

Caretaker

There are no stars anymore. I can't even remember what they looked like, even when I close my eyes and dream what little I can. I rummaged around in another crew cabin and found some glow-in-the-dark paint. For a while, every time the lights went dim and the vault went dark, little white dots looked down on me from the stained-mattress sky above. The paint's faded now. I think about reapplying it but never do. Seems I can never find the will. Things do that down here, just sort of shuffle in and out. I find something once long gone and I just shrug. I lose something I can't live without, I just shrug. All but the seeds, my precious cargo.

It's the only thing I keep in mind each day. When I'm done I can go back to looking up where the false stars used to be and drift off into fragmented dreams. Every day I pull on the jumpsuit, mask, and mitts. Every day I go back and walk up the rows of metal racks and plastic bins. Every day I expect to find one missing, or burst open, or out of place. Every day I swear there's someone else down here with me.

Radio went out some time between my exchange shipping out and me shipping in. He reported trouble with the circuits before the shuttle took him home. There might be a way to fix it. That's what I guess anyways. But, suppose I got hold of someone, what would I say? So, I don't know how many other vaults are online still. Some starless nights I figure I must be the only one, but then hours later the lights come back on sure and steady as any sunrise. I tell myself on my morning rambles that if I'm still here, then someone else is too. Then the day goes on, and each hour grinds that hope away until the lights dim again.

John Wolf

That's when I hear things. No shadows creeping around corners or whispering under doors, I barely even see shadows anymore. Bright light hurts my eyes. But I hear things. Beyond the whisper of the fans and vents keeping me and the endless row of seeds on permanent chill, there isn't much else to hear. One day, somewhere around number fifty I want to say, I heard footsteps one or two aisles over from me. I nearly messed my jumpsuit. Naturally, whoever it was vanished once I scrambled over there. Maybe they're eating the seeds. Whoever they are, whatever they want, they aren't too friendly. They never want to say anything on the days I call out. I really can't be sure if I just want someone to talk with, or if I still feel the need to do my job and protect this place.

I've got almost all the seed names memorized now. *Capsicum annum*, *Juglans nigra*, *Narcissus candidissimus*, *Zostera marina*. They come as easily as the names of friends used to. Each sample is sealed in a dry pack, preserved for all time until the shit stops hitting the fan. The propaganda put it more eloquently I'm sure—probably...maybe. I think the past stays fuzzy partly from the constant routine between vaults and partly from my own mind trying to save itself. If I could clearly remember what the end of it all really looked like, the screaming would echo up and down the rows. Whoever my mysterious friend/intruder is would hear it echo until my throat clenched shut.

I wonder who it is. How did they even get in here? The last rotation is way overdue. Since the first week of no-shows, I have stayed camped out near the vault entrance, the only way in and out, but no soul in sight. No one came in, there's no way they could have without me letting them in. Maybe everyone left doesn't have any souls anymore. They'd have to be to do what we've done.

Maybe that's why you should just say fuck it and light a flare.

John Wolf

I balk at that idea.

Nothing's over my shoulder, but more cold, blank steel leading deeper and deeper into the mountain. Noah's Ark under one hundred feet of rock. I think about what it would look like on fire. The oxygen rich air would catch the spark, billowing flame from one end of the tunnel to the other. The chemist in me imagines spectacular blues, greens, and flashes of purple as alloys catch fire and split apart into their simpler forms. Maybe the seeds would explode in their cases like popcorn. Popcorn for me to watch the grand finale.

There's nothing left to do but watch. It's not like there's anything worth saving in all this mess.

I get up from the bunk and walk down to storage. Inventory and readings are finished for this day, but I go deeper in anyway. Maybe I can catch my mysterious friend. Whoever they are, they must be starving. There is nothing to eat down here but my issued rations (locked away with passcode) and the seeds (all sealed and accounted for). But I have to see them, I have to make sure.

It'll take me another few hours. My transport is parked in the corner. It's little more than a scooter like they used to cart old ladies around in airports when people had regular worries like planes to catch. I leave it. Maybe the walk will do me good. Just the seeds, the dark, and me.

And me.

Walking in the cool dark should clear my head. Only it does the opposite. Here deep below the earth, like an unsprouted seed myself, the mountain above crushes down. My shoulders sag halfway through my rounds.

Light them up, take a walk outside, the cold will do the rest.

John Wolf

That idea brushes soft and soothing, like a hand against my cheek. How long has it been since I felt that?

Too long. Think you'll be less cracked as time goes on?

I don't even remember what she looks like. Just barely remember her hand. That phantom feeling sits there as a reminder. When she said goodbye.

Exactly. What's to wait for here? This shift's the last one, nobody's coming.

I walk a little faster now. I finally notice I'm not wearing my shoes as I pass the perennials. This far down into the rows and stacks, I only hear my ragged breath and the slap of my feet on the bare cement. In the quickening pace, my legs short out before my brain can send the right command and I topple onto the floor. A blast of pain goes up my elbow when I catch myself, my nose inches away from crashing into the concrete.

Those might be footfalls slowing behind me, fading, trying to cover themselves. Could be echoes. I don't think I know anymore. Don't know anything anymore.

Don't even know if I'm alone.

A pair of feet wait at the end of the row. I look up, somewhere in the varieties of wildflowers from Central Europe. I wonder: Is there anything left of what was once Central Europe? Or am I looking at the last piece of it? I shake my head, focus again. The feet do not move.

Nothing but ghosts anymore.

I suppose that's right. Ghosts of plants long gone, from places long gone.

No! I creep up on the shoes. My own shoes. I don't even remember putting them here. At first I think maybe I did, just on my last round. Then I study my feet under the dull light. The toenails are blackened with dust and dirt, my soles cracked like ancient leather.

John Wolf

My mind's unspooling. Can't even deny it now.

If I can't tell how much time's gone by, how can I know there won't be a next shift?

These feet have been down here a lot longer than usual. I feel my face. The tangled beard covers nearly all of it.

I run back to the living quarters, back to where the lights are on overhead but there are no stars in the sky. My fingers, darkened and dirty as my worn feet, crawl over the keyboard. I have to enter my passcode once, twice, three times.

The warning pops up the fourth time: INCORRECT PASSCODE, LOCKOUT IMMINENT.

It hurts to think back so far. It almost feels mad to imagine a time without madness. I search through memories sitting old and dusty in my mind like the shelves of seeds below. I can remember all the names I care for, that what remains of the world hopes for, but I can't recall her name from the dark of my mind.

Is it her name? Is she even real? Or ever was?

No, not just her name. Initials! I find the *K*. Then the *C*. Then the *S*.

Pretty pathetic, can't even recall the full name.

I could if you wanted.

But something maybe doesn't want to? Something, maybe the sensible side, knows enough is enough? Time to quit hugging the dead world and just join it outside in the cold bite of nuclear winter.

"Take care," the words are a croaking semblance of a human command. I whirl around, expecting to see my mysterious, longtime roommate down here in the dark. Nothing. No fading footfalls, no movement out the corner of my eye.

John Wolf

Just me.

And me.

“Take care,” I say again. I can’t blame myself for not recognizing the voice. It’s been so long since I spoke with anyone, since the rumblings in the sky and on the news, since I said goodbye to her and she gave me those two words of advice.

Take care.

I look back over into the seed vault again. Take care. She told me that, KCS, the last person I talked to in...how long? I remember the numbers that go with her initials now. The last day we spoke, the eve of the world’s mental collapse.

My fingers move slowly still, but I’m in no hurry. That realization sits on my mind like a tombstone now. KCS0710. The screen comes alive with the truth. It’s only a few points and clicks till I find the answer I expect. The last shift, a replacement for my duty here beneath the Earth, was scheduled two years ago.

When did my mind start to slip? More than likely after the first few months with no relief. Two years and nothing. Not a communication from anyone. Just me underground with the seeds, ready to sprout.

Only sprouting is never going to happen. Up there is nothing but dead earth and even deader people. Even KCS is probably nothing but ash by now.

In a blast of anger I silence that nagging, gnawing voice in my skull. There’s a time for that, like a time for the world once-was above. Now it’s over. Things can grow from ash again.

Take care.

I take my new marching orders from the ghost of the woman I loved and follow them directly. There’s still running water in the quarters. After quick inspection I manage to bring the

John Wolf

water heater online. A hot shower, still keep it short because God only knows where I'm drawing it from, then a shave and tentative brushing. It feels like I need a pressure washer to get my teeth clean again. The spit in the sink is a strong crimson.

There's over 50 jumpsuits packaged and sealed in their own little vault. Fresh in them and clear headed I walk back to the vault entrance. On and on the tunnel stretches. Cool air rushes up from below, steady and consistent. The seeds are safe. Maybe the rest of life as I knew it is too. I can't tell.

Maybe I don't want to know.

That voice comes cold and clinical. Blunt enough to where I can't deny it. Might be a time I sprout up out of the ground. I like to think now I somewhat resemble the man she fell in love with back when the world made sense. Back when I still hoped to change it. I think I can save that too. I dream of one day going up those stairs and through the airlock. Out into a world, still there, maybe a little emptier, but there and whole. Just waiting for the world to regrow what it lost. I imagine myself, or someone else out there, wandering like Johnny Appleseed and taking the seeds up into the light.

Someone will come.

It's a nice thought, but I have work to do here in the dark. Take care. She meant it, and I aim to do it. I walk back down into the dark and recount the seeds and log the info. There is no way to tell what time it is in here, but the yawn escapes my mouth and lets me know that maybe now would be a good time to rest. I lie back down; stare at the ceiling where stars have gone dark. As I close my eyes I think maybe I might paint some new ones up there tomorrow. And see how long it takes for them to go out again.

John Wolf

END