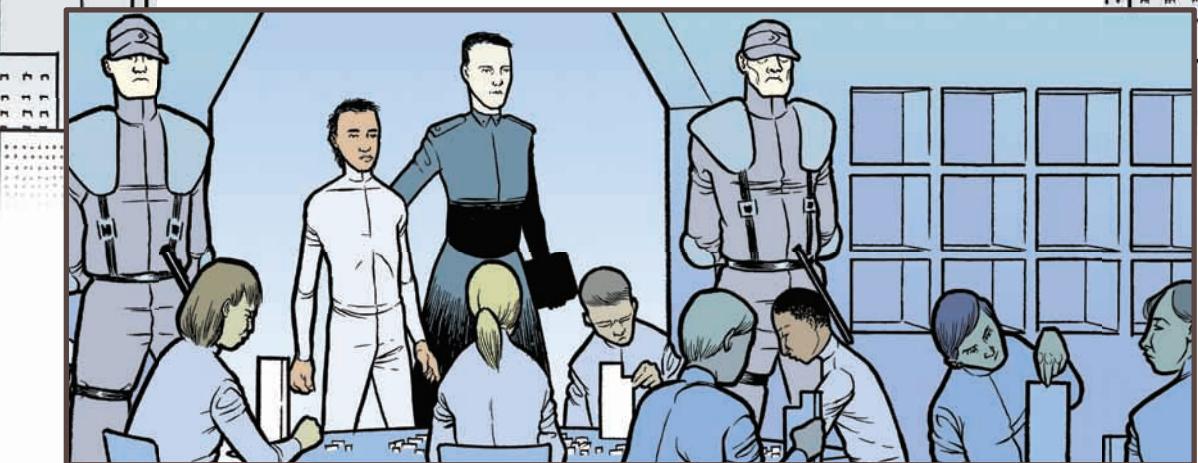


The door to the pod hissed open, and Tre stared at his new classroom, an uncertain flicker in his eyes. Children sat clustered around tables in small groups. In the centre of each lay a pile of building bricks, white as hospital walls. Tre watched as the students dipped into the piles, searching for 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 first 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 firmly 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, stifling 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 all-rounder." 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 fine," 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 finding 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 finishing 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.

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?"



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 finished," 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:

FUN

"Come away from there, Tre," hissed Miss Friend.

To be continued ...

Hushed

by Paul Mason

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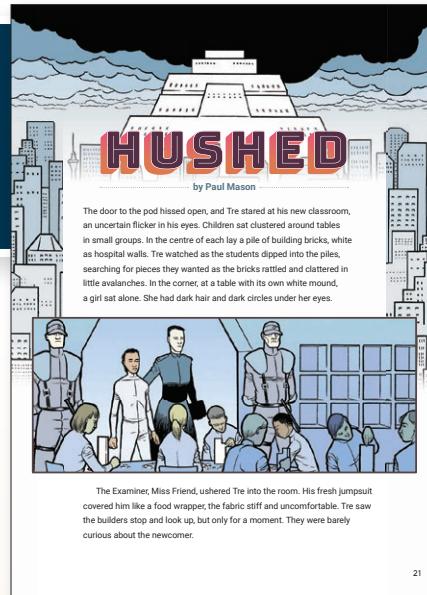
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