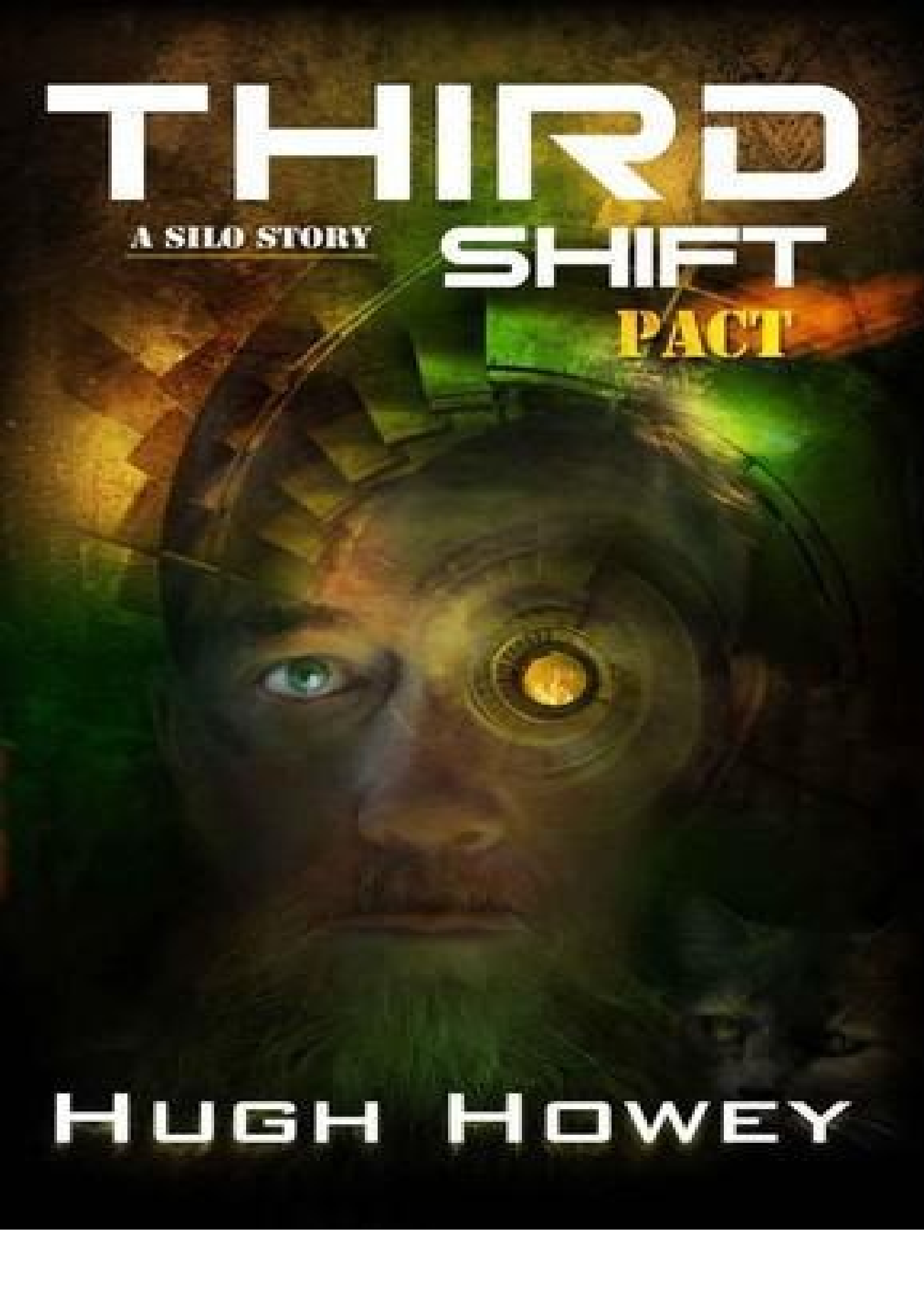


THIRD



A SILO STORY

SHIFT

PACT

HUGH HOWEY

Third Shift - Pact

by Hugh Howey

For those who find themselves well and truly alone.

Silo 17

Hour One

The Loud came before the quiet. That was a Rule of the World, for the bangs and shouts need somewhere to echo, just as bodies need space in which to fall.

Jimmy Parker was in class when the last of the great Louds began. It was the day before a cleaning day. Tomorrow, they would be off from school. For the death of a man, Jimmy and his friends would receive a few extra hours of sleep. His father would work overtime down in IT. And tomorrow afternoon, his mother would insist they go up with his aunt and cousins to watch the bright clouds drift over the clear view of the hills until the sky turned dark as sleep.

Cleaning days were for staying in bed and for seeing family. They were for silencing unrest and quieting the Louds. That's what Mrs. Pearson said anyway, as she wrote rules from the Pact up on the blackboard. Her chalk clacked and squeaked and left dusty trails of all the whys for which a man could be put to death. Civics lessons on a day before a banishment. Warnings on the eve of graver warnings. Jimmy and his friends fidgeted in their seats and learned rules. Rules that very soon would no longer apply.

Jimmy was sixteen. Many of his friends would move off and shadow soon, but he would need another year of study to follow in his father's footsteps. Mrs. Pearson marked the chalkboard and moved on to the seriousness of choosing a life partner, of registering relationships according to the Pact. Sarah Jenkins turned in her seat and smiled back at Jimmy. Civics lessons and biology lessons intermingled, hormones spoken of alongside the laws that governed their excesses. Sarah Jenkins was cute. Jimmy hadn't thought so at the beginning of the year, but now he was seeing it. Sarah Jenkins was cute and would be dead in just a few hours.

Mrs. Pearson asked for a volunteer to read from the Pact, and that's when Jimmy's mother came forward for him. She burst in unannounced. An embarrassment. The end of Jimmy's world began with an embarrassment, with hot cheeks and a burning collar and everyone watching. His mom didn't say anything to Mrs. Pearson, didn't excuse herself. She just stormed through the door and hurried among the desks the way she walked when she was angry. She pulled Jimmy from his desk and led him out with his arm in her fist, causing him to wonder what he'd done this time.

Mrs. Pearson didn't know what to say. Jimmy looked back at his best friend Paul, caught him smiling behind his palm, and wondered why Paul wasn't in trouble, too. They rarely got in or out of fix alone, he or Paul. The only person to utter a word was Sarah Jenkins. "Your backpack!" she cried out, just before the classroom door slammed shut. Her voice was swallowed by the quiet.

There were no other mothers pulling their children down the hallway. If they came, it would be much later. Jimmy's father worked among the computers, and the computers were fast. Jimmy's father knew things before anyone else. This time, it was only moments before. There were others scrambling on the stairwell already. The noise was frightening. The landing outside the school level thrummed with the vibrations of distant and heavy traffic. A bolt in one of the railing's stanchions rattled as it worked its way loose. It felt like the silo would simply shake itself apart. Jimmy's mother took him by the sleeve and pulled him toward the spiral staircase like he was still twelve. She started down, even though home was up.

Jimmy pulled against her for a moment, confused. In the past year, he had grown bigger than his mom, as big as his father, and it was strange to be reminded that he had this power, that he was nearly a man. He had left his backpack and his friends behind. Where were they going? The banging from below seemed to be getting louder.

His mother turned as he gave resistance. Her eyes, he saw, were not full of anger. There was no glare, no furrowed brow, her eyes like tiny slits that tried to see less of him when he was bad. The

were wide and wet, shiny like the times Grandma and Grandpa had passed. The noise below was frightful, but it was the look in his mother's eyes that put the start of a very long fear into Jimmy's bones.

"What is it?" he whispered. He hated to see his mother upset. Something dark and empty—like the stray and tailless cat that nobody could catch in the upper apartments—clawed at his insides.

His mother didn't say. She turned and pulled him down the stairs, toward the thundering approach of something awful, and Jimmy realized at once that he wasn't in trouble at all.

They all were.

Jimmy had never felt the stairs tremble so. The entire spiral staircase seemed to sway. It turned rubber the way a length of charcoal appeared to bend between jiggled fingers, a parlor trick he learned in class. Though his feet rarely touched the steps—racing as he did to keep up with his mother—they tingled and felt numb from vibrations transmitted straight from steel to bone. He could barely feel the rail with his hand as it shook him to his elbow, and Jimmy tasted fear in his mouth like a drop of lemon on his tongue.

There were angry screams from below. Jimmy's mother shouted her encouragement, told him to hurry, and down the staircase they spiraled. They raced toward whatever bad thing was marching upward. "Hurry," she cried again, and Jimmy was more scared of the tremor in her voice than the shuddering of a hundred levels of steel. He hurried.

They passed twenty-nine. Thirty. People ran by in the opposite direction. A lot of people in coveralls the color of his father's. On the landing of thirty-one, Jimmy saw his first dead body since his grandpa's funeral. It looked like a tomato had been smashed on the back of the man's head. Jimmy had to skip over the man's arms, sticking out into the stairwell. He hurried after his mother while some of the red dripped through the landing and splattered and slicked the steps below.

At thirty-two, the shake of the stairs was so great that he could feel it in his teeth. His mother grew frantic as the two of them bumped past more and more people hurrying upward. Nobody seemed to stop for anyone else, even though all eyes were surely wide enough.

The stampede could be heard. There were loud voices among the ringing footfalls. Jimmy stopped and peered over the railing. Below, as the staircase augured into the depths, he could see the elbows and hands of a jostling crowd jutting out. He turned as someone thundered by. His mother called for him to hurry, for the crowd was already upon them, the traffic growing. Jimmy felt the fear and anger in the people racing past, and it made him want to flee upward with them. But there was his mother yelling for him to come along, and her voice cut through his fear and to the center of his being.

Jimmy shuffled down and took her hand. The embarrassment of earlier was gone. Now, he wanted her clutching him. The people who ran past shouted for them to go the other way. Several held pipes and lengths of steel. There were some who were bruised and cut; blood covered the mouth and chin of one man. A fight somewhere. Jimmy thought that only happened in the Deep. Others seemed to be simply caught up in it all. They were without weapons and looked over their shoulders as if a sinister thing were coming. It was a mob scared of a mob. Jimmy wondered what caused it. What was there to be afraid of?

Loud bangs rang out among the footfalls. A large man knocked into Jimmy's mom and sent her sprawling roughly against the railing. Jimmy held her arm, and the two of them stuck to the inner post as they made their way down to thirty-three. "One more to go," she told him, which meant it was his father they were after.

The growing throngs became a crush a few turns above thirty-two. People pressed four wide where there was comfortable room for two. Jimmy's wrist banged against the inner rail. He wedged himself between the post and those forcing their way up. Moving a few inches at a time—those beside him shoving, jostling, and grunting with effort—he felt certain they would all become stuck like that. People crowded in and he lost his grip on her arm. She surged forward while he remained pinned in place. He could hear her yelling his name below.

A large man, dripping with sweat, jaw slack with fear, was trying to force his way up the downbound side. "Move!" he yelled at Jimmy, as if there were anywhere to go. There was nowhere to go but up. He flattened himself against the center post as the man brushed past. There was a scream below.

the outer rail, a jolt through the crowd, a series of gasps, someone yelling “Hold on!” another yelling to let them go, and then a shriek that plummeted away and grew faint.

The wedge of bodies loosened a little. Jimmy felt sick to his stomach at the thought of someone falling so near to him. He wiggled free and climbed up onto the inner rail. Jimmy hugged the center post and balanced there, careful not to let his feet slip into the six inches of space between the rail and the post, that gap that kids liked to spit into.

Someone in the crowd immediately took his place on the steps. Shoulders and elbows knocked into his ankles. He remained crouched there, the undersides of the steps above him transmitting the scrap of shuffling boots from those overhead. He slid his feet along the narrow bar of steel made slick by the rubbing of thousands of palms and worked his way down the railing after his mom. His foot slipped into the gap by the center post. It seemed eager to swallow his leg. Jimmy righted himself, fearful of falling well of falling onto the lurching crowd, imagining how he could be tossed across their frenzied arms and shot out into space.

He was half a circuit around the inner post before he found his mom. She had been forced toward the outside by the crowds. “Mom!” he yelled. Jimmy held the edge of the steps above his head and reached out over the crowd for her. A woman in the middle of the steps screamed and disappeared, her head sinking below those who took her place. As they trampled her, the woman’s scream disappeared. The crowd surged upward. They carried Jimmy’s mom a few steps with them.

“Get to your father!” she screamed, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Jimmy!”
“Mom!”

Someone knocked into his shins, and he lost his grip on the stairs overhead. Jimmy waved his arms once, twice, in little circles, trying to keep his balance. He fell inward on the sea of heads and rolled. Someone punched him in the ribs as they protected themselves from his fall.

Another man threw Jimmy aside. He tumbled outward across an undulating platform of shoulders, elbows and hard skulls, and time slowed to a crawl. There was nothing but empty space beyond the crowd, now packed five wide. Jimmy tried to grab one of the hands pushing and shoving at him. His stomach lurched as the space grew nearer. The rail was below the screaming heads. The rail was invisible. He heard his mother’s voice, a screech recognizable above all the others, as she watched him helpless. Someone screamed to help that boy as he slid down the spiral of heads, rolling and grasping, and that boy they were screaming after was him.

Jimmy went into open space. He was thrown aside by those trying to protect themselves. He slipped between two people—a shoulder catching him in the chin—and he saw the railing at last. He clutched for it, got one hand wrapped around the bar. As his feet tumbled over his head, he was twisted around, his shoulder wrenched painfully, but he kept his grip. He hung there, clutching the railing with one hand and one of the vertical stanchions with the other, his feet dangling in the open air.

Someone’s hip pinched his fingers against the rail, and Jimmy cried out. Hands scrambled at his arms to help, but these people and their concerns were pushed upward by the madness below.

Jimmy tried to pull himself up. He looked down past his kicking feet at the crowds jostling beyond the rail below him. Two turns below was the landing to thirty-four. Again he tried to hoist himself, but there was a fire in his wrenched shoulder. Someone scratched his forearm as they tried to help, and then they too were gone, surging upward.

Peering down his chest, between his feet, Jimmy saw that the landing to thirty-four was packed. The crowd spilled out of the crowded stairs and tried to shove their way back in again. Someone barged out of the doors to the IT level with a cleaning suit on, helmet and everything. They threw themselves into the crowd, silvery arms swimming amid the flesh, everyone trying to get up, more of the bangs and shouts from down below, a sudden pop like the balloons from the bazaar but much, much louder.

Jimmy lost his grip on the railing—his shoulder was too injured to bear the weight any longer. He

clutched the stanchion with his other hand as he slid down, sweaty palm on steel adding one more squeal to the mob. He was left clutching the edge of the steps at the base of the stanchion. With his feet, he tried to feel for the railing one turn below, but all he felt were angry arms knocking his boots aside. His busted shoulder was alive with pain. He swung down on one hand, dangling for an instant.

Jimmy cried out in alarm. He cried out for his mother, remembering what she'd told him.

Get to your father.

There was no way he was getting back up on the stairwell. He didn't have the strength. There was no room. Nobody was going to help him. A surging crowd, and yet he hung there all alone.

Jimmy took a deep breath. He dangled for a moment longer, glanced down at the packed landing below him, and let go.

Two turns of the spiral staircase flew by. Two turns of wide eyes among the packed and crushing crowd. Jimmy felt the swoosh of wind on his neck grow and grow. His stomach flew up into his throat and there was a glimpse of a face turning in alarm to watch him plummet past.

Slamming into the crowd on the landing below, he hit with a sickening thud. Grunts escaped him and those he landed on. The man in the silver suit, faceless behind his small visor, was pinned beneath him.

People yelled at him. Others crawled out from underneath him. Jimmy rolled away, an electric shock in his ribs where he'd hit someone, a throbbing pain in one knee, his shoulder burning. Limping, he hurried toward the double doors as another person barged out, a bundle in their arms. They pulled to a halt at the sight of the crowd on the stairs. Someone yelled about the forbidden Outside, and nobody seemed to care. Tomorrow, there was to be a cleaning. Maybe it was too late. Jimmy thought of the extra hours his dad had been putting in. He wondered how many more people would be sent off for all this violence.

He turned back to the stairs and searched for his mom. The screams and shouts for people to move to get out of the way, made it impossible to hear. But her voice still rang in his ears. He remembered her last command, the plaintive look on her face, and hurried inside to find his father.

It was chaos beyond the doors, people running back and forth in the halls, loud voices arguing. Yani stood by the security gate, the large officer's hair matted with sweat. Jimmy ran toward him. He clutched his elbow to pin his arm to his chest and keep his shoulder from swinging. The sting in his ribs made it difficult to take in a full breath. His heart was still pounding from the rush of the long fall.

"Yani—" Jimmy leaned against the security gate and gasped for air. It seemed to take a moment for the guard to register his existence. Yani's eyes were wide; they darted back and forth. Jimmy noticed something in his hand, a pistol like the sheriff wore. "I need to get through," Jimmy said. "I need to find Dad."

The officer's wild eyes settled on Jimmy. Yani was a good man, a friend of his father's. His daughter was just two years younger than Jimmy. Their family came over for dinner around the holidays sometimes. But this was not that Yani. Some sort of terror seemed to have him by the throat.

"Yes," he said, bobbing his head. "Your father. Won't let me in. Won't let any of us in. But you—" It seemed impossible, but Yani's eyes grew wilder.

"Can you buzz me—?" Jimmy started to ask, nudging the turnstile.

Yani grabbed Jimmy by his collar. Jimmy was no small boy, was growing into his adult frame, but the massive guard practically lifted him over the turnstile like a sack of dirty laundry.

Jimmy struggled in the man's fierce grip. Yani pressed the end of the pistol against Jimmy's chest and dragged him down the hall. "I've got his boy!" he yelled. To whom, it wasn't clear. Jimmy tried to twist free. He was hauled past offices in disarray. The entire level looked cleared out. He thought of the prevailing color on the stairway early on, all the coveralls in silver and gray, and feared for a moment that his father had been among those he'd passed. The crowd had been littered with people from this level, as though they'd been leading the charge—or were the ones being chased.

"I can't breathe—" he tried to tell Yani. He got his feet beneath him, clutched the powerful man's forearm, anything to take the pinch off his collar.

"Where'd you assholes go?" Yani screamed, glancing up and down the halls. "I need a hand with this—"

There was a clap like a thousand balloons popping at once, a deafening roar. Jimmy felt Yani lurch

sideways as if kicked. The guard's grip relaxed, allowing the blood to rush back to Jimmy's head. Jimmy danced sideways as the large man tumbled over like a lush with too much gin in him. He crashed to the floor, gurgling and wheezing, the black pistol skittering across the tile.

"Jimmy!"

His father was at the end of the hall, half around a corner, a long black object under his armpit, crutch that didn't quite reach the floor. The end of this too-short crutch smoked as if it were on fire.

"Hurry, son!"

Jimmy cried out in relief. He stumbled away from Yani, who was writhing on the floor and making awful, inhuman sounds, and ran to his father, limping and clutching his arm.

"Where's your mother?" his dad asked, peering down the hall.

"The stairs—" Jimmy fought for a breath. His pulse had blurred into a steady thrum. "Dad, what's going on?"

"Inside. Inside." He pulled Jimmy down the hall toward a large door of stainless steel. There were shouts from around the corner. His father was on full alert; Jimmy could see the veins standing out on his dad's forehead, trickles of sweat beading beneath his thinning hair. His father keyed a code into the panel by the massive door. There was a whirring and a series of clunks before it opened a crack. His dad leaned into the door until there was room for the two of them to squeeze through. "C'mon, son. Move."

Down the hall, someone yelled at them to stop. Boots clomped their way. Jimmy squeezed through the crack, was worried his dad might close him up in there, all alone, but his old man worked his way through as well, then leaned on the inside of the door.

"Push!" he said.

Jimmy pushed. He didn't know why they were pushing, but he'd never seen his dad frightened before. It made his insides feel like jelly. The boots outside stomped closer. Someone yelled his father's name. Someone yelled for Yani.

As the steel door slammed shut, a slap of hands hit the other side. There was a whir and a clunk once more. His dad keyed something into the pad, then hesitated. "A number," he said, gasping for breath. "Four digits. Quick, son, a number you'll remember."

"One two one eight," Jimmy said. Level twelve and level eighteen. Where he lived and where he went to school. His father keyed in the digits. There were muffled yells from the other side, some ringing sounds from palms slapping futilely against the thick steel.

"Come with me," his father said. "We've got to keep an eye on the cameras, find your mother." He slung the black machine over his back, which Jimmy saw was a bigger version of the pistol. The engine was no longer smoking. His father hadn't kicked Yani from a distance; he had shot him.

Jimmy stood motionless while his father set off through the room of large black boxes. It dawned on him that he'd heard of the room. This was where his father had shadowed. The server room. The machines seemed to watch him as he stood there by the door. They were black sentries, quietly humming, standing guard.

Jimmy left the wall of stainless steel with its muffled slaps and muted shouts and hurried after his father. He had seen his dad's office before, back down the hall and around a bend, but never this place. The room was huge. He favored one leg as he ran the full length of it, trying to pick his way through the servers and keep track of where his dad had gone. At the far wall, he rounded the last black box and found his dad kneeling on the floor as if in prayer. Bringing his hands up around his neck, his dad dug inside his coveralls and came out with a thin black cord. Something silver danced on the end of it.

"What about Mom?" Jimmy asked. He wondered how they would let her in with the rest of the guys outside. He wondered why his father was kneeling on the floor like that.

"Listen carefully," his dad said. "This is the key to the silo. There are only two of these. Do not even

lose sight of it, okay?"

Jimmy watched as his father inserted the key into the back of one of the machines. "This is the comm hub," his dad said. Jimmy had no idea what a comm hub was, only that they were going to hide inside of one. That was the plan. Get inside one of the black boxes until the noise went away. His dad turned the key as if unlocking something, did this three more times in three more slots, then pulled the panel away. Jimmy peered inside and watched his dad pull a lever. There was a grinding noise in the floor nearby.

"Keep this safe," his father said. He squeezed Jimmy's shoulder and handed him the lanyard with the key. Jimmy accepted it and studied the jagged piece of silver amid the coil of black cord. One side of the key formed a circle with three wedges inside, the symbol of the silo. He teased the lanyard into a hoop and pulled it down over his head, then watched his dad dig his fingers into the grating by the feet. A rectangle of flooring was lifted out to reveal darkness underneath.

"Go on. You first," his father said. He waved at the hole in the ground and began unslinging the long pistol from his back. Jimmy shuffled forward a little and peered down. There were handholds on one wall. It was like a ladder, but much taller than any he'd ever seen.

"C'mon, son. We don't have much time."

Sitting on the edge of the grating, his feet hanging in the void, Jimmy reached for the steel rungs below and began the long descent.

The air beneath the floor was cool, the light dim. The horror and noise of the stairwell seemed to fade, and Jimmy was left with a sense of foreboding, of dread. Why was he being given this key? What was this place? He favored his injured arm and made slow but steady progress.

At the bottom of the ladder, he found a narrow passageway. There was a dim pulse of light at the far end. Looking up, he could see the outline of his father making his way down. The light above pulsed, as well, a red throbbing, an unpleasant sight.

"Through there," his father said, indicating the slender hallway. He left the long pistol leaned up against the ladder.

"Shouldn't we cover the—?" Jimmy pointed up.

"I'll get it on my way out. Let's go, son."

Jimmy turned and worked his way through the passage. There were wires and pipes running parallel across the ceiling. A light ahead beat crimson. After twenty paces or so, the passage opened on a space that reminded him of the school stockroom. There were shelves along two walls. Two desks as well—one with a computer, the other with an open book. His dad went straight for the computer. "You were with your mother?" he asked.

Jimmy nodded. "She pulled me out of class. We got separated on the stairs." He rubbed his sore shoulder while his father collapsed heavily into the chair in front of the desk. The computer screen was divided into four squares.

"Where did you lose her? How far up?"

"Two turns above thirty-four," he said, remembering the fall.

Rather than reach for the mouse or keyboard, his father grabbed a black box studded with knobs and switches. There was a wire attached to the box that trailed off toward the back of the monitor. In one corner of the screen, Jimmy saw a moving picture of three men standing over someone lying still on the floor. It was real. It was an image, a window, like the cafeteria wallscreen. He was seeing a view of the hallway they'd just left.

"Fucking Yani," his father muttered.

Jimmy's eyes fell from the screen to stare at the back of his dad's head. He'd heard his old man curse before, but never that word. His father's shoulders were rising and falling as he took deep breaths. Jimmy returned his attention to the screen.

The four windows had become twelve. No, sixteen. His father leaned forward, his nose just inches from the monitor, and peered from one square to the next. His old hands worked the black box, which clicked as the knobs and dials were adjusted. Jimmy saw in every square the turmoil he'd witnessed on the stairway. From rail to post, the treads were packed with people. They surged upward. His father traced the squares with a finger, searching.

"Dad—"

"Shhh."

"—what's going on?"

"We've had a breach," he said. "They're trying to shut us down. You said it was two turns above the landing?"

"Yeah. But she was being carried up. It was hard to move. I went over the rail—"

The chair squeaked as his father turned and sized him up. His eyes fell to Jimmy's arm, pinned against his chest. "You fell?"

"I'm okay. Dad, what's going on? Trying to shut what down?"

His father returned his focus to the screen. A few clicks from the black box, and the squares flickered and changed. They now seemed to be peering through slightly different windows.

"They're trying to shut down our silo," his father said. "The bastards opened our airlock, said our gas supply was tainted— Wait. There she is."

The many little windows became one. The view shifted slightly. Jimmy could see his mother pinned between a crush of people and the rail. Her mouth and chin were covered in blood. Gripping the rail and fighting for room, she lurched down one laborious step as the crowd coursed the other direction. It seemed as though everyone in the silo was trying to get topside. Jimmy's father slapped the table and stood abruptly. "Wait here," he said. He stepped toward the narrow passage, stopped, looked back at Jimmy, seemed to consider something. There was a strange shine in his eyes.

"Quick, now. Just in case." He hurried the other direction, past Jimmy, and through a door leading out of the room. Jimmy hurried after him, frightened, confused, and limping.

"This is a lot like our stove," his father said, patting an ancient thing in the corner of the next room. "Older model, but it works the same." There was a wild look in his father's eyes. He spun and indicated another door. "Storehouse, bunkroom, showers, all through there. Food enough to last for a hundred people for ten years. Be smart, son."

"Dad— I don't understand—"

"Tuck that key in," his father said, pointing at Jimmy's chest. Jimmy had left the lanyard outside of his coveralls. "Do not lose that key, okay? What's the number you said you'd never forget?"

"Twelve-eighteen," Jimmy said.

"Okay. Come in here. Let me show you how the radio works."

Jimmy took a last look around this second room. He didn't want to be left alone down there. That was what his father was doing, leaving him down between the levels, hidden in the concrete. The world felt heavy all around him.

"I'll come with you to get her," he said, thinking of those men slapping their hands against the greasy steel door. His father couldn't go alone, even with the big pistol.

"Don't open the door for anyone but me or your mother," his father said, ignoring his son's pleas. "Now watch closely. We don't have much time." He indicated a box on the wall. The box was locked behind a metal cage, but there were some switches and dials on the outside. "Power's here." His father tapped one of the knobs. "Keep turning this way for volume." His father did this, and the room was filled with an awful hiss. He pulled a device off the wall and handed it to Jimmy. It was attached to the noisy box by a wavy bit of stretchy cord. His dad grabbed another device from a rack on the wall. There were several of them there.

“Hear this? Hear this?” His father spoke into the portable device, and his voice replaced the low hiss from the box on the wall. ~~“Squeeze that button and talk into the mic.”~~ He pointed to the unit in Jimmy’s hands. Jimmy did as he was told.

“I hear you,” Jimmy said hesitantly, and it was strange to hear his voice emanate from the small unit in his father’s hands.

“What’s the number?” his dad asked.

“Twelve-eighteen,” Jimmy said.

“Okay. Stay here, son.” His father appraised him for a moment, then stepped forward and grabbed the back of Jimmy’s neck. He kissed his son on the forehead, and Jimmy remembered the last time his father had kissed him like that. It was right before he had disappeared for three months, before his father had become a shadow, back when Jimmy was a little boy.

“When I put the grate back in place, it’ll lock itself. There’s a handle below to re-open it. Are you okay?”

Jimmy nodded. His father glanced up at the red, pulsing lights and frowned.

“Whatever you do,” he said. “Do not open that door for anyone but me or your mother. Understand?”

“I understand.” Jimmy clutched his arm and tried to be brave. There was another of the long pistols leaning up against the desk with the open book. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t come as well. He reached for the black gun. “Dad—”

“Stay here,” his father said.

Jimmy nodded.

“Good man.” He rubbed Jimmy’s head and smiled, then turned and disappeared down that dark and narrow corridor. The lights overhead winked on and off, a red throbbing like a pulse. There was the distant clang of boots on metal rungs, swallowed by the darkness and soon silent. And then Jimmy Parker was alone.

Silo 1

A Third Shift

Donald couldn't feel his toes. His feet were bare and had yet to thaw. They were bare, but all around him were boots. Boots everywhere. Boots on the men pushing him through aisles of gleaming pods. Boots standing still while they took his blood and told him to pee. Stiff boots that squeaked in the linoleum as grown men shifted nervously in place. And up above, a frantic hall greeted them where men stomped by in boots, a hall laden with shouts and nervous, lowered brows. They pushed him to a small apartment and left him alone to clean up and thaw out. Outside his door, more boots clomped up and down, up and down. Hurrying, hurrying. A world of worry, confusion, and noise in which to wake.

Donald remained half asleep, sitting on a bed, his consciousness floating somewhere above the floor. Deep exhaustion gripped him. He was back to aboveground days, back when stirring and waking were two separate things. Mornings when he gained consciousness in the shower or behind the wheel on his way into work, long after he had begun to move. The mind lagged behind the body; it swam through the dust kicked up by numb and shuffling feet. Waking from decades of freezing cold felt like this. Dreams of which he was dimly aware slipped from his grasp, and Donald was eager to let them go.

The apartment they'd brought him to was down the hall from his old office. They had passed it along the way. That meant he was on the operations wing, a place he used to work. An empty pair of boots sat on the foot of the bed. Donald stared at them numbly. The name "Thurman" wrapped around the back of each ankle in faded black marker. Somehow, these boots were meant for him. They had been calling him Mr. Thurman since he woke up, but that was not who he was. A mistake had been made. A mistake or a cruel trick. Some kind of game.

Fifteen minutes to get ready. That's what they'd said. Ready for what? Donald sat on the double cot wrapped in a blanket, occasionally shivering. The wheelchair had been left with him. Thoughts and memories reluctantly assembled like exhausted soldiers roused from their bunks in the middle of the night and told to form ranks in the freezing rain.

My name is Donald, he reminded himself. He must not let that go. This was the first and most primal thing. Who he was.

Sensation and awareness gathered. Donald could feel the dent in the mattress the size and shape of another's body. This depression left behind by another tugged at him. On the wall behind the door, a crater stood where the knob had struck, where the door had been flung open. An emergency, perhaps. A fight or an accident. Someone barging inside. A scene of violence. Hundreds of years of stories he wasn't privy to. Fifteen minutes to get his thoughts together.

There was an ID badge on the bedside table with a barcode and a name. No picture, fortunately. Donald touched the badge, remembered seeing it in use. He left it where it was and rose shakily on his unsure legs, held the wheelchair for support, and moved toward the small bathroom.

There was a bandage on his arm where the doctor had drawn his blood. Doctor Wilson. He'd already given a urine sample, but he needed to pee again. Allowing his blanket to fall open, he stood over the toilet. The stream was pink. Donald thought he remembered it being the color of charcoal on his lab coat. When he finished, he stepped into the shower to wash off the stink of flesh in a cast too long. That film of death on the surface of something that refuses to die.

The water was hot, his bones cold. Donald shivered in a fog of steam. He opened his mouth and allowed the spray to hit his tongue and fill his cheeks. He scrubbed at the memory of poison on his skin, a memory that made it impossible to feel clean. For a moment, it wasn't the scalding water burning his skin—it was the air. The outside air. But then he turned off the flow of water and the burning lessened.

He toweled off and found the coveralls left out for him. They were too big. Donald shrugged them on anyway, the fabric rough against skin that had lain bare for a century. There was a knock at the door as he worked the zipper up to his neck. Someone called a name that was not his, a name scrawled around the backs of the boots lying perfectly still on the bed, a name that graced the badge sitting on the bedside table.

“Coming,” Donald croaked, his voice thin and weak. He slid the badge into his pocket and sat heavily on the bed. He rolled up his cuffs, all that extra material, before pulling the boots on one at a time. He fumbled with the laces, stood, and found that he could wiggle his toes in the space left behind by another.

Many years ago, Donald Keene had been elevated by a simple change in title. Power and importance had come in an instant. For all his life, he had been a man to whom few listened. A man with a degree, a string of jobs, a wife, a modest home. And then one night, a computer tallied stacks of ballots, and Donald Keene became Congressman Keene. He became one of hundreds with his hand on some great tiller—a struggle of hands pushing, pulling, and fitfully steering.

It had happened overnight, and it was happening again.

“How’re you feeling, sir?”

The man outside his apartment studied Donald with concern. The badge around his neck read “Eren.” He was the Ops Head, the one who manned the shrink’s desk down the hall, one among the pairs of boots that had woken him.

“Still groggy,” Donald said quietly. A gentleman in bright blue coveralls raced by and disappeared around the bend. A gentle breeze followed, a stir of air that smelled of coffee and perspiration, and then was gone.

“Are you good to walk? I’m sorry about the rush, but then I’m sure you’re used to it.” Eren pointed down the hall. “They’re waiting in the comm room.”

Donald nodded and followed. He remembered these halls being quieter, remembered them without the stomping and the raised voices. There were scuff marks on the walls that he thought were new. Reminders of how much time had passed.

In the comm room, all eyes turned to him. Someone was in trouble—Donald could feel it. Eren led him to a chair, and everyone watched and waited. He sat down and saw that there was a frozen image on the screen in front of him. A button was pressed, and the image lurched into motion.

Thick dust tumbled and swirled across the view, making it difficult to see. Clouds flew past on unruly sheets. But there, through the gaps, a figure in a bulky suit could be seen on a forbidding landscape, picking their ponderous way up a gentle swell, heading away from the camera. It was someone outside. Donald could sense that they shouldn’t be. He wondered if this was *him* out there, if he was the one in trouble. He had lumbered up a hill like that once before. The suit looked familiar. Perhaps they’d caught his foolish act on camera, his attempt to die a free man. And now they’d woken him up to show him this damning bit of evidence. Donald braced for the accusation, for his punishment—

“This was earlier this morning,” Eren said.

Donald nodded and tried to calm himself. This wasn’t him on the screen. He had been asleep for longer than a day, which meant this was not him. They didn’t know who he was. A surge of relief washed over him, a stark contrast to the nerves in the room and the shouts and hurrying boots in the hallway. Donald remembered being told that someone had disappeared over a hill when they’d pulled him from the pod. It was the first thing they’d told him. This was that person on the screen. This was

why he'd been woken. He licked his lips and asked who it was.

~~"We're putting a file together for you now, sir. Should have it soon. What we do know is that there was a cleaning scheduled in eighteen this morning. Except ..."~~

Eren hesitated. Donald turned from the screen and caught the Ops Head looking to the others for help. One of the operators—a large man in orange coveralls with wiry hair and headphones around his neck—was the first to oblige. "The cleaning didn't go through," the operator said flatly.

Several of the men in boots stiffened. Donald glanced around the room at the crowd that had packed into the small comm center, and he saw how they were watching him. Waiting on him. The Ops Head looked down at the floor in defeat. He appeared to be Donald's age, late thirties, and he was waiting to be chastised. These were the men in trouble, not him.

Donald tried to think. The people in charge were looking to *him* for guidance. Something was wrong with the shifts, something very wrong. He had worked with the man they thought he was, the man whose name graced his badge and his boots. A senator. Senator Thurman. It felt like yesterday that Donald had stood in that very same comm room and had felt that man's equal but for a moment. He had helped save a silo on his previous shift. And even though his head was in a mist and his legs were weak, he knew this charade was important to uphold. At least until he understood what was going on.

"What direction were they heading?" he asked, his voice a whisper. The others held perfectly still so that the rustle of their coveralls wouldn't compete with his words.

A man from the back of the room answered. "In the direction of seventeen, sir."

Donald composed himself. He remembered the Order, the danger of letting anyone out of sight. These people in their silos with a limited view of the world thought that they were the only ones alive. They lived in bubbles that must not be allowed to burst. "Any word from seventeen?" he asked.

"Seventeen is gone," the operator beside him said, dispensing more bad news with the same flat voice.

Donald cleared his throat. "Gone?" He searched the faces of the gathered. Foreheads creased with worry. Eren studied Donald, and the operator beside him adjusted his bulk in his seat. On the screen the cleaner disappeared over the top of the hill and out of view. "What did this cleaner *do*?" he asked.

"It wasn't her," Eren said.

"Seventeen was shut down shifts ago," the operator said.

"Right, right." Donald ran his fingers through his hair. His hand was trembling.

"You feeling all right?" the operator asked. He glanced at the Ops Head, then back to Donald. He knew. Donald sensed that this man in orange with the headphones around his neck knew something was wrong.

"Still a bit woozy," Donald explained.

"He's only been up for half an hour," Eren told the operator.

There were murmurs from the back of the room.

"Yeah, okay." The operator settled back into his seat. "It's just ... he's the Shepherd, you know? I pictured him waking up chewing nails and farting tacks."

Someone just behind Donald's chair chuckled.

"So what're we supposed to do about the cleaner?" a voice asked. "We need permission before we can send anyone out after her."

"She can't have gotten far," someone said.

The comm engineer on the other side of Donald spoke up. He had one side of his headphones still on, the other side pulled off so he could follow the conversation. A sheen of sweat stood out on his forehead. "Eighteen is reporting that her suit was modified," he said. "There's no telling how long it'll last. She could still be out there, Sirs."

This caused a chorus of whispers. It sounded like wind striking a visor, peppering it with sand.

Donald stared at the screen, at a lifeless hill as seen from Silo 18. The dust came in dark waves. He remembered what it had felt like out there on that landscape, the difficulty moving in one of those suits, the hard slog up that gentle rise. Who was this cleaner, and where did she think she was going?

“Get me the file on this cleaner as soon as you can,” he said. The others fell still and stopped their whispering arguments. Donald’s voice was commanding because of its quietude, because of who they thought he was. “And I want whatever we have on seventeen.” He glanced at the operator, whose brow was furrowed in either worry or suspicion. “To refresh my memory,” he added.

Eren rested a hand on the back of Donald’s chair. “What about the protocols?” he asked. “Shouldn’t we scramble a drone or send someone after her? Or shut down eighteen? There’s going to be violence over there. We’ve never had a cleaning not go through before.”

Donald shook his head, which was beginning to clear. He looked down at his hand and remembered tearing off a glove once, there on the outside. He shouldn’t be alive. How was he alive? He wondered what Thurman would do, what the old man would order. But he wasn’t Thurman. Someone had to take his place once that people like Donald should be in charge. And now he was.

“We don’t do anything just yet,” he said, coughing and clearing his throat. “She won’t get far.”

The others stared at him with a mixture of shock and acceptance. There finally came a handful of nods. They assumed he knew best. He had been woken up, after all. It was all according to protocol. The system could be trusted—it was designed to just *go*. All anyone needed to do was their own job and let others handle the rest.

It was a short walk from his apartment to the central offices, which Donald assumed was the point. reminded him of a CEO's office he'd once seen with an adjoining bedroom. What had seemed impressive at first became sad after realizing why it was there.

He rapped his knuckles on the open door marked *Office of Psychological Services*. He used to think of these people as shrinks, that they were here to keep others sane. Now he knew that they were in charge of the insanity. All he saw on the door anymore was "OPS." Operations. The Head of the Heads of the Heads. The office across the hall was where the busywork landed. Donald was reminded how each silo had a mayor for shaking hands and keeping up appearances, just as the world of yore had Presidents who came and went. Meanwhile, it was the men in shadows whose term limits were bounded by gravestones who wielded true power. That this silo operated by the same deceit should not be surprising; it was the only way such men knew to run anything.

He kept his back to his former office and knocked a little louder. Eren looked up from his computer and a hard mask of concentration melted into a wan smile. "Come in," he said as he rose from his seat. "You need the desk?"

"Yes, but stay." Donald crossed the room gingerly, his legs still half asleep, and noticed that while his own whites were crisp, Eren's were crumpled with the wear of a man well into his six-month shift. Even so, the Ops Head appeared vigorous and alert. His beard was neatly trimmed by his neck and only peppered with gray. He helped Donald into the plush chair behind the desk.

"We're still waiting for the full report on this cleaner," Eren said. "The Head of eighteen warned that it's a thick one."

"Priors?" Donald imagined anyone sent to clean would have priors.

"Oh, yeah. The word is that she was a sheriff, but I only heard that from Gable across the hall. Not sure if I'm buying it. Of course, it wouldn't be the first lawman to want out."

"But it would be the first time anyone's gotten out of sight," Donald said.

"From what I understand, yeah." Eren crossed his arms and leaned against the desk. "Nearest anyone got before now was that gentleman you stopped. I reckon that's why protocol says to walk you. I've heard some of the boys refer to you as the Shepherd." Eren laughed.

Donald cleared his throat into his fist. He was loath to admit that he had been more the loose shepherd than the shepherd. "Tell me about seventeen," he said, changing the subject. "Who was on shift when that silo went down?"

"We can look it up." Eren waved a hand at the keyboard.

"My, uh, fingers are still a little tingly," Donald said. He slid the keyboard toward Eren, who hesitated before getting off the desk. The Ops Head bent over the keys and pulled up the shift list with a shortcut. Donald tried to follow along with what he was doing on the screen. These were files he didn't have access to, menus he was unfamiliar with.

"Looks like it was Cooper. I think I came off a shift once as he was coming on. Name sounds familiar. I sent someone down to get those files as well."

"Good, good."

Eren raised his eyebrows. "You went over the seventeen reports on your last shift, right?"

Donald had no clue if Thurman had been up since then. For all he knew, the old man had been awake when it happened. "It's hard to keep everything straight," he said, which was solid truth. "How many years has it been?"

"That's right. You were in the deep freeze, weren't you?"

Donald supposed he was. Eren tapped the desk with his finger, and Donald's gaze drifted to the man

across the hall, sitting behind his computer. He remembered what it had been like to be that person over there, wondering what the doctors in white were discussing across the way. Now he was one of those in white.

“Yes, I was in the deep freeze,” Donald said. They wouldn’t have moved his body, would they? Erskine or someone could’ve simply changed entries in a database. Maybe it was that simple. Just a quick hack, two reference numbers transposed, and one man lives the life of another. “I like to be near my daughter,” he explained.

“Yeah, I don’t blame you.” The wrinkles in Eren’s brow smoothed. “I’ve got a wife down there. I still make the mistake of visiting her first thing every shift.” He took a deep breath, then pointed at the screen. “Seventeen was lost over thirty years ago. I’d have to look it up to be exact. The cause is still unclear. There wasn’t any sign of unrest leading up to it, so we didn’t have much time to react. There was a cleaning scheduled, but the airlock opened a day early and out of sequence. Could’ve been a glitch or tampering. We just don’t know. Sensors reported a gas purge in the lower levels and then a riot surging up. We pulled the plug as they were scrambling out of the airlock. Barely had time.”

Donald recalled Silo 12. That facility had ended in similar fashion. He remembered people scattering on the hillside, a plume of white mist, some of them turning and fighting to get back inside. “No survivors?” he asked.

“There were a few stragglers. We lost the radio feed and the cameras but continued to put in a routine call over there, just in case anyone was in the safe room.”

Donald nodded. By the book. He remembered the calls to 12 after it went down. He remembered nobody answering.

“Someone did pick up the day the silo fell,” Eren said. “I think it was some young shadow or technician. I haven’t read the transcripts in forever.” He paged down on the shift report. “It looks like we sent the collapse codes soon after that call, just as a precaution. So even if the cleaner gets over there, she’s gonna find a hole in the ground.”

“Maybe she’ll keep walking,” Donald said. “What silo sits on the other side? Sixteen?”

Eren nodded.

“Why don’t you go give them a call.” Donald tried to remember the layout of the silos. These were the kinds of things he’d be expected to know. “And get in touch with the silos on either side of seventeen, just in case our cleaner takes a turn.”

“Will do.”

Eren stood, and Donald marveled again at being treated as if he were in charge. It was already beginning to make him feel as if he really were. Just like being elected to Congress, all that awesome responsibility foisted on him overnight—

Eren leaned across the desk and hit two of the function keys on the keyboard, logging himself out of the computer. The Ops Head hurried out into the hall while Donald stared at a login and password prompt.

Suddenly, he felt very much less in charge.

Across the hall, a man sat behind a desk that once had belonged to Donald. Donald peered up at the man and found him peering right back. It was as though someone had installed a funhouse mirror in the hall, or some kind of tear in the cosmos had ripped open, allowing him to see into the past. That was him on the other side. He used to gaze across that hallway in the opposite direction. And when this man in his former office—who was heavier than Donald and had less hair—likely sat there playing a game of solitaire, Donald struggled with a puzzle of his own.

His old login of Troy with his passkey of 2156 wouldn't work. He tried old ATM codes, and they were just as useless. He sat, thinking, worried about performing too many incorrect attempts. It felt like just yesterday that this account had worked. But a lot had happened since then. A lot of shifts. And someone had tampered with them.

It pointed back to Erskine, the old Brit left behind to coordinate the shifts. Erskine had taken a liking to him. But what was the point? What was he expecting Donald to do?

For a brief moment, he thought about standing up and walking out into the hallway and saying, "I am not Thurman or Shepherd or Troy. My name is Donald, and I'm not supposed to be here."

He should tell the truth. He should rage with the truth, as senseless as it would seem to everyone else. "I am Donald!" he felt like screaming, just as old man Hal once had. They could pin his boots to a gurney and put him back to glorious sleep. They could send him out to the hills. They could bury him like they'd buried his wife. But he would scream and scream until he believed it himself, that he was who he thought he was.

Instead, he tried Erskine's name with his own passkey. Another red warning that the login was incorrect, and the desire to out himself passed as swiftly as it had come.

He studied the monitor. There didn't seem to be a trigger for the number of incorrect tries, but how long before Eren came back? How long before he had to explain that he couldn't log in? Maybe he could go across the hall, interrupt the Silo Head's game of solitaire, and ask him to retrieve his keys. He could blame it on being groggy and newly awake. That excuse had been working thus far. He wondered how long he could cling to it.

On a lark, he tried the combination of Thurman and his own passkey of 2156.

The login screen disappeared, replaced by a main menu. The sense that he was the wrong person deepened. Donald wiggled his toes. The extra space in his loose boots gave him comfort. On the screen, a familiar envelope flashed. Thurman had messages.

Donald clicked the icon and scrolled down to the oldest unread message, something that might explain how he had arrived there, something from Thurman's prior shift. The dates went back centuries; it was jarring to watch them scroll by. Population reports. Automated messages. Replies and forwards. He saw a message from Erskine, but it was just a note about the overflow of deep freeze on one of the lower cryopod levels. The useless bodies were stacking up, it seemed. Another message farther down was starred as important. Victor's name was in the senders column, which caught Donald's attention. It had to be from before Donald's second shift. Victor was already dead the last time Donald had been woken. He opened the message.

Old friend,

I'm sure you will question what I'm about to do, that you will see this as a violation of our pact, but I see it more as a restructuring of the timeline. New facts have emerged that push things up a bit. For me, at least. Your time will come.

I have in recent days discovered why one of our facilities has seen more than its share of turmoil

There is someone there who remembers, and she both disturbs and confirms what I know of humanity. Room is made that it might be filled. Fear is spread because the clean-up is addicting. Seeing this much of what we do to one another becomes more obvious. It explains the great quandary of why the most depressed societies are those with the fewest wants. Arriving at the truth, I feel an urge from older times to synthesize a theory and present it to roomfuls of professionals. Instead, I have gone to a dusty room to procure a gun.

You and I have spent much of our adult lives scheming to save the world. Several adult lives, in fact. That deed now done, I ponder a question more dire, one that I fear I cannot answer and that we were never brave nor bold enough to pose. And so I ask you now, dear friend: Was this world worth saving to begin with? Were we worth saving?

This endeavor was launched with that great assumption taken for granted. Now I ask myself for the first time. And while I view the cleansing of the world as our defining achievement, this business of saving humanity may have been our gravest mistake. The world may be better off without us. I have no will to decide. I leave that to you. The final shift, my friend, belongs to you, for I have worked none last. I do not envy you the choice you will have to make. The pact we formed so long ago haunts me more than ever before. And I feel that what I'm about to do ... that this is the easy way.

-Vincent Wayne DiMarco

Donald read the last paragraph again. It was a suicide note. Thurman knew. All along, while Donald wrestled with Victor's fate on his last shift, Thurman knew. He had this note in his possession and didn't share it. And Donald had almost grown convinced that Victor had been murdered. Unless the note was a fake— But no, Donald shook that thought away. Paranoia like that could spiral out of control and know no end. He had to cling to something.

He backed out of the message with a heavy heart and scrolled up the list, looking for some other clue. Near the top of the screen was a message with the subject line: *Urgent - The Pact*. That word had appeared more than once in Victor's note. Donald clicked the message open. The body was short. He read, simply:

Wake me when you get this.

— Anna

(Locket 20391102)

Donald blinked rapidly at the sight of her name. He glanced across the hall at the silo Head and listened for footsteps heading his way. His arms were covered in gooseflesh. He rubbed them, wiped the bottoms of his eyes, and read the note a second time.

It was signed Anna. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't to him. It was a note between daughter and father. There was no send date listed, which was curious, but it was sorted near the very top. Perhaps it was from before their last shift together? Maybe the two of them had been away recently. Donald studied the number at the bottom. 20391102. It looked like a date. An old date. Inscribed on a locket, perhaps. Something meaningful between the two of them. And what of the mention of this Pact? That was the name the silos used for their constitutions. What was urgent about that?

Footsteps in the hallway broke his concentration. Eren rounded the corner and covered the office a few steps. He circled the desk and placed two folders by the keyboard, then glanced at the screen. Donald fumbled with the mouse to minimize the message. "H-how'd it go?" Donald asked. "You got through to everyone?"

"Yeah." Eren sniffed and scratched his beard. "The Head of sixteen took it badly. He's been in the

position a long time. Too long, I think. He suggested closing down his cafeteria or shutting off the wallscreen, just in case.”

“But he’s not going to.”

“No, I told him as a last resort. No need to cause a panic. We just wanted them to have a heads-up.”

“Good, good.” Donald liked someone else thinking. It took the pressure off of him. “You need your desk back?” He made a show of logging off.

“No, actually, you’re on if you don’t mind.” Eren checked the clock in the corner of the computer screen. “I can take the afternoon shift. How’re you feeling, by the way? Any shakes?”

Donald shook his head. “No. I’m good. It gets easier every time.”

Eren laughed. “Yeah. I’ve seen how many shifts you’ve taken. And a double a while back. Don’t envy you at all, friend. But you seem to be holding up well.”

Donald coughed. “Yeah,” he said. He picked up the topmost of the two folders and read the tabs. “This is what we have on Seventeen?”

“Yep. The thick one is your cleaner.” He tapped the other folder. “You might want to check in with the Head of eighteen today. He’s pretty shaken up, is shouldering all the blame. Name’s Bernard. There are already grumblings from his lower levels about the cleaning not going through, so he’s looking at a very probable uprising. I’m sure he’d like to hear from you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Oh, and he doesn’t have an official second right now. His last shadow didn’t work out, and he’s been putting off a replacement. I hope you don’t mind, but I told him to get on that. Just in case.”

“No, no. That’s fine.” Donald waved his hand. “I’m not here to get in your way.” He didn’t add that he had absolutely no clue why he was there at all.

Eren smiled and nodded. “Great. Well, if you need anything, call me. And the guy across the hall goes by Gable. He used to hold down a post over here but couldn’t cut it. Opted for a wipe instead of a deep freeze when given the choice. Good guy. Team player. He’ll be on for a few more months and I can get you anything you need.”

Donald peered across the hall at the man in the funhouse mirror. He remembered the vacuum sensation of manning that desk, the hollow pit that had filled him. How Donald had ended up there had seemed unusual, a last-minute switch with his friend Mick. It never occurred to him how all the other desks were selected. To think that any might volunteer for such an empty post filled him with sadness.

Eren stuck out his hand. Donald studied it a moment, then accepted it.

“I’m really sorry we had to wake you like this,” he said, pumping Donald’s hand. “But I have to admit, I’m damn sure glad you’re here.”

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