CHAPTER ONE

Beginning Hook

CHAPTER TWO

Caught & Shamed

Scene 1

She dropped the extra loaf of bread into her sack, and then closed the cupboard. She hopped down, dragged the sack to the icebox, and took the leftovers.

 "Hello Jessie."

She gave a start then scurried around the kitchen table and chairs. The people's bodies were now between her and the direction of the voice. With the adult flesh hiding her from view, Jessie squinted out of the space between an arm and ribs and against the flickering light. She was just able to make out the outline of a body at rest in a lonely lounge chair, kitty-cornered to the stove behind her.

Shrouded in shadows, Jessie stared at the figure for a longish ten count. It didn't move. Definitely plugged in.

*Hearing things, that's all...get out...move...one more and done...one more and done.*

She turned to her left, her eyes searching for the sill of the window she'd left open.

"Ah, ah," the voice said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Jessie froze, a deep breath to slow her pounding heart.

 *It's real. One more and done...think!*

Only then did she look again into the dark corner.

"You wouldn't get very far. We've sealed the grid and all of that. But I doubt very much we'll need to get control involved. Am I right?"

Jessie heard the chair sigh as the voice stood. It was a real mass of a man, bigger than she'd ever seen. The men in her grid so scrawny and weak that when he moved into the light of the lamp, she had to bite her lip to keep a gasp from escaping her lips. He looked like one of those statues her mother had in her bedroom, bald and big and round. A Buddha.

*Think, don't freak out, think!*

She shifted more tightly behind the body of the man who lived in the house and tried to make herself small.

"You know who I am then?" he said.

Jessie didn't answer.

"I'm so sorry my dear, but I'm going to need an audible answer."

"Yes," she said softly.

"Fantastic!" He turned his back to Jessie and adjusted the lamp, increasing the flow of oil so it shined brighter, then he brought it into sliver of space between the table and oven where she'd crouched and set it just above her on the kitchen counter.

"Now, if you wouldn't mind standing up, it's extremely hard having a conversation when I can't see you."

Jessie slowly stood, still keeping most of her body hidden behind the body of the man in the chair.

"Please, take a seat Jessie."

She moved to her right a step and slid into the only empty seat at the table, careful not to bump or move the chair of one of the plugged. The man considered the people sitting on his side of the table then grabbed the back of the chair across from Jessie. An inert woman tumbled to the gnarled wooden floor but didn't move. The man nudged her out of the way with his foot, sat down and folded his hands on the table.

"Ok, so you know who I am and where I've come from?" Jessie nodded. "Again, audibly dear, I need to hear that voice for the old records, eh?"

"Yes."

"So you know the great expense my travel entails?"

"Yes."

"And I want you to know that I've come here for only one reason, and that is to meet you Jessie."

Jessie's eyes widened.

"That's right. This little escapade means nothing to me. Yes, I have you red-handed and all that. You're facing hard time right? Complete exile with a one more and done classification?"

"Yes."

"Well no need to fear my dear. I've come to offer you a formal invitation to join, on a full scholarship, the Coder school of Programming and Defense in the Capital. This is a very prestigious offer and one we've never made to a Common as young as yourself. You'll have access to the greatest minds in defensive and gaming programming and receive training that costs the Elite hundreds of thousands of e-credits...at no cost to you of course."

He glanced at the sack of food on the floor beside Jessie and smiled.

"Room and board will be included as well, and a stipend that is yours to spend each month. Now we'll have to leave immediately as the semester started several weeks ago and you'll need to --"

"No thank you."

The man paused. His eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"No. I don't want to."

"I don't think you understand what I'm offering here."

"I do understand. Ryan did too."

The man sighed heavily and sat back in his chair. "Now that was an accident Jessie. Nobody could have stopped that from happening. And measures have been put in place to ensure it never happens again."

"I can't," she said.

"Why's that?"

"My mother. She couldn't take losing another child."

The man's face filled with pity. "Now we both know that's not true."

Jessie's face hardened. "Still, my answer is no."

The man smiled again, but his body betrayed his irritation. With folded arms, he sat back in his chair. "I'm the president of your faction, I traveled a long way at great expense just to meet with you, and I'm offering you the chance of a lifetime. That's not something you say no to."

She shrugged.

"Not to mention" he said, spreading his arms, "You've been caught for the third time now in the act of thieving while the homeowners are plugged in. That, even for a 12-year-old girl, means exile. So the choice becomes get on the jet with me or stay here for the shaming."

Jessie chewed on her lip, waiting for the voice inside her to tell her what to do.

"Aren't you going to ask?" he said.

Jessie narrowed her eyes.

"The question you've been wondering since I first spoke. Here, I'll ask it for you. 'How did I know you'd be here?' Am I right?"

Jessie nodded.

"The answer is, you're not as good as you think you are. Sure, you have some skill, you and your Rats. You know how to silence the triggers and hide a person's logout, but it's nowhere near your potential. You're also not nearly as good at covering your tracks as you think you are. You could be so much better. You already know it. The other Rats know it too. You think they'd be happy that you're with them, but the truth is they hate you for it. They're far too short sighted to see your potential. That's why they told me where you'd be tonight. All of that food you bring them. All of that risk you take to teach them. And this is how they repay you."

Jessie didn't betray her emotions.

"Come with me Jessie! Get out of this hole of an existence and let me show you what you can really do. The faction needs your kind of talent for the next threshing and I want you to reap the rewards."

"And my parents?"

"They'll be taken care of naturally. Their monthly production quota will be dropped by half and the extra e-credits you earn each month will continue to be applied to their account. If you do anywhere near as well as I expect," he continued, "you'll finally be able to get your mom the help she needs."

Jessie nodded, her eyes glistening in the lamp light.

"So you'll come?" he said.

"No."

Scene 2

The din of the crowd filtered through the worn down walls of the ancient church. These days it sat empty except for the occasional sparsely attended townhall meetings.

There was an excitement that rode along the noise.

Jessie sat on the rough wooden pew, her arms folded around her stomach, and stared directly out the ground.

"Please honey. Just end this. Go. Me and your mother will be fine."

Jessie just shook her head.

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

Jessie lifted her head and stared at her father.

"You know," she said.

"It was an accident. It wasn't their fault."

"Won't you miss me? What if I never come back?"

"Of course, I'll miss you. I mean, with both will, of course. But it's better than this."

Jessie shook her head again and locked her eyes back on the ground. Her father glanced over his shoulder at his wife who sat slumped over, the same vacant look in her eyes that was always there while she was unplugged.

The sound of boot crunching against hard groud appeared behind them.

"It's time."

Mayor Charles removed his hat and ran a hand through his graying hair. The deep wrinkles made him look older than he really was. He was gaunt like the rest of the men in town, but his sinewy muscle still showed through the battered skin.

Jessie's father stood.

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Not according to faction law. She was caught stealing from people while they were plugged in. You know that makes them crazy. They have to feel safe while their connected or everything falls apart."

"Of course," he continued, "I've been told that if she requests, she can be transferred directly to the capital."

"That's what we should do then," her father said.

The mayor shook his head.

"Has to come from her."

They both looked at Jessie, but she remained still.

"Ok Jess," the mayor said, putting his hat back on, "let's get this overwith."

Jessie stood, her arms still wrapped around herself and kept her eyes down.

Her father hugged her and whispered "I love you honey."

The mayor began to lead Jessie towards the front, and turned to see Jessie's father taking his wife out the back door.

"Aren't you coming?" the mayor called.

Her dad looked back at the mayor, then at Jessie.

"Uh, no," he said, "it would be too much for her mother. And I can't bare to watch it."

"So you're leaving her on her own for this?"

Guilt passed across the father's face, but he turned and led the mother out the door, letting it shut behind him without a word.

The mayor's face hardened and shaded red. He waited for several long seconds before turning and kneeling down in front of Jessie.

"We'll get you through this, ok Jess? I have to do my part and you have to do yours, but we'll get through it quick as possible."

Jessie nodded, tears pooling in her eyes.

The mayor took a deep breath, then pushed the door open and led her out into the sunlight.

--

Jessie's knees ached and her shoulders burned. She already felt the bruises welling up were the stones had hit. But yet, she held perfectly still. Part from defiance. Part from the fear of more nicks and cuts from the razor.

The jeers and shouts pressed in around her like a stifling heat. She opened her eyes and saw the growing pile of dark hair lying below her. Her eyes focused on the drop of blood pooling on the end of her nose. It quivered there for a moment and then drop in among the hair.

She winced again as the dry razor scrapped against her scalp.

Finally the pressure against her scalp released and she heard the razor snap shut.

Mayor Charles squatted down in the dust and leaned in close to Jessie.

"All done hon."

He glanced up at the crowd, that was getting louder with his inaction.

"All that's left--"

"I know," she said.

Their shouts were coalescing into a single chant.

"Cap her! Cap her! Cap her!" they yelled.

Charles let out a deep sigh.

"You know I don't want to do this," he said.

"I know," she whispered.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out the black piece of metal. The bottom was shapped the same as the plug, but the top was a smooth rounded cap, like the top of a mushroom He fiddled with the bottom of the plug until the green light on the top began to blink.

"This is going to hurt," he said.

Jessie nodded. She'd seen this done before. She craned her neck down to give him as much room to work as possible.

She felt the pressure against the implant at the base of her skull as the mayor set the cap in place. He raised the hammer a foot above the cap.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

He brought the hammer down and the cap slammed in place. Pain sweeped across Jessie's head. She screamed a short, high pitched scream, then clinched her teeth down. The scream became a gutteral moan in the back of her throat.

It felt like rats were fighting to chew their way out of her skull.

She gasped and her tears mingled with the sweat and blood rolling off her face.

The crowd around her cheered.

Mayor Charles stood back, the hammer still in his hand and looked down at her.

The crowd pushed in closer, some began to spit on her. She felt another rock bounce across her back.

"Allright!" Charles yelled. The crowd quieted under his yell.

"It's done," he said. "Time to move on."

There were yells of protest.

"She has her punishment. She can't do it anymore. She's cut off."

Another stone sailed through the air and Charles stepped in front of it, and let it bounce off his sunken chest. He winced, but stood his ground.

"She's a little girl," he yelled. "She's got her punishment, so go on. Don't you all have mining to do?"

The crowd jeered back, but the mayor stood his ground. Soon, the noise began to die out as people realized the show was over, and they began to make their way back to their homes.

When the people had cleared out, the mayor knelt down and unlatched the stocks and swung the piece of wood off of Jessie's neck and hands.

She sunk to her knees and pressed her hands against her head.

Charles looked down at her as if torn on what to do next, then turned and walked away, out of the square.

Jessie knelt in the dust, hands pressed against her head, alone.

After the last of the crowd had drifted off, a man and a woman appeared from behind one of the buildings. They walked slowly towards Jessie, keeping an eye out for anyone that might still be milling around.

The man knelt beside Jessie and picked her up in his arms. Her head lulled back as he squeezed her close.

"We've got you," the man whispered.

The woman checked her pulse and felt around the cap at the base of her skull. Satisfied all was well, she nodded to the man, and they turned and walked out of the square.

The slanted light from the sun bounced off their shorn heads and you could just make out the blinking green lights coming from the base of each of their skulls before they slipped back behind the building.

CHAPTER THREE

Intro'd to New World

Scene 3

Jessie felt someone gently shaking her. She moaned and pushed her face deeper into the thin pillow.

"It's time to wake up. We have to go," the woman whispered.

Jessie squeezed her eyes shut and pushed her face further into the pillow. She pressed her palms hard against her temples. Tears streamed out of the corner of her eyes.

The woman moved beside her and gently rubbed her back.

"I know it hurts honey," she said, "but the best thing you can do is start moving. The pain will fade by tonight."

Jessie rolled to her side and squinted up at the woman. The first thing Jessie noticed was the woman's bald head. It had been shaved so close that the dim light in the room reflected off it.

She put her hand to her own head where her hair used to be.

Jessie registered the other shuffling noise in the room and opened both her eyes and pushed up to her elbow to take in what was happening.

She was in a large room completely enclosed in concrete. There were no windows and only the single door that several other bald people were making their way towards.

The room's floor was completely covered in old cots with only rows in between for people to move.

The room was already half empty, but those still there were dressing hurriedly.

"Come on, let's get you sitting up," the woman said.

She gently pulled on Jessie's arm and helped her into a sitting position. She wrapped her arm around Jessie's shoulders and pulled her close. Jessie let her head fall against the woman's shoulder as she rocked her slowly side to side.

After a few minutes, the woman stood and pulled on Jessie's sleeve trying to get her to stand.

Jessie shook her off and stayed sitting.

"We have to go."

"Who are you," Jessie said. "Where am I?"

"You don't know?"

Jessie, her face still in her hands, just shook her head.

The woman let out a frustrated sigh and sat down on the cot across from her.

"The Mayor didn't explain?"

Again Jessie shook her head.

"What did you think was going to happen after your Shaming?"

Jessie shrugged, still pressing her palms into her forehead.

"Look at me."

Jessie raised her head just enough to look up at the woman. Now that she was no longer shocked by the lack of hair, she could see the woman was beautiful, even though lines were starting to surround her eyes and mouth.

"I'll explain everything, I promise, but we have to go now."

"Can you at least tell me your name?"

The woman stopped and looked back at Jessie.

Jessie sensed the last few remaining people in the room pause as well.

"We're not much for names here. After our Shaming we become a Numbered."

"Numbered?"

"You can call me Eighty-three. Now it's time to go."

Eighty-three turned and started walking to the door.

Jessie stood slowly, one hand still against her head, and stumbled a bit as she began following the woman out of the room.

As they moved between the cots, Jessie finally noticed the odd way the woman was dressed.

She had long sleeved shirt and long pants on that were completely white. And they didn't seem to be norman material. It was some kind of plastic. The cuffs of the pants were cinched tight around the top of heavy duty work boots.

They entered what looked like the kitchen and living area. There were a series of old, tattered chest of drawers along the wall and pushed together for counter space. A stack of dishes stood next to two large buckets of water. A coffee maker was on the counter with a cracked carafe and sat next to dented toaster oven.

The living area was a series of mismatched arm chairs and couches, most with bare spots and rips where stuffing was pushing its way out.

Eighty-three walked to the back of the room and opened an old stand up metal cabinet and started rummaging through the contents.

"We don't have anything your size but we'll have to make do with these."

She pulled out a shirt and pair of pants identical to her own that were much too large for Jessie.

"Put these on," she said, handing them to Jessie.

Jessie held them in her hand hesitating. Eighty-three had moved to a chest on the ground and opened it revealing dozens of boots. She looked over her shoulder at Jessie.

"What are you waiting for?"

This seemed to snap Jessie into action, and she started putting on the pants and shirt.

A minute later Eighty-three turned back to Jessie with a pair of mismatched boots.

"At least they're the same size. The smallest we have."

The next few minutes were filled with pushing and pulling and stuffing as the woman hurried to get Jessie dressed. In the end, Jessie stood with her sleeves bunched up and her pants gathered at the top of her too large boots. They had ended up stuffing rags in the toes of the boots to get them to fit.

"Ok, that will have to do."

Eighty-three turned and started walking to the front door of the building.

"Wait," Jessie said.

Eighty-three turned back to Jessie, obviously annoyed at another delay.

"Where are we going? What are we doing?"

"You're a Numbered now. We have to do our lines."

Jessie stared blankly at her.

Eighty-three pushed up her sleeve and checked a watch.

"I don't have time to explain. It's already almost nine and we haven't even started yet. It's only getting hotter out."

"Hotter? At nine?"

"Of course."

"But I..."

The woman waved her hand cutting Jessie off.

"Let's go."

Jessie followed her to the door.

Eighty-three stopped at a book shelf by the door. Instead of books, the shelves were covered with equipment.

Eighty-three reached to the top shelf and pulled down a white mask with a large rubber band attached to it. She put the rubber band over Jessie's head and put the mask over her nose and mouth, and pulled the band tight. Next she put thick goggles on Jessie, but the lenses weren't clear like the ones Jessie had seen before. They were tinted almost black.

Lastly, the woman put a large brimmed white hat on Jessie's head and handed her a pair of gloves. They were made from the same plastic material as her pants and shirt. There were rubber pads on the palms and fingers of the gloves.

"Put them on and tuck them into your sleeves."

Jessie did this then looked up through the dark lenses at Eighty-three.

"Ready?" Eighty-three said.

Before Jessie could answer, she lifted the latch on the wooden slat door and pushed it open.

As soon as the door opened, Jessie's eyes widened and she took a step back.

Sun streamed in the door and a wave of heat hit Jessie, easily piercing the thin plastic material.

Eighty-three turned and grabbed Jessie's arm, dragging her outside and slammed the door quickly.

The sun was so bright that even with the thick dark lenses, Jessie had to squint. The heat seemed to bare down on her, pushing her to the ground. Wind swept in gusts and threw sand against her, clattering against her suit.

Eighty-three walked to where there were a half dozen carts scattered along the building. She grabbed one and pushed it back over to Jessie.

She bent low and spoke loudly to Jessie over the wind.

"Stay close to me. Don't wander off."

She turned and started pushing the cart around their building and into town.

Jessie recognized the buildings and the direction they were going, but everything was cast in such a harsh brightness that she could barely keep her eyes on anything. She noticed the woman was keeping her head down with the occasional glances up in the direction they were heading.

She hurried to stay close, keeping her head down.

The wind died down after a few minutes and Eighty-three motioned to Jessie to come up beside her.

They continued walking quickly as she spoke.

"You're going to be in charge of ten houses to start with, but that will go up pretty soon. We've had some losses which means everyone's workload is too high right now."

Jessie nodded as if she understood.

"This will be your first one."

Jessie looked up. It was a small house, probably only a single bedroom. She had to look away quickly as the light reflecting off the white, peeling paint was too much for her eyes.

Eighty-three reached into her pocket and pulled out a keyring with a large rectangle metal piece attached to it and a single key.

"This will get you into all of your houses."

She pushed the cart up to the porch, left it there, then ascended the steps to the front door. She unlocked it with her key and Jessie followed her inside and closed the door.

Immediately Jessie was plunged into darkness.

"Take off your goggles."

Jessie pulled them down to hang around her neck and looked around.

The room was still very dark. The windows were all covered in thick curtains that barely let in any light.

"Go into the kitchen," Eighty-three said pointing. "The trash can is under the sink. Empty that into the cart and put it back. I'll grab the others."

Jessie hurried into the kitchen, opened the cabinet and pulled out the trashcan. She went back to the front door, opened it, and immediately let out a scream. She dropped the trashcan and fell back into the house, her hands pressed against her eyes.

She heard Eighty-three run down the hall and close the front door.

"Open your eyes, look at me."

Jessie tentatively opened her eyes. There were large bright spots floating in her vision.

"Can you see me?"

Jessie nodded.

"Never go outside without your goggles. Learn it quick. It only takes a couple exposures to cause permanent damage."

Jessie nodded.

Eighty-three went back in the house and Jessie put her goggles on. She opened the door, cleaned up the trash she had dropped, and dumped it in the cart. Back inside, she pulled off her goggles, replaced the trashcan, and made her way further into the house.

Jessie stepped tentatively into the bedroom.

An elderly man and woman laid in the bed completely still except for the quick movement under their eyelids. The man was in a pair of boxers and shirtless, the woman in a tattered nightgown.

"Trash done?"

Jessie nodded.

"Ok, let's get the bed pans next."

Jessie looked up at her with a disgusted look on her face.

"Come on," Eighty-three said.

She knelt down at the foot of the bed and lifted the linen out of the way and slid out two metal basins. She detached the tubes running into them and stood.

"Take these and dump them in the toilets."

"I'm not doing that," Jessie said, taking a step back.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not doing any of this. This is disgusting."

A bitter laugh escaped Eighty-three.

"This is what it means to be a Numbered. You do your lines. Who do you think cleaned up after you while you were plugged in?"

Eighty-three came over and knelt down in front of Jessie.

"I know this is a lot to take in, but it's best just to do the work. It will keep you busy and your mind off of --" she paused. "Other things."

"I can't do this," Jessie said.

"I know dear. It feels like that, but you'll do fine. Like I said, just keep moving."

She stood and pressed her hand against Jessie's back, pushing her towards the bed.

"Now grab that bed pan and dump it in the toilet. I'm going to wipe down the kitchen."

Eighty-three left and Jessie stood staring at the old couple in the bed.

After a moment she walked slowly to the bed, knelt down, and picked up the bed pan. She began walking towards the bathroom but kept cutting her eyes back to the bed.

She looked away at the wrong time and her elbow caught on the door frame. The pan tipped at the impact and Jessie overcorrected sloshing some of contents down the front of her shirt.

She tried to take a step back to regain her balance, but caught her foot against a thick cord running along the floor. She fell back, crashing into the nightstand. The bed pan flew out of her hands and slammed against the floor splashing the contents across the wall and floor.

Jessie scrambled to her feet and began looking around for something to clean up the mess.

A low moan came from the bed. Jessie turned to see the old woman struggling to sit up. Her eyes were open wide, the pupils darting around wildly. The large plug was still protruding from the back of her head with the thick wire running behind the headboard.

She finally reached a sitting position and turned towards Jessie.

The old woman cocked her head to the side slowly, as if trying to figure out what was going on.

She slung her legs over the side of the bed and stood slowly.

"Are -- are you ok?" Jessie stammered.

 The old woman stared at Jessie for several seconds.

Jessie took a step back from her.

Suddenly, the old woman began screaming and lunged at Jessie.

Scene 4

Jessie threw out her arms trying to stop the old woman's advance and fell back against the wall. The woman swung her arms wildly, clawing and scratching at Jessie's face.

Jessie screamed and kept trying to push the old woman off her, but the attack was relentless. Jessie slid down against the wall and put her head down between her knees and her hands over head. The old woman hit and scratched at Jessie's hands and head, all the while moaning and screaming.

Suddenly, the blows stopped and Jessie heard something hit the bed. She looked up to find Eighty-three on top of the old woman fighting to gain control of her. Jessie sat frozen watching.

Eighty-three finally got ahold of the woman's wrists and was able to pen them down, but the old woman was bucking and fighting to throw her off.

Eighty-three looked at Jessie.

"What are you doing? Plug her back in!"

Jessie looked around wildly and saw that the cord she had tripped over had pulled the end loose from the wall. Jessie jumped forward and grabbed the plug and crawled over to the wall. She tried to plug it in, but her hands were shaking so badly that she couldn't get it into the outlet.

She glanced back to see the old woman still struggling against Eighty-three.

Jessie turned back, took a deep breath, and slowly put the plug in.

She looked up as it connected and the old woman's eyes slammed shut and she immediately went limp underneath Eighty-three.

Eighty-three sat back and looked at Jessie and the spilled bed pan.

"I'm so sorry," Jessie said, "I bumped the wall and dropped the bed pan then tripped --"

"Stop," Eighty-three said getting off of the woman, "it doesn't matter. We need to get everything cleaned up and get out of here."

She disappeared into the hallway and came back a few seconds later carrying several towels. She tossed them to Jessie.

"Get that mess cleaned up. Make sure you get it cleaned up good."

Jessie began wiping down the walls. Eighty-three went back to the old woman and examined her. She straightened the nightgown that had ridden up to her waste. She fixed her hair and put her arms straight by her side. She bent down low over the woman's hands and cleaned out from underneath her fingernails.

After she was done, she knelt down beside Jessie and helped her finish cleaning up the spill. She took the bed pan from and slid it back under the bed and connected the tubes back in place. She hurried and emptied the other one and put that one back too as Jessie watched.

Eighty-three came close to Jessie and gently touched her face. Jessie winced and pulled back.

"She got you pretty good."

"Is it bad?"

"Oh, you'll be fine, but you've got some good scratches. They're not bleeding too much though. Lucky that she doesn't have a scratch on her," Eighty-three said motioning to the old lady.

"Her? She came after me!"

"You just need to hope that she doesn't remember when she logs off tonight."

Eighty-three turned to leave the room.

"Come on, let's go. We still have nine more houses and we're even further behind. We have to be done and off the streets by dusk."

Eighty-three stopped at the front door and started pulling on here goggles, but Jessie had stopped following her.

"Let's go!"

Jessie stood in place, her eyes staring but unfocused.

"What do you mean that I have my lines? You mean I have to clean these houses every day?"

"Yes, that's part of it."

"By myself?"

Eighty-three nodded.

"For how long?"

Eighty-three cocked her head to the side, a questioning look her face.

"What do you mean?"

"When do I get to go home?"

"We can talk about that later, let's keep moving."

Eighty-three went back to putting her goggles on.

"No! I want to talk about it now. I want to know when I'm going home."

Eighty-three sighed and pulled her goggles back down.

"You were caught stealing rations while a citizen was plugged in. That already carries ten years of service. And you must have been robbing the wrong people because when I got the work orders for you --"

Eighty-three paused and looked away from Jessie.

"What?"

"Look, it doesn't matter --"

"Tell me!"

Eighty-three ran a hand over her face, sighed again.

"Honey, you're work order -- you got the maximum time. You're Numbered for twenty-five years. Home is not something you should be thinking about. This is your home now."

Jessie's eyes went wide. She opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again.

"Ok, goggles on," Eighty-three said positioning the lenses over her eyes. "Let's keep moving."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tries to go home

Scene 5

Jessie slid up to the edge of the building, dropped to her knees and slowly peeked around the corner. She was careful to stay in the shadows. The sun was just dipping below the horizon. A few people were already emerging from their homes.

Voices floated from courtyard. She could see two men talking and gesticulating wildly with their hands. It was hard to tell if they were arguing or agreeing.

The courtyard was surrounded on three sides by large store fronts that were now haphazardly fitted for living conditions. Lots of little rooms that barely fit a bed and a table. The people that lived here shared a common kitchen and bathroom. Jessie could see people starting to stir through the big storefront windows.

On the other side of the courtyard sat the townhall. In front were the stocks.

Jessie shuddered and looked away, keeping her eyes on all the dark corners.

In a few minutes, the courtyard would be packed with people as they began their nights.

The two men continued moving through the courtyard and disappeared down an alley.

Jessie pulled her scarf up over her bald head. She checked to make sure it was still covering the green light at the base of her skull. She cast her eyes around one last time before standing and walking directly across the courtyard to the brick circle that held the stocks. She stopped, glanced around again, pulled a loose brick out of the ground, placed a small, folded scrap of paper underneath, and replaced the brick.

She stood and hurried the rest of the way across the courtyard while keeping her eyes roaming back and forth.

She was almost to the edge of the courtyard when their was a loud "beep". Jessie froze and looked around wildly. Her eyes cut back to the courtyard.

It was still empty.

She couldn't locate the source of the noise, so continued moving forward, now visibly fighting the urge to break into a sprint.

As she entered the shadows of the alley, she did break into a run moving through the street blocks, confident of her direction.

The subdivided storefronts and tenements gave way to stand alone houses and duplexes. People were already walking down the streets towards the neighborhood food stores. Jessie automatically kept to the darkest alleys and the houses with the most shadows.

Jessie again stopped beside a building and flattened herself against the wall. She surveyed the street. By now the sun was below the horizon and the heat of the daylight was dissipating quickly. Jessie would have to cross paths with several people this time.

She stepped out and moved at a fast walk across the street. She circled behind the stand alone home to a small door, barely two feet high in the foundation of the home. She dragged it open, dropped to all fours and started through the crawl space door.

"Beep."

Jessie fell back out of the crawl space looking around again for the source of the sound.

She still couldn't make out any movement or where the sound was coming from.

After a full minute, she dropped back to her hands and knees and crawled underneath the house, pulling the small door closed behind her.

She moved through the pitch black confidently without pausing until she'd found her spot. She got to her knees and pushed against the floor above her. A small trap door opened under the pressure.

Slowly, Jessie opened it and laid it back against the floor on the inside of the house. She stood up to her full height, her chest and head now in the house. She put her hands on the floor and hoisted herself completely into the room and knelt, listening.

The room was little more than a closet with an empty sleeping bag on the floor alongside several card board boxes arranged upside down as makeshift desk and chest of drawers. A handful of small clothes were folded in the corner.

She stood and walked slowly, silently into the hallway leaving the trap door open.

"Beep."

Jessie froze. This time she didn't look around, but a worried expression was on her face. She shook her head and headed towards the back of the house.

A clang came from behind her and a hushed voice mutter. Jessie turned and hurried down the hall to the front of the house.

It opened into a larger room. To one side was a living area with a matching sofa and chair. There was also a small, round dining table with four mismatched chairs pushed underneath. All was neat and tidy.

Across from the living room was a small kitchen. The counters were white and spotless. The sink was empty and dishes were stacked neatly on the shelves above the counter. A man in a loosely tied robe was busy making coffee over the propane stove.

"Daddy," she whispered.

The man turned quickly, almost knocking the pot off the stove. He let out a yelp when he saw Jessie.

"It's me!" Jessie said.

"Jessie! What are you doing?"

"I missed you. I've come to see you."

Jessie's father looked quickly around as if he expected to find other people in his house..

"You can't be here!" he said in a strained whisper.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You're a Numbered now. We're not supposed to even talk to you, not to mention have you in our home with us."

"But Daddy --"

"No! Do you have any idea what this would do to your mother if she knew you were here? You have to go."

"I want to come home."

"Well there's not much I can do about that now is there? *You* decided to start stealing. *You* decided to go through the Shaming."

"What choice did I have?"

"Go to the capital!"

"I'm not doing that!"

Silence fell between them.

"Daddy, don't you miss me?"

Her father's face softened and he drew her into hug. Tears leaked from Jessie's eyes.

"Of course I do baby. I want you home so badly."

"I'll just hide here. I'm good at hiding. They won't even know."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Beep."

Jessie reflexively looked behind her, searching for the source of the noise.

"What is it?" her father asked.

"You didn't hear that?" she said.

"Hear what?"

"That beep. I keep hearing it. It's like it's following me. I don't know --"

"Beep."

"Ah!" she said. "Did you hear it that time?"

Jessie's dad screwed up his face and took a step back from her. He was looking at her as if she was crazy.

"Jessie?" he said. "Are you ok?"

"Beep."

Jessie clapped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut.

"What is that?" she said. "They're coming quicker now."

"Shhhh! Keep your voice down!" her father said.

Jessie opened her eyes, but they were immediately pulled to the window by the shadow that had formed in the soft moonlight.

Jessie let out a short scream.

There was someone looking in at her and her father. Someone bald.

Just then there was a loud banging on the door. Jessie and her father both jumped. They looked at the door then each other.

There was another loud bang, then a voice yelled from outside.

"Open the door!"

From the back of the house came the noise of a door opening.

"What is going on? What's all the --"

Jessie and her father turned to see her mother standing at the back of the hall, her night gown disheveled and hanging off one shoulder.

Her mother looked at her father, then at Jessie, then opened her mouth as if to scream, but no sound escaped.

"What is she doing here?" she moaned.

Now the front door flew open with a crack as the deadbolt broke through the thin door frame.

The bald man stepped back to join another man, also bald, behind him. Eighty-three stepped forward, into the house.

"Time to leave," she said.

Scene 6

Everything stopped. Besides the soft moaning coming from Jessie's mom, it was silent. Everyone seemed to be waiting on someone else to decide what to do next.

"Come on, we have to go now," Eighty-three said.

She took a step forward, but Jessie took a step back and the woman froze.

"I'm not going back," Jessie said.

Jessie looked at her dad. Her mom has gone quiet but was pacing back in forth quickly in the cramped hallway, her eyes never leaving Jessie.

"You don't have much of a choice," Eighty-three said.

Jessie's father put up his hand to stop her. He stepped forward and knelt down in front of Jessie and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Baby. You're my daughter -- my only child -- of course I want you at home."

Jessie jumped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. He hugged her close. Jessie sniffled as her tears soaked into his shirt.

"But honey, there's nothing I can do."

He put his hands on her shoulders and tried to push her back.

"Do something!" she wailed, holding tightly to his neck. "Talk to the Mayor! Plead to our faction! I'll pay back what I stole. I'll apologize. I'll do whatever. I just want to come home!"

Jessie's father pried her loose and put her back at arm's length.

"No! You know I can't do that. We already are on thin ice with the faction with your mother. I can't risk it."

"Daddy..."

He stood, his hands still on her shoulders and gently prodded her towards the front door.

Eighty-three stepped through the door and reached out towards Jessie. Jessie screamed and wrenched herself from her dad's grip and dropped to her knees, scurrying away from them. When she was out of arms reach she leapt to her feet and tore off down the hallway. Her dad and Eighty-three both yelled after her, but she ignored them.

Her mother dropped to the floor and cowered against the wall as Jessie ran at her, but Jessie turned before reaching her mother and entered the small room with the trap door. She slipped on the floor and crashed to her side as she hurried into the room. She crawled the rest of the way to the opening in the door and dropped through the hole.

"Beep."

She was on all fours and crawling quickly to the back of the house. She pushed open the little door and dove through into the night air. She scrambled to her feet and started to run.

"Jessie stop!" a voice cried out behind her, but she kept pumping her legs. She heard more voices yelling to each other behind her. They were coming after her.

"Jessie!" Eighty-three called. "You have to stop!"

Jessie didn't slow down. The few people in the street jumped out of her way. She cut behind the neighbors house, across their front yard, and sprinted across the street. She ducked low as she moved quickly beside the house, staying below the windows, and went into the backyard.

"Beep."

She ran up to a tiny storage shed. She glanced around to make sure she was shrouded in shadows and nobody had seen her come this way. The door had two padlocks holding it closed, but she went to the side of the building and pulled a board loose and crawled inside.

Jessie stayed on her knees and fought to keep her breath quiet. She took deep, slow breaths, her small chest heaving as she fought for calm and listened hard into the night.

"Beep."

"I think she went back here," a man's voice called out from the direction of the street.

Another minute passed.

"Jessie, it's me. Eighty-three. You have to come back with us. Please come out" she pleaded.

Jessie crawled to the front of the little shed and peered between the crack of the door, trying to see the people outside. She fought to keep her breath calm.

The two men stayed with the Eighty-three, their eyes roaming back and forth. The woman waited, standing very still. A crowd was starting to form. They were shifting uncomfortably, staring at Eighty-three and the two men.

"Beep.

"Hear that?" Eighty-three called. "I hear it too. It's a warning."

"We have to go now! Leave her."

Jessie peered through the crack. One of the men was waving his hands at her.

"She's not our responsibility!"

Eighty-three waved him off.

"Then go. I'll find her myself."

The man let out an exasperated sigh, but stayed with her.

"Get to where you can see me. I'm going to turn around slowly. Look at my light."

The woman spun slowly all the way around. When her back was to Jessie, she could see the small light in the plug at the base of her skull. It was now glowing a bright yellow instead of a green.

"We're hearing the beeping too. That means we're out of bounds. The beeps and the yellow light are warnings. You don't want the light to turn red."

More time passed in silence.

"Beep."

"That's it," the man said, "I'm going back."

He turned and ran off into the night. The other man with Eighty-three shifted his feet nervously, but stayed by her side.

"We only have a few minutes left before our lights turn red."

Again, she went silent and waited. Jessie dropped her head and put her fingers to the back of her head. She felt the stubble of hair that was starting to grow back. She worked her fingers to the base of her skull and felt along the plug.

"Beep."

Jessie heard voices float through the door. She peeked out again. Eighty-three and the Numbered man were whispering furiously. The murmur from the crowd was getting louder as more people joined them.

One of them shouted something Jessie couldn't make out, but a several other people yelled their angry ascent.

Eighty-three ignored them. She sat down on the ground in the middle of the street and crossed her legs.

"I'm not going anywhere without you. You're a Numbered now and you're my responsibility."

"Beep."

"We probably have less than five minutes."

Jessie stood and shifted her feet anxiously. She grabbed the door handle, then let go, then grabbed it again.

She looked out at Eighty-three again. She was still sitting, waiting.

Jessie lifted the handle and slowly began opening the door. As soon as the door began to swing open, Eighty-three jumped to her feet and sprinted for the shed.

Jesse, startled, let go of the door and back pedaled into the shed, tripped over a box in the dark and sat down hard on the ground. The woman reached the shed in a few seconds and wrenched the door the rest of the way open. She grabbed Jessie's arm, yanked her to her feet and spun her around to see her plug.

The woman muttered a curse, and turned Jessie around, grabbed her face and looked directly into her eyes.

"We have to run ok? You have to keep up with me. I'm not going to stop, there's no time. Ignore everything and stay close to me. Got it?"

She looked over her shoulder at the other man.

"Sixty-one, we have to hurry."

He nodded.

The woman grabbed Jessie's arm and pulled her out of the shed, turned into the night and began running.

Scene 7

The three of them tore off down an alley, heading back towards the Numbered compound.

Eighty-three led the way. Jessie pumped her legs as hard as she could to keep up and Sixty-one brought up the rear. Eighty-three kept shouting at groups of people to move as they cut across streets.

Jessie kept her eyes on the back of Eighty-three's head. The yellow light at the base of her skull was now blinking.

By the time they made it to the courtyard, it was packed with people. Tables were setup around the edges laden with various wares for sale. Many were freeze dried MREs that were old enough the faction couldn't feed them to their recruits. There were dusty coffee makers, dented pots and pans, and anything else that could be scavenged outside of town and resold.

Above the haggling at the tables, the loud den of people talking and laughing floated through the air.

Eighty-three stopped at the edge of the crowd and let Jessie catch up. She grabbed her hand, cut her eyes at Sixty-one then started pushing her way into the crowd cutting straight across the courtyard.

The first few people she shoved turned around with an angry look on their faces, but when they caught sight of her bald head, quickly backed away to give her room.

Before long the entire crowd had gone silent and parted to let them through. All eyes were on the trio of Numbered moving through their midst.

Eighty-three hurried through at a fast walk, dragging Jessie behind her. Jessie kept her eyes on the dirt as they hurried through the crowd.

As they emerged from the other side of the courtyard, Eighty-three dropped Jessie's hand and broke into a run again.

"Come on!" she said, "We have to hurry."

Jessie's legs were growing tired and she was struggling to keep up. She watched Eighty-three disappear around a building, and as she turned, she tripped over something in the dirt and hit the ground hard.

She tried to stand quickly, but her feet were caught in some sort of wire. Prongs were sicking out from the wire and snagging her pants and cutting into her legs.

Sixty-one came around the corner just then. Jessie called out to him to wait but he couldn't stop in time and trip over her, getting entangled himself.

They both fought to right themselves and Sixty-one started tearing at the wire around Jessie's legs. Eighty-three came running back and joined them, working her feet loose. Finally, she grabbed Jessie under the armpits and pulled her up. Sixty-one clawed at the wire and finally got her loose.

"Go go," he said.

Eighty-three put Jessie on her feet. Jessie immediately dropped down to help Sixty-one. He batted her hands away.

"You have to go," he said, "I'll be right behind you."

Eighty-three held his eyes for a moment, he nodded and she grabbed Jessie's hand and started pulling her again to run.

Jessie looked back once as she was running away and could just make out Sixty-one struggling with the wire around his feet.

They ran a few more blocks and Jessie could tell they were getting close. As they rounded the last corner, Jessie skidded to a stop.

All of the Numbered were grouped up about a hundred yards ahead of them. There was no wall or fence, but they were obviously holding a line.

Eighty-three looked back as she kept running.

"Damn it Jessie, come on! We are almost there!"

Jessie broke into a run again. She crossed into crowd and immediately stopped, gasping. Eighty-three grabbed her shoulders and turned her around. She let out a sigh of relief.

"What?"

"You're back to green."

"What about Sixty-one?" Jessie said.

Eighty-three and Jessie pushed their way back to the front of the crowd.

He wasn't in sight.

"He's got to get back to us," she said.

Jessie looked up at her and bit her lip nervously.

"Come on come on come on come on," Eighty-three said staring into the night.

"How far behind you was he?" someone asked.

Eighty-three just shook her head and kept watching.

All of the Numbered stood around them, tense, waiting.

A figure finally appeared around the corner of the building Jessie and Eighty-three had come from.

The crowd let out a muffled cheer.

Sixty-one was struggling to move quickly. Something was obviously wrong with his foot.

Jessie shuffled her feet nervously.

He was about fifty yards off. They could see him clearly. He waved a bit and smiled.

Eighty-three let out a relieved sigh.

Sixty-one hobbled another few steps, then suddenly grasped his head and screamed. He stumbled and fell to the ground writhing in the dirt.

Jessie saw the light at the back of his head had turned red.

"No!" Eighty-three screamed and sprinted away from everyone towards him. After the first two steps, her light had already started blinking yellow again.

Another of the Numbered took off running after her. His light switched to yellow too.

Jessie stepped forward too, starting to run, but someone grabbed her from behind. She kicked and screamed to let her go but the arms held like a vise and lifted her off the ground.

Eighty-three made it to Sixty-one first and the other Numbered joined her right after. They grabbed Sixty-one under the arms and started dragging him back to the group. His screaming had died down but he was still moaning and whipping his head around.

As they got closer, the person holding onto her let her go. Jessie dropped down but stayed put.

The Numbered opened up to let them drag Sixty-one across the line. They laid him down gently. He wasn't moving. Jessie pushed through the mass of people for a better look.

"Light!" Eighty-three yelled.

There was shuffling and movement and someone finally put a small flashlight in Eighty-three's hand. She turned it on and shined it on Sixty-one's face.

Jessie cringed.

His face from his nose down was covered in blood. It had poured across his mouth and down the front of his shirt. There were smears of it across his head too where he had been pressing his hands against his skull.

Eighty-three checked his pulse, then pulled each eyelid open and shined the light into the pupil.

It contracted under the light.

Eighty-three sat back on her legs and sighed.

"Ok, let's get him into bed. You two, carry him to his cot."

The two men she pointed at started gently picking up Sixty-one.

"And you," Eighty-three said pointing at Jessie, "You get to sit up with him tonight and make sure he doesn't die."

She looked down at the blood on her hands, wiped it off on her trousers, then stood and pushed her way out of the crowd of Numbered leaving Jessie alone with them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tribe Member

Scene 8

Light filtered in from the common room as the Numbered shuffled around getting ready. They were pulling on their protective pants and shirts, lacing up their boots, heading out to the common room for coffee before facing the day.

Jessie sat on the floor, her head resting on the side of Sixty-one's cot. His chest rose and fell slowly. The bowl of water on the floor had long since chilled and a rag lay next to it.

Sixty-one breathed in sync with Jessie. All the blood was gone and his bloody shirt had been pulled off.

It's almost like the previous night hadn't happened.

The room emptied except for the two of them.

The hum of the motion from the common room filtered in.

The light bulb hanging from the ceiling cast shadows across the room.

Jessie and Sixty-one's chests rose and fell.

Minutes passed.

Sixty-one's eyes popped open and his eyes darted around the room. His hands came out from underneath the thin cover and felt around his head and then to the back of his skull. He let out a long sigh.

He looked down at Jessie and nudged her with his elbow.

She jerked awake and sat up.

"Hey kid," he said, "can you get me some water?"

Jessie nodded and jumped to her feet, scurrying to the bucket at the back of the room. She ladled water into a small plastic cup and brought it back to him.

Sixty-one had sat up and swung his legs over the side of the cot. He took the cup from Jessie and drained it.

They sat in silence.

Jessie muttered something.

"What?" he said.

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head.

"Not me you should be apologizing to."

"You got hurt though."

"I did, yeah, but it ain't the first time. Probably won't be the last neither. I was kind of hoping it would be though."

Jessie looked at him questioningly.

"Why would you want that?" she said.

He laughed.

"There's not a lot of Numbered my age. But I ain't been at it as long as others have."

"Were you a townie?"

He shook his head.

"Believe it or not, I was a Coder."

"In the capital? For the faction?" Jessie said, shock plain on her face.

"Yes mam."

"What was it like?"

"Oh, you know, just like all the stories say. It's gorgeous. Lots of rich folk. Lots of people. Lots of new tech. Everybody running around doing important stuff. I mean, I was a nobody. Just a grunt in the faction, but even then, it was quite the life."

"What'd you do for them?"

"Nothing glamorous. Had a knack for wiring so they put me in to beat up on new recruits."

"What do you mean?"

"Well these young townies they bring in think because they were decent at mining and scored high on some test that they'll come right in and win the next clash for the faction. Well it was my job to show them it's not all roses."

"You'd hurt them?"

"Course. If not me, then who? They'd put me in the arena with them and show them how quickly things can turn when you're fighting. See, that mining stuff is hard work, but it's just that. Work. When you upgrade to a Coder, things can go south pretty quick. You wire up the wrong thing at the wrong time and," Sixty-one snapped his fingers, "you're out."

"Out?"

He cocked his head at Jessie.

"I forget how little you townies know."

Sixty-one took a deep breath.

"What do you think happened to me last night? When my light turned red."

Jessie shrugged.

"Know what happens if you die while plugged in?"

Jessie just stared at him.

"Honey, it's lights out. Game over. No coming back from it. This is stuff you don't face as a townie. Sure, every once in awhile someone tries to wander to areas they're not supposed to be and they get zapped, but for the most part townies stay were townies belong and do the mining. It's coded up real well that way. The more you mine, the more credits you find, the more your brain gets juiced, and the more you want to mine. Works pretty well. Keeps everybody docile and doing their work. Sure some people's brains get a little fried on it, but that don't effect the faction too much."

"It's even more as a Coder. Now, mind you, I never got pst the grunt stage, but wiring against other factions," Sixty-one licked his lips and wiped a few beads of sweat off his forehead, "well, it felt good. Anytime you fried another Coder, it's hard to describe. Makes any pleasure in this world seem dull and flat."

He paused.

"Still miss it from time to time. Nothing like it in this world."

"So you trained new Coders?" she said.

"Mm-hmm," he said nodding, "got them up to speed on wiring. Smacked their heads a bit when they got it wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, last night I just about made it back right? Then my light turned red? Well what happened to me was a bit of a smack on the head. Pretty much the same code used."

"But you almost died."

"Yep, and if I'd laid out there a few seconds longer probably would have."

"And you did that to other people?"

"Look honey, I know it sounds awful, but it's how our faction wins the clash. Every four years we clash against the other factions. If they win, it's real bad for us. So the townies do the mining. The credits pay for the coding. And the Coders gotta learn how to wire up against the other factions. It ain't a pretty game, we always lose hundreds of Coders in the clash and we got to build back up quick. It don't seem it at your age, but four years go by real fast."

"And you killed Coders that didn't learn fast enough?"

"Nah, never killed nobody. Just, you know, scrambled their brains a bit."

He laughed again.

"One time this one new feller came in. Back fired on me. Scrambled *my* brains. Felt just like it did last night. Just the same. He was this young kid. A townie from here actually. Seemed like just another hotshot like all the others. So stuck on himself thinking cause he escaped the towns that he was a big shot now. Problem was, he really was a big shot. He drew me in with a few flubs in his wiring, and when I went after him, he grabbed me. I knew right away he'd set me up, but I lost those thoughts pretty quick when he started scrambling me."

He laughed to himself again.

"I never did hear what happened to that kid. He was the best Coder any of us had seen. Everybody was talking about him. Then one day he just disappeared. There were plenty of rumors but none of the uppers would let on. It's almost like they wanted to act like he never existed."

"When was this?"

"Oh, just a couple years. Right before I got kicked out here to the Numbered."

"What was his name?"

"Yeah, the juice got to me. I couldn't stop wiring. Finally went too far, broke the rules, so they plugged me up and sent me here."

"No," Jessie said, "what was the boy's name?"

He shrugged.

"What time is it?" he said, looking around. "Where is everybody?"

Jessie pulled on his arm.

"Please tell me his name. What was the boy's name?"

Sixty-one shook her off his arm and stood.

"Nuff war stories for today. Don't matter anyway. I'm Numbered now and don't see me ever going back. Come on," he said walking away, "let's get going. We got chores to do. Only getting hotter out there."

Scene 9

Jessie pulled up on the latch and put all her weight on the door, shoving it open. She stumbled through and quickly shut the door behind her.

Immediately, she started stripping off her suit. First the goggles came off and she tossed them into the bin on the bookshelf. Next she stripped off her gloves and boots, then pulled off the long sleeve plastic shirt.

Her shirt underneath was drenched in sweat and stuck to her body. Sweat was pouring off her head and into her eyes. She wiped them hard with the palm of her hands, as she turned into the common room.

Jessie stopped when she saw everyone.

All of the Numbered had stopped what they were doing and stared at her. She could see Eighty-three on one of the beaten up couches. Her spoon hovered over her bowl as she stared at Jessie.

The awkward waiting extended.

Finally Sixty-one came out of the kitchen, saw Jessie, and smiled.

"Hey kid! Hot one today huh?"

He stepped forward and put an old bottle in her hand.

"Have a drink before you pass out."

Jessie looked at him and then back to the other Numbered who were still sitting in silence.

Sixty-one turned around.

"What y'all starin' at? I'm's the one that got scrambled. And it ain't like it was the first time."

Everyone seemed to relax at this.

"Come on hon, let's get you something to eat."

He led Jessie into the kitchen were a big metal pot sat on a gas burner. Sixty-one lifted the lid and steam rolled out. He pushed the ladle in and poured the pale contents into a big tin mug and pushed it into Jessie's hands.

He ladled himself a large portion into a similar mug, then walked out of the kitchen. Jessie followed closely behind him.

They went towards the couch with Eighty-three, and she scooted over to make room for them.

Jessie sat and busied herself taking a long pull from the bottle and then digging into her food.

"So you ok?" someone asked Sixty-one.

"Course," he knocked on his head, "all the pieces are there, they've just been rearranged a bit."

"That was a close one though," a woman said, cutting her eyes at Jessie. "I didn't think you were gonna make."

Jessie put her eyes back on her food.

"Yeah, who'd we get to play the part of the crazy old coot around here if you get fried?"

Several let a chuckle out at this.

"Yeah, well you keep that in mind next time I'm running late on my chores," Sixty-one said.

"You got the easiest route of all of us!"

Sixty-one scoffed.

"Yeah yeah, you like to say that but no one seems to be in a hurry to switch with me."

All of the awkwardness had left the room as conversation picked up again. They shared stories of what they found in the townie's houses and trash throughout the day. Several pulled out small metal bottles and passed it around. They winced as they took small drinks.

The longer it went, and the more they drank from the little bottles, the louder and rowdier everyone got.

Jessie kept quiet but let her eyes rove over the room as she ate. A few times when a group of the Numbered burst out laughing, she even smiled herself.

After almost two hours, Sixty-one stood up giggling to himself over some joke no one else had heard and announced, "Time for bed!"

He leaned down kissed Jessie on he top of her head twice, then promptly tripped on his own feet and sprawled in the floor.

Everyone roared with laughter.

He laughed himself as he got back to his feet, steadied himself, and started walking and weaving back to the cot room.

Eighty-three scooted closer to Jessie.

"You doing ok?" she said.

Jessie nodded, keeping her eyes down. She wiped a tear away.

Eighty-three wrapped her arm around Jessie and pulled her close.

A few of the other Numbered started making their way back to bed. Several came over and kissed Jessie on the head as well before heading back.

Before long it was down to Eighty-three, Jessie, and just a few other stragglers in the common room.

Jessie cried harder.

"What is it?" Eighty-three asked.

Jessie sniffed and wiped her nose against her now day shirt.

"Why are they being so nice to me?"

Eighty-three didn't answer for a minute, then sighed.

"I suppose they all remember what it was like their first few days as a Numbered. Even if they didn't run away -- most of them don't have any place to go anyway -- they knew that feeling. It's hard to forget."

"Also," Eighty-three continued, "what else can we do? We're all stuck here together. None of us want to be here but we can't leave. We might as well take care of each other right?"

"Plus, you're a pretty cute little girl and it's been a long time since any of them have been around kids. Makes us feel a little more human to have you here I think. Maybe even more of a family."

Jessie cried for a few more minutes before quieting down. She wiped the last of the tears away and rubbed her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" Jessie said.

"Sure, but after this, I've got to get to bed."

Jessie nodded and said, "When I was sitting with Sixty-one this morning, after he woke up, he was telling me about his time in the capital."

Eighty-three rolled her eyes at this.

"What?" Jessie said.

"Look, he's a sweetheart. We all love him. But honey, he's crazy. He's not joking when he says last night wasn't the first time he's been scrambled."

"So he wasn't in the capital?"

Eighty-three shrugged.

"Hard to say. I mean, sometimes it seems like his stories could be true, but most of what he says is nonsense. I don't think he even realizes he's lying half the time, but the stories he's told ranges from him fighting off a dozen faction guards to his love affairs with the most beautiful queens of the country to losing his arm in a mining accident and getting it reattached."

"Sometimes when you get scrambled the way he has and you've spent so long plugged in..." Eighty-three paused, "it's just hard to tease apart reality from everything else that's been fed into your brain."

"Oh," Jessie said. "He just told me a story... I was thinking may be he'd met..."

"Don't put too much stock in anything he's said."

"Ok."

"Now, it's time for me to get some sleep."

"Ok," Jessie stood and went to follow after her.

"What are you doing?" Eighty-three said, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"What?"

"Oh, I must have forgotten to mention the rule," her smile growing bigger.

Jessie's eyes narrowed.

"Whoever's last with their chores has to do the dishes."

Jessie looked around at the cups, mugs, and bowls strewn across the common room.

Eighty-three laughed then headed back to her cot.

"Have fun with that!"

Scene 10

Jessie woke up before she opened her eyes.

She lay listening to the rustle of the white suits as they pulled them on around her. She listened to the banter floating in from the common room as they drank their coffee and readied for the lines of the day.

Jessie took a deep breath through her nose and slowly let it out as a smile played at the corner of her mouth.

She sat up on her cot and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes before bending over and pulling her own suit and boots out from underneath her cot. She stood, pulled on the pants and shirt, rolled up the pants bottoms and shoved her feet into the mismatched boots.

When she entered the common room, several other greeted her. Sixty-one put a mug in her hands. She sat and sipped, waiting for everyone to start heading out for their chores.

There were a few more minutes before the sun was above the horizon and they could head out.

Jessie heard the sound of two light taps come from somewhere. She looked up and around for the source of the noise. Several others did as well.

Quiet started to settled over the Numbered.

The taps came through again, this time clearly from the door.

The Numbered look at each other quizzically before one stepped out and went to the door. He pulled up the latch and swung the door in, squinting against the light.

It looked like he had been hit with a shock. The man went rigid and pale and quickly stepped back from the door, bowing his head.

"Thank you so much," came a voice from the door. "Mind if I come in?"

The Numbered man opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out so he merely nodded.

"Wonderful!"

Jessie's mouth went dry when Captain Mason stepped through the doorway, followed closely by two heavily armed faction guards dressed from head to toe in shining white body armor.

She shrank down, trying to hide herself behind the girl she was sitting next to.

"Good evening all!" he said. "My name is Captain Mason and I need to speak with --"

He glanced down at the small tablet in his hand.

"Yes, here it is. Eighty-three. I need to speak with Number Eighty-three. Are you here?"

Eighty-three stood from the couch across from Jessie and pushed her way to the front.

"Are you Eighty-three?"

She nodded, her eyes on the ground.

"Wonderful! I need to have a discussion with you. Would you rather do it here or in private?"

She shrugged.

"Ok, no problem. We can just do it here. Now, can you please remind me what your role is here with this batch of Numbers?"

Eighty-three started to speak, but Jessie couldn't make it out.

"Please speak up dear. I often have trouble with my hearing and want to make sure I don't miss anything."

Eighty-three cleared her throat.

"To, um, manage the Numbered, distribute chores and work lines, and, um, maintain the order of my batch."

As she spoke, Mason ran his finger down the display.

"That's correct! Almost word-for-word. And for this extra responsibility, what is it that you get in return from the faction?"

"A shorter sentence."

"Correct again! For each year of service you get a year off your days as a Numbered. Is that correct?"

Eighty-three nodded.

"Please speak up dear."

"Yes sir."

"Ok, that's what I thought. I just wanted to be clear. Because I've gotten reports from several townies that, honestly, just couldn't be true. From what they tell me, several Numbered were spotting roaming around after sunset. Running through streets, pushing people."

"Normally, I would right this off as complete fabrication, but then I hear that these Numbered were spotted by *hundreds* of people cutting straight across the busy courtyard."

"So I'm here just to clear this up. Because surely this didn't actually happen since your job is to 'maintain the order of the batch'. How is it possible that your Numbered were running through the streets in full view of the townies if you were maintaining the order of the batch? Is what all of these townies telling me true or false? Because I'm happy to punish them for lying to the faction."

Eighty-three stayed silent.

"I'm going to need an answer dear."

"It's true."

A look of surprise jumped across Mason's face. Then he let out a sigh and shook his head.

"And why was it that they were out after sunset? I can't imagine anything so pressing as to cause this obvious breech of conduct."

Jessie sat forward and started to stand at this, but the Numbered beside her grabbed her arm and held her down. Jessie shot him a look, but he just shook her head at him.

"I was working the lines with a couple others and I lost track of time. Before we knew it, it was dusk and our lights had turned yellow. We were in a hurry to get back before we turned red and had to cut straight across town."

"That seems odd. Yes, that couldn't be it. I'm no expert on this, but from what I've seen, you get warning alerts as the dusk is setting that would have let you know you were getting close to time. Are you saying your plugs are malfunctioning?"

"No sir."

"Then how did this happen?"

"We were being careless sir."

"Hm," he said, clasping his hands behind his back and looking at the ceiling.

"Oh how I surely hate this part of my job, but I can't let this stand. There must be discipline for such an egregious breech of your duties."

"I understand time will be added to my sentence sir. I accept that."

Jessie cringed at this.

Mason look down at her, a confused look on his face.

"What do you mean?"

Eighty-three looked up at him for the first time.

"That's the standard punishment."

"Yes dear, but this isn't a standard crime. You and your Numbered physically assaulted several townies. You were *seen* by literally hundreds. I can't remember another case so egregious. And to add to that, you have now lied to a faction captain."

He let out a deep sigh.

"So yes, I've added time to your sentence. But there has to be harsher punishment dear. There just has to be. I have my people to answer to as well and when they hear about the assault of townies along with your public display, I will have to give my *own* report for what happened. I have to show that I communicated that this type of behavior cannot stand. Do you understand?"

Eighty-three, her eyes back on the ground, nodded.

"My decision is to have you do your normal line of chores at your normal time."

Eighty-three looked up at him.

"Only, you are to wear no protective clothing other than your goggles."

Several of the Numbered gasped. Shock rippled through them all. A few even shouted at Mason.

At this Jessie ripped her arm out the Numbered's grasp and stood.

"No!" she yelled. "It was my fault!"

Captain Mason slowly turned his head to her and smiled.

"Hello dear. Good to see you again. Did you have something you wanted to add?"

Eighty-three turned and shot her a hard look. She shook her head to quiet her, but Jessie ignored it.

"I ran out! She had to--"

Jessie was cut off as Sixty-one's hand clamped over her mouth and an arm wrapped around her chest.

"I'm sorry," Mason said. "Did you have something to say?"

Jessie struggled against Sixty-one, kicking out at his shins and squirming violently.

"I guess not," Mason looked back at Eighty-three. "The sentence will be carried out today. My guards here will accompany you to make sure you are not aided in anyway by your fellow Numbered here. It seems you all are so quick to help each other. I will check on you all this evening to make sure the message has been received."

Mason turned and stepped back to the front door. He slid on a thick pair of sunglasses on and lifted the latch.

"Have a wonderful day!" he said, and stepped out into the light.

Scene 11

She was hard to look at.

Every exposed part of her body was bright red. The worst was her head, where blisters were already pushing up under the skin. All of it glistened under the ointment Jessie and Sixty-one and gingerly applied across Eighty-three's body.

She had moaned and squirmed and twisted as they spread it on.

Now Jessie sat by her cot, gently holding her hand as Eighty-three slept fitfully. She could hear the others talking quietly in the common room over dinner. Gone was the boisterous conversation and laughing.

From what they said nobody had ever dealt with exposure like this. There were only stories. They'd never seen this kind of punishment on a Numbered before.

"Why are you crying hon?" Sixty-one said.

"This is my fault. All of it. If I hadn't run away--"

"Stop that," Sixty-one said, anger creeping into his voice. "This ain't your fault. It ain't her fault. It's the faction. They did this to her."

"But--"

"Sure, if you hadn't run off maybe this wouldn't have happened. But these are the same people that Shamed a little girl. Same people that shoved these damn plugs into our skulls. Who keep us from the bigger world all the townies and faction workers get to be a part of."

Jessie squeezed her eyes shut, forcing more tears down her cheeks.

"It's them. You keep that fire in your belly at them. Not at yourself. Keep stoking that fire till it's burning white hot. One day you'll get a chance to unleash hell on them and you'll need that fire. Hide it in your heart, but never forget they are the evil--"

"Evil?"

Jessie and Sixty-one looked up quickly at the door to the common room. Captain Mason stood with a warm smile on his face.

"Who's evil?"

Sixty-one quickly looked at the ground. Jessie held her eyes on Mason as he stepped through the doorway and came towards Jessie and Sixty-one. He sat down on a cot just a few feet away.

"I'd like an answer please, let's see," he said consulting his tablet again, "Sixty-one is it? Who do we think is evil today?"

"You know who I was talking about."

"Surely not the faction. Because we at the faction believe only in protecting our citizens and--"

"Cruelty to children?" Sixty-one said.

Jessie shot him a look.

"Cruelty? How so?"

"You take a little girl," he said gesturing to Jessie, "Shame her, plug her up, send her down her to work the lines with us. That's not cruel?"

Mason looked around the room as if he couldn't find someone.

"Who are we talking about here?"

Sixty-one looked at Mason as if he were crazy, then looked over at Jessie.

"Her?" Mason said. "Surely you are not talking about her."

"Course I am. She's a Numbered. She's down here with us. The only child. And--"

"I am so very sorry to tell you this, but she's not a Numbered."

Silence hung as Sixty-one looked directly at Mason, his cautiousness gone as he seemed to wonder if Mason was crazy.

"She's here with us ain't she? Working the lines. She's been Shamed and plugged and sentenced."

"Well, yes, but she is no Numbered."

"How you figure?"

Mason paused and looked at Jessie, his head cocked to the side.

Then he stood and called out to all of the Numbered in the common room.

"All of you, come in here."

The few standing near the doorway looked in.

"That's right, come on in. All of you. I've got something you need to hear."

Mason waited patiently, his hands clasped behind his back, a small smile on his face as all of the Numbered filed in. They took their places along the wall staying as far from Mason as possible.

Once every one had taken their places he spoke.

"It has come to my attention that you have made the mistake in including this girl here as part of your Numbered. The faction has never sent a child to be Numbered in all of its years and we have no intention of doing so."

"Yes, she went through the Shaming and has been plugged and works the lines with you, but she is no Numbered. There is one extremely important difference between her and the rest of you."

He paused for several seconds.

"Jessie," he said pointing down at her, "can leave whenever she would like. Jessie came here by her own petulant choice. Jessie is actually a Coder in Training at the faction's Elite school of Programming and Defense. All Jessie has to do is say the word, and she is pulled out of here and put aboard the next transport to the Capital. All of this nastiness could have been avoided if Jessie would simply stop acting like a child and take the freedom that's being offered her."

As Mason spoke, Jessie could feel the air in the room shift. She glanced out of the corner of her eyes to the Numbered in the room, and their eyes weren't on Mason. They were on her.

"Wonderful," Mason said clapping his hands together. "Now that this messed has been dealt with and the misunderstanding cleared up, I'll be off."

"Jessie."

She looked up at Mason, her face hard.

"You let me know when you're ready to leave, ok?"

Then he turned towards the door and went into the common room. The sound of the latch filtered into the room, followed shortly by the slam of the front door.

Jessie looked around the room at all of the Numbered staring angrily at her. She looked at Sixty-one. His face was red, almost purple.

Finally, she dropped her eyes to Eighty-three. She was no longer asleep. Her eyes were open. She was staring at Jessie too.

CHAPTER SIX

Middle Build

CHAPTER SEVEN

Intro'd to New World

Scene 12

"It is 6am and time to wake up Jessie."

Jessie's eyes popped open and she looked around wildly.

"It is 6am and time to wake up Jessie."

She looked at the small monitor on the wall where it was blinking the time. The green light was casting a pale glow.

She sat up on her bed and the light automatically turned on. The room was small. She could almost touch both walls if she stretched out her hands. There was the small bed that folded up into the wall, a sink and faucet and a small closet.

She had arrived in he middle of the night and was escorted by an older man -- Sergeant Arnold -- directly from the jet to her room where she immediately dropped to sleep.

There was a knock on the door.

She stood and walked slowly to the door.

The knock came again.

She tapped the green button beside the door and it slid open to reveal a boy. He looked to be a few years older than Jessie. He was tall for his age which means he towered over her. He was skinny with long greasy black hair that hung to his shoulder. His long pointed nose and chin gave him a hawk like look. His tight, fitted shirt and pants were all dark grey.

"Morning Jessie," he said.

She nodded to him.

"My name is Az and I'll be showing you around this morning before you start the official training. Why don't you get dressed so we can get moving."

Jessie looked down at her tattered clothes. She had brought nothing from the Numbered.

She had nothing to bring.

"Check the closet," he said and pushed the button closing the door.

Jessie opened the closet to find several shirts, pants, and shoes that exactly matched the Az's outfit, except they were sized to fit her.

She quickly pulled off her clothes and dropped them on the floor, then quickly slid the tight, stretchy clothes on. She hit the green button again and stepped out into the hallway.

"Follow me," Az said, turning to walk down the hallway.

The hallway was still dark and lights turned on as they made their way down the corridor. The walls were lined with doors identical to hers.

"We're in the barracks now. Lights out every night at 11pm and we're back up at 7am so we have less than an hour to get you acquainted."

Jessie nodded and continued to walk behind is brisk pace.

"So tell me," Az said casting her a sideways glance, "why did they bring you in to the academy?"

Jessie shrugged.

"It's just a bit irregular."

Jessie stayed quiet.

"I mean, the Threshing is less than nine months away. The last time they brought in new recruits was fifteen months ago. And those were older than you."

Az stopped at a door and tapped in a code. The door slid open and they stepped in. It was a large room with long tables and metal chairs. It could probably fit a hundred people sitting down. Along one wall was a bar with a glass over it.

"This is the cafeteria. Breakfast is first thing at 7:15, lunch is noon, and dinner is at 5:00. It's only open for thirty minutes so I suggest you show up on time."

He turned to walk out the door and they continued down the corridor.

"How much do you know about the academy?" Az asked.

"I just know it's where Coders are trained for the Threshing."

"Do you know much about the training?"

Jessie shook her head.

"How long it lasts?"

She shook her head again.

Az's eyes narrowed but he kept walking until he came to a large door, big enough to drive a truck through.

He tapped in a code on the keypad next to the door.

"Let's head outside," he said.

Jessie gasped and back pedaled quickly away from the door as it slowly slid open.

Az cocked his head at her.

"What's the problem?"

Jessie stopped retreating as she noticed no light filtering in through the door.

"Where are we?" Jessie said.

"We're in the capital."

"Where is that?"

Az narrowed his eyes at her.

"What happened during your briefing?" he said.

"I didn't get a briefing. They flew me straight in from my town."

Az paused for a long moment.

"We're in Etah. The capital of the Americas faction in Greenland. This is the Elite Coder school for Training and Defense. This is where we prepare and train for the Threshing."

Az stepped outside into the warm air. It was dark enough to be midnight.

"This time of year we have almost a full day of darkness. It allows us to train outside during the day. Follow me."

He walked her around the base showing her the different outdoor training facilities.

"You're mind isn't enough," he said, "the Threshing is physically taxing as well so you'll be put physical trials as well."

Az stopped for a moment, then turned and walked directly away from the base for almost a hundred yards. Jessie stayed close to him in the darkness, especially as the lights from the base faded behind them.

He stopped and turned to her.

"Jessie, I don't know why you're here but you're in a lot of danger. You're young, inexperienced, and yet they brought you all the way from your town to the Capital. There's a reason for that. Why did they pick you?"

Jessie shrugged.

"Jessie, I'm trying to help you but you have to be straight with me."

"I don't know!" she said. "President Marcus just showed up..."

"President Marcus?" Az interrupted. "He came all the way to your town to recruit you?"

"Yeah, is that bad?"

"No. I mean maybe."

Az shook his head as if trying to figure something out.

"It's just -- what did you do when you met him? That must have been an amazing honor for him to directly invite you to training."

Jessie shrugged.

Az mimicked her shrug.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well. I turned him down."

Az looked as if he might pass out.

"You turned him down? Why would you do that?"

"I have my reasons," Jessie said.

"What did he do?"

Jessie looked down at her feet and ran her hand over her bald head.

"Oh," Az said blinking, "I see."

He hissed through his teeth and stood to full height looking around.

"Look Jessie, you obviously don't know what's going on or what you're about to get thrown into. This is the toughest training you've ever experienced. We had a head Coder get scrambled just a few days ago. Hell, the first Severing should be coming up any day. You're going to need a friend."

"Now, I don't get to choose what team you're on, but I can help protect you."

Jessie nodded.

"Ok. Thank you," she said.

"Let's get you back inside," he said turning back to the lights of the base. "We need to get you plugged in for the morning briefing."

Scene 13

By the time Jessie and Az made it back inside, the hallways were teaming with people. It was an even mixture of other teenagers dressed int the exact same outfit, and adults dressed in various form of military clothing. Jessie had no idea what any of the medals and stripes stood for, but it was easy to see who was in charge. All of the kids avoided looking the adults in the eye and always gave them pass as they moved through the corridors.

Jessie was struggling to keep up with Az again as his long gait carried him quickly down the hallways deeper into the base than they had gone before.

At one point, as she hurried around the corner she bumped hard into a boy coming the other way. He was short and rather round and she bounced off of him and sat down hard on the floor.

"Oh I'm so sorry," he said and reached down to help her out.

"Back away maggot."

Az had stepped in swatted the boys hand away. He reached down and helped Jessie up.

"She's not interested in your help."

The boy's face was quickly turning a deep red that seemed to be of equal parts embarrassment and rage. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, another boy stepped in between them, close enough to be uncomfortable. This new boy was angry too, though he was much more formidable. He wasn't quite as tall as Az, but was muscular where Az was lanky. He probably weighed fifty pounds more.

"What's your problem Az?"

Az sneered at them both.

"Alex, I would think you and Ernst would be treading lightly after what happened."

"Maybe we'll tread on your face!" Ernst yelled out, now more livid than anything. "After what you did to Ricky..."

Alex waved a hand to cut him off.

"Why don't you keep moving Az and take your new little pet along with you."

He cocked his head to Ernst to follow then bumped his shoulder hard against Az before the two boys continued down the corridor.

Az sniffed.

"Those two won't be around much longer," he said. "Their Coder got scrambled last week which means they're floating."

"Floating?" Jessie asked.

Az shook his head.

"You really don't know anything do you?"

He checked his watch.

"Ok, we have a few more minutes before the morning briefing. Let me show you something."

He hurried off down the corridor until he came to a stretch of the hallway that was glass from the floor to the ceiling. He stopped and motioned for Jessie to have a look.

The room looked like a cross between a hospital ward and computer server room.

There were four hospital like beds arranged in the room. At the head of the bed was the plug that Jessie recognized, but next to each was an IV stand with all the tubes and needles you would expect. There were also two computer monitors and inputs arranged next to the bed and hooked directly into the large cabinets with racks of servers mounted inside.

"What's all this?" Jessie asked.

"These are the Threshing terminals. Or, at least, they're designed to be exactly what you'll see at the Threshing. This training round has been the first time our Faction could actually afford them."

"I don't understand," Jessie said. "I mean, I get why there's a plug but why the doctor stuff and the computers?"

"Every Coder is paired up with two support staff. You have the Comms who uses the computers. And the Medic which uses the medical supplies. The Coder is able to communicate directly with the Comms during the Threshing. That takes a lot of CPU power though, which is why we have the rack sitting next to it. For the Coder's thoughts to instantly translate to the screen is pretty intense computations. The Comms is doing research and recon during the Threshing and feeding information directly to the Coder."

"And the hospital bed?"

"Coding isn't easy Jessie. It's hard on your system. What happens when things go bad while you're logged in?" Az said.

"You get scrambled?"

"Exactly, and it's the Medic's job to keep you physically pumping to keep you from getting scrambled. Which is what the IV and other stuff in those drawers and cabinets are for."

Az paused and looked down at Jessie.

"You know what getting scrambled is right?"

Jessie shrugged.

"It makes your brain go goofy."

Az laughed.

"Something like that. The Reapers control the remaining food production on earth. They also programmed the original grid and setup the first Threshing. It was the only way we could survive. The three factions were spending the last of our resources fighting. The Reapers stepped in to save what was left of humanity and called a truce between the factions. They control the food and resources, and the factions agreed to only fight every four years during the Threshing for access to the resources. In order for the factions to get what they need from the Reapers, they have to have credits. And the only way to get credits..."

"Is to mine for them," Jessie said. "Yeah, I'm familiar with that part."

"Right, that's what the townies do. They mine for credits which gives the Faction what they need to get food, electricity, and even the equipment and software we need to both survive the next four years and compete in the next Threshing."

"Here's the catch though," Az continued, "Whoever wins the Threshing gets 2-to-1 payment for every credit. That means the Faction that wins will always be able to afford not only more food for their people, but better equipment and training for the next Threshing which means..."

"The Faction that wins is the faction that keeps winning," Jessie said.

"Exactly. Why is why it was so surprising."

"What?"

"That we won the last Threshing. It's the first time in over fifty years that someone beat the Eurorussian Faction."

"How'd we do it?"

Az shrugged.

"Nobody knows. We should have lost just like every year. And we *were* losing. But then we didn't."

Jessie stared through the glass.

"Anyway, the Reapers programmed the grid. They wanted to make sure nobody would attempt to hack through the grid, so they put a kill switch in. When you start doing stuff in the grid you're not supposed to do, you get scrambled."

Az shrugged.

"I still don't understand..."

"But that is what training is all about," Az cut her off. He was staring through the glass and walls to the horizon.

'It has to weed out the hacks so only the true Coders get all the way to the Threshing. That's why I'm here. We won the last Threshing. Whoever wins the Threshing gets unlimited credits and all the fame and freedom that comes with that."

He paused. Then said in a whisper.

"And this year I'm going to win."

His eyes came back into focus and he glanced at his wrist.

"Ok, we have to go. The morning briefing is happening in just a couple minutes. Let's get you logged in."

Scene 14

Jessie rounded the corner a couple seconds behind Az. The room was almost dark with just a pale yellow light leaking through the ceiling. There were several rows of plush chairs in a slightly reclined position all facing towards the blank wall at the back of the room.

There were enough to seat well over a hundred people, but about half of them sat empty. The other half were full of inert bodies leaned back in the chairs with their eyes closed.

Jessie was easily the youngest in the room. She realized now that Az was the average age.

"Come on, you take this one."

Jessie saw Az motioning to a chair on the end of a row closest to her. She sat down and leaned back as Az took the chair next to her.

The back of the chair immediately started to move behind her. It slid until the headrest was in line with her head. Then Jessie felt the familiar push against the base of her skull and then her eyes shut and everything turned white.

After years of logging in to mine, she was waiting for the familiar calming sense to rush over her. Instead, it was like her senses were heightened. She was on full alert. It felt like a fresh surge of adrenaline had hit her blood stream.

"Nice of you to join us Az. At least you brought along our newest recruit."

Jessie's mind was immediately filled with an image of black space. Jessie could feel the floor under her feet, but it all seemed as if it were painted black.

In front of her was Sergeant Arnold. He was dressed the same as the night before in his military whites. All of the kids from the room were standing at attention in three rows in front of the Sergeant. Her and Az had been placed at the end of the back row.

Everyone had turned to stare at her.

"Allright everybody, let's pay attention. Eyes back on me."

Most of the kids looked back at the Sergeant.

"As you know, the Severings are coming up. Even I don't know when they're happening as that's the Major's call, but I can only assume it will be soon."

"To remind you, the Threshing tests three things. Your scripting speed and dexterity, your forensics and stealth, and, lastly, your physical stamina."

"Each of the Severings are engineered to test these skills to the maximum. There are still sixteen teams that have made it through the trainings. That's great. I'm proud of each of you. You're in the top third of your class. But that doesn't matter any more. At the end of the Severings there will only be three teams left. Most of you simply won't make the cut. A few of you will get hurt. And, if this is anything like previous Severings, some of you Coders will be sent home to your families."

"We've granted access for all teams to all of the training software we have available. Thanks to a fresh influx of credits from the townies we've been able to purchase the newest training software from the Reapers. You'll see that marked as 'new' when you login to training."

"Make sure you use your remaining time wisely. Get your training in, but stay rested. You don't want to enter the Severing exhausted."

"Ok, before we logoff, let's introduce everyone to our newest recruit."

Suddenly, Jessie was standing in front of all the students next to Sergeant Arnold. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"This is Jessie everyone. She's our newest townie. I realize it's a little unorthodox to bring in a new trainee this close to the Threshing, but I think it couldn't have come at a better time considering what happened last week."

He quickly cut his eyes at Az as he said this.

"She's shown a lot of promise back on the grid and so President Marcus personally recruited her."

He paused for a moment scanning the kids around him then stopped.

"Ernst. Alex. You're no longer floaters." He slapped Jessie on the back which about sent her sprawling.

"Here's your new Coder."

Scene 15

Jessie's eyes popped open as she logged out of the morning briefing. As soon as the plug retracted she sat up and looked at Az. His face was red and angry.

"What does this mean?" Jessie said.

Az moved close to her so the rest of the recruits filing out the room wouldn't hear him.

"It means you'll probably be scrambled in a couple days."

Jessie's eyes went big.

"Ernst and Alex are both imbeciles. They let their last Coder get scrambled just last week. What do you think will happen to you?"

He pushed past her to leave the room with the other recruits.

"Wait!" she said grabbing his sleeve. "Where do I go now?"

He jerked his sleeve away from her.

"Not my problem."

Az pushed forward leaving her behind in the room. Jessie looked around trying to get her bearings. She glanced to the back of the room and saw Alex and Ernst push through an exit door.

She ran between the chairs and got to the door just as it closed and shoved it back open. She stepped out into the empty corridor.

She stopped, listening.

She heard voices coming from around the corner so she took off running. She rounded the corner and saw Alex and Ernst walking alone.

"Wait!" she yelled.

They looked back, then Alex motioned to Ernst and they turned and kept walking away from her. Jessie ran after them yelling. When she got close they both turned around again.

"What do you want?" Ernst said.

"I don't know where to go."

"And that's our problem?" Alex said.

"Well, aren't we... a team, or something?"

Alex scoffed.

"We had a team."

"But Sergeant Arnold said..."

"Yeah, he replaced our Coder with a child that just showed up last night. How exactly is that going to help us?" Alex said.

"It's not really her fault Alex," Ernst said.

"Yeah well it's not ours either."

Alex turned back to Jessie.

"Where's your buddy Az? Isn't he helping you out?" Ernst sneered.

"I don't know. He was. But he left me in the plugin room."

"Well I don't know what to tell you," Alex said. "You're our Coder but that doesn't mean we're your babysitters. Why don't you head back to your room and we'll just see you at the next training sim. You'll be scrambled within a week so what does it matter?"

They turned and began walking away.

"Will you at least tell me 'scrambled' mean?" Jessie asked quietly.

They both stopped again. Ernst's shoulder dropped slightly. He cut his eyes at Alex who sighed.

"Fine," he said.

Ernst looked at Jessie.

"Have you eaten yet?"

Jessie shook her head.

"Come on let's grab something." Ernst said.

Scene 16

Jessie shoved another enormous bite of the pale eggs into her mouth. Alex and Ernst were obviously disgusted.

"You ok there Jessie?" Ernst said.

"These are so good!"

"They're dehydrated eggs. What makes them so good?"

"We didn't have anything like this back in Houstontown. Most everything we had was a different form of corn."

Jessie forked another large chunk of egg and shoved it in her mouth.

"Well, you'll get sick of them soon enough," Alex said.

"So tell us Jessie, how'd you get recruited in at twelve years old just a few months from the Threshing?" Ernst said.

Jessie swallowed hard as she pushed the large bite down her throat, then she recounted the story for the second time that morning.

Alex sat back, let out a short laugh and rubbed his face hard with his hands.

"What?" Jessie said.

"I don't know. It's just so weird. I've never heard of this being done. We've always been told that they recruit in the year after the Threshing and that's the group that gets trained for the next four years. That's why you're the youngest one here. Ernst here has been the youngest at fourteen because they brought him in while he was eleven. Even that was an exception because of how good he was. So why bring you in? The odds aren't exactly in your favor. Even the Coders that are top in our class are beginning to wash out."

"Like Ricky?" Jessie said quietly.

Ernst dropped his head and Alex put a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah. Ricky."

Ernst wiped his eyes and sniffed.

"And he got scrambled?" Jessie said.

"Yeah."

"Does that mean he got to go home. That's what Sergeant Arnold said."

Alex let out a bitter laugh.

"I suppose so."

"Then why's that so bad? Didn't he want to go home?"

Alex looked at her strangely.

"Go home? Why would you want to go back to your town?"

Jessie shrugged.

"We're getting an opportunity to fight for our faction in the Threshing! It's a huge honor. Not to mention the credits our families are getting while we're here."

"But you don't miss your family?"

Alex got quite.

"You'll get used to it." Ernst said, lifting his head again.

"But what about Ricky? Didn't he get to go home?" Jessie said.

"You really don't know what being scrambled means?"

"Well I met a guy back in my town that said he had been scrambled before. He was a little weird but seemed ok."

"You get scrambled when you don't something the grid don't like," Ernst said. "It's the defense mechanism the Reapers put in to fend off hackers. They figured it was a good way to keep people from trying any funny business. Problem is, sometimes people do and so they get kicked in the head a bit from the grid."

"But they survive, so what's the big deal?"

"It's kind of like fire," Alex said. "If you get burned a little bit while you're cooking, it's not a big deal. Your hand turns a little red but you're fine. But what happens if you keep going deeper into the fire?"

"You get burned really bad" Jessie said.

"Exactly."

Ernst stood suddenly.

"We need to just show her," he said.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Alex said.

"Show me what?"

"How else is she going to get it?" Ernst said.

Alex shrugged and stood.

The three of them exited the cafeteria and wound through several corridors. They came to a door marked "Medical" and stepped into a different sort of hallway. This one was white and sterile. Several stern men and women were moving in and out of the rooms.

Jessie followed Alex and Ernst down the tiled hall. She tried to look through the windows in the rooms but all of them were covered with thick drapes from the inside.

Alex and Ernst stopped in front of the door.

"You show her," Ernst said stepping back from the door.

"This was your idea," Alex said.

"I know... I just can't," Ernst turned and started heading back out of the medical hall.

Alex sighed and shook his head.

"This has been pretty hard on Ernst. He looked up to Ricky a lot. He was so young when he got here that he attached to Ricky right away. I think he thought of Ricky like a father or big brother."

He paused, looking at Jessie. She held his stare, waiting.

"Here's the thing Jessie. At this point in the Threshing training we are standing in the hottest part of the fire. If something goes wrong, you don't just get a slight burn. You get fried."

Alex opened the door to the room and stepped back so Jessie could see. She stepped forward to see then froze.

A boy, probably sixteen was writhing in the bed. His arms, legs, and chest were all strapped down to the bed barely holding him in place. The padding under the restraints wasn't standing up to his constant movement and had rubbed hard into the skin. Blood was leaking out from the restraints and had stained the bed. His eyes were open, but the pupils were rolled back and he was repeatedly lifted his head and slamming it back into the pillow. A constant moan came from his lungs as he moved and shook.

Jessie jumped back and put a hand over her mouth. Alex put his hands on her shoulders, steading her.

"So yeah, Ricky gets to go home."

He paused.

"Are you sure you still want to?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

First Test

Scene 17

"They really didn't tell you anything did they?" Ernst said.

Jessie rolled her eyes.

"I really wish everyone would figure that out and get over it."

"I just... it's just irresponsible."

"Whatever," Jessie said, "just show me how it works."

"Ok, up on the table," Alex said.

Jessie crawled up on the table and laid down.

Ernst sighed.

"We're going to have to adjust the whole table," Ernst said. "Get down."

For the next couple minutes Ernst and Alex fought with the chair, figuring out how to make it as short as possible. By the end, they had something that more or less would fit Jessie's height.

"Ok, up you go," Alex said.

Jessie climbed back up and laid down. She put her feet firmly in the footholds and laid her arms up on the arm rests.

"Ready?" Alex said.

Jessie nodded.

He turned to the IV stand and the small control panel attached to it. He tapped a couple buttons and the chair began to softly whir underneath her.

Soft straps slid out from under her ankles and locked her legs into place. Two more straps slid under her armpits and tightened down around her shoulders. Another went across her waist. Finally, two more straps slid out from the arm rests and locked her forearm down firmly.

Alex had already pulled out several round leads with wires running out from them. He gently lifted her shirt and stuck three of them at various points to her chest. Then he put the last two on her forehead.

"What are these?" she asked, her voice shaking a bit.

"We have to track your vitals while you're logged in don't we?"

"We never had to do this back home."

Alex opened one of the draws next to him and pulled out a small plastic pouch. He ripped it open with his teeth and produced a long, thin needle.

"Yeah," he said spitting the plastic into the trashcan next to him, "there's not much profit in tracking the vitals of townies is there? Not to mention mining isn't exactly a strenuous activity."

Alex moved down to her hand and positioned the needle above it.

"Stop!" Jessie squeaked.

Alex looked up at her, a quizzical look on his face.

"Oh, you've probably never seen this before," he said. "My job as your Medic is to keep your body working while your logged in. Remember all the tests the Sergeant said you'd be undergoing? Well, your body hasn't exactly evolved to the point where it understands that what's happening in your mind isn't actually happening to your body. So they figured out pretty quickly that they need someone monitoring the Coder's body at all times."

"See this?" Alex said sliding back his chair to reveal a small black box with a glass door. It was filled with at least a hundred different small bottles.

"These are the meds I use to keep your body running when your brain is telling it to shut down. But I have to get them in your bloodstream as quickly as possible so..." he held up the needle again. "I have to have a direct path."

Most of the blood had left Jessie's face by this point, but she nodded to him. He moved the needle back to her hand and she held her breath against the sting as he slid it in. Alex deftly taped it down in place and connected the tube that rain up to the IV drip bag on the stand.

"All done. You good?" Alex said.

Jessie let out her breath and nodded. She hated not being able to wipe away the tears that had pooled in her eyes. Alex pretended not to notice.

"Ok," Ernst was talking now, "Once we get you logged into the training you'll be able to communicate directly with me. It's a little weird at first for newbies because you won't hear me as much as just know what I'm saying. And you don't need to talk to answer, just think about what you want to say to me and it will show up on my screen here."

Ernst tapped the large monitor in front of him.

"Now I'm blind to what you can see and what you're doing while you're logged in so you have to communicate with me while you're in there. I've uplinked one of the training grounds they give newbies when they first arrive just to give you a taste. We'll need to upgrade the training software pretty quickly though if we're going to have a chance during the Severings."

Jessie nodded.

"Ok, this is basically an obstacle course. Your job is to get through it as quickly as possible. There shouldn't be much you need from me on this one, but just talk me through it as you work so I can keep track of where you're at."

"Ready?"

Jessie nodded, Ernst tapped a button, and she felt the plug slide into the back of her head and clamp down.

Everything went white and then she was standing in front of a large black door.

*Are you in? Can you hear me?*

*Yes. All I see is a door though. Is that right?*

*I think so, hold on.*

A few seconds past.

*Yeah looks that way. Go ahead and open the door.*

Jessie put out her hand and pulled on the handle, then stepped through the doorway.

There was another room, and another door. This one had a padlock on it. She turned around to check the door she had just come through, but it was gone, replaced with a solid wall.

*Ok, another door. Now it's got a lock on it.*

*You've got to get through the lock. Is it a keyed or combination lock?*

*Keyed.*

*Ok, have you ever broken through a keyed lock?*

Jessie rolled her eyes and didn't answer.

*So how do I get the tools I need? I don't see my toolbox.*

*That's part of the test. This isn't like mining where you're given your toolbox when you login. You have to code up your own tools and use them. That's what we're testing here.*

*There's no terminal. How am I supposed to do that?*

*Just send them to me and I'll run them in real time.*

*Ok.*

Jessie shut her eyes.

*Woah!*

Jessie opened her eyes.

*What?*

*Nothing. Keep going.*

Her eyes shut again for just a few seconds.

*Ok, you get that?* Jessie said.

*Yeah. It's almost... ok, there you go. Should be in the room with you. Are you sure about this?*

Jessie turned around and saw what she was looking for. She walked to the corner of the room and grabbed the handle. She pulled on it and slid it across the room to the door.

She grimaced under the weight as she lifted the large sledgehammer but managed barely to get it moving and brought it down hard on the lock. The lock shattered under the weight and Jessie jumped back letting the hammer drop.

She undid the latch that was hanging at an angle now, and pulled the door open enough for her to slip through into the next room.

*Ok, I'm through.*

Silence.

*Ernst?*

*Sorry Jessie.*

*I'm through to the next room.*

*I'm logging you off.*

*What? Why?*

Instead of getting an answer, the room disappeared and everything went white again.

Jessie felt the plug release from her head and she opened her eyes.

"Was that it?"

He looked at Ernst, his face was white and his mouth opened but nothing came out.

She looked at Alex. He was quickly pulling the leads off her head and chest.

"What's going on?"

Alex wouldn't meet her eyes. He concentrated on removing the IV needle from her hand and taping a small bit of gauze in place over the tiny droplet of blood that emerged.

"All trainee meeting," he said. "We have to get back to the briefing room."

He looked up at her.

"The first Severing is happening tomorrow."

Scene 18

They were back in formation in front of Sergeant Arnold. He was pacing as he talked.

"This one came quicker than I was expecting, but I guess that's the whole point."

He stopped pacing and checked the tablet he was holding.

"The first Severing will begin at 0600 tomorrow. Your Coder is expected to be plugged in and checked in by then or you will be disqualified."

"This test will push the bounds of your forensics and stealth. As you know, breaking through the grid is not just about your coding abilities, it's also about your knack at hiding your tracks. During the Threshing the Reapers have their best Coders logged into the grid and hunting you. If you're caught, well, you know what happens when you're caught."

"President Marcus himself coded up this Severing and I think it's a pretty clever way to test your skills. Of course, I can't give out any exact information on how the Severing will work, I would just suggest you get ready for a long run. This one won't be over quick for most of you."

"Any questions?"

Several hands shot into the air.

"Yes, Kerry."

He pointed to a tall girl with long blond hair.

"What's the setting?"

"That'll be a surprise tomorrow morning. I don't even know what the President has in store for you."

Jessie leaned over to Ernst.

"Setting?" she whispered.

"Yeah, like what the world will be."

"What does that mean?"

He shook his head and shushed her.

Sergeant Arnold had finished answering another question and Alex shot his hand up.

The Sergeant nodded to him.

"I want to know what the hell is going on."

He had almost shouted the question. Anger spilled out of the voice.

"Excuse me?"

"Jessie got here yesterday! She had no briefing. She has no training. The one training session we had time for got cut short for this briefing. And now you're loading her into a Severing!"

"Do you have a question Alex?"

"You know what happened to Ricky. And that was after three years of training. What do you think is going to happen to her? Why was she even brought in?"

Jessie's face had turned red and she was staring at her shoes. It still seemed weird to her that all she saw was endless black underneath her where a floor should be.

"That question is above my ranking, and definitely above yours. She was recruited and brought in by President Marcus. He calls the shots around here. And he's more invested in winning the next Threshing than either of us, so I suggest instead of questioning his actions you focus your energy on keeping Jessie safe. That is your job after all."

"But it's hopeless!" Alex shouted.

Now Sergeant Arnold was angry. He stalked over to Alex and leaned in uncomfortably close to him.

"You shut your mouth," he growled, his voice shaking as he struggled to whisper. "Don't you think she's already scared enough? And now her own Medic has already pronounced her hopeless? You need to forget Ricky and move on or you're going to lose her too. Got it?"

Alex nodded.

"Good. Now say another word about this and you'll be sending Jessie into the Severing without a Medic."

Alex nodded again.

Arnold held his gaze for another second before he stepped back and spoke loudly to everyone.

"That's the end of the briefing. I suggest you spend the rest of the day prepping your strategy for the Severing and we'll see you at 0600. Dismissed."

Fear was thick in the air as everyone logged out and stood out of their chairs. Ernst, Alex, and Jessie huddled close as all of the trainees shuffled out the room.

"Poor Alex and Ernst. Going to lose another Coder. I wonder if that will break some kind of record in trainee history... losing two Coders in less than a week."

The three of them spun around to find Az with a big smirk on his face. He was flanked by two other trainees that must be his own Comms and Medic. One of them was a big, hulking figure who looked more like a security guard than a teenager.

Alex lunged forward cocking his fist back but the big trainee behind Az stepped in between them and pushed Alex back.

"You're quick to say something when you have the two idiots to keep you company" Alex said.

"Yes, yes, we all know you could beat me up," Az said. "Fortunately, though, your physical might doesn't matter for much here. It only matters what you can do once you're logged in and we both know I can run circles around your new Coder. In fact," he paused and looked up as if thinking hard, "yes, I think I will."

He looked back at the three of them.

"I'm going to make it my personal mission to find Alex tomorrow and make sure she's scrambled to the point that Ricky looks healthy."

Alex's fist clamped closed and he made to take a step forward.

Jessie reached out her hand and put it on his arm. He looked back quickly.

"Don't," she whispered, "I'm fine. We need to get out of here."

Alex looked back at Az's sneering face one last time before they turned and left the briefing room.

Jessie was leading the way down the corridor.

"I need to get logged into the grid," she said.

"Yes, let's do it," Ernst said.

He looked at Alex.

"What training module should she run through? We spent over a year on forensics and stealth with Ricky, so I'm not exactly sure where to start with just a few hours..."

"No," Jessie said, "I need to get into the common grid."

"What do you mean? Where the townies are?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Why?"

"I have a few things I need to get," she said.

"What does that mean?" Ernst said.

She stopped so fast that the two boys almost ran into her.

"I think I can do this," she said.

Alex opened his mouth to retort, then closed it. Both the boys looked at her as if she were lying on her deathbed.

"I know you think I can't do this," Jessie said. "I know I haven't done the training, but this also isn't my first time on the grid. There's a reason I was brought in to the training and I need you to at least have hope that I can survive this. I have an idea, but I need your help getting what I need."

She paused for a long moment, then whispered.

"I don't want to go home like Ricky."

They both nodded.

"Ok Jessie," Alex said. "What do you need?"

Scene 19

Jessie was kneeling on a small pillow. A few feet away an extremely overweight man sat on a much larger pillow, his legs crossed in front of him. He wore a wide rimmed black hat. Black suspenders ran over a crisp white shirt down to black pants. All of the clothes looked homemade.

The small room they were in was lit by a single lamp sitting off to the side. Smoke rolled out of the cigar the man was smoking adding to the already thick smell in the room.

"I cannot say I'm joyous at the occasion of laying my eyes upon you my dear."

Jessie rolled her eyes.

"And I can't say I've missed our conversations Balaam."

"Then pray tell why you hath placed yourself at my feet in such a manner as to lay my whereabouts exposed to those great and mighty kings of our glorious faction?"

"I need your help."

"Thou hast traveled many leagues hence to the den of the snakes which we feareth."

"Which is exactly why you should help me. I'm deeper than any of us have ever gone. Deeper than I ever planned to go. But I'm here and I can't figure out what to do."

"And the help yond thou art requesting shall putteth both me and our cater-cousins in most wondrous danger. Coequal me talking to thee couldst expose me nay grant you mercy to how thee hast broken into mine own system."

"They can't track me."

"Sayeth the girl yond hast been caught and shamed."

Jessie ignored this and pressed forward.

"There doesn't seem to be a way out of this. If I win, I get sent to the Threshing where I'll definitely die. But if I lose, I'll be scrambled out of my mind. You've lived the longest outside of the grid without the faction catching you. How do I get out of this?"

Balaam didn't answer right away. Instead he took several long drags from the cigar. He released the smoke in small puffs of rings.

"There is a story of a most wondrous prophet longeth before the most wondrous Burning. That gentle man did spread the valorous and true word of our Lord to people all over the earth. And yet, that gentle man wast afflicted with a thorn. A thorn yond couldst not remove. That gentle man didst prayeth and that gentle man didst work for our Lord and yet the thorn couldst not be undone. So that gentle man hath decided the thorn wast there to keepeth the gentle man from the sin of pride. As we groweth in power dear girl, pride doth take over."

"Thee seeth two paths did lay out in front of thee by the prideful. But art those the only two paths which existeth?"

"From what I can see, yes. Do you see a third path?"

"Aye."

"What is it?"

Balaam shook his head and stood with great effort from his seated position. He stood staring down at Jessie as he drew deeply on his cigar again. He turned to the back of the room where a door had appeared.

He walked back to the door and took the knob in his beefy hand.

Jessie jumped to her feet.

"What is it? What's the third path?"

He glanced back over his shoulder at her.

"Beest the thorn."

Scene 20

Lightning flashed across the sky and thunder hit almost immediately after. Jessie startled at the loud noise.

Rain filtered through the leaves and big drops splashed against Jessie's bare head. She wiped her face with her hand and looked around in awe. She'd never seen anything like this.

Back home, the few trees that were around her town were scraggly, brittle sticks. She'd heard people talk about huge, green trees but always assumed they were exaggerating. But here...

Lightning flashed across the sky again.

There was an entire *forest* of trees. All of them tall. All of them amazing.

Jessie stood about hundred yards from the edge of the forest. There was a large field of grass that swayed and bent in unison as the wind from the storm whipped over it.

*It's beautiful.*

*What is?*

Jessie looked around again as she described the scene to Ernst.

*Did they have anything like this in your town?* Jessie asked.

*I doubt that exists anywhere anymore.* *Ok, the orders are downloading to us. Hang on.*

*Ok, can you see a blinking red light from where you are standing? It should be in the middle of the forest.*

Jessie wiped the rain out of her eyes and squinted against the dark.

*Yeah I can barely see it, but it's there.*

*That's your goal. You have to get there. And you have to be one of the first eight Coders to make it otherwise you'll get logged out of the system.*

Jessie began walking down the hill towards the forest.

*Where are the other Coders? I don't see anyone else.*

*They're spread out around the forest. Don't forget, they're trying to win too and can force a log out on you.*

*How may coding credits did they give us?*

*Just eight.*

Jessie shook her head.

*That's not much.*

*Yeah, this Severing isn't about your coding skills, it's about your stealth and ability to remain undetected while reaching your goal.*

Jessie picked up her pace into a jog. She stopped and peered into the forest when she reached the edge, then turned and started jogging around the perimeter of the trees.

Every twenty or so yards she'd stop and listen into the forest, then she'd pick up the jog again.

On one of these stops as she listened she heard a sharp crack come from the trees. She clinched and unclinched her fists a few times and then stepped gently into the forest towards the sound she'd heard.

The forest was completely new terrain for her. She might as well have been on a different planet. The ground was covered with leaves and sticks, all soaked with the rain. All the trees seemed big and foreboding and the bark was slick to the touch. Big drops of rain kept leaking from the leaves above and spattering against her head and shoulders.

She kept moving thought towards the direction of the sound as fast as she could while remaining quiet.

After a couple minutes, she heard another soft sound and a low voice.

She took another step towards the sound and she jumped at the crack that came from under her own foot. Jessie froze as the sound of the stick seemed to echo through the forest.

She waited, listening.

After a few moments she let out the breath she'd been holding and kept moving in the direction of the sound.

She had to be getting close.

She crept up behind a particularly big, gnarled trunk of a tree and peered around it.

In a small clearing one of the other Coders -- Ben was his name -- was standing. Jessie narrowed her eyes. Why was he standing that way? He looked as if he was waiting on something.

Jessie took a step back from the tree when an arm wrapped around her neck and picked her off the ground. She started to scream but the person's other hand clamped over her mouth and it became a muffled moan.

Jessie struggled and kicked trying to get loose. The person's arm started to lose its grip and she pushed harder against it.

"Ben! Come help me!"

The boy from the clearing came running to help. He grabbed Jessie's hands and put her wrists together to control her.

Jessie kept fighting and struggling.

"Stop!" he hissed at her. "Or we'll have to scramble you right here and end it."

Jessie stopped squirming and waited.

"Will you be quiet?

Jessie nodded.

"Ok Clifton," Ben nodded at her and the hand disappeared from her mouth, but the arm around her neck still held tight.

"How'd you find us?"

Jessie shrugged but didn't answer.

"We should just log her out now and be done with it," Clifton said.

"No, I can help," she said quickly.

Ben gave her a look that made it obvious he didn't agree.

"How?"

"You two obviously planned to meet up, which is good. But what if you need a third person? This is all about sneaking right? Well I'm small and quiet."

"We found you pretty easily," Clifton said.

"Sure, but I found you pretty easily too," she replied.

Ben laughed.

"She's got you there Cliff."

Jessie suddenly let her feet go to drop to her knees and put all her weight against Cliff's arm which had loosened while they talked. She popped free and hit the dirt and rolled away before jumping to her feet.

She stood facing both the boys, ready to dart into the woods if need be.

"There's eight open spots," she said. "And three of us. Both of your Comms can keep you up-to-date on status of remaining spots. If we hurry, we can all make it -- wouldn't you rather face me in the next Severing than one of the other Coders? And if there's only two spots left..." she shrugged, "I'm sure you two can log me out quick enough then."

Ben and Clifton exchanged glances.

"I don't know," Clifton said. "We have her now."

"She's got a point though. If we help her through this Severing we'll only have five other Coders to worry about in the next one."

"Fine," Clifton said looking at Jessie, "you can stay with us and we'll protect you as long as we can. But..."

He walked over to her and turned her to face the woods and pointed into them over her shoulder.

"You're the scout."

Scene 21

Jessie glanced at the small compass on her wrist for the third time to make sure she was heading in the right direction, then kept moving forward trying to stay as low as possible.

She'd kicked in two of her own credits to code up the compass. She knew Clifton and Ben had wired a tracker into it as well so they could easily follow her through the darkness. Ernst was none too happy about her teaming up with them, but he did his job and ran her credits just the same.

They'd been making steady progress for the past few hours. She'd kept Ernst and Alex up-to-date on her progress along the way.

Jessie would slowly creep forward through the forest for twenty minutes, then she would wait as the two boys caught up.

This last meet up they had scolded her for going too slow. They were sure others were going to make it to the tower before them since they had spent so much time meeting up and then dealing with Jessie at the beginning.

So instead of crawling, she had stayed on her feet and tried to use as much of the trees and undergrowth as cover as possible.

But now she had a dilemma.

There was a large clearing in front or her. The quickest route would be to walk right through it in the direction of the tower but she would be exposed for several seconds even if she ran.

However, working her way around it would be costly in time and she knew she'd hear about it from Clifton and Ben.

The problem was, the closer they got to the beacon, the more likely they were to run into another Coder.

Jessie waited a few more seconds scanning her eyes around the edge of the clearing and listening intently. After a full minute, she crouched forward, readied herself and then leapt out from behind the tree and to sprint across the opening, however as soon she took her first step there was a loud bang, she was spun around violently, and fell hard into the mud.

There was another bang and she felt something splatter mud near her face. She rolled quickly away from the clearing and struggled to crawl behind a tree.

Another bang and bark flew from the tree she was now hiding behind.

Jessie took a deep breath which caught in her throat as the pain from her arm finally hit. Her right arm almost to the shoulder felt like it had been jabbed with a hot poker.

She clamped her hand against it and winced. She felt blood oozing between her fingers.

"Jessie!"

Az's voice came from across the clearing. She didn't answer.

"I told you I'd find you and scramble you myself. You might as well come on out and let me finish the job. I know I hit you. You won't make it far injured."

Jessie, still clutching her arm, leaned slowly out from behind the tree and peered across the clearing.

She saw a flash of light and screamed as she heard the bullet whistle just by her head.

"I see you!" she yelled. "You're right there at eleven o'clock across the clearing!"

"Unfortunately that doesn't help you at all," Az said. "Because I can see you clear as day. You're the one hurt. I'm going to pick you off as soon as you move."

*What the hell is going on Jessie? Your vitals are all over the place here.*

*Az shot me.*

*Az? Shot you? Are you ok?*

*He got my arm. I'm not sure how bad it is, but it's bleeding a lot and my fingers are going numb.*

Ernst cursed bitterly.

*How did he even get a gun?* Jessie said. *You'd need way more than eight credits to code one up.*

*There's already been two Coders logged out. That must have been Az because you get any credits that are left over when you log someone out. Twenty-four credits is more than enough to code up a gun.*

Jessie winced and laid her head against the tree, waiting. She clutched her arm trying to stop the bleeding and steel herself against the pain.

*Hang in there Jessie. Alex is giving you something for the pain. You'll need to stop the bleeding but the pain should subside shortly.*

After several minutes of Az throwing taunts at her she heard a rustling come from his direction.

"Fine," he said. "I'll just come get you. I need to make sure I'm the first one to the beacon anyway."

A few seconds later as she heard Az moving through the forest, there was a loud yell and a commotion broke out. Jessie chanced a look into the clearing and saw Ben on top of Az. They were struggling for control of the hand gun Az had used against Jessie.

Jessie struggled to her feet. She went to run across the clearing, but immediately staggered and fell to her knees. She caught herself with her bad arm and yelped. Stars floated in her vision as she pressed her hand back against the wound and struggled to her feet.

Just as she was getting close to the two fighting, Az kicked out at Ben's stomach and he doubled over in pain. Az quickly jumped to his feet still clutching the weapon. He stepped forward and viciously kicked Ben in the head which sent the boy onto his back.

Az was breathing hard as he lifted the gun and pointed it at Ben's chest.

"You just made my job all that easier," he said.

Just as he was about to pull the trigger there was a scream from the woods and Clifton emerged at a full run straight for Az. He dove into the air just as Az raised the gun. There was a loud bang as Clifton collided with Az and they both went down into the mud. The gun flew out of Az's hand into the brush several feet away.

This gave Ben a chance to get unsteadily back to his feet and he hurried to where the two boys had landed. Az struggled out from underneath Clifton, took one look at Ben coming for him and turned and darted back into the woods as fast as he could.

Jessie and Ben made it to Clifton at the same time. Ben turned him over.

"Clifton!" he yelled, but Jessie already knew it was too late. The bullet had gone through his chest. He was already gone.

"No no no no no," Ben stammered.

"I'm so sorry," Jessie said after a few moments.

"He was all I had here. We were the only two from our town to make the cut. His mom..."

Jessie kept scanning her eyes around the clearing as Ben rocked back and forth holding Clifton.

"Ben, we have to keep moving," she said tugging at his shirt sleeve.

He stayed on his knees besides Clifton, his hands pressing against the boy's still chest for several more seconds.

Finally he stood and looked at Jessie.

"Where'd the gun go?"

Jessie pointed over to the patch of brush. Ben searched through it quickly and retrieved the weapon. He ejected the clip counted the two rounds left and slid it back into place.

"Can you run?"

Jessie nodded.

"I think so."

"Then let's go."

Scene 22

*We're here.*

Jessie and Ben were crouched down at the edge of a large clearing, at least a hundred yards across. In the middle of the clearing stood the beacon tower.

It was a wooden structure with exposed stairs leading up the six stories to the top where the red light was still slowly beating like a dying heart. At the bottom of the tower was a single doorway that led to the stairs.

*Great! You just have to get to the top of the tower and hit the button to log out safely.*

*How many Coders have made it so far?*

*None. One more has been scrambled so it's down to twelve of you.*

He paused, then said, *I'm still not sure why you spent your credits on that stuff though.*

Jessie ignored him and spoke to Ben instead.

"How do you want to do this?"

"I'll cover you while you run to the door."

"You could just leave me to fend for myself you know. You have the weapon."

Ben shrugged.

"I agreed to take you with me if there were still spots."

They both stood and Ben held the gun in both hands, ready. He nodded to Jessie and she stepped out into the clearing. She half expected another shot to ring out, but it stayed quiet.

She began walking quickly towards the tower. When she was less than twenty yards away, a voice called out.

"Looks like you made it."

She turned in time to see Az step out from the trees. As soon as he came into view, two quick shots rang out from Ben's direction. Az dove back into the trees as the bullets went wide of him. Jessie heard Ben curse behind her.

Az stood back up, brushed the leaves off his clothes and walked confidently back into the clearing towards the tower.

"Tsk tsk," he said. "Ben you should be a better shot than that by now."

"Stop!" Jessie yelled moving quickly to close the gap between her and the doorway.

"What are you going to do?" Az said, still walking towards her. "You can't do anything. You're hurt and don't have enough credits for anything that would stop me. In fact, if I were you, I'd get moving. I already logged one Coder out with my bare hands today. I can do it again."

"I mean it," Jessie said stepping closer to the doorway. "Stop!"

She pulled out the two items she'd spent her credits on from her pocket. In her hurt arm she held a small vial with a bit of cloth she'd ripped from her shirt shoved in the top. In the other she held a lighter.

Az did stop but he was cocking his head to the side quizzically.

"What are you going to do with that? It's a pretty pathetic weapon."

Az started moving towards her again, this time much quicker.

Jessie leaned over and flicked the lighter several times until a flame appeared. She put the lighter to the bit of cloth. It caught quickly and the flame grew in her hand. She cocked her arm back as if to throw it in Az's direction.

He slowed but didn't stop.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said.

Jessie turned to the tower and threw the flaming vial against the door in the tower. The vial shattered and the liquid flew across the door and immediately ignited. The doorway was engulfed in flames.

"No!" Az screamed as he sprinted to the doorway, but by the time he got there the heat was too much and he had to stay back. Jessie had already back pedaled away from the doorway, clutching her arm again. The pain meds Alex had given her were starting to wear off.

"What did you do?" Alex screamed at Jessie.

She shrugged, which threw him into a fit of rage. He ran at her and tackled her to the ground. She screamed as all of their weight landed on her damaged arm.

Az continued yelling and cursing as he rained down blows down on Jessie. They were wild, out of control swings, but many still landed savagely against her face and head. Jessie lost track of how many times he hit her.

Then suddenly he was gone.

Jessie opened the one eye she still could and saw Ben lifting Az bodily off of her and throw him down in the grass. He placed himself between her and Az.

"Keep off her!" Ben yelled.

"Look what she's done!" Az screamed pointing over his shoulder

The entire base of the tower was now engulfed in flames.

Jessie sat up slowly and looked around her.

*What is going on?* Ernst said.

*What do you mean?*

*Everyone here is in an uproar. Several of the Comms are screaming about something happening to the tower.*

Jessie didn't respond.

Several other Coders had stepped out into the clearing and were standing still watching the flames. They all seemed unsure what to do.

For several minutes they watched as the flames continued to climb up the tower, then suddenly everything went white.

Jessie kept her eyes shut as she felt the restraints loosen and the plugin disengage.

When she finally opened her eyes she saw Alex and Ernst hovering above her. They both looked angry.

"What the hell did you do?" Alex said.

CHAPTER NINE

First Test Aftermath

Scene 23

Shouting and chaos pushed in around Jessie as she struggled out of the chair. All around her the angry faces of her fellow trainees were yelling and pushing in her direction.

It was an anger fueled by fear and the unknown.

Alex was shouting back and shoving those that pressed in the closest. Ernst held Jessie behind him and put his own voice into the mayhem.

"We have to get out of here," he shouted to Alex.

"Move! Get out of the way!" Alex shouted, but the trainees wouldn't relent. To Jessie the shouts and jeers were all too familiar. Glimpses of the screaming crowd in the town square flashed through her mind.

One of the taller boys, Jessie recognized him as a Comms, Bill was his name, got in Alex's face and started demanding that they plug Jessie back in so they could fix her themselves.

Alex didn't even take the time to pull back his fist, it just jumped up from his waist and landed on Bill's chin. Bill sprawled back onto the floor. Alex didn't hesitate. He grabbed Ernst's sleeve and dragged the two of them through the hole in the crowd Bill had created. The sudden violence seemed to quiet the crowd for the moment and Alex shoved through the last of the trainees and hurried down the corridor.

Nobody spoke as they moved. Jessie was back to jogging to keep up with the older boy's longer legs.

They reached Jessie's bunk room. Alex pointed at the control panel. Jessie pressed her hand against the scanner, it clicked green and the door slid open. They all pushed into the small space. Alex closed the door behind him and turned on Jessie.

It was clear he was just as angry as the other trainees.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

"They didn't tell you?"

"It was hard to make out as I was fighting them off from attacking you. All I know is everyone got logged out at the same time long before the Severing was over."

"I ended it," Jessie said.

"You burnt down the tower didn't you?" Ernst said.

Alex glared at Ernst.

"You knew what she was going to do?"

"No! I swear. But it's the only thing that makes sense. I was wondering why she coded up the lighter and butane. I figured she was trying to make some kind of weapon. But even that didn't make sense."

Alex turned back to Jessie.

"Tell us what happened."

Jessie told them, from meeting up with Ben and Clifton, to Az's attack, to burning down the tower.

"You could have won!" Alex yelled. "You were right there! You would have been the first one! You know huge that would have been? You've only been here a couple days and you beat all of the other Coders."

Jessie bit her lip and stayed silent.

Alex grabbed the front of her shirt and yanked her close.

"Alex!" Ernst yelled grabbing at his shoulder. "Let her go."

Alex shrugged him off.

"Do you think this is a game?" Alex shouted in her face. "We've all been yanked from our families and put here in this metal cage to train for eighteen hours a day and you slide in here and start screwing with everything. This is the only chance I have to take care of my family and make it to the Threshing. What are you playing at here?"

"I don't want to be here!" Jessie screamed back. "I did everything I could not to come and I'm still here. You got to choose to come. I chose not to, and I'm still here. You want to play their games, fine. You're not the one that's going to end up like Ricky or die in the Threshing! That's me."

Jessie pushed at Alex's hands and he let her go. She stepped back from him warily.

"My only way out is to cause so much trouble that they just send me home."

"Or they scramble you themselves," Ernst said.

Jessie shrugged.

"That's the path I'm on already."

Alex shook his head.

"Jessie, you haven't been around as long as we have. You haven't seen what the Faction does to the trainees that break the rules."

Quiet fell between them as they all followed their own strings of thought.

"What are they going to do to her?" Ernst asked.

Alex shook his head.

"I have no idea. As far as I know this has never happened." He swore. "The President himself coded that Severing. What do you think he's going to do when he finds out what happened?"

"We need to get her out of here," Ernst said.

"What?" Alex looked at Ernst as if he had lost his mind.

"If the Faction doesn't get her, the other trainees will. We need to hide her until we can find a way to smuggle her out to one of the towns."

"How do you suppose we're going to do that from Greenland? It's not exactly a short walk to the next town."

"I'm not sure yet, but I do know a place we can hide her until we can figure it out."

"Where?"

"It's down in the basement. There's an old Comms room down there that nobody uses anymore." Ernst looked embarrassed. "I used to go down there when... when it just got too much."

Alex sighed and rubbed his face.

"Ok fine, we need to do it quick though."

He looked at Jessie.

"What do you think?"

"Can't I just stay here?" she said.

"You can, but are you ready for whatever the President wants to do?"

Fear flashed across Jessie's face. She rubbed her hand across her head and felt the short prickly hair starting to grow back.

"Ok, let's go."

"Alright, I'll step out first and make sure it's clear then we'll all leave together."

Ernst and Jessie nodded.

Alex turned and pressed the button. The door slid open. Alex jumped back and Jessie screamed.

Two tall men dressed from head to toe in black were standing just outside the door. Both held their weapons at the ready.

One of them stepped forward and pushed Alex roughly to the side. He grabbed Jessie's arm and pulled her out of the room.

"You're coming with us."

Scene 24

The two men kept firm grips on her arm without hurting Jessie. As soon as they began walking down the corridor she saw that Ernst and Alex's plan would have never worked. The trainees were all idling in the halls in groups. Some were whispering amoung themselves while others were shouting and still in an uproar.

The three of them would have never made it to the basement unseen.

As Jessie passed by, they all stopped talking and glared at her.

The two guards moved at a slower pace so Jessie could keep up without tripping, but this also meant there was more time for her to face the animosity from her fellow trainees.

They emerged from the barracks and turned down a separate corridor. At the end they stopped and a door and one of the guards waved his badge in front of the panel and pushed a button. A few seconds later the door slid open and they all stepped into the small elevator.

The elevator lurched and began moving down. The longer they moved, the more the space seemed to get smaller and smaller around Jessie. The men that were already so much taller than her, seemed to tower over her even more.

They never let go of her arms.

Finally the elevator stopped and the door slid back open.

An identical corridor stretched out ahead of them lined with doors.

They pulled Jessie out of the elevator and walked to the end of the hall then let go of her arms.

She looked up at the guard that had spoken first, waiting for instructions.

"Go on. He's waiting for you."

Jessie pressed her hand against the panel next to the door. It clicked green and the door slid open. She looked back to the guards, but they had already turned their backs to the door and stared straight ahead, assuming their post.

Jessie took a step through the door and it slid closed behind her.

"Come on in Jessie. Have a seat. I'll be right with you."

Jessie stepped out of the small entryway and looked around the large office.

It was a wreck.

Desks lined the walls and there wasn't a surface that wasn't covered. To the right, old computers were stacked so high that they threatened to fall over. They were all in varying states of disassembly. Wires hung out of cases. There were stacks of cooling fans, mother boards, and various other circuitry Jessie didn't recognize.

Along the back wall were the working computers. Several different computers seemed to all be haphazardly wired together and whirring loudly. Two large monitors sat next to each other on the desk in the midst of the stack of hardware. Windows were popping up, moving around, disappearing on the screen. Commands were printed out, the cursor flew around the screen on its own.

Jessie's eyes finally fell on the man that had spoke to her. His back was to her, but she could tell he was old by the wispy white hair across the top of his head. He was obviously skinny, though dressed in dirty old jeans and a bulky sweatshirt.

He was rattling and fighting with an old coffee maker. The entire desk was filled with junk that Jessie had only ever seen hawked in the town square by the Scroungers. Several coffee makers sat stacked in the corner. There were a half dozen toasters. Jessie recognized a microwave, but she'd never seen one actually plugged in and turned on. The rest of it were various things she had seen before but wasn't sure what they were for.

"Ah!" he said, he did something else to the coffee maker that Jessie couldn't see then turned around.

His thick, bifocal glasses sat on the end of his nose and he was slightly hunched over.

"Have you ever had coffee Jessie?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Ah, ah! Well you're in for a treat! I don't suppose there's much available in the towns these days. It'll be ready shortly. Why don't you have a seat?"

He motioned to the middle of the room where an old coach and several loungers sat all facing each other around a small table. The carpet was red and shaggy. It was stained in several spots and papers and stacks of folders were piled everywhere.

"Um..."

"Yes dear?"

"Who are you?"

"Why I'm President Marcus. Who else? Though I'd rather you call me Barry. That's my first name and I much prefer it."

"I've met President Marcus and you aren't him."

Barry laughed.

"Oh that guy? That's Mikey. He's just my stand in. It's much easier to get people to do what you want when you look the way he does."

He opened his hands in front of himself.

"I've never had much of a presence myself, so he does all the public stuff for me. I don't exactly have the time to be flying around the entire Americas making appearances either. Now, sit, sit. I'll get the coffee and then we have a few things to talk about."

Jessie moved over and took her seat on one of the coaches. She sat just on the edge of the cushion.

Barry puttered around with the coffee a few more minutes then brought two steaming cups over. He sat one on the table in front of Jessie and then took a seat in the lounger across from her. He lifted his own cup to his face, dropped his nose to the cup, and inhaled deeply.

"Nothing quite like it," he said then took a sip and placed it back on the table.

"Now dear, I was greatly impressed by your performance in the Severing. I've been doing this for, well, much longer than I care to think about, and never had someone hack the game quite like you did. Sure, a few always try some last ditch efforts when they know they're going to lose, but you... you could have won and yet you burned it all down. Care to explain why?"

Jessie shrugged.

"Seemed like a good idea."

"But you could have been scrambled."

"That wasn't how it was coded."

Barry's eyes lit up.

"And how did you know that?"

Jessie pressed her lips together and looked away from him.

"Now you've left me with a bit of a problem. That Severing was supposed to cut the amount of teams in half and I had coded the next one for only that many teams. It's easy enough to fix. I minor inconvenience. I'll still be able to pare the teams down to the number we need for the Threshing."

Jessie's eyes cut at him.

"You have a problem with that?"

"Why do you have to scramble us?"

"It's the only way to truly test you. We can only send the best to the Threshing."

"Then why bring me in? I have no training. Why force me here instead of just recruit me for the next one?"

Barry paused for a long moment.

"Let's just say one of my advisors all but insisted on bringing you here now."

"Who? Who here even knew I existed?"

Barry waved away the question.

"It doesn't matter. All I've seen so far suggests he was right in his insistence. You say you have no training, yet you were the first to make it to the tower. That shows me you're more prepared than at least some of the Coders that have been training for the past three years. And your burning down of the tower shows me you're thinking far outside the bounds of what is presented to you, which is what we'll need to win the Threshing for the second time."

Fear seized Jessie. She dropped her head and tried to keep from shaking.

"You're sending me to the Threshing?" she asked quietly.

"Well we don't know that yet do we? There's still two more Severings left."

"And what if I don't want this? What if I refuse to play?"

Barry paused for a moment, then motioned to Jessie's cup. She leaned down, picked up the cup and took a sip of the steaming liquid.

Her face screwed up as the taste hit her tongue.

"Ah yes, it's a bit bitter at first. It's an acquired taste."

"Tell me dear," he continued, "do you know what happens to a Coder that gets scrambled during training?"

Jessie thought of her visit with Ricky.

She nodded.

"And their parents?"

Jessie shook her head, "No".

"We take care of them. They get a triple credit payout for the rest of their lives for their sacrifice. It's usually enough to move into a nicer home, afford better food, and have a little extra. What about the Comms and Medics? Know what happens if their Coder gets scrambled?"

Jessie shook her head again.

"They merely get sent home. They're usually pretty ashamed, and the extra credits their family was getting while they were training goes away, but at least they get to go back to their families in one piece, right?"

President Marcus stood, leaned over to pick up both coffee cups then stared down at Jessie. She had to crane her neck slightly to look up at him. His face seemed to darken. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled with rage.

"I promise you this. If you pull another stunt like you did in the first Severing, if you even *lose* one of the next Severings, I will see to it myself that both Alex and Ernst are scrambled to the point that Ricky looks healthy. And they will get sent home to their families with nothing. Do you understand?"

Jessie couldn't move or speak. She merely stared back at him.

"Good. Now get the hell out of my office."

Scene 25

The two guards escorted Jessie back to the elevator. This time there was no need to hold on to her. She stared off at the horizon as they made their way back down the corridor. When the elevator opened again, they didn't follow her out and Jessie numbly began walking back do her bunk.

She barely registered the other trainees reactions when they saw her. The looks of disgust and anger were still there, but they kept quiet and kept their distance.

As she turned the corner to her bunk, she saw Alex and Ernst waiting for her outside the door.

Their eyes lit up when they saw her.

"Jessie! Where have you been?" Alex said.

He continued excitedly before she could answer.

"Oh man! I wish you could have seen it! Arnold read everyone the riot act. Railed about how this new recruit with no training was able to pull off such an upset. He individually called out mistakes all of the Coders made, and oh man, Az -- that was the best part! He pulled Az to the front and berated him for a good five minutes on letting you not only reach the tower before him but burn it down while he was standing there. It was amazing!"

As Alex talked, Jessie had opened her bunk door and they had crowded in.

Ernst and Alex beamed at her, unable to contain their excitement.

"What about everyone else? They're still glaring at me as I walk down the halls," Jessie said.

"Oh that," Ernst waved his hands as if that didn't matter. "They're just jealous. Arnold warned everyone that they better keep their hands off you and instead of attacking you they should probably try to learn something from you."

Alex laughed at that.

"Oh you should have seen the other Coder's faces! They *loved* being told to learn from the recruit that's been here for a week."

"And here's the best part," Ernst said. "Our equipment and credits have been upgraded. It's pretty standard that the teams that pass the Severings get new installs, but since we were the only ones to win, we got a bigger upgrade than normal."

"Yeah, we have our own private bay with bigger stacks and much nicer medic equipment," Alex said.

"Come on, let's go take a look at it." Ernst said, turning to the door.

"Wait," Alex said to Ernst then looked down at Jessie. "Where'd you go during the briefing? Where'd those guards take you?"

Jessie paused. Everything that President Marcus had said raced through her head. She struggled to speak.

Should she tell them what he had said? Shame shot through her mind. She thought of Eighty-three, blistered and sunburnt. She thought of her parents. She pictured Alex and Ernst in the medical wing alongside Ricky. Of their families, destitute back in their towns trying to care for them.

She looked between Alex and Ernst's excited faces.

They had no idea. Their fate was tied to hers now.

Why hadn't she just gone to the top of the tower? She had been lucky enough to make it their first. She would have won and they would be thrilled. Then when she inevitably got scrambled in the second Severing, Alex and Ernst could have been sent home whole and healthy. Sure, they would have been a bit poorer, but at least they would have their minds intact.

Now, their fate was tied to hers and they didn't even know it.

"Um," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "Apparently Arnold knew the other trainees weren't happy with me so he sent the guards to get me before anything happened. They just sat me in a room. I had no idea what was going on until I saw you two."

She forced a smile on her face.

"This is great though. We're one step closer to the Threshing. Let's go take a look at the upgrades."

CHAPTER TEN

Training

Scene 26

Alex and Ernst chatted excitedly as they walked quickly down the corridors to their new bay. Neither of them noticed that Jessie had dropped to walk behind them and stayed very quiet.

"Hey Az!" Alex shouted.

"Come on Alex, don't," Ernst whispered.

This brought Jessie out of her thoughts. Az was further down the corridor walking towards a different part of the base. He stopped and turned to face them.

"Too bad about the Severing," Alex said. "Seems maybe you aren't Arnold's favorite anymore."

They caught up with Az who waited for them to approach.

"Yeah, we'll see how the next one goes won't we?" Az said.

Alex shrugged nonchalantly.

"I don't know. Jessie's been here a couple days and already making you look silly. Not sure how you can come back from that."

Alex face was turning a dark red, but his voice remained steady.

"So she burned it down," he said. "That's not exactly impressive. I would have made it through the Severing either way. The only reason she survived at all is because of Clifton and Ben, one of which I won't have to worry about any more."

Az smiled viciously.

"He's up hanging out with Ricky now."

Ernst stiffened beside Jessie but kept his mouth shut.

Before Alex could retaliate, Az continued.

"I guarantee if it were just Jessie and I at that Severing and she didn't have two other Coders looking after her, she'd never make it to the tower."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself when you don't have to actually back it up." Alex said.

Az slid his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small memory stick and held it up for them to see.

"That's the thing, we *can* test it again. I just came from Arnold's office and convinced him to pass me the simulator for the first Severing so I could practice."

Az shrugged, then continued.

"It can take multiple Coders. I'm happy to give it another try."

Alex cut his eyes at Jessie and Ernst. Ernst shook his head no.

"What is it?" Az jeered. "Who's the one backing down now?"

Alex shot him a middle finger then turned his back to Az and pulled Ernst and Jessie into a huddle.

"What do you think Jessie?" Alex said.

"I don't know, I guess we could do it. But I don't want to risk getting scrambled if it's not a real Severing."

"No, no," Alex said, "It's impossible to get scrambled in a simulation. Plus, Ernst can log you out safely at anytime as opposed to the Severing where you're locked in."

"I don't know," Ernst said cutting his eyes at Az who was standing with a smirk on his face. "Seems like he's up to something. Why risk it?"

"There's no risk!" Alex said. "If Jessie loses, no big deal, she won the real Severing and that's all that matters."

"She didn't actually win..." Ernst began but Alex cut him off.

"If she *does* win then it's just one more embarrassment for Az. Maybe he'll get sent home before we even have to deal with him in the next Severing. If he loses again, they may go ahead and scrub him out since we have too many teams left already."

"I don't like it," Ernst said.

Alex shot him a look, but Ernst ignored him.

"But it's your call Jessie. I'll be on Comms the whole time so I can pull you out whenever you want."

"I do like the idea of getting Az kicked out without the risk of getting scrambled myself," she said. "I watched him scramble Clifton."

She paused and looked between Alex's hopeful face and Ernst's nervous one. She glanced over their shoulders and saw Az standing there taping the memory stick with a smirk on his face.

"I'm in," she said. "Let's take him down."

Scene 27

*Something is off.*

Jessie scanned the scene around her. The same rain. The same forest. The same time of day. It all looked exactly the same.

And yet, something was wrong.

*What is it?* Ernst said.

Jessie didn't answer right away. She turned slowly around, looking for what was causing her mind to scream that something was wrong.

*Jessie what is it?*

*I'm not sure.*

*I ran all the diags on the training sim before you logged in.*

*Diags?*

*Yeah, diagnostics. To make sure Az didn't slip a bug into it.*

*And everything checked out?*

*Yeah, I mean... yeah.*

*What?*

*Well it showed that it could have up to sixteen logins at the same time, which is strange for a training sim, but that could be because that was the number for the Severing.*

*So nothing to worry about?*

*Nah, you're fine.*

Jessie paused and looked around again.

*Something still feels off, I just can't figure out what it is.*

*Should I log you out?*

*No. No, it's fine. I just need to get moving.*

Jessie turned and ducked into the woods and began moving quickly towards the center where the tower would be. The quicker she got this over with the better. She hadn't wanted to do this, but she had pulled Alex and Ernst into this with her and now if she lost the next Severing, them and their families would suffer because of her. If she had a chance to get rid of Az without the risk of being scrambled herself, then it was worth it.

Besides, she could always get Ernst to log her out if things started going bad. She wouldn't have that luxury in the next Severing.

*I'm moving through the woods towards the center, just like last time.*

*How long do you think it will take?*

*Not sure. Last time it took me awhile to get started and then I was sneaking. Now I'm just trying to get there as quickly as possible.*

*Well take some precaution, Az can still come after you.*

*Yeah but he doesn't have the same access to credits he had in the Severing.*

*True.*

Jessie stepped over a large log in her path and almost slipped on some wet leaves. She caught her balance, then stopped.

There it was again. She had seen it just as she slipped. It was like a bubble formed in her vision. That's what she had seen when she first logged in. It wasn't a big deal. But it was like something was trying to push through the visual core of the simulation.

Jessie shook her head and kept moving. The sooner she got to the tower the sooner this would be over.

The rain continued to spatter against the trees above. Where she was in awe the first time around, Jessie now felt like the forest was a prison. Each of the trees were watching her, waiting for her to make a mistake. The large drops that fell from the leaves spattered against her scalp and ran into her eyes. Her clothes were long since soaked through and she was covered in mud from the many times she had slipped and tripped.

She was so concentrated on moving in a straight line that she was relieved when she finally broke from the vegetation into the clearing. She didn't realize right away that she wasn't alone.

Once she was about halfway through, it hit her. She'd been in this clearing before. It felt far too familiar.

She slowed her pace and looked around. That's when she saw the body. It was lying right where she and Ben had left it. She crept over to the body, keeping here eyes along the edge of the clearing. When she got to it, she turned it over and Clifton's unblinking eyes seemed to look right through her.

The dread inside of Jessie that had been running just below the surface since she had logged in now flooded over her.

*Ernst, what kind of stuff would hold over in this sim from the actual Severing?*

*What do you mean?*

*I'm back in the clearing where Clifton was scrambled.*

*Ok, that makes sense...*

*And his body is still here.*

Jessie waited. Ernst didn't reply immediately.

*Ernst?*

*Sorry. Talking to Alex. We don't think he should still be there.*

*Then how...*

Jessie caught movement off to her left. A boy stepped out from the trees into the clearing. She instantly recognized him as one of the other Coders, though she didn't know his name. He was one of the Coders Alex had shoved back from her when she had first logged off from the Severing.

He was holding a bat.

Jessie turned to face him and slowly began backing away.

There was a crack behind her. She whipped around to find a girl stepping out from the woods. Another Coder. She was holding a knife.

*There's other Coders here. I see two of them. They have weapons.*

*How? I only see Az logged into the system. They shouldn't be there.*

*Well they're here! They've obviously been waiting for me.*

*That's it, I'm getting you out of there. Hang tight, I'll have you logged off in a couple seconds.*

Jessie had turned so she could see both the Coders, then two more stepped out in front of her, both brandishing weapons.

She was now surrounded on three sides.

*Ernst?*

*It's not working!*

*What do you mean?*

*I keep firing the command to log you out, and it's accepting the command but then it doesn't do anything.*

*There's four of them now. I have to get out of here.*

The only way out was to go back the way she came. She turned, crouched, ready to sprint immediately stopped and slipped in the mud and sat down hard.

Az was closing off her only escape route. He was twirling his own long bladed knife. He laughed when he saw her sprawled in the mud.

"I'll admit," he said, "you surprised me in the Severing. I didn't think you'd be that crazy. I obviously underestimated you. I thought you were here to win the Threshing too, so that's how I was playing it. But now I see you're here just to screw around with the rest of us that are taking it seriously."

Jessie slowly got her feet back underneath her, but stayed crouched in the mud.

*It's not working!* Ernst said, *Can you force a logout from your end?*

"You may have impressed President Marcus with your little performance, but he's the only one. The rest of us see through your act. Even Sergeant Arnold agrees you shouldn't be in the program which is why he helped me create this modified sim."

Jessie closed her eyes and attempted the force logout command. It went through fine too, but nothing happened.

Az laughed.

"And as you and Ernst are probably figuring out now, we left an important part of the Severing in place in this simulation. You only get logged out when you reach the tower. Unfortunately for you, I also added an important modification."

Az opened his hands wide to indicate the clearing.

"All roads lead here."

He started slowly walking towards Jessie as he spoke.

"You have to come through this clearing in order to make it to the tower. That way we'd know where to find you."

Jessie took a couple steps back as he continued to close the gap between them.

"President Marcus will scramble you himself if you hurt me," Jessie said.

"You see," Az said, "I don't think he will. Sure, he may get annoyed that his pet project got scrambled, but he won't have any choice but to keep us all in the program since we're his best chance at winning the next Threshing."

*Jessie! What's going on? What's happening.*

She took a couple steps back again, but stopped knowing there were two more Coders closing in from that direction.

*Az is here. They were waiting for me. I'm trapped.*

*Jessie...*

Jessie looked around quickly and saw the other Coders had started walking towards her along with Az. In just a few seconds any gaps or chance of escape would be closed off. It didn't matter anyway. All of these Coders were older, stronger, and faster than her.

She locked her eyes back on Az.

She tensed her muscles.

She'd at least force the fight rather than let them close the noose passively.

Jessie cocked her head slightly.

There it was again. That bulge in her vision. This time it was bigger than before. Something was trying to push through right behind Az to his right. She could see a thin, black crack running down the middle of it.

She lunged forward sprinting directly towards Az. At first he was taken aback but then his smirk was back and he readied his knife.

Just as Jessie closed within a few feet of him she leapt to his right. He had already started swinging his knife at her and was surprised when she took a different direction.

She felt the searing pain as the knife sliced through her side and then she hit the bubble. She felt as if she had connected with a thick film and worried that she would just bounce off, then it finally gave and she tumbled forward into darkness.

Scene 28

Jessie rolled through the air, and then stopped. She didn't hit anything. There was no force that stopped her, but she knew she had stopped. She moved her feet around, but they didn't connect with anything.

At first she thought she was falling, but there was no wind or movement to show that. It was like she existed in a place that wasn't a place. Just floating. Nothing to indicate that anything was happening around her.

The pain broke through suddenly and she clutched at her side. The knife had done some kind of damage to her right side under her ribs. She could feel wetness but couldn't tell what was blood and what was rain.

She tried to feel along the wound with her fingers, but the pain was too much. She just pressed her palm against the wound and winced against the burning.

*Ernst?*

She tried to call out to him.

*Are you there?*

There was no response. She was alone in this space, wherever it was. Maybe she'd fallen into a glitch in the simulation. If Az had been hacking around with the code, he might have created a bug that wasn't there before.

But that bulging in the visual field. That looked too much like an active push into the system. A coder had to be behind that.

Suddenly her feet were on solid ground. She didn't land or hit the ground, it just appeared beneath her feet.

Colors flickered across her vision, and then everything was black and empty again. There was nothing solid under her feet anymore.

She floated her for a few more minutes. Or it seemed that way. It was hard to tell with no sensory input.

And then the floor was there again. And again the colors flickered, but this time they stopped flickering and everything was white around her. There was still no dimension to anything though.

Jessie took a tentative step forward. The ground stayed solid. She took another step, then whipped around.

She'd heard a voice. It had sounded like it called her name.

Jessie waited.

There it was again. It was like someone was calling out to her from a coat closet. It was muffled and barely there.

Colors flashed across her vision again and now she was in a long hallway. The floors and ceilings were still white, but the walls of the hallway had turned a deep red.

She stepped to the walls and reached out, but as soon as her hand touched them they glitched and disappeared. She turned around twice trying to get her bearings, and then the walls were back, this time black. She reached out and touched them, and they stayed solid.

"Jessie, can you hear me?"

Jessie turned around again, but all she saw was the long white and black hallway leading off into infinity in both directions.

"I hear you!" she called out.

"Can you come this way?"

"Which way?"

"It doesn't matter, just start walking. It'll help me nail down your location."

"Who is this?"

"Just walk! We don't have much time."

Jessie immediately started walking down the hallway. There was no indication that she was making any progress. The blank walls and infinite space in front of her made it seem like she was walking in place.

The voice cursed.

"What?"

The voice answered but it was muffled again and she couldn't make it out.

The walls disappeared again.

"No!" she called, "What's happening?"

Everything went black and the feeling of falling and not falling was back, then everything went white. A few seconds later she felt the plug disengaging from her skull, but when she opened her eyes, it wasn't Alex and Ernst that were waiting for her, it was Sergeant Arnold.

Scene 29

Arnold grabbed a handful of the front of Jessie's suit and picked her up off the chair. She grabbed at his wrists and kicked her feet but he held tight.

He pulled her close to his face that was almost purple with rage.

"What was that?" he yelled.

She looked around for Alex and Ernst, but they were standing off to the side staring hard at their shoes.

"Don't look at them," he bellowed. "They can't save you. I want to know where you've been for the last five hours."

Jessie struggled to not let the surprise show on her face.

Five hours? She had been in the simulation for less than an hour when Az attacked her in the clearing. And the time in that empty space couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes.

"Az and the other Coders attacked me!" she said.

"How is that possible when they've been logged off and in their bunks for the past four hours?"

Jessie didn't answer.

Arnold finally dropped her hard on the ground, only to grab her collar and start dragging her down the hallway. Jessie made one more look back at the boys and they watched her get dragged away with anguish on their faces.

The whole way down the hallway Jessie struggled to keep her feet under her. Arnold's iron grip would just keep dragging her until she was able to get her balance again, only to lose it shortly after.

They finally reached his office and he slapped his hand against the scanner. When the door slid open, he threw her through the doorway and she fell and slid hard into the front of her desk.

"Is this how we're treating trainees now Sergeant Arnold?"

Arnold stiffened and stood straight and saluted President Marcus.

"Sir," Arnold said, "Trainee Jessie has been plugged into the grid for five hours with no logs tracking her movement. Her Comms and Medic were unable to log her off. Trainee Az brought their situation to my attention and with some effort I was able to do a forced logoff."

Marcus walked around the table as Arnold spoke and helped Jessie to her feet. He got her seated in one of the chairs next to Arnold's desk.

Everything about this office was the opposite of the President's. Where there were piles of paper and equipment, Arnold had everything neatly arranged and filed into the large filing cabinets. His desk was large and wooden and everything sat at perfectly right angles.

Where Marcus was an absent minded coder, Arnold was an obsessively organized military man.

"That didn't answer my question Sergeant."

"I'm sorry sir," Arnold said, "my emotions got the best of me."

"Mmhm," Marcus said nodding, then he looked down at Jessie.

"Why don't you tell us what happened."

Jessie recounted the story of Az goading them into competing again. When she mentioned the part about Sergeant Arnold providing the Severing simulation, he opened his mouth to speak but Marcus cut him off with a wave of his hand then motioned for Jessie to continue.

She told them about the clearing and the Coders attacking her.

"And then?" Marcus said, prodding her along.

Jessie hesitated. This was the part she didn't have an explanation for. She kept thinking she should just tell them what happened, but something inside of her insisted she keep it a secret.

It was the voice.

She'd only heard the voice say a few words, and yet there was something about it. Something that stirred her deeply. Made her trust it. Made her want to protect its secrets.

"And then," she continued slowly, "I, um, was able to dive past Az and escape into the woods. He cut me along my ribs, but that didn't stop me."

"That's ridiculous!" Arnold said.

"And did you give Az the Severing simulation?" Marcus asked Arnold.

"Of course not! It must have been something they coded themselves."

"Seems pretty advanced and technical for them to be able to code it in a few hours," Marcus said.

"Sir, I assure you..."

"It doesn't matter," Marcus said turning back to Jessie, "because even if he did, your story still does not hold up. Az reported that you disappeared, not that you ran into the woods. In addition, all of the Coders logged off within ten minutes of your disappearance and the simulation was ended, which means we still have roughly four hours of your being plugged in but unaccounted for. On top of all of this, our system is built to automatically log every movement a trainee makes while logged in and your logs are mysteriously empty."

Marcus knelt down in front of Jessie.

"Now my dear, I want you to first think on our last conversation before you answer my next question."

He paused for a few seconds.

"Where did you disappear to for the last four hours?"

Jessie locked eyes with him.

"I don't know."

Marcus sighed and stood shaking his head.

"I swear!" she said. "I dove past Az and made it into the woods. He's just saying I disappeared because he's mad that I was able to outsmart him again."

"And the last four hours?" Marcus said.

"I don't know. A few minutes after I ran into the woods, everything went black and then I was logged off. That's all I remember."

Arnold step forward toward her menacingly.

"You're a liar!" he yelled.

"Jessie, that just doesn't make sense," Marcus said. "eYou would have just been logged off. Why couldn't Ernst or Alex rouse you? Why did it take another thirty minutes for Sergeant Arnold to code a custom forced log off script to get you out?"

Jessie shrugged.

"Maybe it was a bug in Az's simulation," she said. "I don't know how your systems work. I've only been here four days."

They all stood looking at each other unsure of what to do next.

"And you remember our conversation?" Marcus said.

"Of course," she replied. "You said if I don't make it through the next Severing the right way you will personally scramble Alex and Ernst and send them back to their towns with nothing."

Arnold's face darkened briefly at this and he shot a look at Marcus, which the President ignored.

"Exactly."

"Well that's what I'm trying to do," Jessie said. "I was running a training simulation with Az and I'm ready to continue my training for the next Severing if you'll let me get back to it."

Marcus waited for several seconds considering the small girl in front of him. Then he nodded and stepped back opening a path for Jessie to the door. He motioned to Arnold to do the same and Arnold stepped back next to him.

Jessie stood, looked at both the President and Sergeant, then walked quickly out the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Second Test

Scene 30

The next several days passed quickly. Ernst and Alex kept Jessie busy running her through as many training sims as possible.

"The next Severing is all about your Coding speed."

Alex and Ernst drilled this into her and pushed Jessie harder and harder. She knew they were worried about her. They had questioned what happened in the simulation with Az, but she had kept the truth to herself. She knew they thought she was lying, but she stuck to her story. If she brought them in on her lie then they would be held responsible for it. She'd already gotten them in enough trouble. There was no reason to rope them deeper.

Jessie opened her eyes as the plug disengaged. She was covered in a cold sweat. Her uniform was clammy.

That one hadn't gone well.

Ernst was shaking his head as he fired off the final commands on the terminal. Alex started unhooking her IV.

"Let's run it again," Jessie said.

"Can't," Alex responded. "We have the Threshing briefing."

Jessie glanced at the clock. It was already late. She hadn't eaten anything all day so she could keep training.

"Can I grab something to eat on the way?" she asked.

"Sure, we're pretty hungry too," Ernst said. "We stay here while you're plugged in ya know."

"Right, yeah, of course," she said.

The three of them stopped in at the cafeteria and grabbed a couple of the pre-packaged meals and scarfed them down as they hurried down the hallway.

They were the last trainees into the briefing room and took the closest three chairs and plugged in.

Sergeant Arnold appeared in their vision. They were lined up in formation again.

"Part of your preparation for the Threshing is not merely the training sims," he began, "it's studying the past Threshings and those that have gone before you."

Arnold paced back and forth in front of them as he talked, his hands clasped behind his back.

"As you know, the Threshing of 2120 was the first of its kind. It was the first that the Americas faction had ever won."

There was a murmured cheer and excitement around them.

"It's provided more credits and equipment and rations to us and the towns than ever before. If we hope to continue living in this prosperity, we must win the next Threshing as well. The following is a training video that President Marcus has put together based on the past few Threshings. Study the film. Your life and the rest of the faction's depends on it."

At that last word, Arnold disappeared and the space in front of them became one large screen.

The face of President Marcus, the fake one that had visited Jessie in the town, filled the screen.

He began by saying many of the things Arnold had just said.

"We must win the coming Threshing to maintain the way of life in our Americas faction."

He then launched into how the faction had grown in the four years since the previous faction. How they had pushed into more remote towns than ever before and integrated them into the grid which meant more credits mined than ever before. Food was less scarce, though Jessie could have begged to differ based on her experience. And the training facilities had been upgraded significantly.

They *would* win the Threshing once again thanks to the hard work, dedication, and sacrifice of the trainees.

Now Marcus, the fake one still, transitioned into talking about how each Threshing worked.

There were three stages to each Threshing, though it had been decades since it had made it past stage two.

A new face popped up on the screen. It was a boy about the age of the other Coders. He looked like he had gone without sleep for days. His face was haggard and the dark circles around his eyes hung low. He sat slouched in a chair as other people moved quickly back and forth behind him.

"I um..." he started. "It's the most intense thing I've ever experienced. I barely made it through stage one."

A voice came from off camera

"What would you tell trainees preparing for the next Threshing?"

The boy waited for several seconds before answering.

"Take your training seriously. Work hard. You'll need everything you've trained for and more. You must make your faction proud."

The screen faded to black, then words appeared on the screen.

"Trainee Michael. Deceased. Stage Two of the Threshing of 2120. He gave his life for our faction."

Applause broke out around Jessie, though she remained still, her hands next to her sides She looked around her unable to understand the other trainee's reactions. Even Ernst and Alex were applauding.

Another face came onto the screen. A girl this time. Her blond hair was cut short and ragged. She looked just as exhausted as the previous Coder.

She began to speak, but Jessie had stopped listening. Her eyes were glued on a woman that was in the background. She had walked into view just after the girl had begun speaking. She was standing and talking with one of the Medics in the background. Then she glanced at the camera before turning and walking out of view.

Jessie had thought she recognized her when she had first come in, but couldn't place her. The way the woman moved. Her high cheek bones. It seemed familiar to Jessie. But when she had looked directly into the camera, Jessie finally recognized her.

"Eighty-three," she whispered.

Alex glanced at her quizzically.

"What?" he whispered.

"That was her, I know it," Jessie said.

"Who?"

Jessie just shook her head at him and continued to look forward. Her mind was spinning.

The screen went black again and gave the same message about the girl being deceased, and once again applause broke out.

All of this registered in the background for Jessie though.

What did this mean? Why was Eighty-three there? Why had she never told Jessie?

The film continued to play, but Jessie was long gone, off in her old world desperately trying to put together what was going on.

Before she had left the Numbered, she had asked Eighty-three if she had known that Jessie could leave. Eighty-three had insisted that she didn't, but doubt had remained.

Jessie had always wondered why Eighty-three had worked so hard to protect her. Why Eighty-three had risked her life to save her. She had convinced herself it was because she had loved her maybe even saw her as a daughter. But now...

Why wouldn't she mention that she had been in the capital for the Threshing? What was she doing there? What got her sent out to the Numbered?

The film ended, Arnold spoke some more, and then everyone was logged out. Jessie missed all of this and didn't break out of her mind spin until everything went white and she felt the plug disengage.

Jessie sat up slowly still trying to piece together what was going on.

"Jessie," Alex said, "come on, we need to get you ready."

"For what?" she responded.

Alex looked at her as if she were crazy and cut his eyes at Ernst.

"Weren't you listening? They've fast tracked the timeline because of what you -- what happened in the last one."

"The next Severing is tomorrow," Ernst said.

Scene 31

Jessie opened her closet and pulled out the last clean gray suit. She dressed slowly in the pale light that came from the monitor. She was up before her alarm. She'd been awake far longer.

She had replayed the Severing and Az's simulation over and over in her head.

Az was right.

She'd gotten lucky.

Clifton and Ben could have easily scrambled her in the first Severing. If she'd come across any of the other Coders, they probably would have and she'd be gone.

And in Az's simulation, if that weird bubble hadn't have shown up when it did, she would have definitely gotten scrambled by Az and the other Coders.

She opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. She wasn't the only one up early.

She kept her eyes on the floor as she maneuvered the hallways to the cafeteria.

Eye contact was to be avoided with anyone else.

She definitely wouldn't find any friends in this next round of Severing. She was on her own. Which means she was dead.

Which meant Alex and Ernst were too.

She cringed as she thought about this again. She still hadn't told them about President Marcus's threat. She figured if it came to that, she'd be long past the ability to care.

Jessie grabbed a small bowl of pale fruit and a roll.

Alex had told her to go light on food. If the Severing got rough, it would just be something for him to clean up and her to choke on.

After a few minutes, Alex and Ernst sat down next to her.

"You couldn't sleep either?" Ernst said.

Jessie shook her head.

They ate for several minutes in silence.

"You're gonna be fine Jessie," Ernst said. "You've done so good so far."

Jessie shrugged and Alex stayed laser focused on his food.

They sat in silence long after their food was gone.

Finally, Alex spoke.

"Time to go."

They stood, put their trays away, and made their way down the corridor to their bay.

Ernst immediately began fiddling with the monitor and Alex started setting up the his equipment and readying the IV.

Arnold's boomed through every room.

"Three minutes until the start of the Severing. All Coders are to logon now."

Alex moved next to Jessie's chair.

"You ready?"

She glanced at Ernst who looked like he was on the edge of tears, she looked back at Alex and nodded.

Jessie shut her eyes, then opened them to find herself in a small, empty room. There was one door leading out. It had a simple doorknob with no lock.

*Instructions are downloading now,* Ernst said. *Ok, it's a capture the flag scenario. Your room is your flag. As soon as another Coder steps into your room, they claim your flag, you get scrambled, and they double their available credits.*

*It looks like,* he continued, *you're in a large building full of hallways and rooms exactly like yours. So the goal is to be one of the last six Coders left. When the seventh from last gets scrambled, the Severing is over and you'll be logged out.*

*How many rooms are there?*

*Hard to tell. Hundreds at least.*

*How am I supposed to find the other Coders.*

*That's the test I think.*

*Why don't I just stay here and let them fight it out?*

*What kind of defenses does your room have?*

*None.*

*Exactly. You have to use your handful of credits to both defend and attack. Every time you capture a room, you get double the credits you started with, so each room you take gives you a better chance of winning.*

Jessie sighed.

She was unsure what to do.

If she went on the hunt and ran into another Coder, she would easily be over powered. If she stayed put, with her current credit balance she couldn't do much more than deadbolt her door.

*What are you going to do?*

*I'm working on it.*

Jessie grabbed the door knob and slowly turned it. She pulled the door open an inch and peeked out. The hallway was the same stark white as her room and there was an identical door right across the hallway. She opened her door a little more and could see there were carbon copies of the same door all the way down the hallway.

She opened the door enough for her to move through and stuck her head out see how long the hallway stretched.

As soon as her eye peaked around she saw another Coder, who instantly saw her contrasted against the white hallway. The boy broke into a run towards her. Jessie immediately jumped back in the room and slammed the door. She held the doorknob with both hands and started started sending coding instructions to Ernst.

There was a bang against the door and Jessie felt it shudder as the Coder slammed into the door. The knob rattled under her grip.

*Done!* Ernst said.

Within two seconds, the deadbolt appeared on the door. She reached up and secured it then stepped back.

There was another slam into the door. A few seconds later, the Coder's body hit the door again and Jessie heard a crack come from the door frame.

*I'm trapped,* Jessie said.

*No, no, we can get you out of there.*

*It doesn't matter. They've already found my room. I've used most of my credits.*

Jessie backed away until her back hit the wall and then she slid down to the floor.

It was over.

She'd be scrambled. Ernst and Alex would be sent home scrambled with nothing for their families. And all of it was her fault. She kept trying to be so clever and every time it only got her more alone and hurt what few people were still with her.

The bangs against the door continued. The cracking in the door frame was getting louder.

It would only take a few more tries then the Coder would be in the room.

Jessie wiped away the tears that had formed in the corner of her eyes. She put her head down on her knees.

*I'm so sorry Ernst. Tell Alex I'm sorry too.*

*No Jessie, don't give up. There's got to be some way out of there.*

Jessie didn't respond. She just waited for the final crack and the door to give way.

After a few moments, Jessie realized the banging on the door had stopped. It had become almost rhythmic and then it was gone.

She lifted her head and looked at the door, but it had take on a strange oval shape, almost like she was looking at it through a drop of water.

And then she realized what she was seeing.

It was the same visual anomaly from before. The one she'd jumped through in Az's simulation.

She stood slowly and walk towards it. She reached out her hand and felt the same thick film as before. When she pushed harder against it, her hand slipped right through. She looked around her to make sure everything was the same, then she stepped into the bubble.

Scene 32

This time the floating sensation lasted just a few seconds before she was standing back in the same infinite hallway. When she touched the walls this time, they stayed solid.

"Should I walk again?" she called out.

The voice came back clearly.

"Yes, either direction."

Jessie began walking and within seconds she came to a door. It was a large, mahogany door with an intricate swirly design carved into the wood. It was unlike anything Jessie had ever seen.

The reached out and pulled the latch on the door and it swung open slowly.

She stepped through onto a thick red carpet. All of the walls were lined with beautiful wooden bookshelves builtin. All of the shelves were finally carved. The book shelves were stuffed with hardback books. She'd only seen a handful of actual, paper books in her lifetime, but there must be thousands lining the shelves.

At the back of the room was a large wire place that held an equally large crackling fire. Two chairs were positioned near the fire and turned towards it.

A man was sitting in one of the chairs.

Suddenly Jessie couldn't breath.

All she could see was the top of the back of his head, but that was all she needed. She knew who was in that chair.

"Randy?" she whispered.

The man stood and turned to her, then smiled warmly. Jessie ran to him and jumped in his arms. He hugged her tightly and slowly knelt down to put her back on the floor. Jessie clutched at him, her face buried in his neck. She let the tears come this time. She didn't care.

"I knew it!" she said. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it."

Her fingers clung to him and when he went to pull away, they dug in even harder.

"Jessie," he said softly as he gently pulled at her. "Jessie, we don't have much time."

She reluctantly let go of him. As soon as he was free he stood and walked to the door he poked his head out into the blank hallway, looked both ways then shut the door.

He helped Jessie into one of the chairs next to the fire and then took his place in the other one.

"Where have you been?" Jessie said.

Randy sighed, checked the large watch on his arm, then said, "That's a really long story."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm here, at the base in the Capital."

"Where?" Jessie almost screamed.

"I'm not really sure where they keep me."

"Keep? Like in jail or something?"

Randy's face hardened.

"You could say. They have me continually connected to the grid."

"What? Why?"

"Well, President Marcus is pretty desperate to figure out how I did it."

"How you did what?"

Randy's brow knit together and the looked at Jessie strangely.

"How I won the last Threshing."

Jessie's eyes bulged and she jumped out of her seat.

"*You* won the last Threshing?"

"Of course! Don't you know that?"

"No!"

"Then what do you think happened to me?"

"I never knew. No one ever told me. Every time I asked Dad he would just tell me you died but he wouldn't say how or why."

"You didn't even know I was a trainee?"

Randy was on his feet yelling now. His face was red with rage. Jessie backed up and sat back down in her seat a little afraid of his reaction.

"I've been gone for almost eight years," he was talking to himself now, "I won't the Threshing, and my reward is hanging my family out to dry and locking me up in the basement."

"Randy," Jessie's voice seemed small under his rage, "what is going on? Why am I here?"

"I told Marcus to bring you here."

"To the capital?"

"Of course."

"You sent me to the Numbered?" she said.

"No, I mean, yes it was probably my fault. I just told Marcus that you were the key to winning the next Threshing. I had no idea you would fight it so hard."

"But why me?"

"Because I need your help."

"What am I supposed to do? How could I possibly win the Threshing? I haven't even won a..."

Jessie stood and looked at the door suddenly.

"The Severing? What's going on? If I lose or if Marcus realized I'm gone..."

Randy stood and put his hand on Jessie's shoulder, getting her to sit back down.

"It's ok Jessie, I have it all worked out. Your room in the Severing is completely hidden. When I put you back in, it will be like you've been hiding the whole time and they just missed your room."

"But that Coder that was breaking in!"

"Broke in to find an empty room that wasn't yours. You're safe here. But we do have to finish before the Severing is over."

Randy checked his watch again.

"They're down to eight Coders left, we have to hurry."

He knelt down in front of her.

"I know I've dumped far too much on you too fast."

He put a hand to her face and Jessie closed her eyes and leaned into it.

"And you are far too young to be dragged into this, but I need you Jessie. I need your help."

Jessie opened her eyes and stared into Randy's for several seconds.

"Whatever you need, I can do it," she said.

Randy backed up and sat into his chair again. He checked his watch before continuing.

"Four years ago, I was the best Coder the Capital had ever seen. Marcus was grooming me the entire four year training cycle to be the lead on the Threshing. While we were in the second stage, I lost my other two Coders from the Americas. I was backed into a corner by two of the Euro-russian Coders. As a last ditch effort, instead of attacking them, I attacked the Threshing itself. And I found a crack in the Reavers code."

Jessie gasped.

"Here's the thing Jessie. It was a split second in the game but seemed like hours for me. I was able to see into the Reavers core systems."

Jessie shook her head and fear was etched on her face.

"Jessie, they're evil. They're not what you think. We're taught that they are these benevolent leaders that saved the world from destruction, but it's not true. They live in opulence consuming most of the food and resources still left on the planet and they divvy up a small portion of it to the rest of the factions. They use the Threshing and the grid and lies to keep us fighting each other instead of the real true enemy which is the Reavers!"

By this time Randy's voice was loud again and he was yelling.

Jessie was frozen. The mix of unbelief and terror and anger was too much for her.

Randy continued.

"We have to tear them down Jessie! That's why you're here."

"Me? I can't do anything. I'm barely surviving as it is."

Randy shook his head.

"No, no I need someone that can move around the capital. They have me locked into the grid, which has allowed me to hack into their systems so I can do things like talk to you without them knowing, but I need you to do something for me to give me the access I need. I need you to install something into their physical servers on site at the capital in order to help me have what I need."

Randy checked his watch again.

"Oh! I have to get you back."

He stood and took Jessie's hand and they walked back towards the door.

"I'm so sorry to ask all of this of you Jessie. It's not fair. But you were the only person I knew I could trust."

He knelt down in front of her again. Jessie immediately hugged him tight again.

"I love you Randy and I've missed you so much."

"I know baby, and when this is over we can finally be together again for real."

Jessie let go on her own this time and stepped back.

"I'll send you instructions on what I need the next time you're logged in. We have to do it before the next Severing. Be safe Jessie, Marcus is watching your every move."

Jessie nodded, then she opened the door and stepped back into the Severing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Second Test Aftermath

Scene 33

Jessie stood, waiting in her Severing room. Whatever room Randy had dropped her in was identical to the one he had saved her from.

She was lost in thought. Too much information and emotion had been shoved into her brain at the same time. She was having a hard time coping.

Jessie didn't even notice when everything went white.

She blinked a couple times as the plug pulled back from her head. When she was finally able to focus, Alex's elated face swam into her vision.

"You did it!" Alex said. "You made it all the way through!"

Jessie sat up slowly. Ernst was standing a few feet back. His arms were folded and he seemed upset more than anything.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Sergeant Arnold pushed open the door to their bay.

"Congratulations Jessie," he said.

His stony face was hard to read, but if Jessie didn't know better, it looked like he was relieved.

"Thank you sir," she said.

"We're down to six teams now. We'll have a briefing for you first thing in the morning. Get some rest and we'll see you there."

They all nodded and Arnold turned to leave.

Jessie hopped down from the chair and turned to leave, but Ernst blocked her path.

"What?" Jessie asked.

"What happened in there?" Ernst said.

Jessie shrugged.

"I just stayed hidden, kept my head low, and let all the other Coders pick each other off."

"Stop it Jessie," Ernst said. "Stop lying to us."

"Come off it Ernst," Alex said, "What does it matter? She won. We've made it to the last Severing. That's what we want right?"

Ernst stared down at Jessie for a few seconds.

His voice stayed low and calm as he talked.

"The last you said to me was you were sorry and to tell Alex you were sorry. One of the Coders had found you."

Jessie held his gaze but didn't say anything.

"How'd you get past him?" Ernst asked.

Jessie stayed quiet.

"Because from my understanding, there was only one way in and out of each of those rooms. You had coded up a deadbolt, but if a Coder had found you, he could have gotten in easy enough. So what? Did he just decide to let you go and move on to someone else?"

"And even so, why weren't you communicating with me? You say you're going to lose and you say goodbye, and then you go silent for the next hour as I see Coder after Coder picked off. Then the Severing is over, you're still in it, and you wake up here."

"So what the hell happened?"

Jessie stared at Ernst. She cut her eyes at Alex, who, while he tried to maintain some distance, obviously had his own questions.

Jessie opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again.

The silence lengthened between them.

"I don't know what to tell you Ernst," she finally said, "I slipped past the Coder and was able to hide in another room until it was over."

Ernst's eyes rimmed with red as he held Jessie's gaze.

Alex stepped over and put his hand on Ernst's shoulder who immediately shrugged it off.

"Come on man," Alex said, "we need to get some rest. We'll have a long day tomorrow."

Ernst wiped the tears out of his eyes as he turned and stalked out the door.

Alex grabbed the door before it closed, then paused and looked back at Jessie.

"Keep your secrets. That's fine with me."

He nodded towards where Ernst had disappeared.

"But he loves you Jessie. He'd sooner die than see what happened to Ricky happen to you. Just keep that in mind."

Scene 34

It'd been a couple weeks since the last briefing after the Severing. A briefing which was completely useless. Why'd they all have to login for Arnold to tell them he didn't know when the last Severing would be but they should keep training?

Jessie pulled the safe open and stepped through into the vault. Her eyes immediately cut across the room looking for that odd, oval shape to appear again. But all was as it should be.

The door closed behind her and she walked through to the back of the vault where another, even more complex vault door loomed.

She knelt down in front of it and unrolled her black canvas bag of tools.

Just as she reached for one, everything went white.

"What's going on?" Jessie asked as the plug came undone.

"You're done for the day," Alex said. He had already removed the IV from her hand.

"I was only halfway through the sim," Jessie said.

"It's 2am," Ernst said. "They're gonna wake us up in four hours to start again."

Jessie had sat up by now. She shrugged.

"I feel great, let's keep going."

"That's the meds Jessie, you know that," Alex said. "You can't keep pushing like this. It's been a week now of twenty hour days of training. Your body's gonna give out at some point."

"But I'm getting better," Jessie said. "You have to see that. Look at how quick I was moving through those vault doors."

Alex rolled his eyes and kept packing up his supplies.

"Ernst? Come on," she said.

He kept his back turned towards her and kept running the shut down sequences.

He'd barely spoken to her since the last Severing. He never seemed mad, he just kept his distance from her.

"We're going to bed Jessie," Alex said. "You do what you want."

Alex and Ernst disappeared down the corridor. She sat on the chair kicking her legs for a couple minutes then jumped down from the chair and went over to Ernst's terminal. She tapped a few commands and then hopped in the chair, closed her eyes, and logged in.

She was back in the vault. Her tools where on the floor waiting for her, but she just sat down and leaned her back against the vault door. Her eyes moved back and forth.

After a few minutes, the her eyelids began to drift shut. Jessie arched her eyebrows trying to force them open, but eventually she gave into sleep. After a few minutes of inactivity, she was logged off, the plug disengaged, and Jessie continued sleeping alone in the bay.

Scene 35

"You're as ready as you can be. You've been training non-stop," Alex said.

Jessie shook her head shoved another spoonful of food into her mouth.

They continued eating in silence. The cafeteria had gotten creepy since the last Severing. It was down to the last six teams, so even if they all ate at the same time, it still left the room empty and echoey.

"Ernst," Jessie said. He broke the stare into his bowl and looked up at her.

"Remember after the first Severing when you were going to hide me? You said you knew about an old Comms room in the basement that nobody uses anymore."

"So?" Ernst said.

"Are there other parts of the capital that are abandoned?"

Ernst shrugged.

"How should I know?"

"I'm just asking."

Ernst shrugged again and then kept eating.

"Can you show me that old Comms room?" Jessie asked.

Ernst looked back up at her and narrowed his eyes.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cause I don't want to," he said.

"Why?"

"Why do you even want to? What's the point? You looking to hide out during the last Severing? That's not going to help anything."

"No I'm just curious."

Ernst rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"What?" Jessie said.

"You," he said, "you're lying again. Oh don't look offended. Alex and I both know you were lying about what happened at the last Severing. You lied about what happened in the sim with Az. I think you're lying about where the guards took you after the first Severing. And now you're lying about why you want to go rummaging around in the basement. So I'm done. I'll do your Comms tomorrow for the Severing but that's it. Anything else, you're on your own."

Ernst again went back to eating.

Jessie looked at Alex and motioned to Ernst. She mouthed "Do something."

"I'm not doing anything," Alex said.

Ernst looked at Alex then cut an angry look at Jessie.

"He's right you know," Alex said. "I'm happy to help since you keep winning, but if you think we actually believe all this innocent" -- Alex took on a high pitched falsetto -- "'I don't know what happened' crap, then that says a lot about what you think of our intelligence."

Alex and Ernst pushed back their chairs in unison and stood to leave.

"Ok fine," Jessie said. "Take me down to the abandoned Comms room and I'll tell you."

Scene 36

Jessie, Ernst, and Alex all made their way down the corridors trying to act as normal as possible. They had left the barracks just a few minutes before lights out and hurried toward the front bay where Jessie had been brought in from the helicopter.

"The entrance is outside," Ernst said.

"Why would the only entrance be from the outside?" Jessie said. "That doesn't make any sense."

Ernst shrugged.

"There's probably another way to get in there, I just never bothered to find it," he said.

Ernst tapped at the keypad next to the large bay door and it started opening. As soon as it was high enough, Ernst hit the button to close the door and they all ducked under it as it slowly sank back into place.

The three of them stayed close together in the dark and walked around the perimeter of the building. It was pitch black out and the handful of lights on the outside of the building gave them just enough light to see.

They were almost to the backside of the building when Ernst stopped them next to a thick metal door. It had a handle in the middle of it and a single keyhole.

"No keypad?" Jessie said.

Ernst shook his head no and began digging through some brush beside the door.

"So how are we supposed to get in?"

Ernst ignored her and kept digging. Jessie looked at Alex but he just shrugged.

After a few more seconds, Ernst stood and showed them a large crowbar almost completely orange with rust. Jessie looked back at the door and now noticed all the dents and divots around the handle. Ernst wedged the edge of the crowbar in near the lock and push hard. With a loud pop the door swung open to reveal a steep set of metal stairs that led down into darkness.

Ernst pulled out a small flashlight from his pocket, turned it on, and began descending the stairs. Jessie stepped through behind him and Alex closed the door as he followed.

Jessie kept an iron grip on the railing as they walked down the stairs. She quickly lost track of how many stairs there were but they had to have descended several stories by now.

Finally she saw the light from Ernst's flashlight reflect back off the floor. Ernst stepped off the stairs and Alex and Jessie joined him. Ernst searched the wall with his flashlight and then flicked at a little switch on the wall. Lights above them flickered and then turned on. They were in a small room with a single door. Jessie reached for the handle, but Ernst blocked her way.

"Now Jessie," he said. "I want to know what happened when you disappeared during the last Severing and why you want to come down here tonight."

Jessie sighed, stepped back, and sat down on one of the stairs.

"Fine," she said, "but you're not going to like it."

Scene 37

"No, no way," Alex said, "I don't believe it."

"Which part?" Jessie asked.

"All of it. First, there's no way someone could hack the Severing like that--"

"Then where do you suppose I went during Az's sim for four hours?" Jessie said.

Alex waved her off.

"Second, that's not how winning the Threshing works. You become a hero. They don't lock you in the basement."

"Then where did my brother go?"

"He probably got scrambled like all the other Coders."

"But we won the Threshing last time didn't we? And have you seen the Coder that won? Have you even seen his Medic or Comms? They're all gone. Why aren't they hear training us?"

"And third, the idea that the faction would permanently log someone into the grid is crazy. Your body couldn't handle it. You'd die."

"So you think I'm making it all up," Jessie said. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "Maybe everyone else is right and you're an attention seeking show off that thinks it's more fun to screw off instead of actually work to win the next Threshing."

"Alex..." Ernst said.

"No!" Alex yelled. "This isn't true. This isn't how the faction works. They take care of us and our families. That's the whole reason we're here. To fight for the faction and to makes sure our families get the credits they need. They don't lock up their winners in a dungeon and tell their families they're dead. That doesn't make any sense."

"You know it does," Ernst said.

"Shut up Ernst," Alex yelled.

Ernst stepped forward close to Alex. He seemed to grow a few inches taller as he stood straight and looked into Alex's eyes.

"I believe her," Ernst said. "And you do too. We've talked before about the shady stuff the faction does."

"This is different though," Alex's voice cracked. "This is everything. This is why we're here."

"I'm telling the truth," Jessie said. "My brother's locked up somewhere in the capital. He was supposed to send me instructions on what to do next but I haven't heard from him."

"And that's why you wanted to come down here?" Ernst said.

Jessie shrugged.

"I figured it was as good a place to start looking for him as any."

"I haven't been down here in awhile," Ernst said opening the door. "There's not much to it. Just a few cluttered hallways with offices crammed with old equipment."

Ernst felt around and flipped on a light switch. The corridor blinked a few times and lit up. Ernst's description was accurate. All Jessie could see was old electronic and medical equipment shoved and stacked haphazardly. It seemed like it started with some sense of order and then devolved into a mess pretty quickly.

Ernst and Jessie stepped through the door. They turned back to Alex.

"You coming?" Ernst asked.

Alex hesitated but stepped forward to follow them.

"What are we looking for?" Alex said.

"I don't know exactly," Jessie said. "I've been all over the upstairs and can't find anywhere that they would be keeping Randy, but I'm sure they'd have any entrances secured and hidden. But if they don't know that Ernst has been down here, maybe they have a way through that's not as locked down."

They were walking down the main hallway, picking their way through all the equipment. It stretched for a couple hundred feet before branching to the right and left.

"Well I never really came this deep. I just stayed near the door. It was more about being alone in a place they couldn't see me."

Jessie opened one of the doors that peeled off the hallway, glanced into the cluttered, dusty office, then closed it and kept moving.

They checked each of the doors as they moved down the hallway, but all the offices were the same. It looks like they had just been abandoned one day. There were still computer terminals, cups with pens and pencils in them, and even the occasional potted plant, long since dead.

They reached the end of the hallway and peered down to the left and right trying to figure out which way they should go.

"We could split up," Alex said.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," Ernst said.

"We could cover more ground that way," Jessie said. "Let's do it."

"You two stick together and go left, I'll go right," Alex said. He glanced at his watch. "We'll meet back here in twenty minutes whether we find anything or not. Sound good?"

"Sure."

"What is it I'm looking for again?" Alex said.

"I'm not sure," Jessie said. "I guess anything that seems out of place down here. This seems like a great place to hide someone or something they don't want found"

Jessie shrugged.

"Ok, I think I got it," Alex said. "See you in twenty."

Alex turned and started walking down the right corridor. Ernst and Jessie watched him for a few seconds before turning down their own hallway.

It almost immediately turned back to the right again.

"I wonder if it's just a big circle," Ernst said.

The junk lining the hallways had thinned out some. They continued checking the individual offices, but without any expectation of finding something interesting.

"You think Alex is ok?" Jessie said.

"I don't know," he said. "He loves the faction. And President Marcus. The idea that he got to come here to train was a huge honor for him, even though he knows the odds of him making it back with anything are low. When Ricky got scrambled, he was more upset that he was getting sent home. I mean, he liked Ricky and everything, but he felt like he had let the faction down."

"So the idea that faction could do something like lock up your brother against his will when he had won the Threshing -- he'll take that hard."

Jessie opened her mouth to respond, but she heard yelling behind her. They turned around to see Alex running down the corridor to them, weaving through the stacks.

"Come on!" he yelled, "I found something."

Scene 38

Jessie and Ernst followed closely behind Alex as he led them down the hallways. Where Jessie and Ernst's had been a straight shot, his had branched multiple times.

"It was hard to keep my sense of direction, but I tried to keep going towards the middle of the capital. Deeper. I was checking all the offices along the way like we were, but then this one caught my eye."

Alex stopped and motioned to one of the doors.

"I'm not sure why, but it just seemed... in use."

Jessie opened the door and peered in.

Alex was right. It wasn't anything in particular that caught her eye, but there seemed to be just a little less dust on everything and things arranged a little neater.

But everything else was the same. The nondescript desk with the computer terminal, pencils and pens, and ink blotter. There were no dead plants in here, but it did have a few filing cabinets and a long empty fish bowl.

"Here's the interesting part," Alex said walking around behind the desk.

He got down on his knees and crawled under the desk as Jessie and Ernst watched. They heard a click and then the computer started whirring. The three of them crowded around the terminal.

The green on black screen flashed through several boot up commands before finally printing out:

Heromo 25.6 (Lightning)

americas1.mainframe.nn tty1

americas1.mainframe.nn login: \_

"Oh my god," Ernst said.

"What?" Jessie asked.

He looked up at them, his eyes wide.

"I, um," he stammered, "we need to go. Now."

He started for the door. Jessie hurried to block his way.

"What is it?" Jessie said. "What's that mean?"

Ernst looked at Alex, wanting him to step in and help.

"Sorry Ernst," he said, "I'm just as curious as Jessie."

Ernst let out a long sigh.

"Ok fine. When you login to the grid your senses pick up on things. Or rather your mine interprets them as senses. You can see, hear, smell, and so on? You're obviously not actually experiencing those things. That's the grid feeding code into your brain that it interprets as those things, right?"

Alex and Jessie nodded.

"Well, that code lives on giant mainframe computers. There are computers that fill entire rooms. Or warehouses in the case of the capital. It takes a lot of computing power to run the grid. But the grid has all the safe guards we've talked about before. You try to hack the grid, you get fried."

"This though," he said pointing at the terminal, "is a direct line into the mainframe. It bypasses the safeguards and goes directly into the system."

"This is what we've been looking for!" Jessie said.

"Come on, you were looking for a power source or a locked door or something," Alex said.

"Yeah, well this is better," Jessie shot back. "They've got to have information on where my brother is in there. We just have to login."

"That's the thing," Ernst said, "We don't have the login. So we can't get in. And either way it doesn't matter, because getting caught using this terminal would be so very bad for us. We need to get out of here."

Alex and Jessie ignored him. They both immediately started moving. Alex dropped down in the chair and started pulling open the drawers. Jessie started opening the filing cabinets.

Most of the filing cabinets were empty, and the handful of papers and folders she found were dense with bureaucratic nonsense. Alex rifled through the drawers, pushing aside office supplies and various bits of paper.

"What are you looking for?" Ernst said.

They didn't answer, they just kept searching.

After a couple minutes Alex sat back in the chair, thinking. Then he picked up the keyboard attached to the terminal and turned it upside down.

"Found it!" he said.

There was a small, brightly colored square of paper stuck to the underside of the keyboard. On it was scrawled in fading pencil "}393>9g649;sU64/]kb".

"Looks like a password to me," Jessie said.

"Oh god," Ernst said.

"We still don't have the login though," Alex said.

Silence fell, and Jessie and Alex looked at Ernst. He finally let out something between a groan and a sigh, snatched the paper out of Alex's hand, and shooed him out of the chair so he could sit.

He tapped the keys on the keyboard.

Heromo 25.6 (Lightning)

americas1.mainframe.nn tty1

americas1.mainframe.nn login: root

root@americas1.mainframe.nn's password: }393>9g649;sU64/]kb

He tapped the return key.

Two more lines appeared.

Last login: Sun Feb 19 02:33:28 2201 from americas.mainframe.nn

root@americas1.mainframe.nn: ~/

"Oh hell," Alex said.

"What?" Jessie asked.

"We're in," Ernst said.

"But that's good right?" Jessie asked.

"Sure, except for the fact that someone else logged in from this machine three days ago."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Third Test

Scene 39

Jessie led the way down the corridor. The three of them were walking in a tight clump down the corridor. One of the lights flickered overhead.

The Capital seemed empty and cavernous the last few weeks. The Coders were either in the infirmary or already back with their families. All of the Medics and Comms had been sent home empty handed too.

There seemed to be a mix of grim despair and resolve that had settled over those that were left. There was another Severing coming. The last one.

Ernst glanced over his shoulder for the dozenth time.

"Nobody's around Ernst," Alex said. "Everyone's in bed."

"Which is where we should be," Ernst said.

Jessie ignored this.

"You're sure this will work?" Jessie asked.

"It's hard to know," he said. "It's a pretty complicated system and I haven't really had a chance to test it."

"I thought that's what we were doing now," Alex said.

"Yeah but it's not the same," Ernst said, "I can spin up a Heromo Lightning instance to run a test, but it won't be an exact replica of what the Faction has running."

"I knew we should have stayed and kept working," Jessie said.

"No way," Ernst replied, "there were way to many triggers and firewalls in place. I would have definitely gotten caught.

"No," Alex said, "this is the best way to do it. I'll install Ernst's virus--"

"It's not a virus!" Ernst said too loudly. He stopped to look over his shoulder again, then hurried to catch up.

"Right," Alex continued, "I'll install Ernst's virus" -- Ernst rolled his eyes -- "during the next Severing when most of the Capital's computing resources are dedicated towards that. Not to mention, it'll be easier to sneak down to the terminal again since every body will be watching the Severing."

"Ok," Jessie said, "that's a plan I guess."

They kept walking in silence and finally came to a locked bay door. It had "Computing" stenciled onto the steel door. Jessie moved to scan her palm print, but Ernst stopped her.

"Why is it," Ernst said, "that we're not talking about the real question?"

"Look Ernst," Alex said, "we've been over this. There's no way to know who's been logging in on that machine. It's probably just one of the Capital's programmers."

"No way!" Ernst said. "That doesn't make any since. Why would a programmer be working in the basement that doesn't have access from inside the building? Not to mention, if the Capital knew we could access that terminal they would have done something to prevent it."

"No," he continued, "there's somebody else here that's sneaking down there to the terminal."

"But what are they doing?" Jessie asked. "Could you check the logs?"

"Maybe," Ernst said, "but I'd have to be at the terminal to do it."

"Could you do that while you're down there?" Jessie asked Alex.

"Maybe," Alex said, "I'm not sure how to do that though."

"We'll get Ernst to show you how then," Jessie said, then she put her palm on the reader and the door clicked green and slid open.

"Aren't you worried that if Arnold checks the logs he'll wonder why we're visiting the Computer bay in the middle of the night?" Ernst asked.

Jessie shrugged.

"At this point," she said, "we can do whatever we want as long as we're not caught breaking a big rule. There's only six teams left. They're not going to kick one of us out. We'll just say we needed to come down and run some simulations."

"Look at all this old stuff," Alex said. "Can you believe this used to be the only way people ever worked with the grid?"

The room's motion sensing lights blinked on as the trio stepped into the room. The room wasn't big, but it was stuffed with equipment. Half of the room was long tables with metal chairs in front. The tables were lined with terminal after terminal complete with keyboard and mouse.

The other half of the room was filled with random computer equipment. It reminded Jessie of her visit to President Marcus's office.

There was a half hearted attempt to keep things organized with shelving and labels, but that was abandoned years before. It looked like a mass computer autopsy room that had stopped midway through the procedure. The guts of the computers were strewn everywhere with wires and circuit boards laying around haphazardly.

Jessie glanced at Ernst. Even with the stress he was carrying around, he was still obviously excited but what he saw.

"Ok now Ernst," Alex said, "calm down. We're here to get work done."

"I know!" Ernst shot back and started walking to one of the terminals on the table.

Alex and Jessie grinned at each other as they followed.

Ernst sat at the first terminal, booted it up and began working.

"This'll take a couple minutes," he said.

Jessie and Alex sat down on either side of him and watched him work silently.

This is why Jessie tried to keep moving. Anytime she sat still, her mind immediately spun out of control.

Where was Randy? Why hadn't he contacted her again? He'd said he would reach out to her the next time she was plugged in but he didn't. And hadn't, even though Jessie was spending almost every waking hour plugged in.

Did Marcus or Arnold catch on to what he was doing? Did some kind of innocuous system upgrade inadvertently patch the hole Randy had been using to reach out to her?

He was supposed to give her instructions on what to do next, but she was flying blind. And the longer it went, the more worried she got.

After almost eight years, she finally got her brother back and now he was gone again.

What was wrong?

Jessie looked up at Ernst and Alex.

Ernst's face was set in that stony look he got when he was concentrating hard on a problem. Alex was kicked back balancing on two legs of his chair studying his fingernails and then gnawing on a corner of one.

She still had not forgotten that their fate was tied to hers.

Sure, they were risking some to help her track down her brother. But they didn't know the consequences of her losing the next Severing.

She shouldn't be sneaking around in the basement and computer bay, she should be focusing on winning the next Severing so Ernst and Alex won't end up going home scrambled and creditless.

But she couldn't ignore the fact that her brother was trapped somewhere right here in the Capital.

Jessie pressed her hands on her temples.

This is why she didn't let herself stop to think. She just cycled in an endless loop until her mind was tapped out.

"You ok?" Alex asked.

Jessie looked up at him. He was looking at her with a worried expression on his face.

"Yeah," she said, "yeah, just tired."

Alex opened his mouth to respond, but Ernst cut him off.

"Ok it's up," he said. "I've got the same instance of Heromo Lightning running as on the terminal downstairs. I've also tried to replicate the faction systems the best I can but obviously--"

"We know," Jessie said, "you can't make it perfect."

"Right," Ernst said digging in his pocket.

He pulled out a small memory stick and reached down to plug it into the terminal tower.

"Ok, you take over," Ernst said getting up.

Alex sat and awkwardly put his hand on the mouse.

"First you pull up a command window," Ernst said.

"I know!" Alex said. "Give me a minute. We've gone over it a thousand times. I have to be able to do it by myself so shut your hole."

Ernst looked annoyed but stayed quiet.

Alex slowly tapped on the keys, having to backspace and rekey commands several times. But finally he got to the point where he could run the virus Ernst had built. It was supposed to walk through the entire Faction system, open up several backdoors and dump a log of the entire system into a file Ernst could access from anywhere in the Capital.

They wanted the next time they sneaked into the basement to be the last.

"Alright," Alex said as he entered the last command.

The cursor blinked as the computer worked, then after a few seconds it dumped a bunch of unintelligible code onto the screen and kicked out of the program.

Ernst cursed.

"Move, move," he said pushing Alex out of the way.

Alex relented and Ernst took his place. He pulled up the screen again and tapped several commands quicker than Jessie and Alex could follow.

The cursor went back to blinking, then after a few more seconds, started spitting out status reports as the virus infected the simulated environment.

"There we go," Ernst said sitting back.

"What happened?" Jessie said.

Ernst began to explain, but, even though it sounded like English, it was impossible for either Jessie or Alex to understand.

"What happens if it does this while I'm down there by myself?" Alex asked.

"It won't," Ernst said.

"Are you sure?" Jessie asked.

Ernst didn't answer.

"You can't be sure can you?" Jessie said. "Not to mention that if we want to pull the logs on the terminal to figure out who was on the machine, Alex doesn't know how to do that either."

"I can show him," Ernst said.

"Yeah but what if it's different?" Alex said. "Even if just one command doesn't work I'll be completely stuck."

They all sat silent looking at each other, none of them wanting to state the obvious.

"What if you need me though Jessie?" Ernst said. "I won't be able to run code for you or communicate. I'll be off the grid while you're in there."

"I can run the communication," Alex said.

"Yeah," Ernst responded, "but we both know that's a stretch for you. What if she needs to run code? Or needs me to run one of the scripts we've prewritten? There's hundreds of them now. I have them all memorized and can load them in seconds."

"It doesn't matter," Jessie said. "This is more important. Alex and I can make do while you're gone. How long will it take you?"

Ernst chewed on his lip as he thought.

"Thirty minutes? Even if things start to go wrong, I'll just bail on it. So forty-five minutes tops?"

"We can last that long," Jessie said nodding to Alex. "This will be a long Severing I'm sure. You need to be the one that runs the virus, otherwise the whole thing will be useless."

Ernst looked between the two of them.

"Fine," he said, "I'll do it. You just can't die in there while I'm gone Jessie. I'd never forgive myself."

*You won't be sane enough to feel guilty* Jessie thought, then nodded.

"It's a deal," she said.

Scene 40

Alex and Jessie huddled close.

"They're going to notice. They're going to ask," Alex said in a strained whisper.

Jessie glanced around the room at the other groups all moving around their stations positioning everything.

"I knew this was a bad idea," Alex said.

"How could we have known this?" Jessie spat back. "The last Severing we were in our own private bay. How could we have possibly known they would have pulled us all together for this one?"

The small room was brightly lit with concrete floors and white walls. There were four stations setup complete with the Coder's chair, Comms station and Medic equipment. They were in a circle facing each other. Thick cables came out of the ceiling above each station and ran into the Comms terminals, Coder chairs, and the large screens placed around the room.

Apparently they were all going to get to watch this Severing live.

She looked quickly at Az's group, but they were focused on preparing for the Severing.

Alex shook his head and cut his eyes at Sergeant Arnold.

"Get it together Alex," Jessie said, "if we just stand here fretting it's going to be even more obvious and then we won't be ready for me to login to the Severing. Let's just act like everything is normal and start prepping just like we planned too."

"Right," Alex said, "you're right."

Alex sat down at the terminal and booted up the machine. He reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a small piece of folded paper. He opened it up, smoothed it out, and laid it next to the terminal. Once the command window appeared, Alex leaned over the cheat sheet Ernst had created for him and began entering commands.

Jessie smiled and turned around, almost bumping into Az who had sneaked up behind her.

"What do you want?" she said.

"I'm just a little worried for you," he said. "Seems you've lost your Comms and have been forced to replace him with a monkey."

Alex shot Az an angry look but turned back to the screen.

"Where's Ernst?" Az said.

"I don't think it's any of your business Az," Jessie said. "Maybe you should focus on the Severing so I don't embarrass you again."

Az's face turned a light shade of pink, then his eyes shot up and over Jessie's shoulder. Jessie turned to find Sergeant Arnold towering over her.

"You're right," Arnold said. "It isn't any of Az's business, but it is mine. Care to tell me where your Comms is?"

"He, um," Jessie started.

"He got sick," Alex said, spinning around in his chair.

"Sick?" Arnold said.

"Yeah, real gross," Alex continued. "Puking everywhere. Not exactly what we need here. So he went up to the infirmary to get some meds. Should be back any time."

"So if I call up to the infirmary they'll tell me Ernst is up there?" Arnold said.

"I suppose so," Alex said. "I didn't escort him there myself."

Arnold looked at Alex and Jessie in turn.

"That's bull--" Az started.

"Shut up Az and get back to your station," Arnold barked.

"You two need to get prepped for the Severing," he said to Jessie and Alex.

"That's exactly what we were doing," Jessie said.

"Good, then you're ready," he said.

Keeping his eyes locked with Jessie's he raised his voice for all to hear.

"Login in two minutes. The final Severing is underway!"

Scene 41

When the white faded away, the six Coders were all standing in a large, ornate room. Built in bookshelves lined the walls stuff with books.

Dread fell over Jessie.

She glanced behind her to find a crackling fireplace.

This was the exact room she'd met her brother in.

The only difference was all of the furniture had been removed and in the center of the room was a beautifully carved, round wooden table. Across the top of the table were one inch squares in alternating green and black colors. The edges of each of the squares were drawn in gold.

There were seven chairs arranged around the table. The Coders were already arranged around six of them.

In the seventh sat President Marcus.

He was quietly shuffling and reshuffling a small deck of cards.

"Welcome," he said opening his hands with a flourish, "to the final Severing."

"Who are you?" one of the Coders, Mark, asked.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" Marcus said. "Tsk, tsk. Doesn't bode well for you I think."

Everyone remained quiet.

"It's President Marcus," Jessie said just above a whisper.

"Yes!" Marcus said. "But she did have a bit of a hidden advantage on that one."

Az shot her looked mixed with anger and confusion.

"I am the 'man in the machine' as they say," Marcus continued, "and I have put together a very simple final test to see who should represent our great Americas Faction in the upcoming Threshing. Please, have a seat."

Each of the Coders took their seat. Jessie was forced to sit on Marcus's right. As they took their chairs, twenty-one figurines appeared on the table in front of each of them arranged in the squares closest to their seat. There were eighteen figures dressed in armor, and three in common clothes.

Marcus continued shuffling the small deck of cards.

"As you can see," Marcus said, "you're going to play a simple game of Providence. I'm sure each of you played this game of knights and peasants as children. This Severing is not about moving quickly or out-coding your rivals or anything other than logic. I need the three of you that can out maneuver and out think the others. So here we are."

"It, of course, has one small twist," Marcus continued. "Each time you lose a peasant to an opponent, you must draw from this pile."

He tapped the deck in his hand.

"In this deck are two types of cards. A white card," Marcus drew a white card from the deck to show them, "and a red card." He drew a red card to show them.

"There are exactly three red cards in this deck. If you draw a red card, you're out. If you lose all of your peasants, your out. When there are three of you left in the game, the Severing is over. Any questions?"

Marcus paused and took the time to look at each Coder in the eyes. Jessie could have sworn he lingered on her longer than the others.

"Wonderful! Play begins to my left," he motioned to Catharine. "The final Severing starts now."

Marcus stood and immediately he and his chair disappeared. The small deck of cards sat in the middle of the table.

After a brief pause, Catharine reached for one of her knights.

Scene 42

Jessie had always hated Providence. There was so much long term strategy, she'd always struggled to keep track of everything in her head. Whenever she'd played with Randy, he had always let her think she was about to win and then take all of her peasants at the end.

She'd played a few times with her friends, and with more people it was always more complicated. There were always tenuous alliances as you could arrange your knights to protect your peasants along with someone next to you.

But of course, this left you open once the game got serious.

And it always got serious.

The first ninety percent of every game was slow and methodical as people vied for better positioning for their knights. And then suddenly every move would be on the attack.

They had already been playing almost two hours and Jessie was still unsure if any of her moves had been the right ones.

It was obvious that Az, who had sat down directly across from her at the table, had teamed up with Mark, who was on her right, and Craig, who was in between Mark and Az, from the very beginning. Catharine was arranging her defenses in a way to help protect Jessie, but Jessie was wary. The final Coder at the board, Finn, seemed to be going it alone.

The table had been quiet as each took their turns moving one of their pieces. Alex had finally quieted down in Jessie's head, though Jessie knew he was still freaking out. Jessie was scared too, but kept trying to push it out of her head.

She couldn't worry about Ernst now, she had plenty right in front of her she needed to concentrate on.

But where was he? He had said he would be gone forty-five minutes at the most. What could he possibly be doing for two hours?

Jessie wondered if the virus had stalled and he was having to run it manually. Or maybe he found Randy and was trying to free him.

"Jessie," Az barked at her, "it's your move."

"Oh, sorry," she mumbled and quickly reached out and slid one of her knights diagonally to position it better between her and Mark.

Az sucked in a breath of air.

"Not a great move Jessie," he said, "you're leaving your front far to exposed."

Jessie ignored him and tried to concentrate on her pieces and what her next move should be.

*How's it going?* Alex asked.

*It's fine. You know how these games go. It's so slow at the beginning. This is why I always hated this game.*

*Stick with it. I'm sure you're doing great.*

Jessie mentally rolled her eyes.

She really wanted Ernst back.

Catharine had gone again and, once Finn made his move, a smile crept across Az's face. Jessie looked closer at Finn's pieces and immediately saw his mistake.

He had overcommitted to defending against Mark and Craig's attack and left his flank open to Az. Finn didn't seem to know it yet, but he was just a couple moves from losing the first peasant of the game.

The play went around the table twice more and after Az's move, Finn finally realized the trouble he was in. He tried to move to defend Az's advance, but it was too late.

Two more rounds later and Finn's hand shook as he retreated his exposed peasant for the final time. Az moved his knight and took Finn's peasant. Immediately, the deck of cards that Marcus had been shuffling floated into the air a few inches and drifted towards Finn.

When the deck reached him, Finn reached for the top card, his hand shaking more than ever. He slid the top card off and held it in front of him. Fear went across his face in a flash. He looked quickly around the table as if pleading the other Coders to help. Blood began running from one of his nostrils. Then the other. He brought a hand up to his nose and smeared the blood with his fingers and then looked at them, glistening with red before he slumped forward slamming his head on the table, scattering the rest of his pieces.

*What the hell just happened?* Alex said.

*It's Finn. He just pulled a red card. He just got scrambled.*

*Wait, hold on.*

Several seconds passed. All of the other Coders were looking off into the distance as they communicated with their Comms as well.

*Oh god Jessie. Finn isn't scrambled. He's dead.*

Jessie's eyes went wide and she looked around the table. It was obvious the other Coders were getting the same message. They were all shocked and scared.

All except for Az.

Az was staring directly into Jessie's eyes.

He was smiling.

Scene 43

Jessie broke her stare and tried to make eye contact with Catharine, but she was now just staring down at the board.

*Alex, go over to Catharine's Comms and get him to tell her to partner with me. It's the only chance we have of surviving. See if they'll confirm.*

*Ok, I'm on it.*

Craig had already made his move after Az's capture of Finn's peasant. Mark was studying the pieces.

After a couple minutes, Catharine turned to look at Jessie and gave her a slight nod.

*It sounds like they're in.* Alex said.

*Got it.*

Play continued around and around the board. Finn's pieces had disappeared a few seconds after he'd slumped to the table. Az had unceremoniously kicked Finn's chair back so it toppled to the floor. Jessie could just see a few wisps of blond hair from the top of Finn's head.

Finn's missing pieces had left a huge gap on the board to Catharine's left which gave her an advantage of space between her and the three boys still at the table.

Az continued to mock Jessie's movements, trying to play with her head. Mark kept attacking her flank, but Catharine and Jessie made good use of the space left open by Finn.

Craig and Az kept pressing their advance though, blocking off escape paths for Catharine.

After another thirty minutes of play, Jessie could tell they were in trouble. Even with the alliance with Catharine, the three-against-two odds still put them behind.

And it was obvious Az was pressing the attack on Catharine.

Finally, she left one of her peasants exposed so she could arrange a defense for the other two. Az quickly took the peasant and the deck of cards floated to Catharine.

She stiffened her spine and pulled a card. She let out a sigh of relief as she turned it over to show the rest of them the white card.

More rounds went by, and finally Mark made the move Jessie had left open for him. She quickly closed ranks and was able to take over half of his knights over the next several moves. She had also taken two of his peasants, but he drew white cards both times.

Down to eight knights and a single peasant, he started retreating towards Craig's pieces.

Catharine soon went on the attack, surprising Az it seemed. Jessie moved her pieces to defend Catharine's peasants as she advanced. Catharine lost five of her own knights but had taken four of Az's and six of Craig's.

Craig was now retreating and closing ranks and left one of his peasants exposed which Jessie quickly took but, once again, a white card was pulled.

Jessie surveyed the table.

The last bit of attacks and defending had left all of their armies weak and somewhat exposed. The three boys still had the advantage in numbers, but they were spread out and weakened.

Az, Craig, and Mark kept exchanging glances as they fought to regain control of the board. Catharine was more exposed than Jessie since Catharine had gone on the attack. She began retreating back to a safer position, but all three of the boys pressed in on her. Jessie tried to move her pieces to defend but it was too late.

This time Craig took a second of Catharine's peasants.

Jessie quickly did the math in her head.

The odds were still well in Catharine's favor to draw a white.

The deck floated in front of Catharine as she reached out and peeled the top card from the deck. She turned it over. She stared at it for a few seconds, her face stony then she turned to look at Jessie as blood began to dribble from her nose.

"I'm so sorry," she said, then slumped in her chair and fell to the floor on top of Finn's body.

Catharine's pieces disappeared from the board. Az immediately made his next move as if nothing had happened.

Jessie retreated and regrouped over the next few rounds. She kept her face still but was reeling inside trying to put together a plan that would let her survive.

"You know why I have such a problem with you Jessie?" Az began as he made another move. "You don't actually care about the Faction or the Threshing. You had to be forced to come to the Capital when all the rest of us realize what an honor it is. Then you just keep sliding by on luck and apparently protection from President Marcus. You kept taking spots from Coders who had worked harder and trained longer. We all came here four years ago giving up our family and friends and lives to defend the faction's honor and place as winner of the Threshing. And you've done nothing but mock and circumvent all of it."

As he talked, they continued to move their pieces. Az pressed in on Jessie's left side, Craig on her front, and, emboldened by the advantage, Mark was on the attack again on her right.

"Which is why," Az continued, "I've been watching you. I've been waiting for you to make a mistake I could use. Ever since you disappeared from my simulation, I knew you were up to something. You had figured out some way to worm into the mainframe of the Capital. I tried to tell Arnold, but he didn't believe me. So I started following you. It's much easier than you would think in the Capital. I knew you would finally show your hand."

Az took another of Jessie's knights.

"And sure enough, you did. You led me directly to that terminal in the basement. Then you sent Ernst down there before the Severing started. I, of course, reported this egregious breaking of the rules to Arnold. And then you and Alex both lied to cover it up. Exactly how I knew you would."

Craig had pressed forward and Jessie took one of his knights, but lost two of her own in the process. She continued pressing her knights in Az and Craig's direction, leaving her flank more exposed to Mark.

"Didn't you wonder why Alex didn't react to what happened to Catharine?" Az said.

Jessie slowly lifted her head, finally shifting her attention enough from the game to take in what Az was saying.

"See, now I have your attention."

"What did you do?"

Az paused.

"You know Craig," he said looking to his left, "I forget. What is the punishment for hacking the Capital grid system?"

"I believe it's immediate shaming and shipped off to the Numbered." Craig said.

"That's right," Az sighed. "I had forgotten."

"I believe the family of the criminal is also punished," Mark said.

"Yes!" Az said. "Their monthly credit quota is slashed in half."

Dread filled Jessie as they spoke back and forth. Tears filled her eyes.

"Tsk, tsk," Az said. "It's such a shame when a trainee gets mixed up with the wrong people. They forget why they're here in the first place."

Jessie's hand shook as she moved a piece. She dropped it, knocking over two pieces, and quickly replaced them on the board.

Mark had used the distraction to move his knights into position to Jessie's right between two of her peasants. Over the next few rounds, her hands still shaking, Jessie moved most of her knights to the right to try and defend, but Mark struck quickly. He dispatched first one peasant -- Jessie drew a white card -- and then a second. Jessie quickly pulled the second white card and threw it aside.

The three boys openly taunted her now. They speculated on the type and severity of punishment that both Ernst and Alex would receive. They mockingly consoled Jessie since she wouldn't be around to deal with the shame she'd brought on them.

Mark wiped tears from his eyes as he stifled giggles.

His next three turns he quickly moved his knights into position to expose Jessie's final peasant.

Then Jessie moved one of her knights diagonally to the right and Az's laughter cut off suddenly.

"Pay attention Mark!" he shouted.

Mark looked at the board confused, then his eyes grew wide.

Craig made his move, Mark hastily pulled back his knights, but it was too late.

Jessie's final peasant was still two moves away from being taken, but her knight sat within striking distance.

There was nothing they could do.

Jessie would take Mark's final peasant on her next turn. It didn't matter that she had left her last peasant exposed to Az and Craig's attack. She would still be one of the last three standing.

A stunned quiet fell over the four of them.

"You idiot!" Az yelled at Mark.

"Do something!" Mark yelled back.

"What can I do?" Az spat at him. "We had her cornered and you stopped paying attention."

A fresh set of tears were running from Mark's eyes.

"No, no, no," he pleaded. "Don't let them do this to me Az!"

Az gritted his teeth as he stared down at the table. His jaw muscles worked underneath the skin.

He looked up slowly at Jessie. When he locked eyes with her, she smiled at him. Then winked.

A growl slowly built inside of Az's throat then it turned into a shrill scream as he lunged across the table. The knights and peasant scattered as he scrambled towards Jessie. She tried to push her chair back, but it was too late. He was twice her size and threw himself onto her body.

Jessie's chair tipped back and they both hit the floor. She went to get to her feet, but Az dropped onto her, straddling her, holding her on the ground. He closed his hands around her neck and began squeezing.

She reached up and tried to pull at his hands, but he held on tight. Jessie's vision began to swim, but she fought for consciousness. She dragged her fingernails across his hands, but he didn't relent. She reached up and clawed at his face leaving a deep, bleeding gouge across his cheek.

He continued to scream and started picking up her head and slamming it into the ground.

Jessie blacked out then came to just in time for him to slam her head back into the ground again. Finally, she let go into the blackness.

Az continued squeezing and beating her head into the ground until Mark and Craig dragged him off of her.

Az stood back, breathing hard and pushed his black hair back out of his face.

Mark bent down and put his fingers to Jessie's neck.

He waited a few seconds. Then a few seconds more to be sure. He looked up at Az and Craig.

"She's dead."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Third Test Aftermath

Scene 44.3

Randy stood motionless next to the empty chair, his hands clasped behind his back. He stared straight ahead at the door through the thick glass partition that ran from floor to ceiling, wall to wall.

Several minutes passed.

He shifted his feet a bit, then returned to his rigid stance.

The door slammed open.

President Marcus stepped into the room, followed closely by a tall woman with long brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail.

Marcus stalked up to the partition and stared at Randy.

Neither of them spoke. The woman shuffled nervously behind Marcus.

"Jessie's dead," Marcus said.

Randy's jaw clinched and unclenched.

"I know."

"Randy..." the woman said.

"Shut up!" Marcus growled at her, then turned back. He opened his mouth to speak, but Randy cut him off.

"You have to let me out," Randy asked.

Marcus scoffed.

"Why would I do that?" Marcus said.

"I'm your only chance of winning the Threshing now."

"No," Marcus said motioning to the woman behind him, "no that's why we brought Lyla in. She's going to train the Coders just like she trained you."

"She doesn't know how I won."

"You're going to tell her. Then she's going to get Az and Craig ready."

"Why would I tell her anything now? The only reason I was helping you was to protect Jessie."

Marcus's jaw worked as he thought.

"You have other pressure points."

"Not that I care about."

"Your parents. Why, even Lyla here is a friend of yours. What's to stop me from... applying pressure?"

"Jessie was my only way out. I'm not an idiot."

Marcus nodded.

"Perhaps I roll my dice with Craig and Az--"

Randy laughed.

"Only two teams? Az is smart enough, but Craig is a disaster."

"I thought you were a disaster too, and look what happened."

Randy stepped back and sat down in the chair. He spread out his hands.

"Be my guest. Give it a try."

"You're not going to help?" Marcus asked.

Randy held his stare but remained quiet.

"Then I suppose," Marcus said, "there's no reason to keep you around at all. It's easy enough to notify your parents of two dead children as much as one."

A hint of emotion passed across Randy's face, but he quickly went back to his stony silence.

Marcus and Randy stared at each other.

Lyla finally stepped forward.

"Let him out Marcus," she said. "We both know he's the only one that has a chance to get Az and Craig ready."

Marcus turned towards her.

"Then why the hell did I bring you up here at all?"

"That doesn't matter now. What matters is that we have to win the Threshing and you're keeping our best chance locked up."

"It's too dangerous!" Marcus said. "You saw what he did. We almost lost everything."

"*You* almost lost everything," Randy said.

"Shut up!" Marcus said pointing at him. "You're a ruthless sociopath that will stop at nothing--"

Randy jumped out of his chair.

"I'm the sociopath?" he screamed through the glass. "Who's kept the savior of the faction locked in the grid for four years?"

Lyla stepped between Marcus and the glass.

"Stop it," she yelled.

She turned back to Marcus.

"Jessie's gone. We all know she was the only Coder that had a shot at winning the Threshing. So make a choice. Keep your pride and lose for sure. Or let him out and have a shot."

Marcus's face was red with anger. He looked between Lyla and Randy, mulling over the decision.

"Fine," Marcus said. "We'll unplug you. But you'll be accompanied at all times by Capital guards. Your access to the grid and any terminals will be heavily surveilled. You give me even one moment's pause that you're stepping out of line and I'll scramble you myself."

Marcus turned towards the door.

Lyla let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

She turned back to Randy and smiled, but his face was still a mask emotion.

"I have one more condition," Randy said.

Lyla's eyes went wide and she shook her head quickly side to side.

Marcus jolted as if he'd been shot through with electricity.

He turned slowly around, his face approaching the color purple. He opened his mouth to speak, but Randy raised his hands as if surrendering.

"It's simple," Randy whispered. "A small request from a brother."

Marcus didn't respond, so Lyla did.

"What?" she asked.

"I'd like my sister's body immediately cremated and sent home to my parents. They deserve closure for at least one of their children."

Scene 45

The bay sat silent. It was like the aftermath of a hurricane. They were all dealing with a cocktail of emotions from stunned and horrified to distraught and angry.

Finn's body had already been removed and his Comms and Medic were no where to be found. The plug from Finn's chair was laying on the floor and it looked like one of his team had started freaking out as the medical supply cabinet had been tipped over, its supplies strewn across the floor, and the terminal had a crack running across the screen.

Catharine's body was still there. A sheet had been thrown over it. Her Comms and Medic were gone too. Mark was laying on his table, his lips already turning a light shade of blue.

Az stood off against the wall huddled with his team. He still held the ice pack against his cheek where it had swollen and turned red. Craig floated near him with their Comms and Medics, constantly casting nervous glances towards Alex and the door.

Three Capital guards stood in the middle of the room.

Alex had started attacking Az before he'd logged out. Az's Comms and Medic had tried to fight him off, but he had pushed through them without a problem.

He had landed several blows, including a vicious one to Az's face, before the guards could get to him.

Now he sat, breathing heavily, his eyes locked on the group across the bay from him. His hands were behind him, held together by plastic ties.

He never let his eyes stray to Jessie's body which still laid in the chair to his left.

The door slid open and Alex jumped to his feet.

Arnold stepped in, immediately followed by Ernst who was shoved roughly in by another Capital guard.

He stumbled and barely caught his balance. His hands were behind his back, held together by the same type ties as Alex.

Ernst ran over to Jessie's body and stood for a moment, stunned, as if his mind couldn't register what was going on. Then his chest lurched as the first sob rippled through him.

He cried out and slid to his knees next to Jessie's chair and continued crying loudly. Alex moved close, but stopped, standing behind him, unsure of what to do.

Arnold stood just inside the door. He tried to maintain an impassive stare ahead, but his eyes kept cutting over to Jessie's body.

A half hour passed as everyone waited.

Ernst never got up from his knees, but he quieted down. Alex returned to his seat, and continued his glaring at Az's corner of the room.

Az was nervous too.

He tried to hide it, but his feet kept shuffling and he kept casting glances towards the door.

"What's the matter Az?" Alex said.

"Alex..." Arnold warned.

"No," Alex continued, "I'm just wondering why Az is so nervous. I mean, he proved his bravery in the Severing by murdering a little girl that had out smarted him."

Az scowled at him but remained quiet.

"Shut up, Alex," Arnold said.

Alex quieted down for a minute then spoke up again.

"There's no reason to be nervous Az. You're a cheating, low-life hack. You'll fit right in with the Fact--"

Alex was cut off when Arnold stepped quickly forward and backhanded him across the mouth. The chair tipped over and Alex fell hard against the floor, unable to catch himself.

Arnold grabbed the plastic ties holding his wrists together and lifted them roughly, twisting Alex's shoulders and getting a yelp of pain from him. Arnold put the chair upright and dumped Alex back in his seat. Blood was smeared across Alex's lips.

"Sit there and shut up," Arnold said, then he turned back to the door.

Before he could regain his post, the door slid open and President Marcus stepped in.

Az immediately backed up against the wall placing his Comms and Medic, along with Craig, between him and Marcus.

One look at Marcus explained why.

All of the congeniality was gone. There was no smile. There was nothing laid back about him.

The facade was gone. Written across his face was every reason he had been able to seize and maintain control of the Americas Faction for the past decade.

He looked slowly around the room at the barely contained chaos. His eyes stopped on the group of boys huddled against the wall.

"You two, here, now."

Az and Craig stepped tentatively forward at first, then hurried to obey at the look Marcus shot at them.

They lined up.

Marcus looked at each one in turn, then stepped forward and slapped Az across the face. Az dropped the ice he had been holding at his side and put his hands up over his face, cowering.

"Stand up," Marcus growled.

Az slowly straightened up, and put his shaking hands down by his side.

Marcus hit him again, this time with his fist. The force behind the blow was more than you would think the small, older man could muster.

Az fell to the floor. A gash had appeared across cheek and began bleeding freely.

"Get up!" Marcus yelled at him.

Az stood slowly as Marcus turned his back to him and stepped away, working to constrain himself.

"It's been decided by powers outside of my control that the two of you will represent the faction at the upcoming Threshing," he said. "Even though we're down to you two idiots..."

Marcus turned back to face Az, who flinched under his stare.

"It's the only choice we currently have, so we are going with it."

He stepped forward to face the two boys.

"The Threshing," he continued, "is in four weeks. Looking at the two of you, I would say our chances of winning our almost none. However, we're going to move forward and start your training right away."

Marcus stepped close to them and raised his hand a finger outstretched in their direction.

"Now get the hell out of here, clean yourselves up, and get to the training bay now."

Az and Craig hurried out of the room, followed closely by their Comms and Medics.

Marcus turned to Alex and Ernst.

"On your feet," he said.

Ernst struggled to his feet, but Alex remained seated and stared up at Marcus.

A small smile played at the edges of Marcus's mouth.

Arnold stepped behind Alex and grabbed his wrists again and yanked up, forcing Alex to his feet.

"And you two..." Marcus began.

"We know," Alex said. "We get sent home with nothing."

Marcus looked at them with mock surprise.

"What? Did Jessie not tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Ernst said.

"Well I made a promise to her weeks ago. Right after the first Severing."

Marcus nodded at the guards and two of them moved behind the boys and grabbed their shoulders.

"I told her if she didn't make it to the Threshing, then you two would be scrambled as punishment."

Both the boy's eyes went wide.

"And I sure do hate to break my promises, especially with the trainees that let me down so spectacularly."

"But we won!" Alex shouted. "It was Az--"

"You shut up!" Marcus roared. "Your team lost. Again. Two Coders you've failed to protect. You've had more than enough chances."

He nodded at the guards again.

"Take them to the infirmary. The doctors are expecting their newest patients."

Alex bucked and kicked against his guard, but the man held fast. Ernst simply dropped his head and walked out of the room.

Arnold and Marcus were left with the last Capital guard.

Marcus stepped forward and looked down at Jessie's body. He stared at her face for several minutes. Arnold finally spoke to break the silence by clearing his throat.

"What would you like us to do with her... with the body?"

"The incinerator," Marcus said looking up at Arnold. "Then arrange for her remains to be sent back to hew parents.

Scene 46.2

Lyla hurried to keep up with Marcus's long gate as they walked down the hallway. They were followed closely by a half dozen Capital guards.

"This is a little overkill don't you think?" Lyla asked, but Marcus didn't answer.

They weaved their way through several corridors and locked doors that required higher and higher security clearance. Even with her extensive time spent in the Capital, Lyla had no idea how far the compound actually stretched.

Most of the rooms and offices were empty. Years ago, before the Fall, this place was a bustling military base. Now it felt like a hollowed out shell where the last remaining ghosts still clung to their existence.

Marcus stopped at a door and turned to face Lyla and the guards.

"You," he said pointing at Lyla, "stay next to me at all times. I don't want you going out of sight."

She opened her mouth to respond but he cut her off.

"You three," he said pointing at the guards, "keep close to him as he wakes up. You two, stay close to us."

"You," he said pointing to the last guard, "fetch us a wheelchair from the old infirmary down the hall."

The guards nodded and Marcus turned and pressed his palm against the small screen to the right of the door. It blinked green and Marcus slid his security card through the slot and the door pinged and openned.

The bay's lights slowly blinked to life as the seven of them stepped inside.

Lyla gasped when she saw Randy.

He was unbearably thin. His skin was so pale it seemed almost see through. The skin on his face was pulled taught over his skull. His hair was mostly gone. What little was left fell in long tufts.

Instead of lying on a table, he was strapped into a device that allowed each of his limbs to move independently. He was currently being held in an upright position with his arms slowly moving up and down in front of him.

Tubes ran into his nose, under his shirt, and down into the loose fitting pants. The plug in the back of his head had an unusually thick cable attached to it.

Marcus ignored Randy's body and immediately sat down at the terminal and began working.

Lyla took a few steps towards Randy, but Marcus barked at her to stay close.

The three guards surrounded Randy, and the other two took their position flanking Marcus and Lyla.

It only took a few minutes for Marcus to initiate the release of Randy. The device lowered until he was in a prone position. The plug disengaged and fell from the back of his head.

At first, it seemed like nothing would happen.

Then slowly Randy opened his eyes. He blinked a couple times then closed them again and moaned.

The tendons in his neck pushed against the skin as Randy strained to sit up, but the straps held him in place.

"Get the straps off!" Lyla yelled at the guards around Randy.

Theys glanced at Marcus and he nodded.

The one closest stepped forward and gently undid the strap around his legs. The other two guards joined him and began working on the straps around his arms, legs, and head.

While they worked, Randy rolled his head to the side to look at Lyla and Marcus. Lyla couldn't tell if he was actually seeing them or not.

When they were done, the guards stepped back. Randy once again strained to sit up. His arms floundered in the air before he fell back again.

Lyla took a step towards Randy, but the guard next to her grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

Lyla struggled to be free of his grasp.

"Let me help him!" she yelled at Marcus.

"Hold onto her," Marcus said to the guard. Lyla cursed at him but he ignored her and walked slowly towards Randy.

Randy's eyes followed Marcus as he approached. As he got closer, Randy struggled again to situp and finally got his elbows under him, but when Marcus reached him, he put his hand against Randy's sunken chest and pushed him back down onto the bed.

The president held him down and leaned close to Randy's ear. He began whispering. As he spoke, the tendons in Randy's neck strained again and his hands closed into fists.

Marcus straightened and turned back to the guards. The bay's door slid open and the guard came in pushing a small wheelchair.

"Help him into the chair," Marcus said to the guards.

They nodded and the closest guard stepped forward. He reached under Randy's arm and his knees and easily lifted him up. He turned and gingerly placed him in the wheelchair where Randy slumped over, unable to hold himself up.

This time Lyla was able to wrench herself free and she ran forward and dropped to her knees in front of Randy and gently pushed his body back to an upright position.

His eyes met Lyla's.

He opened his mouth to speak, but only a small croak escaped. He attempted to clear his throat and Lyla leaned in close.

Finally Randy was able to force a small whisper out.

"Jessie?" he said.

Lyla placed one hand on top of his bony hand.

"It's happening now," she said.

He nodded slightly then closed his eyes and leaned his head back, exhausted.

Scene 47.2

This is not what Chuck had signed up for.

His job was the trash.

Every day all of the bins were dumped and delivered down to his floor and he oversaw the incinerating process.

After forty years, he knew every square inch of the large furnace. He'd had to fix and replace almost every part of the entire system, from conveyor to ash disposal.

But this was different.

He took another swig and shoved the small flask back into his pocket, then stood and approached the cart that the Capital guard had delivered an hour earlier.

The orders were "Immediate Disposal and Collection," but what did it matter? She was dead. He'd checked the poor girl's pulse himself. Twice.

He approached the cart and scooped up the small body, then placed it on the conveyor.

Chuck blinked back tears, then turned to the control panel.

Behind him, a hand appeared as it dropped off the side of the conveyor and showed below the sheet.

He held down the safety button then mashed the big red button with his thumb, the same as he'd done thousands of times before.

The siren sounded three short bursts.

Chuck turned back to the body, and his eyes latched onto the small hand.

Tears flowed freely as the conveyor began moving.

He watched as the sheet made it's way closer to the glowing entrance to the incinerator.

He turned and began to walking back to his little office at the back of the room. He stopped and looked back.

The bump was now less than twenty feet from incinerator entrance. He knew from experience that the heat was already almost unbearable at that point.

He turned back to his office and reached for the doorknob, then froze.

The hand.

It was gone.

He turned and ran as fast as his body would allow. The heat was intense and burned hot against his skin when he reached the girl's body.

He ripped back the sheet and the girl's eyes shot open and looked directly at him.

Chuck screamed and lunged for her.

Scene 48

Before the plug was even loose, vomit was spewing out of Craig's mouth. Gagging sounds erupted from him and shot the vomit even further.

"Flip him over before he chokes," Randy croaked at Craig's Comms and Medic. They struggled to get Craig up on his side as the bile continued pouring from his mouth.

Az lay panting in his chair long after the plug had released. Jessie was sitting up, but holding her head in her hands. Alex was double checking her vitals as Ernst gently rubbed her back, continually asking if she was ok.

Randy leaned back over the terminal and continued pecking at the keys.

A few days out of the grid had given him a bit of strength back, though he was still unable to walk on his own. Some color had appeared on his skin and what was left of his hair had been shaved off.

Lyla left his side to check on Jessie. As soon as Lyla touched her Jessie jerked away keeping her eyes on the floor. Lyla stayed close but refrained from touching her again.

After a few minutes, Randy looked up from the terminal.

"That could have gone better," he said.

Az cursed at him now that he had regained his breathing.

Randy chuckled and pushed back from the terminal. He struggled to push at the wheelchair wheels and finally motioned for Lyla's help.

Lyla walked over and wheeled Randy into the middle of the room.

"What you just faced in there was my recreation of the opening act of my Threshing. It's tough, I know, but we have to get you ready for far more tougher challenges than you've faced so far. I've said since my time here at the Capital that Marcus goes far to soft on the Coders."

The Capital guards standing behind Randy stiffened at the mention of the President, but remained at their post.

"Me and the other two Americas Coders," Randy continued, "were completely unprepared for what we faced in the Threshing."

Az sat up in his chair.

"But you won didn't you," he said.

Randy nodded.

"I did. But that had nothing to do with Marcus's training."

Jessie remained still, holding her head, her eyes on the floor.

"Why the spinning?" she asked.

Randy shrugged.

"Ask the Reapers. They're pretty good at coming up with new and sadistic ways to test the Coders."

Randy locked his eyes on Az.

"You move to quick Az. You're smart and you're fast, but you have to calm down, especially in the beginning. The Eurorussians are pushers. They're brutes. They will hunt you down and attack at full speed. If you try to meet that head-to-head you'll lose every time. They are trained under relentless pressure and the drugs their Medics have access to are able to push them further than anything we have. They are stronger and faster than you'll ever be. It's just a fact."

Randy pushed on the wheels himself to get a bit closer to Az. Az, despite himself, shrunk back under his approach.

"But they'll give out fast. Their plan is always a direct attack. They'll try to overwhelm you out of the gates, but if you can duck and give ground and stay calm, they'll wear out. Even the best drugs the Medics can pump into them can't keep them going at full speed forever."

Randy motioned towards Jessie with his head, and Lyla wheeled him in front of her.

"And Jessie, you're smart. And clever. But the Asians are more clever. They're usually the last ones standing because no one sees them coming. You're getting far too focused on the task at hand. That's when they like to slip the knife in your back. While you work, you have to stay aware. It's better to go slower and keep an eye out behind you than move fast but never get a chance to finish."

Lyla pulled him back to the middle of the room.

"What about me?" Craig asked.

Randy ignored him.

"What I just showed you was just the first act of the Threshing and none of you would have made it through.

"How many acts are there?" Az asked

"Usually three," said Randy.

"Usually?" Jessie asked.

"My Threshing didn't make it out of act two."

"You killed all the other Coders by act two?" Craig asked incredulously.

"The Reapers replicated one of the bombed out cities from the Fall as a setting. Too many places to hide but too many angles to defend. Both the Eurorussians and Asians were down a Coder so they ganged up against us. I still had the other two Americas Coders with me at the start of the second act. The Eurorussians had us pinned down in a basement way on the outskirts of the city. A basement we thought had no other entrances."

"Holding up in a basement with no exits seems like a bad way to protect yourself. Why'd you let yourself get cornered like that?" Az asked.

Randy smiled at him.

"So I could win the Threshing."

"And how'd you do that?"

Randy chuckled then motioned for Lyla to wheel him back to the terminal.

"You're not ready for that yet. Get through at least one of my sims and then maybe we can talk about it. Go get cleaned up."

Scene 49

Jessie continued sitting on her table after the others had left. Randy pushed back from his terminal and motioned with his hands for Jessie to come over to him.

She hopped down off the table but waited, cutting her eyes at Lyla.

Randy let out a long sigh then asked Lyla to wait for him outside, then he turned to the two guards by the door.

"Can you give us a minute?" he asked.

One of the guards walked to the Terminal, tapped a few keys to lock it down, then turned and left the room with the other guard.

After Lyla and the guards left Jessie ran across the room to her brother. She took his hand and knelt down in front of him.

"You have to start trusting her," Randy said. "This isn't going to work otherwise."

Jessie looked away from him.

"She was doing what was best for you Jessie. What I asked her to do. She kept you safe didn't she? She risked her own life for you that night."

"But she didn't tell me you were alive! She just pushed me to do my chores and made me suffer in the heat and let me hurt pour Sixty-one. If she had told me you were alive..."

"She couldn't do that. If Marcus had found out I was communicating with anyone it would have ruined everything."

Jessie stuck her lip out defiantly but stopped arguing. She rubbed the top of Randy's hand lightly.

"Why did he do this to you?" Jessie asked.

"He's just scared Jessie."

"Of what?"

"Everything. He's scared we'll lose the Threshing. He's scared I wanted to take over the Faction--"

"Did you?"

"Of course not," he said. "I just wanted to win the Threshing so I could go back home with you. I had no idea what he was going to do to me."

Jessie fell quiet, deep in thought. Randy reached up and ran his fingers through her short hair.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid of what will happen at the Threshing. What will happen to us if we win. If Marcus didn't let you go home, why would he let me?"

"I won't let that happen," Randy said.

"But how? How can you stop him?"

"I can't. But *we* can. This is why you have to trust her. I can barely function. She's here to help us. There's no way we can do this without Lyla."

"Do what?"

Randy cut his eyes at the door then leaned down to Jessie and whispered in her ear.

"We're going to lose the next Threshing Jessie. It's our only way out."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Final Act

Scene W

STATUS

Marcus: Dead, killed by Lyla.

Az: Dead, sacrificed himself so Jessie could win the Threshing.

SETTING:

Randy has locked himself in a bay with Jessie who is plugged into the Threshing. It's just Jessie and Craig cornered in a cave. Az sacrificed himself to give them time to seal the exit.

Jessie stood staring at the caved in ceiling. She could still hear Az's screams in her head. Craig sat behind her, his back against the stone. He was slobbering and muttering as he cried.

"What now, what now, what now," he repeated.

*Where are you Jessie,* Randy said. *What happened.*

*Az,* she said, *he, um, detonated it by hand. We're, Craig and I, we're trapped in here.*

*That's good. We don't need to get you out, you're exactly where you need to be.*

*Good? But Az?*

*You have to forget about him for now. We can mourn later, but it's time Jessie. It's time to end this once and for all.*

*But how?*

*By winning the Threshing.*

*But you said we were going to lose. That that was the only way to take Marcus down.*

*Marcus isn't a problem anymore.*

*What do you mean?*

*Lyla took care of him. It's done. I'm going to take over as Faction president and you'll win the Threshing and we'll be done. We'll have everything.*

*President? What do you mean? I thought we were going home?*

*We can't Jessie, there's bigger things at play here.*

*What about Mom and Dad?*

Randy didn't answer.

*Randy?*

*You mean the people that shipped their children off to be tortured and killed? Those people? Those are who you want?*

*I just want...*

*Stop acting like a little girl with broken toys! We will win. You and I will be together. I'll be President. We'll have everything you could possibly want. Now, are you going to do what I say or are you going to keep arguing?*

Jessie looked at Craig, who continued crying into his hands. She looked around the dark cave, trying to make out what was around her.

*Yes Randy, what do I do now?*

There was a long pause.

*Randy?*

*I know, hang on.*

Jessie stood, waiting for several minutes. She fought to ignore Craig's crying. She pushed the sounds of Az's screams out of her thoughts. She tried not to think what the other Coders were already working on to get through to her.

*Jessie, you and I both can go places in the grid that others can't go. There's a reason you're here. There's a reason you keep winning against all odds. It's because you move in the grid and understand it in a way that no one else can. You already know this is true.*

Jessie's mind was already back in the town. To Balaam and the other Rats. How she could always do the errands no one else could. And the Severings. She kept getting through. Even when she died.

She shook her head. She didn't like thinking about that one.

*The reason,* Randy said*, I had you come to the edge of the Threshing is because there are backdoors in the code at the edges. This allows the Reapers constant access to what's going on inside, but it also leaves a vulnerability.*

*Wouldn't they put security around it?*

*Oh they do. But you can walk right through the security. It's a bit painful, but once you're through, you have access to the grid in a whole new way.*

*This is how you won the last Threshing?*

*It is.*

*So you didn't defeat the other Coders?*

*That's right. I just shut the whole thing down, which scrambled everyone in the system and left me as the last man standing.*

*Even your teammates?*

*Jessie, there are always casualties in a war.*

She paused, waiting for him to continue, but he remained quiet too. Jessie glanced up at Craig who was now looking around nervously through the cave.

*What about Alex and Ernst?*

*They're here with me, safe. Just follow my instructions and we'll be fine.*

*Ok. Where do I start?*

Scene X

Randy typed furiously delivering the instructions to Jessie. He continued ignoring the banging and screaming from the bay door.

"Can you get them to shut up?" he growled.

Lyla looked through the glass at Alex and Ernst and shrugged.

"Not much I can do," she said.

After several minutes Randy pushed back from the terminal and slowly wheeled around to Jessie's monitors. He tapped on the screen a few times then began opening and rummaging through the medical drawers.

He extracted a small vial, unwrapped a syringe and pulled the contents in. He shook the syringe up then added it to the IV tube leading to Jessie's arm.

"What are you doing?" Lyla asked.

"Is it done?" Randy said.

Lyla cut her eyes at Alex and Ernst before answering.

"Yes," she said.

A smile stretched across Randy's face, pulling the already taught skin tighter against his skull.

"What's done?" Alex asked.

"Well don't hide it from the boys," Randy said. "They'll find out soon enough."

"What?" Ernst said, looking between Lyla and Randy.

"President Marcus has come to an unfortunate end."

The boy's eyes went wide and Lyla smiled at Randy.

"You're looking at the new Faction President," he said, opening up his hands wide.

"What?" Alex said, "You can't just name yourself President. You have to..."

"The hell I can't!" Randy said. "There's a power vacuum and it will be replaced by the one who can take care of things. And since I'm about to lead us to a second win of the Threshing, I am the one that will take over."

"That doesn't make any sense," Alex said. "There's no way he would have let you get close to him."

"Do you think everyone just bows down and kisses Marcus's feet?" Randy yelled. "He is an incompetent old fool that has no business running things. He took the one person that helped him solidify his power and locked me up for four years while he continued running the Faction into the ground. And I'm not the only one that's seen it. His guards have seen it. The town mayors have seen it. They saw us win the Threshing and then their lives stayed exactly the same. Everybody knew Marcus was a disaster but no one had the guts to stand against him. And here's the thing. I would have *helped* him. But he was too scared of me. Too scared of what I was capable of. And his fear led to his downfall."

"So things will be different now. The Americas Faction will grow its power and its reach further than ever before. We're not just going to win this Threshing, we're going to destroy the other Factions. Our towns will prosper beyond anything we've seen since the Fall. I won't hoard everything for myself like Marcus did, I'll give it to the people. And they will mine more than ever giving us everything we need to secure our power."

Randy was breathing hard raspy breaths as he finished, his body shaking under the strain.

He pushed at the wheels turning himself back towards the Medic bay.

He rifled through the cabinet, knocking vials over.

He growled something intelligible.

"What?" Lyla said.

"There's no sedatives here. Nothing to put her to sleep."

"Of course not. There's no use for it in the Threshing."

"I need something then," he said.

"For what?" Lyla said.

Randy ignored her and sat thinking for a moment, then reached into the bottom of the cabinet. He pulled out two small vials, then put the contents into a new syringe.

"Take that," he said, thrusting it at Lyla. He turned the wheelchair back towards the terminal.

"What is that?"

"Adrenaline."

Lyla looked at the vials, then back to Randy.

"That's two full doses," she said. "That will put her in cardiac arrest."

Randy kept struggling at the wheels then finally stopped and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Why are you just standing there? Push me back over to the terminal."

Lyla grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and started pushing him back over to the terminal.

"What is this for?" she asked.

He didn't answer at first. He pecked a few commands into the terminal, then he stopped.

"Insurance," he whispered.

Scene Y

"What is that?" Craig asked.

"Stay back," Jessie said. "I'll need your help in a little bit, but for now, stay where you are."

Jessie had used her flashlight to pick her way back through the cave. Craig had hurried to follow so he wasn't left alone in the dark.

After they had walked for a few minutes, they came to a dead end. A sheer wall of rock stood in front of them, but it seemed out of place. It was too sudden, too steep, too flat. All around them the cave was ragged and jutted. But here it just stopped.

Jessie had knelt down and started emptying her pack onto the ground.

Craig took a couple steps back.

"But what is it?"

"It's the end."

"Of what?"

"The Threshing sim. We've made it to the edge of the code."

"How does that help us?"

Jessie ignored him, stood straight and faced the wall.

*What now?* she said.

*There will be a soft spot. A place where you can push through. The Threshing is too big for the Reapers to manage every piece of it and make is secure, so they just try to put a fence around it. But you can get through the fence without being hurt.*

She reached out her hand and pressed on the rock. She pressed harder but nothing happened.

She stepped to her left sliding her hand slowly up and down as she moved.

"What are you--" Craig started.

"Shut up," Jessie barked at him.

She closed her eyes and continued moving her hand, pressing hard against the stone.

Suddenly her hand dipped through the rock and disappeared up to her wrist. A loud crackling sound came from the spot. Jessie's body went rigid and she jerked back from the wall and sprawled on the ground. Craig ran over to her, but as he knelt down her eyes were already back open and she was struggling to sit up.

"I'm ok, I'm ok," she said.

She motioned to her bag.

"Can you bring me my stuff?"

Craig hurried over and carefully picked up the wires and tools she had laid out and brought them and the bag to her.

Jessie carefully got to her knees and shook her head.

"Jessie," Craig started hesitantly.

She looked up at him annoyed.

"What?"

"Your nose," he said, "it's bleeding."

She quickly wiped the back of her hand under her nose and a long smear of bright red blood came away. She wiped it on her pants, then pulled up her shirt to wipe the rest of the blood away then stood and walked over to Craig. She grabbed a couple of the tools, reached in the bag to pull out the small portable terminal and walked back to the spot on the wall where her hand had slipped through.

She opened up the telescoping metal piece and started feeding it into the wall. Once it reached its full length, she set it down and took the wire running from the end of it and plugged it into the back of her terminal.

*Ok, I'm ready*, she said.

As Randy gave her instructions, she fed them into the terminal. Her fingers flew over the keys for several minutes before she stopped and looked up.

The wall in front of her was still there, but there was a thinness to it. Something had changed.

She stood and took a step towards it.

"Jessie?" Craig said, he was breathing hard.

"Where have you been?"

"I was just checking on the entrance and--"

A muffled boom echoed through the cave.

"They're working on something. They're trying to get through to us."

"How long do you think we have?"

He shook his head.

Jessie started shoving all of the equipment back into her bag.

"With their firepower, not long. Five minutes? Ten, tops."

"Ok, you stay here and warn me when you hear them getting close."

Jessie slung her bag over her shoulder and stepped up to the wall.

"Warn you? Where are you going?"

With a deep breath, she stepped through.

Scene Z

As soon as Jessie pushed through the wall she found herself standing along a narrow metal pathway. The walls of the pathway were crowded with thousands of different color wires. She looked up and the ceiling was covered the same way.

This place seemed so familiar, yet she was sure she'd never been anywhere like it before.

She described this to Randy.

*You're in a part of the grid that doesn't have visual gui,* he said. *Your mind is coding this up on the fly which is why it feels so familiar.*

*So how do I find where I'm supposed to work?*

*That's what's amazing about this. Anybody else but you would have died trying to get in here. You're now acting as a system admin. There's no security. Every spot is the right spot. As soon as you hook in and start running commands, the grid will do what you need it to do.*

Jessie quickly pulled off her bag and dropped to her knees. She rummaged through and pulled out two wire tappers. She clamped them on two random wires running across the wall and plugged them into the back of her terminal.

She immediately began typing in commands.

*You need to setup and get to work,* Randy said. *The Reapers will start attacking if they realize where you are.*

*Ok, give me a couple minutes to get hooked in.*

*It shouldn't take that long.*

Jessie's fingers continued flying over the keys.

*Well I've never done this before. I'm moving as fast as I can.*

*Fine, just let me know when you're hooked in. It will take a good twenty minutes to upload the virus.*

Jessie continued working furiously.

After a couple minutes, Randy spoke.

*Jessie, come on. It's a simple tap into their system. That should be done by now.*

Jessie didn't answer.

*Jessie?*

*I hath found my path of entry,* a voice said.

*Who is that?* Randy said. *What is going on?*

*Ignore him,* Jessie said. *I've almost got you full access. Hang on a sec.*

*Jessie, what is going on? What are you doing?*

She answered as she kept working.

*What are you going to do once we win the Threshing and you're in charge of the Faction?*

*What do you mean? What is that guy doing?*

*What are you going to do? How are you going to make the towns better? What are you going to do with the credits and supplies we get from the winnings? You said you would do everything better, but what does that mean?*

*I'll-- first, I'll have to solidify my -- our power. Then we'll begin work for the next Threshing to make sure our power isn't taken. Then--*

*Which is exactly what Marcus has done for the past eight years! You'll be no different. The towns will still suffer. The people will still be hooked into the grid. The Numbered will still be slaves. How will it be better for them?*

*It will be better for* us*!*

Jessie paused. Her fingers were still over the keyboard. She stared off into the distance.

*Remember that day in the woods five years ago?*

*What?*

*I barely do, but it's become clearer in the last few hours. I remember you running and carrying me. I loved it. I felt safe and warm in your arms. I liked being held by you. It felt good to be outside. But then I saw your face. The terror. The tears. And I got scared and said your name. You screamed and stumbled and fell, almost dropping me. It's always been this weird memory that I couldn't quite understand. But I get it now.*

*What are you talking about?* Randy asked.

*Do you remember what we were doing before that? That was the piece that was always weird to me. We were playing your games in the grid. The ones where you would give me puzzles to solve. I remember something happening and getting zapped and the next thing I knew I was in your arms in the woods.*

*Jessie stop. You're remembering this wrong.*

*Why is it,* Jessie said*, that the one request you had before getting released from the grid was that I be cremated?*

*Because I wanted mom and dad--*

*Stop it!* Jessie said. *Stop lying! You don't care about them. You even said you weren't going to bring them to the Capital once we won the Threshing. Why would you worry about making sure they knew I was dead? That doesn't make any sense.*

*Jessie...*

Tears began to roll down her cheek and drip onto the terminal. She wiped them away with her sleeve, transferring some of the blood back onto her face.

*And why would you send my body to be cremated when you knew I could come back?*

*That's not what happened! I can explain!*

*Ok Balaam,* Jessie said, *your direct link should be live. You see it?*

There was a brief pause before he answered.

*I seeth it.*

*Get it uploaded,* she said.

Scene AA

*Hurry Balaam,* Jessie said.

*Thou must haveth patience,* Balaam replied.

Jessie let out a sigh. She had stopped replying to Randy's ravings in her head and he had quieted down. She checked the clock on her terminal. She'd been here almost ten minutes. Balaam had access for almost five.

The corridor shook as another boom filtered through from the cave.

The other Coders had to be getting close.

Jessie turned back to the terminal and chewed on her lip as she continued watching the blinking cursor.

 Something fell behind her onto the pathway. She felt it shake underneath her. She turned quickly to see Craig writhing on the floor, banging into the railings.

"Craig! You can't be in here! Get out!" she yelled, but he struggled to his knees and grabbed the railing and started pulling himself up.

Blood was already draining freely from his nose, and his face was burning a bright red.

She jumped to her feet and ran to him.

As soon as she was close, he let go of the railing and lunged at her. She screamed and fell back. Her head slammed into the metal rail as she fell back. Her vision darkened and she was barely aware of Craig's body falling in a heap on top of her.

She blinked hurriedly, trying to come back to her senses.

Craig, blood covering his mouth and running down the front of his shirt, was straddling her. He pulled back his fist. Jessie raised her hands to block him and tried to sit up to stop him, but it was no use.

His fist connected with her cheek bone with a crunch that slammed her head back into the floor.

She groaned as Craig crawled overtop of her.

Jessie rolled to her side and craned her neck to watch Craig.

He was heading straight for the portable terminal.

"No," she croaked in barely whisper, but it didn't matter. Craig kept moving.

But he was slowing down.

When he looked back at her, blood was now coming out of his ears as well.

Jessie struggled to her hands and knees, then pushed herself up to her feet. She swayed and her knees threatened to buckle underneath her, but she put a hand on the railing to steady herself.

She took steps towards Craig, and opened her mouth to yell at him, but he collapsed to the floor, still several feet from the terminal.

Jessie stumbled over to him and dropped down next to him, rolling him onto his back.

His eyes stared up at the ceiling. He clutched at his chest, fighting to breath.

"Why did you come in here? You knew..."

"You were going to kill me," he said.

"Kill you?"

"End the threshing," he said, struggling through each word. "Randy said you were going to--" Craig let out a hacking cough that sprayed a fine mist of blood into the air. "-- scramble all of us. Just to win."

"Craig I would never..." but she stopped. He couldn't hear her anymore. He couldn't hear anything anymore.

*The file hast been deliver'd.*

Jessie sat in silence. Her hand on Craig's chest. Tears rolling down her face.

*Jessie.*

It was Randy's voice again.

*Jessie, I know you can hear me.*

*You killed him.*

*I'm so sorry for what happened to Craig, but you have to understand. I can't let you continue. I have to stop you from destroying what I've worked for. What is best for the faction. What is best for* us.

Jessie wiped the tears from her eyes and slowly crawled over to the terminal. She sat down cross-legged and leaned back agains the railing. The cool metal felt good against her head.

She reached out to the terminal and pulled it into her lap.

She began slowly tapping the keys.

*Craig got scared and made a stupid decision,* he said.

*He was doing what you told him to.*

*I had to stop you from destroying everything. Jessie, you don't know what will happen if you destroy the grid. You're too young to understand. It will be chaos. People have lived with the grid their entire lives, you can't just set them loose.*

*So I should just let people like Marcus and you keep them trapped?*

*I will be different. I will take care of you. I will work for the towns.*

*Why did you try to kill me?*

*What are you talking about?*

*With the incinerator. You tried to have me burned up.*

*But you were--. I mean, everyone thought you were dead.*

Jessie shook her head.

*You knew. You knew I'd come back.*

There was a long pause, and then Randy's voice was back in her head.

*Jessie, we've been over this. I didn't know--.*

*Stop it! Stop lying! I know what you did!*

*Fine. Yes, I thought you might come back. But I was scared Jessie. I had been locked up for four years. Four years! I was afraid that Marcus would put me back in.*

*But you tried to kill me!*

*I didn't know for sure you would come back. I just wanted things to end so I could... so Marcus wouldn't be in charge any more. And we're so close Jessie. Marcus is gone. I'm in charge here now. All you have to do is help me win the Threshing and it will be over. You can come back. We can be in charge together. We'll have everything you and I dreamed about back home.*

Jessie started to answer, but didn't know what to say.

*I know you don't trust me. I know you're scared of me. And I'm so sorry for that. But I promise I will make it up to you. And what choice do you have? If you stay where you are, the other Coders will eventually find you and beat you. If you help me, I can get you out and we can be together and start over again. Finally have a chance to be a family again.*

Jessie waited, thinking.

Another loud boom came from the cave. This time everything shook around Jessie.

They were getting close.

*Jessie! Can you here me? Jessie! It's Ernst! I think I'm through...*

*Yes. I'm hear.* Jessie replied. *Where are you? Aren't you with Randy?*

*No! He locked Alex and me out of the bay.*

*Jessie,* Randy said, *do not listen to him. He can't do anything for you. Only I--.*

*That's not true!* Ernst said, *I have access to a terminal. I'm ready to run.*

*Listen to me,* Randy said. *I can't let you or anyone else get in my way. I've come too far. I've suffered to much too stop now. I'm here, with your body, and everything I need to stop you and end this.*

*But then you'll lose the Threshing,* Jessie said.

*True, but I'll retain control of the Faction and there will be another Threshing in four years. I'll win that one. You have a simple choice Jessie. Help me win the Threshing, serve the Faction alongside me, and I'll let your friends go back home to their towns with the full support of the Capital for them and their families. Or, the entire Faction suffers the loss of the Threshing, your friends die, and... Jessie, you'll die too. This time for real.*

Jessie sat quietly. She wiped her hand off on her pants, then reached up and touched the wound on her head again.

There was another loud bang from the cave. She heard rocks scattering.

Voices floated into the passageway. The other Coders had broken through.

*Ernst?*

*I'm here Jessie.*

*And Alex?*

*He's with me too.*

*I have Balaam's file. I'm running the pre-checks now. Once it starts to go, it will happen fast. The Reaper's will go first, but I need you to keep the pathways open to the towns.*

*I'm ready,* Ernst said.

Jessie began typing, but suddenly her fingers started missing keys. She realized she was breathing heavily and her heart was beating fast. She tried to focus on the screen but her vision was starting to blur.

*Randy,* she said, *what did you do?*

There was a long pause.

*I'm so sorry Jessie. You didn't give me a choice.*

Scene BB

Jessie's eyes slid closed and she started to slump forward. She caught herself and forced her body back upright and opened her eyes, looking around wildly.

*What do I do?* she yelled out.

*What happened?* Ernst said.

*He stuck me with something. My heart is racing. My vision is going. I can't...*

Jessie fell to her side on the metal pathway. Her eyes stared through the gridded metal down to the wires below.

*I can barely move,* she said.

*Thee must log out*, Balaam said.

*I can't!* she said, *I'm in the Threshing. They have me locked--*

*And be not conformed to this world,* he said, *but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Jessie's heart was racing. Her arms and legs felt like lead weights. She was pretty sure her eyes were open, but the blood pulsing wildly through her body was pushing her vision to darkness.

*Thee are not the grid,* he said.

Jessie closed her eyes and took in as deep of a breath as she could.

She focused hard on her mind.

"You are the system admin," her brother had said.

She was creating this world. Her mind was coding it on the fly.

Which means...

Jessie's eyes popped open.

She was staring up into harsh fluorescent lights. She turned her head slightly and felt the pull of the plug in the back of her head. She squinted her blurred vision towards the terminal. Lyla was sitting there, typing furiously.

"Nothing's happened yet" she yelled, "You must have stopped her in time.

She heard a voice very close to her curse.

She rolled her head back and looked towards her feet.

Randy stood there, leaning heavily against the table, his head turned to Lyla.

"Send the guards to find them both. I want them eliminated immediately," he yelled.

He turned his head back to Jessie and their eyes met. Shock spread across his face and he almost fell back, a squawk coming from his throat. Something caught Jessie's eye and she struggled to focus on what it was. It was to close to her face and her eyes couldn't focused.

Then realization flooded over her.

The syringe Randy had used to flood her system with adrenaline was still sticking out of her chest.

She reached up both hands and grabbed it, but Randy lunged forward and threw his bony hands on top of hers, trying to keep it in.

Jessie brought up her knee hard and connected with his shoulder, throwing him off balance. He fell half onto Jessie and half onto the table.

Jessie wrenched the needle out of her chest, and without thinking, plunged it into the back of Randy's neck.

He let out a high pitched scream and slid off the table collapsing onto the floor.

Jessie's heart was still beating wildly in her chest and her breathing was coming in gasps. She reached up behind her head and felt around for the plug.

Lyla had jumped from her chair and run to Randy, who was collapsed on the floor, not bothering to check on Jessie.

Finally, she got ahold of the plug and yanked it free.

She sat up quickly, then immediately fell back as her head swam. She rolled to her side and looked down just as Lyla looked up at her. Lyla's mouth dropped open, but before she could react, Jessie threw herself off the table and onto Lyla and Randy.

They fell to the ground, a mess of struggling limbs and bodies.

Jessie tried to take swings at Lyla, but her limbs were heavy again and her vision was fading.

Finally Lyla threw Jessie off to the floor and she jumped to her feet. Randy groaned behind her, and she knelt back down next to him. She had removed the syringe, but he was in a bad state. She lifted Randy up gently by the arms, then dragged him back into his wheel chair.

He slumped over to his right, his arm pit catching on the arm rest, but he remained upright.

He turned his head and stared down at Jessie, who was now breathing quickly on the floor. She stared up at him her hands clutched to her chest as if she were trying to keep her heart from escaping her body.

"End her," he croaked to Lyla, never breaking eye contact.

Lyla stepped towards Jessie and knelt down. She pulled another syringe from her pocket and popped off the cap.

"I'm so sorry honey," she said.

Jessie opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Lyla put one hand on Jessie's chest, holding her down. As she moved the needle to her, there was a beep behind her.

Lyla's head snapped around. The light above the door had turned green. The door slid open and Alex was standing on the other side.

There was a half second that seemed to span for several minutes as they all took in what was happening.

Lyla moved first.

She turned back to Jessie and jammed the syringe into her chest. But before she could push the plunger down, Alex's body slammed into her. They fell to the floor hard, but Alex was immediately back on his feet. He kicked Lyla hard in the ribs. Several bones cracked audibly and she let out a heavy scream.

He turned back to Jessie and slid to his knees beside her. He took quick stock before pulling the syringe out of her chest.

He picked up her head and looked down into her eyes.

"You still with me?" he said.

She nodded.

"What did he do to you?"

Jessie opened her mouth and struggled to push the word out.

"Adrenaline," she whispered.

Alex cursed, then he turned around at a sound behind them. Lyla had gotten back on her feet and was pushing Randy's wheelchair quickly towards the door.

He jumped to his feet to follow, but Jessie grabbed at his pants leg. He looked down at her.

She shook her head.

"I need..." she whispered.

He understood.

He looked back one more time at Lyla and Randy as they escaped out of the open door and then he dove at the Medic cabinet. He quickly rifled through, found what he need, filled an empty syringe and was back at Jessie side within a minute.

"This isn't going to be fun," he said.

She manage a half smile and a quick shrug of the shoulder, and he put slid the needle into her chest and pressed the plunger all the way down.

Her chest immediately seized up, and the heaviness through her whole body gave way to constricted pain.

She moaned and squirmed on the floor, her eyes closed tight against the burning. Alex kept a hand under her head, and tried to keep her from moving too much.

After a minute, the pain began to abate.

She opened her eyes and lifted a hand, pointing at the terminal.

"What?" he said.

"I need..." she whispered, took a deep breath. "One more..."

Alex nodded and knelt down beside here. He slid one arm under her shoulders and one under her legs and gently lifted her off the ground.

He walked slowly over to the terminal and placed her in the chair, still lightly holding her shoulders so she wouldn't slump over.

Jessie reached out her hands to the terminal.

She slowly tapped at the keys before pressing return one more time.

There was a long pause as the cursor blinked back at her.

She watched, waiting.

Suddenly code started spitting out on the screen faster than she could keep up with. It was sliding down quickly.

She struggled to watch it, but once she as satisfied everything was running correctly, she leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and finally let consciousness slip from her grasp.

Scene CC

The first thing she heard was the metallic voices coming from comms units. There was frantic talking and shouting happening around her. People being sent here and there. Reports coming in.

She slowly opened one eye to take in the room, as soon as her vision cleared she tensed up, fear flooding her body.

She was in the same bay as before, back on the table, but it was now packed with Capital guards. There were several standing around her table, backs to her, weapons at the ready.

She turned her head slightly to take in more of the room.

Ernst was sitting at the terminal, hunched in close watching the screen. Alex was standing behind him giving orders to one of the guards, who immediately left the room and ran down the hall.

What was going on?

How was Alex giving orders? Why weren't him and Ernst in restraints, or worse?

Why were the guards protecting her instead of...?

Alex turned towards her and she quickly shut her eyes and laid very still. A few seconds later, she felt hands on her wrist checking her pulse. Then there was a hand on her forehead. It rested there for a few seconds then disappeared.

"Jessie."

Alex whispered near her ear.

"Jessie, if you can hear me, I need you to wake up. Just show us you're ok."

She slowly opened her eyes and turned to look at Alex. He smiled down at her. A grin played at the edges of Jessie's lips before her eyes darted again to the guards.

"It's ok," he said, "it really is."

"Randy?" she asked.

"He's gone. We're not sure where, but Lyla was able to steal one of the transports in the chaos."

She nodded, and started to close her eyes again.

"No, no," Alex said, putting a hand on her arm. "stay with me."

She forced her eyes back open.

"Your body has been through a good bit, but I think you're going to be ok. Think you can sit up?"

She nodded and Alex gently put his hands under her back and lifted her up.

Everyone in the room had stopped moving. Some of the comms continued squawking but they were ignored.

The guards all stood at attention. Ernst and swiveled his chair around and was smiling in her direction, though worry was betrayed around his eyes.

"What's happening?" Jessie asked.

Ernst swallowed hard.

"It's hard to tell right now. I'm able to pick up some reports, but very little. We do know that virus you ran did exactly what it was designed to do. It shut down and corrupted the entire grid. All of the towns are offline. The Reapers are offline. We're assuming it's the same for the Eurorussian and Asian factions as well. The few reports we're getting is via radio signals, mostly from the Numbered in the towns."

"And?" Jessie said.

Ernst cut his eyes at Alex.

"What?" she said.

Alex put his hand on her shoulder and she looked up at him.

"It's not good. Everyone connected to the grid were logged out all at once."

Jessie's mind flickered back to the bedroom and the old lady she had woken up. Was that happening to everyone? What about the people that weren't logged in, but can't get in now? And credits? Where are those going to come from? Do they even exist any more?

Jessie's head overloaded on the questions and she started to slump backwards.

"Woah, woah," Alex said, catching her. "It's ok. We'll get it figured out."

Jessie sat for a couple minutes, staring at the floor. A bit of movement started in the room again as guards answered the comms and Ernst's eyes flickered back to the terminal.

She felt like she was going to be sick.

She slid forward off the table to her feet. She swayed a bit, but Alex steadied her again. The guards around her had gone rigid again, at full attention.

"What are we going to do?" she asked Alex.

He looked hard at her.

"That's... Jessie, that's up to you," he said.

She looked at Alex, and then to the guard standing closest to her.

He turned towards her in a clipped manner.

"Is there something you need Madam?"

"Madam?" she asked.

The guard's eyes cut to Alex, then back to Jessie.

"Yes, Madam President."

Scene DD

Dust flew and swirled in the darkness as the transport hovered and slowly descended to the ground. Jessie peered through the window. She could make out the roofs of the buildings against the darkness but that was it.

"Still no electricity?"

Ernst shook his head.

"It's coming intermittently," he said, "but still pretty unreliable in the towns."

Jessie stayed quiet as she looked out into the darkness.

She stood as the transport touched down.

Her hair was pulled back into a very short ponytail and the black suit she was wearing had been custom made to fit tight and crisp against her small frame.

The door to the transport lowered into a ramp as the engines of the transport died down. When she stepped out, she was immediately greeted by a dozen people, all with shaved heads. She scanned the mostly familiar faces. She nodded in particular to the older man of the group.

Alex, Ernst, and two Capital guards followed closely behind her as she descended the ramp.

The older man approached as she stepped onto the dirt.

"Anders, it's been a long time," she said.

"Yes madam. It has."

She walked to the center of the square and ran her hand along the stocks. She kicked at loose brick at its base.

"Can I get an update?" she said.

"Things have mostly calmed down," Anders said. "We created some makeshift cells and padded them up for those worse off. Mostly though, people are just lethargic. No energy. Depressed. But between the heat of the day and the electricity being out most nights, it keeps everyone indoors and docile."

"How may didn't make it?"

Anders hesitated and looked to Alex, who nodded at him.

"Eighteen."

"How?"

"Different ways," he said. "A few died immediately when they were logged off. A few more in crazy days after the grid went offline. The rest just... they laid down and never got back up."

Alex stepped forward.

"I'd like to get you indoors Madam," he said.

Jessie nodded and turned to follow the guards into the town hall. There were several more Numbered in here. There was a lot of controlled energy in the room. Salvaged chalk boards had lists and diagrams drawn on them. There were large stacks of boxes and crates along the walls, all labeled and numbered.

"What's the state of supplies?"

"We immediately put everyone on rations so it's lasting longer than other towns I think," Anders said. "But we have about three weeks left before a crisis really hits."

He hesitated then asked.

"Still no word from the Reapers?"

Jessie shook her head.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing since... everything went offline."

Anders nodded.

"So no word on any supply runs?"

Jessie shook her head.

Anders rubbed the stubble along his head, a worried look on his face.

"Permission to tell you my worries?"

"Of course."

"We have no supplies from the Reapers. We're struggling to get power to the towns without the grid. I'm assuming all of the other towns are in the same shape. Water is fine since we've always supplied that ourselves, but things are going to get rough pretty quick."

Silence hung between them.

"What are we going to do madam," Anders finally said.

Jessie stared across the room, her eyes focusing on nothing.

"I have no idea," she said.

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