regressing, like her weeks of working to make

things better were taking her back to where she'd

started.

The long halway between the two grow stations was

dark. A handful of wires hung from the pipes overhead,

drooping between the spots where they'd been hastily

attached. They marched in these upside-down leaps

toward the hum and glow of the growing plots in the

distance.

Juliette checked the offices and found nothing for

warmth. No coverals, no curtains. She moved toward

the dining hal, was turning to enter, when she thought

she heard something beyond the next plot of plants. A

click. A crackle. More relays for the lights? Stuck,

perhaps?

She peered down the hal and into the grow station

beyond. The lights were brighter there, warming up.

Maybe they had come on sooner. She crept down the

halway toward them, drawn like a shivering fly to a

flame, her arms bursting with goosebumps at the

thought of drying out, of getting truly warm.

At the edge of the station, she heard something else. A

squeal, maybe metal on metal, possibly another

circulation pump trying to kick over. She

and Solo

hadn’t checked the other pumps on this level. There

was more than two people could eat or drink in the first

patches.

Juliette froze and turned around to look behind herself.

Where would she set up camp if she were trying to

survive in this place? In IT, for the power? Or here, for

the food and water. She imagined another man like

Solo squeezing through the cracks in the violence, laying

low and surviving the long years. Maybe he'd heard the

air compressor earlier, had come down to investigate,

got scared, hit Solo over the head and ran. Maybe he

grabbed their gear bag just because it was there, or

maybe it had been knocked under the

railing by

accident and had sunk to the pits of Mechanical.

She held the knife out in front of herself and slid down

the halway between the burgeoning plants. The wal of

green before her parted with a rustle as she pushed

through. Things were more overgrown here.

Unwelcoming. Not picked over. This filed her with a

mix of emotions. She was probably wrong, was

probably hearing things again just as she had for weeks,

but part of her *wanted* to be right. She wanted to *find*

this man who was like Solo. She wanted to make

contact. Better that than living in fear of someone in

every shadow, behind every corner.

But what if there was more than one of them? Could a

group of people have survived this long? How many

could there be and go undetected? The silo was a

massive place, but she and Solo had spent *weeks* in the

down deep, had been in and out of these farms several

times. Two people, an old couple, no more. Solo had

said they were his age. They would have to be.

These calculations and more ran through

her mind,

convincing her that she had nothing to be afraid of. She

was shivering, but her adrenaline was pumping. She

was armed. The leaves of wild and unkempt plants

brushed against her face; Juliette pushed through this

dense outer barrier and knew she'd found something on

the other side.

The farms here were different. Groomed. Tamed.

Recently guided by the hand of man. Juliette felt a wash

of fear and relief, those two opposites twisting together

like staircase and rail. She didn’t want to be alone,

didn’t want this silo to be so desolate and empty, but

she didn’t want to be attacked. The first part of her felt

an urge to cal out, to tel whoever was in

there that she

meant no harm. The second part tightened its grip on

the knife, clenched chattering teeth together, and

begged her to turn and run.

At the end of the groomed grow station, the halway

took a dark turn. She peered around the corner into

more unexplored territory. A long patch of darkness

wrapped toward the other side of the silo, a distant

glow of light emanating from what was probably yet

another crop station sucking juice from IT.

Someone was here. She knew it. She could feel the

same eyes she'd felt for weeks, could sense the

whispers on her skin, but this time she wasn't imagining

it; she didn't have to fight the awareness

or think she

was going crazy. With her knife at the ready and the

welcomed thought that she was between this someone

and defenseless Solo, she moved slowly but bravely

into the dark hal, passing open offices and tasting

rooms to either side, one hand on the wal to guide and

steady herself—

Juliette stopped. Something wasn't right. Had she heard

something? A person crying? She backed up to the

previous door, could barely see it in front of herself, and

realized it was closed. The only one she could see along

the hal that was closed.

She stepped away from the door and knelt down.

There had been a noise inside. She was sure of it.

Almost like a faint wail. Looking up, she saw in the wan

light that some of the overhead wires diverted

perpendicular to the rest and snaked through the wal

above the door.

Juliette moved closer. She crouched down and put her

ear to the door. Nothing. She reached up and tried the

knob, felt that it was locked. How could it be locked,

unless—?

The door flew open—her hand stil on the knob—it

yanked her into the darkened room. There was a flash

of light, and then a man over her, swinging something at

her head.

Juliette fel onto her ass. A silver blur moved past her

face, the crunch of a heavy wrench slamming into her

shoulder, knocking her flat.

There was a high pitched scream from the back of the

room. It drowned out Juliette's cry of pain. She swung

the knife out in front of her, felt it hit the man's leg. The

wrench clattered to the ground, more screams, people

shouting. Juliette kicked away from the door and stood,

clutching her shoulder. She was ready for the man to

pounce, but her attacker was backing away, limping on

one foot, a boy no more than fourteen, maybe fifteen.

“Stay where you are!” Juliette aimed the knife at him.

The boy’s eyes were wide with fear. A group of kids

huddled against the back wal on a scattering of

mattresses and blankets. They clung to one another,

their wide eyes aimed at Juliette.

The confusion was overwhelming. She was seized by

the sensation of wrongness. Where were the others?

The adults? She could feel people with bad intentions

sliding down the dark halway behind her, ready to

pounce. Here were their kids, locked away for safety.

Soon, the mother rats would be back to punish her for

disturbing their nest.

“Where are the others?” she asked, her hand trembling

from the cold, the confusion, the fear. She scanned the

room and saw that the boy standing, the one who had

attacked her, was the oldest. A girl in her teens sat

frozen on the tangle of blankets, two young boys and a

young girl clinging to her.

The eldest boy glanced down at his leg. A stain of

blood was spreading across his green coverals.

“How many are there?” She took a step closer. These

kids were obviously more afraid of her than she was of

them.

“Leave us alone!” the older girl screamed. She clutched

something to her chest. The young girl beside her

pressed her face into the older girl’s lap, trying to

disappear, to not be seen by not seeing. The two young

boys glared like cornered dogs, but didn’t move.

“How did you get here?” she asked them. She aimed

the knife at the tal boy, but started to feel sily for

wielding it. He looked at her in confusion, not

comprehending the question, and Juliette knew. Of

course. How would there be decades of

fighting in this

silo without that second human passion?

“You were born down here, weren’t you?”

Nobody answered. The boy’s face screwed up in

confusion, as if the question were mad. She peeked

back over her shoulder.

“Where are your parents? When wil they be back?

How long?”

“Never!” the girl screeched, her head straining forward

from the effort. “They’re dead!”

Her mouth remained open, her chin trembling. The

tendons stood out on her young neck.

The older boy turned and glared at the girl, seemed to

want her to remain quiet. Juliette was stil trying to

comprehend that these were mere kids. She knew they

couldn’t be alone. Someone had attacked Solo.

As if to answer, her eyes were drawn to the wrench on

the decking. It was Solo’s wrench. The rust stains were

distinctive. How was that possible? Solo had said—

And Juliette remembered what he’d said. She realized

these kids, this young man, was the s *ame age that he*

still saw himself. The same age he’d

been when he'd

been left alone. Had the last survivors of the down deep

perished in recent years, but not before leaving

something *behind*?

"What's your name?" Juliette asked the boy. She

lowered her knife and showed him her other palm. "My

name's Juliette," she said. She wanted to add that she

came from another silo, a saner world, but didn't want

to confuse or freak them out.

"Rickson," the boy snarled. He puffed out his chest.

"My father was Rick the Plumber."

"Rick the Plumber." Juliette nodded. She saw along

one wal, at the end of a tal dune of supplies and

scavenges, the gear bag they'd stolen. Her change of

clothes spiled out the gaping mouth of the bag. Her

towel would be in there. She slid toward the bag, an

eye on the kids huddled together on the makeshift bed,

the group nest, wary of the older boy.

“Wel, Rickson, I want you to gather your things.”

Kneeling by her bag, she dug inside and searched for

the towel. She found it, puled it out and rubbed it over

her damp hair, an indescribable luxury. There was no

way she was leaving them here, these kids. She turned

to face the other children, the towel draped across the

back of her neck, their eyes al locked on hers.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Get your things together.

You’re not going to live like this—”

“Just leave us,” the older girl said. The two boys had

moved off the bed, though, and were going through

piles of things. They looked to the girl, then to Juliette.

Unsure.

“Go back to where you’re from,” Rickson said. The

two eldest children seemed to be gaining strength from

each other. “Take your noisy machines and go.”

That’s what this was about. Juliette remembered the

sight of the compressor on its side, more heavily

attacked maybe than Solo had been. She nodded to the

two boys, had their ages pegged for ten or eleven. “Go

on,” she told them. “You’re gonna help me and my

friend get home. We have good food there. Real

electricity. Hot water. Get your things __”

The youngest girl cried out at this, a

horrible peal, the

same cry Juliette had heard from the dark halway.

Rickson paced back and forth, eyeing her and the

wrench on the floor. Juliette slid away from him and

toward the bed to comfort the young girl, when she

realized it wasn’t her squealing.

Something moved in the older girl’s arms.

Juliette froze at the edge of the bed.

“No,” she whispered.

Rickson took a step toward her.

“Stay!” She aimed the point of the knife at him. He

glanced down at the wound on his leg, thought better of

it. The two boys froze in the act of stuffing their bags.

Nothing in the room moved save the baby squealing

and fidgeting in the girl’s arms.

“Is that a child?”

The girl turned her shoulders. It was a motherly gesture,

but the girl couldn’t be more than fifteen. Juliette didn’t

know that was possible. She wondered if that was why

the implants went in so early. Her hand slid toward her

hip almost as if to touch the place, to rub the bump

beneath her skin.

“Just go,” the teenager whimpered. “We’ve been fine

without you.”

Juliette put down the knife. It felt strange to relinquish it

but more wrong to have it in her hand as she

approached the bed. “I can help you,” she said. She

turned and made sure the boy heard her. “I used to

work in a place that cared for newborns. Let me—”

She reached out her hands. The girl turned more

toward the wal, shielding the child from her.

“Okay.” Juliette held up her hands, showed her palms.

“But you’re not going to live like this anymore.” She

nodded to the young boys, turned to Rickson, who

hadn’t moved. “None of you are. This isn’t how anyone

should have to live their days, not even

their last ones.”

She nodded to herself, her mind made up. “Rickson?

Get your things together. Only the necessities. We’l

come back for anything else.” She dipped her chin at

the younger boys, saw how their coverals had been

chopped at the knees, their legs covered in grime from

the farms. They took it as permission to return to

packing. These two seemed eager to have someone

else in charge, maybe anybody other than their brother,

if that's what he was.

"Tel me your name." Juliette sat down on the bed with

the two girls while the others rummaged through their

things. She fought to remain calm, to not succumb to the

nausea of kids having kids.

The baby let out a hungry cry.

“I’m here to help you,” Juliette told the girl. “Can I see?

Is it a girl or a boy?”

The young mother relaxed her arms. A blanket was

folded away, revealing the squinting eyes and pursed

red lips of a baby no more than a few months old. A

tiny arm waved at its mother.

“Girl,” she said softly.

The younger girl clinging to her side peeked around the

mother's ribs at Juliette.

"Have you given her a name?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

Rickson said something behind her to the two boys,

trying to get them not to fight over something—

"My name's Elise," the younger girl said, her head

emerging from behind the other girl's

side. Elise pointed

at her mouth. “I have a loose tooth.”

Juliette laughed. “I can help you with that if you like.”

She took a chance and reached out to squeeze the

young girl’s arm. Flashes of her childhood in her

father’s nursery flooded back, the memories of worried

parents, of precious children, of al the hopes and

dreams created and dashed around that lottery.

Juliette's thoughts swerved to her brother, the one who

was not meant to be, and she felt the tears wel up in

her eyes. What had these kids been through? Solo at

least had normal experiences from before. He knew

what it meant to live in a world where one could be

safe. What had these five kids, six,

grown up in? Seen?

She felt such intense pity that there was this sick,

wrong, sad desire for none of them to have ever been

born—

This was just as soon washed over with a wave of guilt

for even considering it.

“We’re going to get you out of here,” she told the two

girls. “Gather your things.”

One of the young boys came over and dropped her bag

nearby. He was putting things back into it, apologizing

to her, when Juliette heard another strange squeak.

What now?

She dabbed her mouth on the towel, watching as the

girls reluctantly did an adult's bidding, finding their

things and eyeing one another to make sure this was

okay. Juliette heard a rustling in her gear bag. She used

the handle to separate the zippered mouth, wary of

what could be living in the rat's nest these kids had

created, when she heard a tiny voice.

Calling her name.

She dropped the towel and clawed through the bag,

past tools and bottles of water, under her spare

coverals and loose socks, until she found the radio. She

wondered how Solo could possibly be caling her. The

other set had been ruined in her suit—

“—*please say something,”* the radio hissed.

“Juliette, are you there? It’s Walker. Please, for

God’s sake, answer me—”

23

“What happened? Why aren’t they responding?”

Courtnee looked from Walker to Shirly, as if either of

them could know.

“Is it broken?” Shirly picked up the smal dial with the

painted marks and tried to tel if it had accidentaly

moved. “Walk, did we break it?”

“No, it’s stil on,” he said. He held the headphones up

by his cheek, his eyes drifting over the various

components.

“Guys, I don’t know how much longer we have.”

Courtnee was watching the scene in the generator room

through the observation window. Shirly stood up and

peered out over the control panel toward the main

entrance. Jenks and some of his men were inside, rifles

pinned against their shoulders, yeling at the others. The

soundproofing made it impossible to hear what was

going on.

“*Hello?*”

A voice crackled from Walker’s hands. The words

seemed to tumble through his fingers.

“Who’s there?” he caled, flicking the switch. “Who is

this?”

Shirly rushed to Walker's side. She wrapped her hands

around his arm, disbelieving. "Juliette!" she screamed.

Walker held up his hand, tried to quiet her and

Courtnee both. His hands were trembling as he fumbled

with the detonator and finaly clicked the red switch.

"Jules?" His old voice cracked. Shirly squeezed his

arm. "Is that you?"

There was a pause, and then a cry from the speakers, a

sob. “Walk? Walk, is that you? What’s going on?

Where are you? I thought—”

“Where is she?” Shirly whispered.

Courtnee watched them both, her cheeks in her palms,

mouth open.

Walker hit the switch. “Jules, where are you?”

A deep sigh hissed through the tiny

speakers. Her voice

was tiny and far away. “Walk, I’m in *another silo*.

There’s more of them. You wouldn’t believe—”

Her voice drifted off to static. Shirly leaned against

Walker while Courtnee paced in front of them, looking

from the radio to the window.

“We know about the others,” Walker said, holding the

mic below his beard. “We can hear them, Jules. *All* of

them.”

He let go of the switch. Juliette’s voice returned.

“How are you—? Mechanical— I heard about the

fighting. Are you in the middle of that?” Before she

signed off, Juliette said something to someone else, her

voice barely audible.

Walker raised his eyebrows at the mention of the

fighting.

“How would she have heard?” Shirly asked.

“I wish she were here,” Courtnee said. “Jules would

know what to do.”

“Tel her about the exhaust. About the plan.” Shirly

waved for the microphone. “Here, let me.”

Walker nodded. He handed Shirly the headset and the

detonator.

Shirly worked the switch. It was stiffer than she thought

it'd be. "Jules? Can you hear me? It's Shirly."

"Shirly—" Juliette's voice wavered. "Hey you. You

hanging in there?"

The emotion in her friend's voice brought tears to

Shirly's eyes. "Yeah—" She bobbed her head and

swalowed. "Hey, listen, some of the others are routing

the exhaust feed to IT's cooling vents. But remember

that time we lost back pressure? I'm worried the motor

might—"

"No." Juliette cut her off. "You have to stop them.

Shirly, can you hear me? You have to stop them. It

won’t do anything. The cooling is for the *servers*. The

only people up there who—” She cleared her throat.

“Listen to me. Make them stop—”

Shirly fumbled with the red switch. Walker reached

over as if to help, but she finaly got the device under

control. “Wait,” she transmitted. “How do you know

where the vents lead—?”

“I just do. This place is laid out the same. Goddammit,

let me talk to them. You can’t let them __”

Shirly hit the switch again. There was a blast of sound

from the generator room as Courtnee threw open the

door and ran outside. “Courtnee’s going,” she said.

“She’s going right now. Jules— How did you—? Who

are you with? Can they help us? It’s not

looking good

over here.”

They tiny speakers crackled again. Shirly could hear

Juliette take a deep breath, could hear other voices in

the background, heard her give commands or orders to

some other person. Shirly thought her friend sounded

exhausted. Weary. Sad.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Juliette said.

“There’s no

one here. One man. Some kids. Everyone’s gone. The

people who lived here, they couldn’t even help

themselves.” The line went silent, and then she clicked

through again. “You have to stop the fighting,” she said.

“Whatever it takes. Please— Don’t let it be because of

me. Please stop—”

The door opened again, Courtnee returning. Shirly

heard shouts in the generator room. Gunfire.

“What is that?” Juliette asked. “Where are you guys?”

“In the control room.” Shirly looked up at Courtnee,

whose eyes were wide with fear. “Jules, I don’t think

we have much time. I—” There was so much she

wanted to say. She wanted to tel her

about Marck.

She needed more time. “They’re coming for us,” was al

she could think to relate. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

The radio crackled. “Oh God, make them stop. No

more fighting! Shirly, listen to me—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shirly said, holding the button and

wiping at her cheeks. “They won’t stop.” The gunfire

was getting closer, the pops audible through the thick

door. Her people were dying while she cowered in the

control room, talking to a ghost. Her people were

dying.

“You take care of yourself,” Shirly said.

“Wait!”

Shirly handed the headset to Walker. She joined

Courtnee by the window and watched

the crush of

people cower on the other side of the generator, the

flash and shudder of barrels leaning against the railing,

someone in Mechanical blue lying stil on the ground.

More faded pops. More distant and muted rattles.

“Jules!” Walker fumbled with the radio. He shouted her

name, was stil trying to talk to her.

“Let me talk to them!” Juliette yeled, her voice

impossibly far away. “Walk, why can I hear you and

not them? I need to talk to the deputies, to Peter and

Hank. Walk, how did you cal me? I need to talk to

them!”

Walker blubbered about soldering irons, about his

magnifiers. The old man was crying, cradling his boards

and wires and electrics as if they were a broken child,

whispering to them and rocking back and forth,

saltwater dripping dangerously onto this thing he'd built.

He babbled to Juliette while more men in blue fel, arms

draped over railings, inadequate rifles dropping

noiselessly to the ground. The men they had lived in

terror of for a month were inside. It was

over. Shirly

groped for Courtnee, their arms entangling, while they

watched, helpless. Behind them, the sobs and mad

ravings of Old Walk mixed with the jitter of deadened

gunfire, a popping noise like the grumble of a machine

losing its balance, sliding out of control —

24

• Silo 18 •

Lukas teetered on the upturned trashcan, the toes of

his boots denting the soft plastic, feeling as if it could go

flying out from under him or colapse under his weight at

any moment. He steadied himself by holding the top of

server twelve, the thick layer of dust up there teling him

it had been years since anyone had been in there with a

ladder and a rag. He pressed his nose up to the AC

vent and took another whiff.

The nearby door beeped, the locks clanking as they

withdrew into the jamb. With a soft squeal, the massive

hinges budged and the heavy door swung inward.

Lukas nearly lost his grip on the dusty server top as

Bernard pushed his way inside. The head of IT looked

up at him quizzicaly.

“You’l never fit,” Bernard said. He laughed as he

turned to push the door shut. The locking pins clunked,

the panel beeped, and a red light resumed its watch

over the room.

Lukas pushed away from the dusty server and leapt

from the trashcan, the plastic bucket flipping over and

scooting across the floor. He wiped his hands together,

brushed them on the seat of his pants, and forced a

laugh.

“I thought I smeled something,” he explained. “Does it

look smoky in here to you?”

Bernard squinted at the air. “It always seems hazy in

here to me. And I don’t smel anything. Just hot

servers.” He reached into his breast pocket and brought

out a few folded pieces of paper. “Here. Letters from

your mother. I told her to porter them to me and I’d

pass them along.”

Lukas smiled, embarrassed, and accepted them. “I stil

think you should ask about—” He glanced up at the

AC vent and realized there was no one in Mechanical

to ask. The last that he'd heard from the radio below

was that Sims and the others were mopping up. Dozens

were dead. Three to four times that many were in

custody. Apartment wings were being prepped in the

mids to hold them al. It sounded like there would be

enough people to clean for years.

"I'l have one of the replacement mechanics look into

it," Bernard promised. "Which reminds me, I'd like to

go over some of that with you. There's going to be a

massive shift from green to blue as we push farmers into

Mechanical. I was wondering what you'd think of

Sammi heading up the entire division down there."

Lukas nodded as he skimmed one of the letters from his

mother. "Sammi as head of Mechanical?

I think he's

overqualified but perfect. I've learned a lot from him."

He glanced up as Bernard opened the filing cabinet by

the door and flipped through work orders. "He's a

great teacher, but would it be permanent?"

"Nothing's permanent." Bernard found what he was

looking for and tucked it into his breast pocket. "You

need anything else?” He pressed his glasses up his nose.

Lukas thought he looked older from the past month.

Older and worn down. “Dinner’l be sent over in a few

hours—”

Lukas did have something he wanted. He wanted to say

that he was ready, that he had sufficiently absorbed the

horror of his future job, had learned what he needed

without going insane. Now could he please go home?

But that wasn't the way out of there. Lukas had sorted

this out for himself.

"Wel," he said. "I wouldn't mind some more reading

material—"

The things he had discovered in server 18 burned in his

brain. He feared Bernard would be able to read them

there. Lukas thought he knew, but he needed to ask for

that folder in order to be sure.

Bernard smiled. “Don’t you have enough to read?”

Lukas fanned the letters from his mother. “These?

They’l keep me busy for the walk to the *ladder*—”

“I meant what you have below. The Order. Your

studies.” Bernard tilted his head.

Lukas let out a sigh. “Yeah, I do, but I can't be

expected to read that twelve hours a day. I’m talking

about something less dense.” He shook his head. “Hey,

forget it. If you can't—”

Bernard waved his hand. “What do you need? I'm just

giving you a hard time.” He leaned against the filing

cabinet and interlocked his fingers across his bely. He

peered at Lukas through the bottoms of his glasses.

“Wel, this might sound weird, but it's this case. An *old*

case. The server says it's filed away in your office with

al the closed investigations—”

“ A n *investigation*?” Bernard’s voice rose quizzicaly.

Lukas nodded. “Yeah. A friend of a friend thing. I'm

just curious how it was resolved. There aren't any digital

copies on the serv—”

“This isn't about Holston is it?”

“*Who*? Oh, the old Sheriff? No, no. Why?”

Bernard waved his hand to dismiss the thought.

“The file is under Wilkins,” Lukas said, watching

Bernard closely. “George Wilkins.”

Bernard's face hardened. His mustache dropped down

over his lips like a lowered curtain.

Lukas cleared his throat. What he'd seen on Bernard's

face was nearly enough. "George died a few years ago

down in Mech—" he started to say.

"I know how he died." Bernard dipped his chin. "Why

would you want to see that file?"

"Just curious. I have a friend who—"

"What's this friend's name?" Bernard's smal hands slid

off his bely and were tucked into his

coverals. He

moved away from the filing cabinet and took a step

closer.

“What?”

“This friend, was he involved with George in any way?

How close of a friend was he?”

“No. Not that I know of. Look, if it's a big deal, don’t

worry about—” Lukas wanted to simply ask, to ask

why he'd done it. But Bernard seemed intent on teling

him with no prompting at al.

"It's a very big deal," Bernard said. "George Wilkins

was a dangerous man. A man of *ideas*. The kind we

catch in whispers, the kind who poisons the people

around him—"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Section thirteen of the Order. Study it.

Al

insurrections would start *right there* if we let them, start

with men like him.”

Bernard’s chin had lowered to his chest, his eyes

peering over the rims of his glasses, the truth coming

freely without al the deceit Lukas had planned.

Lukas never needed that folder; he had found the travel

logs that coincided with George’s death, the dozens of

wires asking Holston to wrap things up. But now he

saw he never even needed to *ask* for the folder at al.

There was no shame in Bernard. George Wilkins hadn't

died; he'd been murdered. And Bernard was wiling to

tel him why.

“What did he do?” Lukas asked quietly.

“I’l tel you what he did. He was a mechanic, a

greaser. We started hearing chatter from the porters

about these plans circulating, ideas for expanding the

mine, doing a lateral dig. As you know, lateral digs are

forbidden—”

“Yeah, obviously.” Lukas had a mental image of miners

from silo 18 pushing through and meeting miners from

silo 19. It would be awkward, to say the least.

“A long chat with the old head of Mechanical put an

end to that nonsense, and then George Wilkins came up

with the idea of expanding *downward*. He and some

others drew up schematics for a level one-fifty. And

then a level one-sixty.”

“*Twelve* more levels?”

“To begin with. That was the talk, anyway. Just

whispers and sketches. But some of these whispers

landed in a porter's ear, and then *ours* perked up.”

“So you kiled him?”

“Someone did, yes. It doesn't matter who.” Bernard

adjusted his glasses with one hand. The other stayed in

the bely of his coverals. “You'l have to do these things

one day, son. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts." Bernard shook his head slowly. "Some men

are like a virus. Unless you want to see a plague break

out, you inoculate the silo against them. You remove

them."

Lukas remained silent.

"We've removed fourteen threats this

year, Lukas. Do

you have any idea what the average life expectancy

would be if we weren't proactive about these things?”

“But the cleanings—”

“Useful for dealing with the people who want *out*. Who

dream of a better world. This uprising we’re having

right now is ful of people like that, but it’s just one sort

of sickness we deal with. The cleaning is one sort of

cure. I'm not sure if someone with a different ilness

would even clean if we sent them out there. They have

to want to *see* what we show them for it to work."

This reminded Lukas of what he'd learned of the

helmets, the visors. He had assumed this was the only

kind of sickness there was. He was

beginning to wish

he'd read more of the Order and less of the Legacy.

“You’ve heard this latest outbreak on the radio. Al of

this could have been prevented if we’d caught the

sickness earlier. Tel me that wouldn’t have been

better.”

Lukas looked down at his boots. The trashcan lay

nearby, on its side. It looked sad like that. No longer

useful for holding things.

“Ideas are contagious, Lukas. This is basic Order

material. You know this stuff.”

He nodded. He thought of Juliette, wondered why she

hadn’t caled in forever. She was one of these viruses

Bernard was talking about, her words creeping in his

mind and infecting him with outlandish dreams. He felt

his entire body flush with heat as he realized he'd caught

some of it too. He wanted to touch his breast pocket,

feel the lumps of her personal effects there, the watch,

the ring, the ID. He had taken them to remember her in

death, but they had become even more precious

knowing that she was stil alive.

“This uprising hasn’t been nearly as bad as the last

one,” Bernard told him. “And even after *that* one,

things were eventualy smoothed over, the damage

welded back together, the people made to forget. The

same thing wil happen here. Are we clear?”

“Yessir.”

“Excelent. Now, was that al you wished to know from

this folder?”

Lukas nodded.

“Good. It sounds like you need to be reading

something else, anyway.” His mustache twitched with

half a smile. Bernard turned to go.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

Bernard stopped, but didn't turn to face him.

“That kiled George Wilkins. It was you, right?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah. It matters to— To me— It means __”

“Or to your *friend*?” Bernard turned to face him.

Lukas felt the temperature in the room go up yet

another notch.

“Are you having second thoughts, Son? About this

job? Was I wrong about you? Because I’ve been

wrong before.”

Lukas swalowed. “I just want to know if it’s something

I’d ever have to— I mean, since I’m shadowing for—”

Bernard took a few steps toward him. Lukas felt

himself back up half a step in response.

“I didn't think I was wrong about you. But I was,

wasn't I?” Bernard shook his head. He looked

disgusted. “Goddammit,” he spat.

“Nossir. You weren’t. I think I've just been in here too

long.” Lukas brushed his hair off his forehead. His scalp

was itchy. He needed to use the bathroom. “Maybe I

just need some air, you know? Go home for a while?

Sleep in my bed. What's it been, a month? How long

do I need—?”

“You want out of here?”

Lukas nodded.

Bernard peered down at his boots and seemed to

consider this a while. When he looked up, there was

sadness in his eyes, in the droop of his mustache, across

the wet film of his eyes.

“Is that what you want? To get out of here?”

He adjusted his hands inside his

coverals.

“Yessir.” Lukas nodded.

“Say it.”

“I want out of here.” Lukas glanced at the heavy steel

door behind Bernard. “Please. I want you to let me

out.”

“Out.”

Lukas bobbed his head, exasperated, sweat tickling his

cheek as it folowed the line of his jaw. He was

suddenly very afraid of this man, this man who al of a

sudden reminded him even more of his father.

“Please,” Lukas said. “It's just . . . I’m starting to feel

cooped up. Please let me out.”

Bernard nodded. His cheeks twitched. He looked as if

he were about to cry. Lukas had never seen this

expression on the man's face.

"Sheriff Bilings, are you there?"

His smal hand emerged from his coverals and raised

the radio to his sad, quivering mustache.

Peter's voice crackled back. "I'm here, sir."

Bernard clicked the transmitter. "You heard the man,"

he said, tears weling up in the bottoms of his eyes.

"Lukas Kyle, IT engineer first class,

says he wants

out—”

25

• Silo 17 •

“Helo? Walk? Shirly?”

Juliette shouted into the radio, the orphans and Solo

watching her from several steps below. She had hurried

the kids through the farms, made hasty introductions,

checking the radio al the while. Several levels had gone

by, the others trudging up behind her, and stil no word

from them, nothing since she'd been cut off, the sound

of gunfire sprinkled among Walker's words. She kept

thinking if she just got higher, if she tried one more time.

She checked the light by the power knob and made

sure the battery wasn't dead, turned the

volume up until

she could hear the static, could know the thing was

working.

She clicked the button. The static fel silent, the radio

waiting for her to speak. “Please say something, guys.

This is Juliette. Can you hear me? Say anything.”

She looked to Solo, who was being supported by the

very man who had dazed him. “We need to go higher, I

think. C’mon. Double-time.”

There were groans; these poor refugees of silo 17 acted

like she was the one who’d lost her mind. But they

stomped up the stairs after her, their pace dictated by

Solo, who had seemed to raly with some fruit and

water but had slowed as the levels wore on.

“Where are these friends of yours we talked to?”

Rickson asked. “Can they come help?” He grunted as

Solo lurched to one side. “He’s heavy.”

“They aren’t coming to help us,” Juliette said. “There’s

no getting from there to here.” *Or vice-versa*, she told

herself.

Her stomach lurched with worry. She needed to get to

IT and cal Lukas, find out what was going on. She

needed to tel him how horribly awry her plans had

gone, how she was failing at every turn. There was no

going back, she realized. No saving her friends. No

saving this silo. She glanced back over her shoulder.

Her life was now going to be one of a mother to these

orphaned children, kids who had

survived merely

because the people who were left, who were

committing the violence on each other, didn’t have the

stomach to kil them. Or the *heart*, she thought.

And now it would fal to her. And to Solo, but to a

lesser degree. Often, he would probably be just one

more child for her to attend to.

They made their gradual way up another flight, Solo

seeming to regain his senses a little, progress being

made. But stil a long way to go.

Each step, each moment that went by without a reply

from silo 17 took her that many more paces into her

new future. She thought of the work they'd need to

perform in IT to make it ready. The kids were already

adept at tending the farms, which was good. There'd be

plenty of that to do. And she was *alive*. She reminded

herself how lucky she was to be alive. She'd been sent

to clean and had not perished. This was something—no

matter the life she'd found on the other side. It was a

life. It would be.

They stopped in the mids for bathroom breaks, filing

more empty toilets that wouldn't flush. Juliette helped

the young ones. They didn't like going like this,

preferred to do it in the dirt. She told them that was

right, that they only did this when they were on the

move. She didn't tel them about the years Solo had

spent destroying entire levels of apartments. She didn't

tel them about the clouds of flies she'd

seen.

The last of their food was consumed, but they had

plenty of water. Juliette wanted to get to the

hydroponics on sixty-two before they stopped for the

night. There was enough food and water there for the

rest of the trip. She tried the radio repeatedly, aware

that she was running down the battery. There was no

reply. She didn't understand how she'd heard them to

begin with; al the silos must use something different,

some way of not hearing each other. It had to be

Walker, something he'd engineered. When she got

back to IT, would she be able to figure it out? Would

she be able to contact him or Shirly? She wasn't sure,

and Lukas had no way of talking to

Mechanical from

where he was, no way of patching her through. She'd

asked a dozen times.

Lukas—

And Juliette *remembered*.

The radio in Solo's hovel. What had Lukas said one

night—they were talking late and he'd said he wished

they could chat from down below where it was more

comfortable. Wasn't that where he was getting his

updates about the uprising? It was over the radio. Just

like the one in Solo's place, beneath the servers, locked

behind that steel cage for which he'd never found the

key.

Juliette turned and faced the group; they stopped

climbing and gripped the rails, stared up at her. Helena,

the young mother who didn't even know her own age,

tried to comfort her baby as it began to squeal. The

nameless infant preferred the sway of the climb.

"I need to go up," she told them. She looked to Solo.

"How're you feeling?"

"Me? I'm fine."

He didn't look fine.

"Can you get them up?" She nodded to

Rickson. “Are

you okay?”

The boy dipped his chin. His resistance had seemed to

crumble during the climb, especialy during the

bathroom break. The younger children, meanwhile, had

been nothing but excited to see new parts of the silo, to

feel that they could raise their voices without bad things

happening to them. They were coming to grips with

there being only two adults left, and neither seemed al

that bad.

“There’s food on sixty-two,” she said.

“Numbers—” Rickson shook his head. “I don’t—”

Of course. Why would he need to count numbers he’d

never live to see, and in more ways than one?

“Solo wil show you where,” she told him. “We’ve

stayed there before. Good food. Canned stuff as wel.

Solo?” She waited until he looked up at her, the glazed

expression partly melting away. “I have to get back to

your place. I have people I need to cal, okay? My

friends. I need to find out if they’re okay.”

He nodded.

“You guys wil be fine?” She hated to leave them but

needed to. “I’l try and make it back down to you

tomorrow. Take your time getting al the way up, okay?

No need to rush home.”

Home. Was she already resigned to that?

There were nods in the group. One of the young boys

puled a water bottle out of the other’s bag and

unscrewed the cap. Juliette turned and began taking the

stairs two at a time, her legs begging her not to.

This was her *home*. It was a sickening realization. A

horrible new awareness. She clutched her shoulder bag

and set a porter's pace, the change in clothing

becoming damp with her sweat, the air growing less

frigid as she put distance between

herself and that flood

below. A level up, and she could hear the kids behind

her already getting back to their games, their shouts and

their laughter. This terrible trip of hers, this dreadful

sprint up on dead legs, it was for them the most exciting

and uplifting experience of their young and tragic lives.

••••

Juliette was in the forties when it occurred to her that

she might not make it. The sweat she'd worked up was

chiling her skin; her legs were beyond the ache, beyond

the pain; they were numb with fatigue. She found her

arms doing a lot of the work as she lunged ahead,

gripped the railing with clammy hands and hauled

herself up another two steps.

Her breathing was ragged. It had been for half a dozen

levels. She wondered if she'd done damage to her lungs

from the underwater ordeal. Was that possible? She

had no idea. Her father would know. She thought of

spending the rest of her life without a doctor, of teeth as

yelow as Solo's, of caring for a growing child and the

chalenge of seeing that more weren't

made.

At the next landing, she again touched her hip where her

birth control rode under her skin. Such things made

more sense in light of silo 17. So *much* about her

previous life made sense. Things that once seemed

twisted now had a sort of pattern. A logic about them.

The expense of sending a wire, the spacing of the levels,

the single and cramped stairway, the bright colors for

particular jobs, dividing the silo into sections, breeding

mistrust . . . it was al designed. She'd seen hints of this

before, but never knew why. Now this empty silo told

her, the presence of these kids told her. It turned out

some crooked things looked even worse when

straightened. Some tangled knots only

made sense once

unraveled.

Her mind wandered while she climbed, wandered in

order to avoid the aches in her muscles, to escape the

day’s ordeals. When she finaly hit the thirties it gave

her, if not an end to the suffering, a renewed focus. She

stopped trying the portable radio as often. The static

never changed, and she had a different idea for

contacting Walker, something she should have pieced

together sooner, a way to bypass the servers and

communicate with other silos. It was there al along,

staring her and Solo in the face. There was a smal sliver

of doubt that she might be wrong, but why else lock up

a radio that was already locked up two

other ways? It

only made sense if that device was supremely

dangerous. Which is what she hoped it would be.

She stomped up to thirty-five dead on her feet. Her

body had never been pushed this hard, not even while

plumbing the smal pump, not during her trek through

the outside. Wil alone helped her lift each foot, plant it,

straighten her leg, pul with her arm, lunge forward for

another grab. One step at a time, now. Her toe banged

on the next step as she could barely lift her boot high

enough. The green emergency lights gave her no sense

of the passing of time, no idea if night had come, when

morning would be. She desperately missed her watch.

Al she had these days was her knife. She

laughed at the

switch, at having gone from counting the seconds in her

life to fending for each and every one of them.

Thirty-four. It was tempting to colapse to the steel

grating, to sleep, to curl up like her first night in that

place, just thankful to be alive. Instead, she puled the

door open, amazed at the effort this required, and

stepped back into civilization. Light. Power. Heat.

She staggered down the halway with her vision so

constricted it was as if she could only see through some

straw at her center, everything else out of focus and

spinning.

Her shoulder brushed the wal. Walking required effort.

Al she wanted was to go cal Lukas, to hear his voice.

She imagined faling asleep behind that server, warm air

blowing over her from its fans, the headphones tight

against her ears. He could murmur to her about the

faraway stars while she slept for days and days—

But Lukas would wait. Lukas was locked up and safe.

She had al the time in the world to cal him.

She turned instead into the suit lab,

shuffled toward the

tool wal, didn’t dare look at her cot. A glance at her

cot, and she’d wake up the next day. Whatever day

that was.

Grabbing the bolt cutters, she was about to leave, but

went back for the smal sledge as wel. The tools were

heavy, but they felt good in her hands, one tool in each,

puling down on her arms, stretching her muscles and

grounding her, keeping her stable.

At the end of the hal, she pressed her shoulder against

the heavy door to the server room. She leaned until it

squeaked open. Just a crack. Just wide enough for her.

Juliette hurried as much as her numb muscles would

alow toward the ladder. Shuffling. Fast as she could

go.

The grate was in place; she tugged it out of the way and

dropped the tools down. Big noise. She didn’t care—

they couldn’t break. Down she went, hands slick, chin

catching a rung, floor coming up faster than she’d

anticipated.

Juliette sank to her butt, sprawled out, shin banging the

sledge. It took a force of wil, an act of God, to get up.

But she did.

Down the hal and past the smal desk. There was a

steel cage there, a radio, a big one. She remembered

her days as sheriff. They had a radio just like it in her

office, used it to cal Marnes when he was on patrol, to

cal Hank and Deputy Marsh. This one was different.

She remembered something Lukas said once, about

listening in, about wishing he could talk to her down

below where it was comfortable.

He meant this radio.

She set the sledge down and pinched the jaws of the

cutter on one of the hinges. Squeezing was too hard.

Her arms shook. They trembled.

Juliette adjusted herself, put one of the

handles against

her neck, cradled it with her colarbone and shoulder.

She grabbed the other handle with both hands and

puled toward herself, hugging the cutters. Squeezing.

She felt them move.

There was a loud crack, the twang of splitting steel. She

moved to the other hinge and did it again. Her

colarbone hurt where the handle dug in, felt like it might

be the thing to crack, not the hinge.

Another violent burst of metal.

Juliette grabbed the steel cage and puled. The hinges

came away from the mounting plate. She tore hungrily

at the box, trying to get to the prize inside, thinking of

Walker and al her family, al her friends, the sound of

people screaming in the background. She had to get

them to stop fighting. Get everyone to stop fighting.

Once she had enough gap between the bent steel and

the wal, she wrapped her fingers around this and

tugged, bending the protective cage on its front edge,

tilting the box away from the wal, the shelf, revealing

the entire radio unit beneath. Who

needed keys? Screw

keys. She wrenched the cage flat, then bent her weight

on it, making a new hinge of its front, warping it out of

the way.

The dial on the front seemed familiar. She turned it to

power the unit on and found that it clicked instead of

spinning. Juliette knelt down, panting and exhausted,

sweat running down her neck. There was another

switch for power; she turned this one instead, static

rising in the speakers, a buzz filing the room.

The other knob. This was what she wanted, what she

expected to find. She thought it might be patch cables

like the back of the server, or dip switches like a pump

control, but it was tiny numbers arranged

around the

edge of a knob. Juliette smiled, exhausted, and dialed

the pointer to 18. Home. She grabbed the mic and

squeezed the button.

“Walker? Are you there?”

Juliette slumped down to the ground and rested her

back against the desk. With her eyes shut, mic by her

face, she could imagine going to sleep

like that. She saw

what Lukas meant. This was comfortable.

She squeezed again. “Walk? Shirly? Please answer

me.”

The radio crackled to life.

Juliette opened her eyes. She stared up at the unit, her

hands trembling.

A voice:

“Is this who I think it is?”

The voice was too high, too high to be Walker. She

knew this voice. Where did she know it from? She was

tired and confused. She squeezed the button on the mic.

“This is Juliette. Who is this?”

Was it Hank? She thought it might be Hank. He had a

radio. Maybe she had the wrong silo completely.

Maybe she'd screwed up.

"I need radio silence," the voice demanded. "Al of

them off. Now."

Was this directed at her? Juliette's mind spun in circles.

A handful of voices chimed in, one after the other.

There were pops of static. Was she supposed to say

something? She was confused.

"You shouldn't be transmitting on this

frequency," the

voice said. "You could be put to cleaning for such

things."

Juliette's hand fel to her lap. She slumped against the

wooden desk, dejected. She recognized the voice.

Bernard.

For weeks, she had been hoping to speak to this man,

had been silently begging for him to

answer. But not

now. Now, she had nothing to say. She wanted to talk

to her friends, to make things okay.

She squeezed the radio.

“No more fighting,” she said. Al the wil was drained

from her. Al desire for vengeance. She just wanted the

world to quiet itself, for people to live and grow old and

feed the roots one day—

“Speaking of cleanings,” the voice squeaked.

“Tomorrow wil be the first of many more to come.

Your friends are lined up and ready to go. And I

believe you know the lucky one who’s going first.”

There was a click, folowed by the hiss and crinkle of

static. Juliette didn’t move. She felt dead. Numb. The

wil was drained from her body.

“Imagine my surprise,” the voice said. “Imagine when I

found out a decent man, a man I trusted, had been

poisoned by you.”

She clicked the microphone with her fist but didn’t raise

it to her mouth. She simply raised her voice instead.

“You’l burn in hel,” she told him.

“Undoubtedly,” Bernard said. “Until then, I’m holding

some things in my hand that I think belong to you. An

ID with your picture on it, a pretty little bracelet, and

this wedding ring that doesn't look official at al. I

wonder about that . . . ”

Juliette groaned. She couldn't feel any part of her body.

She could barely hear her thoughts. She managed to

squeeze the mic, but it required every ounce of effort

that she had left.

“What are you going on about, you twisted fuck?”

She spat the last, her head drifting to the side, her body

craving sleep.

“I’m talking about Lukas, who betrayed me. We found

some of your things on him just now. Exactly how long

has he been talking to you? Wel before the servers,

right? Wel guess what? I’m sending him your way. And

I finaly figured out what you did last time, what those

idiots in Supply helped you do, and I want you to be

assured, be very assured that your friend won’t have

the same help. I’m going to build his suit personaly.

Me. I’l stay up al night if I have to. So when he goes

out in the morning, I can be sure that he

gets nowhere

near those blasted hils.”

26

• Silo 18 •

A group of kids thundered down the staircase as

Lukas was escorted to his death. One of them squealed

in delighted horror as if being chased. They spiraled

closer, coming into view, and Lukas and Peter had to

squeeze to one side to let them pass.

Peter played the sheriff role and yeled at the kids to

slow down, to be careful. They giggled and continued

their mad descent. School was out for the day, no more

listening to adults.

While Lukas was pressed against the outer railing, he

took a moment to consider the temptation. Freedom

was just a jump away. A death of his own choosing,

one he had considered in the past when moods turned

dark.

Peter puled him along, hand on his elbow, before

Lukas could act. He was left admiring that graceful bar

of steel, watching the way it curved and curved, always

spinning the same amount, never ending. He pictured it

corkscrewing through the earth, could sense its

vibrations like some cosmic string, like a single strand of

DNA at the silo's core with al of life clinging to it.

Thoughts like these swirled as they gained another level

on his death. He watched the welds go by, some of

them neater than others. A few puckered up like scars;

several had been polished so smoothly

he almost

missed them. Each was a signature by its creator, a

work of pride here, a rushed job at the end of a long

day there, a shadow learning for the first time, a

seasoned pro who with decades of practice making it

look al too easy.

He brushed his shackled hands over the rough paint, the

bumps and puckers, the missing chips that revealed

centuries of layers, of colors that changed with the times

or with the supply of dyes or cost of paint. The layers

reminded him of the wooden desk he'd stared down at

for almost a month. Each little groove marked the

passage of time, just as each name scratched into its

surface marked a man's mad desire to

have *more* of it,

to not let that time whisk his poor soul away.

For a long while, they marched in silence, a porter

passing with a bulky load, a young couple looking

guilty. Exiting the server vault had not been the strol to

freedom Lukas had longed for the past weeks. It had

been an ambush, a march of shame, faces in doorways,

faces on landings, faces on the stairway. Blank,

unblinking faces. Faces of friends wondering if he was

their enemy.

And maybe he was.

They would say he had broken down and uttered fateful

taboo, but Lukas now knew why people were put out.

He was the virus. If he sneezed the wrong words, it

would kil everyone he knew. This was the path Juliette

had walked and for the same absence of reason. He

believed her, always had, always knew she'd done

nothing wrong, but now he *really* understood. She was

like him in so many ways. Except he would not survive,

he knew that. Bernard had told him so.

They were ten levels up from IT when Peter's radio

buzzed with chatter. He took his hand off Lukas's

elbow to turn up the volume, see if it was for him.

"*This is Juliette. Who is this?"*

That voice.

Lukas's heart leapt up a little before plummeting a very

long way. He fixed his gaze on the railing and listened.

Bernard responded, asked for silence. Peter reached

for his radio, turned it down but not off. The voices

climbed with them, back and forth. Each step and each

word ground down on Lukas, chipped away at him. He

studied the railing and again considered *true* freedom.

A grab and a short leap up; a long flight.

He could feel himself going through the motions,

bending his knees, throwing his feet over.

The voices in the radio argued. They said forbidden

things. They were sloppy with secrets, thinking other

ears were off.

Lukas watched his death play out over and over. His

fate awaited him over that rail. The visual was so

powerful, it wrecked his climbing pace, it affected his

legs.

He slowed, Peter slowing with him. Each of them began

to falter, to waver in their convictions. The strength in

Lukas drained away, and he decided not to jump.

Both men were having second thoughts.

27

• Silo 17 •

Juliette woke up on a floor, someone shaking her. A

man with a beard. It was Solo, and she

was passed out

in his room, by his desk.

“We made it,” he said, flashing his yelow teeth. He

looked better than she remembered him looking. More

alive. She felt as though she were dead.

Dead.

“What time is it?” she asked. “What day?”

She tried to sit up. Every muscle felt torn in half,

disconnected, floating beneath her skin.

Solo went to the computer and turned on the monitor.

“The others are picking out rooms and then going to the

upper farms.” He turned to look at her. Juliette rubbed

her temples. “There are *others*,” he said solemnly, like

this was stil news.

Juliette nodded. There was only one other that she

could think of right then. Dreams came back to her,

dreams of Lukas, of al her friends in holding cels, a

room of suits being prepped for each of them, no care

for whether they cleaned or not. It would be a mass

slaughter, a symbol to those who remained. She thought

of al the bodies outside of *this* silo, silo 17. It was easy

to imagine what came next.

“Friday,” Solo said, looking at the computer. “Or

Thursday night, depending on how you like it. Two in

the morning.” He scratched his beard. “Felt like we

slept longer than that.”

“What day was it yesterday?” She shook her head.

That didn’t make sense. “What day did I dive down?

With the compressor?” Her brain wasn’t working.

Lukas looked at her like he was having similar thoughts.

“The dive was Thursday. Today is tomorrow.” He

rubbed his head. “Let’s start over—”

“No time.” Juliette groaned and tried to stand up. Solo

rushed to her and put his hands under her arms, helped

lift her. “Suit Lab,” she said. He nodded. She could tel

he was exhausted, maybe half as much as she was, but

he was stil wiling to do anything for her. It made her

sad, someone being this loyal to her.

She led him down the narrow passage, and the climb up

the ladder brought back a legion of aches. Juliette

crawled out to the server room floor; Solo folowed up

the ladder and helped her to her feet. They made their

way to the Suit Lab together.

“I need al the heat tape we’ve got,” she told him,

prepping him while he escorted her. She staggered

through the servers, bumped into one of them. “It needs

to be the kind on the yelow spool, the stuff from

Supply. Not the red kind.”

He nodded. “The good kind. Like we used on the

compressor.”

“Right.”

They left the server room and shuffled down the

halway. Juliette could hear the kids squealing around

the bend, the patter of their feet. It was a strange sound,

like the echoes of ghosts. But something normal.

Something normal had returned to silo 17.

In the suit lab, she got Solo busy with the tape. He

stretched out long strips on one of the workbenches,

overlapping the edges, using the torch to cauterize and

seal the joints.

“At least an inch of overlap,” she told him, when it

looked like he was being shy with the stuff. He nodded.

Juliette glanced at her cot and considered colapsing

into it. But there was no time. She grabbed the smalest

suit in the room, one with a colar she knew might be a

tight fit. She remembered the difficult squeeze to get into

silo 17 and didn’t want to repeat it.

“I’m not gonna have time to make another switch for

the suit, so I won’t have a radio.” She went through the

cleaning outfit, piece by piece, puling out the parts

engineered to fail and hunting through her hauls from

Supply for a better version of each. Some she'd have to

seal over with the good tape. It wouldn't be as nice as

the one Walker had helped arrange, but it would be a

world different than what Lukas was getting. She

grabbed al the parts she'd spent weeks puzzling over,

marveling at the engineering it took to make something

weaker than it appeared. She tested a

gasket from a

pile she wasn't sure about by pinching her fingernails

together. The gasket parted easily. She dug for another.

"How long?" Solo asked, noisily stretching another

piece of tape out. "You'l be gone a day? A week?"

Juliette looked up from her workbench to the one Solo

was working over. She didn't want to tel him she might

not make it. This was a dark thought she would keep to

herself. “We’l figure out a way to come for you,” she

said. “First, I have to try and save someone.” It felt like

a lie. She wanted to tel him she might be gone for

good.

“With this?” Solo rustled the blanket of heat tape.

She nodded. “The doors to my home never open,” she

told him. “Not unless they are sending someone to clean

___”

Solo nodded. “It was the same here, back when this

place was crazy.”

Juliette looked up at him, puzzled, and saw that he was

smiling. Solo had told a joke. She laughed, even though

she didn’t feel like it, and then found that it helped.

“We’ve got six or seven hours until those doors open,”

she told him. “And when they do, I want to be there.”

“And then what?” Solo shut down the torch and

inspected his work. He looked up at her.

“Then I want to see how they explain my being alive. I

think—” She changed out a seal and flipped the suit

around to get to the other sleeve. “I think my friends are

fighting on one side of this fence, and the people who

sent me here are fighting on the other. Everyone else is

watching, the vast majority of my people. They are too

scared to take sides, which basicaly means they’ve

checked out.”

She paused while she used one of the smal extractors

to remove the seal that linked the wrist to the glove.

Once she had it out, she reached for a good one.

“You think this wil change that? Saving your friend?”

Juliette looked up and studied Solo, who was almost

done with the tape.

“Saving my friend is al about saving my friend,” she

said. “What I think wil happen, when al those people

on that fence see that a cleaner has come home, I think

it’l make them come down on the right side of things,

and with that much support, the guns and the fighting

are meaningless.”

Solo nodded. He began to fold up the blanket without

even being asked. This bit of initiative, of knowing what

needed to happen next, filed Juliette with hope. Maybe

he needed these kids, someone to take care of. He

seemed to have aged a dozen years already.

“I’l come back for you and the others,” she told him.

He dipped his head, kept his eyes on her a while, his

brain seeming to whir. He came to her workbench and

set the neatly folded blanket down, patted it twice. A

quick smile flashed in his beard, and then he had to turn

away, had to scratch his cheek as if he

had an itch

there.

He was stil a teenager like that, Juliette saw. Stil

ashamed to cry.

••••

Nearly four of Lukas's final hours were burned hiking

the heavy gear up to level three. The kids had helped,

but she made them stop one level down, worried about

the air up top. Solo assisted her in suiting up for the

second time in as many days. He studied her somberly.

“You’re sure about this?”

She nodded and accepted the blanket of heat tape.

Rickson could be heard a level below, commanding one

of the boys to settle down.

“Try not to worry,” she told him. “What happens,

happens. But I have to try."

Solo frowned and scratched his chin. He nodded.

"You're used to being around your people," he said.

"Probably happier there anyway."

Juliette reached out and squeezed his arm with one of

her thick gloves. "It's not that I would be miserable

here, it's that I would be miserable knowing I let him go

out without trying something."

"And I was just starting to get used to having you

here." He turned his head to the side, bent over and

grabbed her helmet from the decking.

Juliette checked her gloves, made sure everything was

wrapped tightly, and looked up. The climb to the top

would be brutal with the suit on. She dreaded it. And

then navigating the remains of al those people in the

sheriff's office and getting through the airlock doors.

She accepted the helmet, scared of what she was about

to do despite her convictions.

"Thanks for everything," she said. She felt like she was

doing more than saying goodbye. She knew there was a

very good chance that she was doing wilingly what

Bernard had attempted so many weeks ago. Her

cleaning had been delayed, but now she was going

back to it.

Solo nodded and stepped around her to check her

back. He patted the velcro, tugged on her colar.

“You’re good,” he said, his voice cracking.

“You take care of yourself, Solo.” She reached out and

patted his shoulder. She had decided to carry the

helmet one more flight up before putting it on, just to

conserve her air.

“Jimmy,” he said. “I think I’m going back to being

caled Jimmy, now.”

He smiled at Juliette. Shook his head sadly, but smiled.

“I’m not going to be alone anymore,” he told her.

28

• •

Juliette made her way through the airlock doors and up

the ramp, ignoring the dead around her, just focusing on

each step, and the hardest part was over. The rest was

open space and the scattered remains she wished she

could pretend were boulders. Finding her way was

easy. She simply turned her back on that crumbling

metropolis in the distance, the one she had set off for so

very long ago, and began to walk away from it.

As she picked her way across the landscape, the sight

of the occasional dead seemed sadder now than during

that previous hike, more tragic for having shared their

home for a while. Juliette was careful

not to disturb

them, passed them with the solemnity they deserved,

wishing she could do more than feel sorry for them.

Eventualy, they thinned, and she and the landscape

were left alone. Trudging up that windswept hil, the

sound of fine soil peppering her helmet became oddly

familiar and strangely comforting. *This* was the world in

which she lived, in which they al lived. Through the

clear dome of her helmet, she saw it al as clearly as it

could be seen. The speeding clouds hung angry and

gray; sheets of dust whipped sideways and low to the

ground; jagged rocks looked like they'd been sheared

from some larger piece, perhaps by the machines that

had crafted these hils.

When she reached the crest, she paused to take in the

vista around her. The wind was fierce up there, her

body exposed. She planted her boots wide so she

wouldn’t topple over and peered down into the inverted

dome before her, at the flattened roof of her home.

There was a mix of excitement and dread. The low sun

had only barely cleared the distant hils,

and the sensor

tower below was stil in shadow, stil in nighttime. She

would make it. But before she started down the hil, she

found herself gazing, amazed, at the scattering of

depressions marching toward the horizon. They were

just like the silo schematic, evenly spaced depressions,

fifty of them.

And it occurred to her, suddenly and with a violent

force, that countless others were going about their days

nearby. People *alive*. More silos than just hers and

Solo's. Silos unaware, packed with people waking up

for work, to go to school, maybe even to cleaning.

She turned in place and took it al in, wondering if

maybe there was someone else out on

that landscape at

the exact same time as her wearing a similar suit, a

completely different set of fears racing through their

mind. If she could cal out to them, she would. If she

could wave to al the hidden sensors, she would.

The world took on a different scope, a new scale from

this height. Her life had been cast away weeks ago,

likely should have ended. If not on the slope of that hil

in front of her home, then surely in the flooded deeps of

silo 17. But it hadn’t ended like that. It would probably

end here, instead, this morning with Lukas. They might

burn in that airlock together if her hunch was wrong. Or

they could lie in the crook of that hil and waste away as

a couple, a couple whose kinship had

been formed by

desperate talks lingering into the night, an intense bond

between two stranded souls that was never spoken nor

admitted to.

Juliette had promised herself never to love in secret

again, never to love at al. And somehow this time was

worse: she had kept it a secret even from him. Even

from *herself*.

Maybe it was the proximity of death talking, the reaper

buffeting her clear helmet with sand and toxins. What

did any of it matter, seeing how wide and ful the world

was? Her silo would probably go on. Other silos surely

would. And the things that she *thought* mattered—

suddenly shrank. It was a sad loss, this ilusion of

importance, a humbling blow.

A mighty gust of wind struck her, nearly ripping the

folded blanket out of her hands. Juliette steadied

herself, gathered her wits, and began the much easier

descent toward her home. She ducked down below the

crest with its sobering views and saddening heights, out

of the harsh and caustic winds. She folowed that crook

where two hils met, winding her way toward the sad

sight of a couple buried in plain view, who marked her

fateful, desperate, and weary way home.

••••

She arrived at the ramp early. There was no one on the

landscape, the sun stil hidden behind the hils. As she

hurried down the slope, she wondered what anyone

would think if they saw her on the sensors, stumbling

toward the silo.

At the bottom of the ramp, she stood close to the heavy

steel doors and waited. She checked the heat tape

blanket, ran through the procedure in her mind. Every

scenario had been thought of either during her climb, in

her mad dreams, or during the walk through the wild

outside. This would work, she told herself. The

mechanics were sound. The only reason no one

survived a cleaning was because they never had help;

they couldn’t bring tools or resources. But she had.

Time seemed to pass not at al. It was like her delicate

and precious watch when she forgot to wind it. The

trapped soil along the edge of the ramp

shifted about

impatiently with her, and Juliette wondered if maybe the

cleaning had been caled off, if she would die alone.

That would be better, she told herself. She took a deep

breath, wishing she would’ve brought more air, enough

for a return trip, just in case. But she had been too

worried about the cleaning going *through* to consider

that it might not.

After a long wait, her nerves sweling and heart racing,

she heard a noise inside, a metalic scraping of gears.

Juliette tensed, her arms rippling with chils, her throat

constricting. This was it. She shifted in place, listening to

the great grind of those heavy doors as they prepared

to disgorge poor Lukas. She unfolded part of the heat

blanket and waited. It would al go so quickly. She

knew. But she would be in control. No one could come

in and stop her.

With a terrible screech, the doors to silo 18 parted, and

a hiss of argon blasted out at her. Juliette leaned into it.

The fog consumed her. She pushed blindly forward,

groping ahead of herself, the blanket flapping noisily

against her chest. She expected to run into him, to find

herself wrestling a startled and frightened man, had

prepared herself to need to wrestle him, hold him down,

get him wrapped up tightly in the blanket —

But there was no one in the doorway, no body

struggling to get out, to get away from the coming purge

of flames.

Juliette practicaly fel into the airlock; her body

expected resistance like a boot at the top of a darkened

stairway and found instead empty space.

As the argon cleared and the door began to grind shut,

she had a brief hope, a tiny fantasy, that there was no

cleaning. That the doors had simply been opened for

her, welcoming her back. Maybe someone had seen

her on the hilside and had taken a chance, had forgiven

her, and al would be okay—

But as soon as she could see through the bilowing gas,

she saw that this was not the case. A man in a cleaning

suit was kneeling in the center of the airlock, hands on

his thighs, facing the inner door.

Lukas.

Juliette raced to him as a halo of light

bloomed in the

room, the fire nozzles spitting on and reflecting off the

shimmering plastic. The door thunked shut behind her,

locking them both inside.

Juliette shook the blanket loose and shuffled around so

he could see her, so he would know he wasn’t alone.

The suit couldn’t hide the shock. Lukas startled, his

arms leaping up in alarm, even as the flames began to

lance out.

She nodded, knowing he could see her through her

clear dome, even if she couldn’t see him. With a

sweeping twirl she had practiced in her mind a thousand

times, she spread the blanket over his head and knelt

down swiftly, covering herself as wel.

It was dark under the heat tape. The temperature

outside was rising. She tried to shout to Lukas that it

was going to be okay, but her voice sounded muffled

even inside her own helmet. Tucking the edges of the

blanket down beneath her knees and feet, she wiggled

until it was tightly pinned. She reached forward and

tried to tuck the material under him as

wel, making sure

his back was fuly protected.

Lukas seemed to know what she was doing. His gloved

hands fel to her arms and rested there. She could feel

how stil he was, how calm. She couldn’t believe he

was going to wait, had chosen to burn rather than clean.

She couldn’t remember anyone ever making that

choice. This worried her as they huddled together in the

darkness, everything growing warm.

The flames licked against the heat tape, striking the

blanket with enough force to be felt, like a buffeting

wind. The temperature shot up, sweat leaping out on

her lip and forehead, even with al the superior lining of

her suit. The blanket wouldn’t be enough. It wouldn’t

keep Lukas alive in his suit. The fear in her heart was

only for him, even as her skin began to heat up.

Her panic seemed to leach into him, or maybe he was

feeling the burns even worse. His hands trembled

against her. And then she literaly felt him go mad, felt

him change his mind, begin to burn, *something*.

Lukas pushed her away from himself.

Bright light

entered their protective dome as he began to crawl out

from under it, kicking away.

Juliette screamed for him to stop. She scrambled after

him, clutching his arm, his leg, his boot, but he stomped

her, kicked at her, beat her with his fists, franticaly tried

to get away.

The blanket fel off her head, and the light

nearly blinded

her. She felt the intense heat, could hear her dome pop

and make noises, saw the clear bubble dip in above her

and warp. She couldn’t see Lukas, couldn’t feel him,

just saw blinding light and felt searing heat, scorching

her wherever her suit crinkled against her body. She

screamed in pain and yanked the blanket back over her

head, covering the clear plastic.

And the flames raged on.

She couldn’t feel him. Couldn’t see him. There would

be no way to find him. A thousand burns erupted

across her body like so many knives gouging her flesh.

Juliette sat alone under that thin film of protection,

burning up, enduring the raging flames, and wept hot

tears. Her body convulsed with sobs and anger, cursing

the fire, the pain, the silo, the entire world.

Until eventualy—she had no more tears and the fuel ran

its course. The boiling temperature dropped to a mere

scalding, and Juliette could safely shrug off the steaming

blanket. Her skin felt as if it were on fire. It burned

wherever it touched the interior of her

suit. She looked

for Lukas and found she didn’t have to look far.

He was lying against the door, his suit charred and

flaking in the few places it remained intact. His helmet

was stil in place, saving her the horror of seeing his

young face, but it had melted and deformed far worse

than hers. She crawled closer, aware that the door

behind her was opening, that they were coming for her,

that it was al over. She had failed.

Juliette whimpered when she saw the places his body

had been exposed, the suit and charcoal liners boiled

away. There was his arm, charred black. His stomach,

oddly distended. His tiny hands, so smal and thin and

burned to a—

No.

She didn’t understand. She wept anew. She threw her

gloved and steaming hands against her bubbled dome

and cried out in shock, in a mix of anger and blessed

relief.

This was not Lukas dead before her.

This was a man who deserved none of her tears.

29

• Silo 18 •

Awareness, like sporadic jolts of pain from her burns,

came and went.

Juliette remembered a bilowing fog, boots stomping al

around her, lying on her side in the oven of an airlock.

She watched the way the world warped out of shape as

her helmet, a viscous thing, continued to sag toward

her, melting. A bright silver star hovered in her vision,

waving as it settled beyond her dome. Peter Bilings

peered through her helmet at her, shook her scalded

shoulders, cried out to the people stomping around,

teling them to help.

They lifted her up and out of that steaming place, sweat

dripping from faces, a melted suit cut from her body.

Juliette floated through her old office like a ghost. Flat

on her back, the squeal of a fussy wheel below her,

past the rows and rows of steel bars, an empty bench in

an empty cel.

They carried her in circles.

Down.

She woke to the beeping of her heart, these machines

checking in on her, a man dressed like

her father.

He was the first to notice her awake. His eyebrows

lifted, a smile, a nod to someone over her shoulder.

And Lukas was there, his face—so familiar, so strange

—was in her blurry vision. She felt his hand in hers. She

knew that hand had been there a while, that he had

been there a while. He was crying and laughing,

brushing her cheek. Jules wanted to know what was so

funny. What was so sad. He just shook his head as she

drifted back to sleep.

••••

It wasn't just that the burns were bad—it's that they

were everywhere.

The days of recovery were spent sliding in and out of

painkiler fogs.

Every time she saw Lukas, she apologized. Everyone

was making a fuss. Peter came. There were piles of

notes from down deep, but nobody was alowed up.

Nobody else to see her but the man dressed like her

father and women who reminded her of her mom.

••••

Her head cleared quickly once they let it.

Juliette came out of what felt like a deep dream, weeks

of haze, nightmares of drowning and burning, of being

outside, of dozens of silos just like hers. The drugs had

kept the pain at bay—but her consciousness, too. She

didn’t mind the stings and aches if it meant winning back

her mind. It was an easy trade.

“Hey.”

She flopped her head to the side—and Lukas was

there. Was he ever not? A blanket fel from his chest as

he leaned forward, held her hand. He smiled.

“You’re looking better.”

Juliette licked her lips. Her mouth was dry.

“Where am I?”

“The infirmary on thirty-three. Just take it easy. Do you

want me to get you anything?”

She shook her head. It felt amazing to be able to move,

to respond to words. She tried to squeeze his hand.

“I’m sore,” she said weakly.

Lukas laughed. He looked relieved to hear this. “I bet.”

She blinked and looked at him. “There’s an infirmary on

thirty-three?” His words were on a delay.

He nodded gravely. “I’m sorry, but it’s the best in the

silo. And we could keep you safe. But forget that. Rest.

I’l go grab the nurse.”

He stood, a thick book spiling from his lap and

tumbling into the chair, burying itself in the blanket and

pilows.

“Do you think you can eat?”

She nodded, turned her head back to face

the ceiling

and the bright lights, everything coming back to her,

memories popping up like the tingle of pain on her skin.

••••

She read folded notes for days and cried. Lukas sat by

her side, colecting the ones that spiled to the floor like

paper planes tossed from landings. He apologized over

and over, blubbering like he was the one who'd done it.

Juliette read al of them a dozen times, trying to keep

straight who was gone and who was stil signing their

names. She couldn't believe it about Knox. Some things

seemed immutable, like the great stairway. She wept for

him and for Marck, wanted desperately to see Shirly,

was told that she couldn't.

Ghosts visited her when the lights were out. Juliette

would wake up, eyes crusted over, pilow wet, Lukas

rubbing her forehead and teling her it would be okay.

••••

Peter came often. Juliette thanked him over and over. It

was al Peter, al Peter. He had made the choice. Lukas

told her of the stairway, his march to cleaning, hearing

her voice on Peter's radio, the implications of her being

alive.

Peter had taken the risk, had listened. That had led to

him and Lukas talking. Lukas had said forbidden things,

was in no danger of being sent anyplace worse, said

something that confused her about being a bad virus, a

catching cold. The radio barked with reports from

Mechanical of people surrendering. Bernard sentenced

them to death anyway.

And Peter had a decision to make. Was he the final

law, or did he owe something to those who put him in

place? Did he do what was right, or what was expected

of him? It was so easy to do the latter, but Peter Bilings

was a good man.

Lukas told him so on that stairwel. He told him that this

was where they'd been put by fate, but what they did

going forward defined them. That was who they were.

He told Peter that Bernard had kiled a man. That he

had proof. Lukas had done nothing to deserve this.

Peter pointed out that every ounce of IT security was a

hundred levels away. There was only

one gun up-top.

Only one law.

His.

30

Weeks later

• Silo 18 •

The three of them sat around the conference table,

Juliette adjusting the gauze bandage on her hand to

cover the raised lace of scar tissue

peeking out. The

coverals they'd given her were loose to minimize the

pain, but the undershirt itched everywhere it touched.

She sat in one of the plush chairs and roled back and

forth with the push of her toes, impatient, ready to get

out of there. But Lukas and Peter had things to discuss.

They had escorted her this close to the exit, this close to

the great stairwel, only to sit her down in that room. To

get some *privacy*, they had said. The looks on their

faces made her nervous.

Nobody said anything for a while. Peter used the

excuse of sending a tech for some water, but when the

pitcher came and the glasses were filed, nobody

reached for a drink. Lukas and Peter exchanged

nervous glances. Juliette grew tired of waiting.

“What is it?” she asked. “Can I go? I feel like you’ve

been delaying this for days.” She glanced at her watch,

wiggled her arm so it would fal from the bandage on

her wrist and she could see the tiny face. She stared

across the table at Lukas and had to laugh at the worry

on his face. “Are you trying to keep me

here forever?

Because I told everyone in the deep that I'd be seeing

them tomorrow tonight."

Lukas turned to Peter.

"C'mon, guys. Spit it out. What's troubling you? The

doc said I was fine for the trip down and I told you I'd

check in with Marsh and Hank if I had any problems.

I'm gonna be late enough as it is if I

don’t get a move

on.”

“Okay,” Lukas said, letting out a sigh. It was as though

he’d given up on Peter being the one. “It’s been a few

weeks—”

“And you two’ve made it feel like months.” She twisted

the dial on the side of her watch, an ancient tic returning

like it had never left.

“It’s just that—” Lukas coughed into his fist, clearing

his throat. “—we couldn’t give you *all* the notes that

were sent to you.” He frowned at her, looked guilty.

Juliette’s heart dropped. She sagged forward, waiting

for it. More names would be coming to move from one

sad list to another—

Lukas held up his palms. “Nothing like that,” he said

quickly, recognizing the worry on her face. “God, sorry,

nothing like that—”

“*Good* news,” Peter said. “Congratulatory notes.”

Lukas shot him a look that told Juliette she might think

otherwise.

“Wel . . . it is *news*.” He looked across the table at

her. His hands were folded in front of him, resting on

the marred wood, just like hers. It felt as though they

might both move them several inches until they met, until

fingers interlocked. It would be so natural after weeks

of practice. But that was something worried friends did

in hospitals, right? Juliette pondered this while Lukas

and Peter went on about elections.

“Wait. What?” She blinked and looked up from his

hands, the last part coming back to her.

“It was the *timing*,” Lukas explained.

“You were al anyone was talking about,” Peter said.

“Go back,” she said. “*What* did you say?”

Lukas took a deep breath. “Bernard was running

unopposed. When we sent him out to cleaning, the

election was caled off. But then news got around about

your miraculous return, and people showed up to vote

anyway—”

“A *lot* of people,” Peter added.

Lukas nodded. “It was quite a turnout. More than half

the silo.”

“Yeah, but . . . *Mayor*?” She laughed and looked

around the scratched up conference table, bare except

for the untouched glasses of water. “Isn’t

there

something I need to sign? Some official way to turn this

nonsense down?”

The two men exchanged glances.

“That’s sorta the thing,” Peter said.

Lukas shook his head. “I *told* you—”

“We were hoping you’d accept.”

“Me? *Mayor*?” Juliette crossed her arms and sat back,

painfuly, against the chair. She laughed.

“You’ve gotta

be kidding. I wouldn’t know the first thing about—”

“You wouldn’t have to,” Peter said, leaning forward.

“You have an office, you shake some hands, sign some

things, make people feel better—”

Lukas tapped him on the arm and shook his head.

Juliette felt a flush of heat across her skin, which just

made her scars and wounds itch more.

“Here’s the thing,” Lukas said as Peter sat back in his

chair. “We *need* you. There’s a power vacuum at the

top. Peter’s been in his post longer than anyone, and

you know how long that’s been.”

She was listening.

“Remember our conversations al those nights?

Remember you teling me what that other

silo was like?

Do you understand how close to that we got?”

She chewed her lip, reached for one of the glasses, and

took a long drink of water. Peering over the lip of the

glass, she waited for him to continue.

“We have a chance, Jules. To hold this place together.

To put it *back* to—”

She set the glass down and lifted her

palm for him to

stop.

“If we were to do this,” she told them cooly, looking

from one of their expectant faces to the other. “*If* we do

it, we do it my way.”

Peter frowned.

“No more lying,” she said. “We give truth a chance.”

Lukas laughed nervously. Peter shook his head.

“Now listen to me,” she said. “This isn’t crazy. It’s not

the first time I’ve thought this through. Hel, I’ve had

weeks of nothing *but* thinking.”

“The truth?” Peter asked.

She nodded. “I know what you two are thinking. You

think we need lies, fear—”

Peter nodded.

“But what could we invent that’s scarier than what’s

really out there?" She pointed toward the roof and

waited for that to sink in.

"When these places were built, the idea was that we

were al in this together. Together but separate, ignorant

of one another, so we didn't infect the others if one of

us got sick. But I don't *want* to play for that team. I

don't agree with their cause. I refuse."

Lukas tilted his head. “Yeah, but—”

“So it’s us against them. And not the people in the

silos, not the people working day to day who don’t

know, but those at the top who *do*. Silo eighteen wil be

different. Ful of knowledge, of *purpose*. Think about it.

Instead of manipulating people, why not *empower*

them? Let them know what we’re up against. And have

that drive our colective wil.”

Lukas raised his eyebrows. Peter ran his hands up

through his hair.

“You guys should think about it.” She pushed away

from the table. “Take your time. I’m going to go see my

family and friends. But I’m either in, or I’l be working

against you. I’l be spreading the truth one way or the

other.”

She smiled at Lukas. It was a dare, but he would know

she wasn’t joking.

Peter stood and showed her his palms. “Can we at least

agree not to do anything rash until we meet again?”

Juliette crossed her arms. She dipped her chin.

“Good,” Peter said, letting out his breath and dropping

his arms.

She turned to Lukas. He was studying her, his lips

pursed, and she could tel he knew. There was only one

way this was going forward, and it scared the hel out of

him.

Peter turned and opened the door. He looked back at

Lukas.

“Can you give us a second?” Lukas

asked, standing up

and walking toward the door.

Peter nodded. He turned and shook Juliette's hand as

she thanked him for the milionth time. He checked his

star, which hung askew on his chest, and then left the

conference room.

Lukas crossed out of sight of the window, grabbed

Juliette's hand and puled her toward the

door.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. “Did you realy think

I would just accept that job and—?”

Lukas pressed his palm against the door and forced it

shut. Juliette faced him, confused, then felt his arms slide

gently around her waist, mindful of her wounds.

“You were right,” he whispered. He leaned close, put

his head by her shoulder. “I’m staling. I don’t want you

to go.”

His breath was warm against her neck. Juliette relaxed.

She forgot what she was about to say. She wrapped an

arm around his back, held his neck with her other hand.

“It’s okay,” she said, relieved to hear him say it, to

finaly admit it. And she could feel him trembling, could

hear his broken and stuttered exhalations.

“It’s okay,” she whispered again, pressing her cheek

against his, trying to comfort him. “I’m not going

anywhere for good—”

Lukas puled away to look at her. She felt him searching

her face, tears weling up in his eyes. His body had

started shaking. She could feel it in his arms, his back.

And then she realized, as he puled her close and

pressed his lips against hers, that it wasn't fear or panic

she was sensing in him. It was *nerves*.

She whimpered into their kiss, the rush to her head

better than the doctor's drugs. It washed away any pain

caused by his hands clutching her back. She couldn't

remember the last time she'd felt lips move against her

own. She kissed him back, and it was over too soon.

He stepped away and held her hands, glanced

nervously at the window.

“It’s a . . . uh—”

“That was nice,” she told him, squeezing his hands.

“We should probably—” He jerked his chin toward the

door.

Juliette smiled. “Yeah. Probably so.”

He walked her through the entrance hal of IT and to

the landing. A tech was waiting with her shoulder bag.

Juliette saw that Lukas had padded the strap with rags,

worried about her wounds.

“And you’re sure you don’t need an escort?”

“I’l be fine,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ears.

She shrugged the bag higher up her neck. “I’l see you

in a week or so.”

“You can radio me,” he told her.

Juliette laughed. “I know.”

She grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze, then

turned to the great stairwel. Someone in the passing

crowd nodded at her. She was sure she didn’t know

him, but nodded back. Other chins were turning to

folow her. She passed through them and

grabbed that

great curved bar of steel that wound its way through the

heart of things, that held those pouting and worn treads

together as life after life was ground away on them. And

Juliette lifted her boot to that first step on a journey far

too long in coming—

“Hey!”

Lukas caled after her. He ran across the

landing, his

brows lowered in confusion. “I thought you were

heading *down*, going to see your friends __”

Juliette smiled at him. A porter passed by, loaded down

with his burdens. Juliette thought of how many of her

own had recently slipped away.

“Family first,” she told Lukas. She glanced up that

great shaft in the center of the humming silo and lifted

her boot to the next tread. “I’ve got to go see my

father, first.”

www.hughhowey.com

Q&A With Author Hugh Howey

Q: Is this realy the end?!

A: To quote every one of my favorite Top-10 kung-fu

movies: *Every end is a new beginning*. There are

many more stories to tel. Not just the rest of silo 18's

story, but the future of silo 17, which is about to

change. And then there are al the *other* silos crowding

in around them. You won't *believe* what's going on in

silo 40!

Q: Why are these books so cheap?

A: Because I'm a big fat nobody, that's why! Until you

have a name for yourself, you are forced to strum your

guitar in subway stations and scribble your poetry on

bathroom stals. Later, people wil pay for that stuff

instead of drawing penises on it. At first, I even

agonized over charging more for this volume, but it

ended up being five times the length of the first WOOL.

I’ve been assured that this is stil a

bargain for what

you're getting (and I take donations at my website if

you agree).

Q: Can I tel you how awesome I think these books

are?

A: Why yes you can! And I would prefer you did it with

Amazon reviews. I read *every single one of them*, I

promise. This is how the series is

discovered, so if you

want other readers to find and enjoy them as you have,

take a few minutes and review anything of mine you've

read. Bonus fan-points for reviewing the books

individualy!

Q: What's next?

A: I have a Moly Fyde book (the fifth in the saga)

that's almost complete. And I also have

a brand new

series I’m working on. I haven’t spiled the beans on

this yet (you loyal readers get to hear the juicy gossip

first), but it’s going to be caled SAND LAND. It’s the

story of two brothers who live in that narrow and

inhospitable strip of land between the Sand Mountains

and the constant warring in No Man’s Land. It is a truly

dreadful place to live. Silo 17 would be their Shangri-

La. Anyone who's ever tried to leave Sand Land has

either perished or never been heard from again.

That is, until a young girl comes *back* from that

elsewhere with stories from the other side . . .

Q: How can I keep up with your writing?

A: That's an awfuly convenient

question! Thanks for

asking.

You can folow me on Twitter: @MolyFyde

You can visit my website regularly:

www.hughhowey.com.

And you can email me: molyfyde@gmail.com.

I try to respond to al emails, and I love receiving them.

Don’t be shy!

Q: Tel the truth: Did you come up with al these

questions yourself?

A: Yes.

Meanwhile, in silo 17 . . .

Epilogue

• Silo 17 •

“Thirty two!”

Elise danced up the steps of the down deep, her

breath trailing in long curls of steam behind her, the

clumsy feet of youth making a racket with their heavy

boots on the wet steel.

“Thirty two steps, Mr. Solo!”

She made it back up to the landing, tripped over the last

step, and caught herself on her hands and knees. Elise

stayed there a minute, head down, probably deciding if

she would cry or be okay.

Solo waited for her to cry.

Instead, she looked up at him, a wide smile teling him

she was fine. There was a gap in that smile where a

loose tooth had come out and had not yet been

replaced.

“It’s going *down*,” she said. She wiped her hands on

her new coverals and ran over to him. “The water’s

going down!”

Solo grunted as she threw herself into his hip and

hugged his waist. He draped an arm across her back

while she squeezed him.

“Everything’s gonna be great!”

Solo held the railing with one hand and looked down

past the rust-colored stain of old blood beneath his feet,

looked past that memory and into the receding waters

far below. He reached for the radio on his hip. Juliette

would be the most excited to know.

“I think you’re right,” he told little Elise,

puling his radio

free. “I think everything’s gonna be just fine . . .”