The door to the pod hissed open, and Tre stared at his new classroom,

an uncertain fl icker in his eyes. Children sat clustered around tables

in small groups. In the centre of each lay a pile of building bricks, white

as hospital walls. Tre watched as the students dipped into the piles,

searching for pieces they wanted as the bricks rattled and clattered in

little avalanches. In the corner, at a table with its own white mound,

a girl sat alone. She had dark hair and dark circles under her eyes.

The Examiner, Miss Friend, ushered Tre into the room. His fresh jumpsuit

covered him like a food wrapper, the fabric stiff and uncomfortable. Tre saw

the builders stop and look up, but only for a moment. They were barely

curious about the newcomer.

“This is Tre,” said Miss Friend,

“transferred from Region G. Say hello.”

A few of the children nodded.

The dark-haired girl in the corner briefly

met Tre’s gaze, then dropped her eyes

back to the mound of white.

“Probably his fi rst time in a proper

classroom,” whispered one girl to

another, just loud enough for Tre to hear.

Miss Friend pointed to a spare chair

beside them.

“You’ll make him feel at home, won’t

you, Dove? Zyn?”

Miss Friend smiled encouragingly,

and Tre sat down. “I’ll just check on the

other classes. Back soon.” She left, the

door sliding fi rmly shut behind her.

Aware of Dove’s watchful eyes, Tre

selected a few bricks and cautiously

began piecing them together. The class

chatted, laughing occasionally, ignoring

the drone of the city, stifl ing and grey

outside the thick windows.

“Pace is the fastest,” explained

Dove, indicating a big boy across the

room. She clicked more bricks onto

her construction. “But Luna’s the allrounder.”

She looked admiringly at the

girl with blonde hair who sat beside her.

“She so is,” agreed Zyn.

Tre looked over at Luna. The corners

of the girl’s mouth lifted in an unfriendly

smile.

“What was it like in Region G?” Dove

asked. “Was it awful?”

Tre stiffened. “It was fine,” he said

quietly.

“No offence, but there’s no way I’d

live there,” Luna said.

In his mind, Tre caught a glimpse

of the cabin by the water, of the wind

chimes made from driftwood, the string

gently rattling. Out the back, he saw the

swan plants, a flutter of butterflies.

It was fi ne,” he said again.

“Why are you here if it was so fine?”

asked Zyn.

“You know, I bet his parents were

Hushed,” whispered Dove.

Tre didn’t say anything. He forced a

few more bricks together, holding it in,

but his eyes still misted over.

“I knew it!” she hissed triumphantly.

“Hushed … shame!” said Luna, the

quiet smirk fi nding its way back onto her

face. Her tower was taller than she was.

The girl stood up so she could carry on

building, her hands moving swiftly, her

pony tail gently swaying.

“Luna always builds the best things,”

whispered Zyn, staring with dismay at

her own construction.

“Yes, you mentioned that,” said Tre,

though carefully, so as not to appear

rude. “So when does class start?”

Dove and Zyn looked at each other,

ridicule dancing in their eyes. They both

began to giggle. “This is class, silly,”

Zyn finally managed to say.

“I knew it was his first time,” said Dove.

Tre blushed and stared down at his

hands. “It was different at home,” he

stammered. “We didn’t do this kind of

thing.”

“So backwards,” snorted Luna.

Tre managed another anxious look

around the pod. They were all building

towers. All of them. Tall and white.

There were no shapes, no colours,

nothing remotely original. Each tower

was merely trying to be taller than the

one beside it: a relentless skyline that

went up and up. It was impossible to

tell why Dove admired Luna’s so much.

There was nothing that distinguished it,

nothing at all. Tre felt his fear rising.

Tre looked over at the girl in the corner.

She was staring ahead, blank despair in her

eyes. She hadn’t made a tower. She hadn’t made

anything.

“That’s Muse,” said Dove. “They Hushed her too.”

“Poor Muse,” said Zyn cheerily.

Tre kept looking at Muse. Was that what

happened when you were Hushed – your spark

was wrenched from inside?

He remembered his parents’ faces as the

Voids shoved them onto the transport – the look

in their eyes. It was the last time he’d seen them.

He’d only been allowed one short phone call since,

and something had changed. His parents hadn’t

sounded the same. Tre wiped his eyes with the

back of his hand and carried on building.

After a time, Miss Friend swished back into

the room, tablet in hand. She checked on the

children’s progress, picking her way through the

work stations. Tre hurriedly clicked more bricks

into place.

“Not bad, Pace, still a way to go.”

“Milo. Nice work. Keep it up.”

“That could be sturdier, Star, don’t you think?”

Tre watched as Miss Friend stopped beside

Luna, who now had to stand on tiptoes to add the

fi nishing touches to her construction.

“Oh, my. Now that is the most impressive

building,” Miss Friend said. “Stop and take a look

at Luna’s work please, class.”

“That is just so tall and so straight,” said Zyn.

“Way to go,” said Dove.

The class closed in around Tre like a

net. He stopped building and looked at

what he had done. He had made a boat.

An old-fashioned row boat. Its bow rose

proudly as if it was carving through real

water. “What is that?” Dove asked with a

grimace.

“Doesn’t look anything like a tower,”

said Luna.

“It’s a boat – only it’s not fi nished,”

said Tre. “My dad made one like this,

from real wood too.” Tre’s voice died

away. “But that was before –”

“Well, we don’t make that sort of

thing here,” snapped Miss Friend.

She gestured at the other tables with

a wave of her tablet.

“Crazy,” said Luna, shaking her head.

Miss Friend changed her approach.

She softened her tone and smiled.

“You’re new here, Tre. You weren’t to

know. Break it up and start again.”

Tre began to pull the bricks apart.

Piece by piece, the boat disappeared.

“That’s better,” said Miss Friend.

“We don’t need another Muse.”

“You should have seen the things

she used to make,” said Dove. “She was

totally out there.”

“And now she doesn’t say a word,”

added Zyn.

“Hush, little baby …,” hummed Luna,

and the girls laughed.

Tre couldn’t bear to listen. The fear

came once more, stronger this time.

He got to his feet and went over to Muse.

He was desperate to see a glimmer,

some life in her eyes. Something that

told him he wasn’t alone. But she just

stared ahead.

Then Tre saw it. Spelt out in front

of Muse on the table. A single word:

“Come away from there, Tre,” hissed

Miss Friend.

Luna blushed. “Thanks, guys.” Then the smile

dropped away from her face. She pointed at Tre’s

bricks. “Miss Friend, should he be doing that?”