Scene 1

Jessie stopped and swung her lantern behind her. She peered into the dark trying to see beyond the circle of yellow light. She waited, listening.

A voice came over the large, pink ear phones on her head. One side completely covered her ear with the cushioned speaker. The other side was pushed back off her ear so she could hear her surroundings. The wire from the headphones ran down into her backpack.

“Why’d you stop moving?”

“I thought I heard something.”

“It’s probably them. You know, I hear they kids when they can’t scavenge enough food.”

“Shut up Mark.”

“I’m serious! My cousin’s friend got caught down there once and they never saw him again. The only thing they ever found was one of the bones from his arm. It had teeth marks on it.”

Jessie shook her head in the dark and kept walking down the tunnel. Every step she would reach her legs just beyond her normal gate so she could place her feet on each of the boards. She was careful to stay off the rails.

Another voice crackled through the radio.

“You know that story is bull, right Mark?”

“No way Libby, Bobby told me all about it,” Mark said.

“Then how’d they know it was his?” Libby said.

“His what?”

“His arm. If all they found was a bone, how’d they know whose it was?”

There was a long silence.

“Oh,” Mark said. “Well it’s true that they live down there.”

“Whatever,” Libby replied.

Jessie smiled as she continued walking down the path.

She was short, even for her twelve years of age, which was one of the reasons she seemed to get sent out on scavenges more than any of the other Rats. Her long dark hair was pulled back into a messy bun. She had a heavy backpack slung over one shoulder and she swung the lantern a bit as she stretched for each step.

“You’re just about there,” Mark said. “You see the ladder yet?”

Jessie walked a few more yards before she saw it. The metal rails ran up the wall and into a small hole that was punched into the rock overhead.

“Yeah, it’s here.”

“Great, up you go.”

Jessie nodded and set down the lamp at the base of the ladder. She pulled off her bag and unzipped the main pouch. She rummaged through making sure all the equipment was in the right place. She slowly zipped the bag back up and then stood and looked above her, peering into the black hole that the ladder ran into.

“Are you moving yet?” Mark said.

“I’m working on it,” Jessie replied.

“Well get moving. We’ll be out of daylight if you don’t hurry.”

Jessie put the backpack on then knelt down beside the lantern. She took a deep breath, let it out slow, then clicked the switch.

Complete darkness closed in around her. With practiced movements she folded up the lantern and slid it into her pocket. Then she started climbing the ladder.

This was always the worst part. You never knew when it was doing to end. In the past she would count the ladder rungs, but that somehow made it drag on longer. Now, she only focused on the next rung. The next step. All that matters is climbing to the next one.

She slowed as she reached the top. She could always tell when she was getting close. The sounds bounced different at the top.

Jessie wrapped her arm around a rung of the ladder and reached up with her other hand feeling for the top. She reached as far as she could without touching anything so she carefully went up two more rungs, wrapped her arm again and felt out above her in the darkness.

Her fingers racked against top. The first thing she did was dig her fingers into the breast pocket of her shirt and pulled out a small clip which she shoved onto her nose. Next, she reached up and felt around on the cap until her hand closed on the latch. She pulled it down then pushed up on the cap.

It fell open with a loud clang and she carefully climbed out of the hole and onto the hard, cold tile floor.

She quickly pulled out her lantern and unfolded it. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the small flint. She lit the lantern in two tries. She turned up the flame and the yellow light filled the hallway she had emerged into.

People were lined up on both sides of the hallway sitting shoulder to shoulder on whatever scavenged chairs they could get their hands on. They stared straight ahead with open, empty eyes. The thick cords ran up from the base of the skulls from each of them to the ceiling and connected to the larger, main conduits running along the ceilings. Tubes ran from inside each of the peoples pants, out the bottom, and along the floors to troughs cut into the floors along the walls.

Even with the clip on her nose she had to fight against gagging on the stench.

“Let’s get moving,” Mark said. “You have a lot stairs to climb.”

Jessie nodded to herself then stood and began walking down the hall. She kept her eyes forward and off the gaunt faces and bodies that she passed as she walked.

“Ok, take your second right. You’ll pass the elevators and the stairs will be just past them on the left.”

Jessie passed the elevators that had long since been welded shut and threw her shoulder against the horizontal metal bar pushing the door open. She stepped through and stared up the stairs. After a few seconds, she took a deep breath, cinched the straps on her pack tight around her shoulders then began jogging up the stairs.

Several minutes passed. Jessie’s breath was starting to come in shallower gasps.

“You need to slow it down,” Mark said. “You’ve got a ways to go still.”

Jessie stopped and put her hands on her knees, taking deep breaths. She glanced up at the “33” sign above the door. It was directly below the same framed picture of the same large, bald headed man that was plastered across the entire city.

“You’re the one that said I needed to hurry.”

“Yeah, but you have another fifty floors to go. Pace yourself.”

“How long until log off?”

“Less than two hours.”

Jessie closed her eyes, took a deep breath in, held it for a couple seconds, and slowly exhaled. Then she started up the stairs at a jog again.

The floors went by at a steady pace. She focused on each step, keeping the rhythm. Once again, it wasn’t about making it to the top, it was just about taking the next step.

“Where are you now?”

Jessie slowed to a walk, working to control her breath.

“Just coming up on eighty-five.”

Jessie slowly took the last few stairs then pulled open the door to the hallway. She began walking down the plush carpet. She’d been in several of the nicer buildings in the city, but they had never been able to gain access to 432 Park Avenue.

Until now.

“Ok Jessie, this is the big one. Are you ready?”

Jessie stood in front of the door. She nodded, then answered.

“Yep.”

“Ok,” Mark said. “Get started. Let me know if you need anything.”

Jessie loosened the straps on the bag and pulled it off. She unzipped the main pouch and pulled out a small handheld screen. She unwound a short wire, plugged one end to her handheld and the other to the underside of the lock mechanism on the door.

She tapped several commands onto the screen, then waited as numbers scrolled down.

“Is he sure he got the right codes.”

“Balaam’s never gotten it wrong so far.”

Jessie nodded. She chewed on her thumbnail as she waited.

Finally, the number stopped clicking and the green light above the lock came on. Jessie slowly pushed the door open and stepped in.

The lanterns around the room automatically lit around the spacious apartment as soon as she entered. She stepped through the large foyer that was inlaid with marble and entered the living room.

Her mouth fell open a little when she saw the view. She stepped slowly up to the floor to ceiling windows until her nose almost touched the glass.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

“What’s that?” Mark said.

“It’s beautiful.”

She could see across the tops of all the skyscrapers and off into the distance where the ocean met the horizon. Shadows were already starting to fall across the city as the sun set behind her, but she could still see the entire Hudson River that encircled the island. And though all of the trees and vegetation had been cut and burned away to keep the creepers from hiding, the huge rectangle of Central Park still stood out strangely from the mass of buildings that surrounded it.

Jessie walked to the next window where could easily make out what was left of the Queensboro Bridge. She looked south and could make out parts of the Williamsburg bridge still sticking up out of the dark water.

All of the bridges and tunnels were gone or caved in long before she had come along. This is the farthest from the Manhattan she’d ever seen.

“Jessie! Have you found them yet? What’s taking so long?”

This snapped her out of her gaze.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it,” she said.

She turned down the main hallway of the apartment and walked quickly to the back bedroom. She pushed the door open. Light streamed through the same floor to ceiling windows across the white tiled floor. Jessie’s face screwed up in disgust when her eyes landed on the two obese people in the enormous bed.

They were lying down, sheets covering their bodies up to their armpits. Tubes ran out from under the sheets under the bed. Jessie knew the large pillows under their heads had holes cut into them for the wiring.

She walked directly to the headboard and leaned against the wall to see where the wires ran.

“We have a problem,” she said.

“What’s that?” Mark answered.

“The wiring. It runs directly into the wall. There’s no panel that it’s plugged into.”

“That’s impossible. That’s the only way it can communicate with the grid. There has to be one.”

“Well it’s not here. I know what a panel looks like.”

“What are we going to do?”

Jessie paused, biting her lip.

“I’ll start looking for it, try to get him on the line.”

“You think he’ll answer?”

Jessie pulled the nightstand away from the wall and checked the back of it.

“I hope so or this whole thing is wasted.”

“Just bail. We can try again tomorrow,” Mark said.

“The codes could change by then. The Elites always have the best security. It’s now or never.”

“Ok, keep looking. I’ll ring him.”

Jessie reached as far as her short arms could reach behind the bed, feeling around. She went to the other side of the bed and checked the back of the second night stand. She was breathing hard again.

She went to her hands and knees, crawling around the room checking underneath all of the furniture. There was no panel. No access point.

“Jessie, he’s on.”

“Yes?” a staticky, computerized voice came on the line. There was a loud hiss coming over the headphones now.

“Balaam--“

“Doth not useth mine own name ov'r the radio,” he said.

“Right, so, the wiring from the two Elites runs straight into the wall. There’s no panel. I’ve searched the entire bedroom and nothing. We’ve got--“ Jessie glanced at the large watch on her wrist, “-- less than thirty minutes before the miners log off. I need to find it now.”

“Wait. I shall check.”

Jessie stood in the center of the bedroom, chewing on her thumbnail again.

“Lavatory. Under the sink.”

Jessie slammed the bathroom door open and dropped to her knees. She opened the cabinets under the sink and immediately saw the blinking LEDs at the back.

“Got it!” she said.

There was an immediate click on the line and the hiss cut off.

“He’s gone,” Mark said. “You’ve got what you need?”

“Yep!”

Jessie had already unzipped her bag and pulled out the tablet, wiring, and small toolset.

“I’m on it,” she said.

“You have to hurry Jessie. How long will it take you to get back down the stairs?”

“Less than ten minutes.”

“You’re cutting it close.”

“I know! Let me work!”

Jessie reached under the cabinet and scooped all of the bottles and baskets onto the floor and shoved them out of her way. She stuck her head and shoulders all the way into the cabinet.

With practiced precision, she unscrewed each screw at the corners of the panel and laid them carefully down. She slowly pulled back the panel to expose the mess of wires behind it. She reached out to her own wiring and pulled it in the cabinet. Carefully, she snapped each end of her wires to the corresponding wires on the back of the panel, then backed out from under the cabinet.

The picked up the plug at the end of the wire, pulled her hair up and out of the way with one hand, then shoved the plug into the hole at the base of her skull.

Everything went black, then white, then a single blinking cursor appeared. She thought through her commands and the words and characters quickly spit out across her vision. After it was all their, she read over it again, then submitted the command.

She took a deep breath in through her mouth and slowly let it out through her nose. Just as she began her second breath, a counter appeared on the screen and started quickly scrolling up.

“We’re pulling!” She said.

“Alright!” Mark said. “Just over fifteen until logoff.”

Jessie sat cross legged, watching the counter quickly count up.

“Five thousand!” Mark said.

Jessie nodded.

Two more minutes passed.

“Eight thousand! Ok, that’s good, you need to get going.”

Jessie sat quietly.

“Jessie! You’re under twelve minutes, you need to go!”

“A little bit more.”

“This is plenty! More than we’ve ever scored. Get out of there.”

Jessie thought of the husband and wife sprawled out on the enormous bed in the other room.

“No, not yet. I want to wipe them out.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What they eat today could feed my mom and dad for a week. It’s disgusting.”

“They’ll just get all the credits back if you get caught.”

Jessie waited. The number ticked past twelve thousand.

“Ten minutes! Jessie!”

The number stopped ticking. Twelve thousand eight hundred and seventy-two.

“Done! I wiped them out!”

“Great, fine, whatever. Just get out of there.”

Jessie issued the log out command then reached back and unplugged the wire from her skull. She wedged herself back into the cabinet and pulled her wiring out. She pushed the panel closed and quickly got the screws in their holes, turning each one just a couple times. Enough to hold it in place.

She shoved all her equipment into her bag, zipped it closed and threw it over her shoulder. She quickly scooped up all the bottles and toiletries and threw them back under the sink, shut the cabinet doors and stepped out of the bathroom.

“I’m packed up and leaving,” she said.

“You’ve got less than seven minutes until log off. You’re not going to make it.”

She stopped a brief second and looked at the large couple lying in the bed. A little smile formed on her face, then turned and ran down the hall.

She yanked the front door open and ran down the hall. She heard the door slam behind her as she crashed into the door to the stairs.

She took the stairs two at a time jumping down as fast as she could. Twice she missed a stepped and tumbled, but was back on her feet before she stopped moving.

As she ran, Mark ticked off the minutes to her as they passed.

He was right. She wasn’t going to make it.

He announced the logoff time. The sun had set outside and she still had five more floors to descend.

When she reached the bottom floor, she pressed her face against the door straining to see down the hallway.

It was empty.

She gently pushed the door open, then turned and held the door as it closed making sure it shut silently. She turned and crept down the hallway and peeked around the corner. Most of the miners were already standing from their chairs, stretching. The plugs were dangling from the ceiling above them. The tubes leading to the troughs in the floor were laying below the chairs.

Jessie stepped out among them and walked slowly pushing her way through the mass of bodies. She kept her eyes on the floor. A few gave her odd looks, but most ignored her, oblivious to her existence.

“Jessie, where are you?” Mark asked.

“Shh,” she replied and he remained quiet.

Jessie made it back to the hatch in the floor. She stopped, looking around her. The hallway was packed with people making their way towards the exits for the night. There was no way to do this subtlety.

She took a deep breath, waited for the next person to come to a stop on the hatch. It was a woman with long, matted blond hair. Her eyes were dark and sunken. She was just as pale and thin as the rest of them. Jessie put her hands on the woman’s stomach and shoved as hard as she could.

The woman screamed and flailed her arms, knocking down two others as she hit the floor. All around Jessie the miners stopped and backed up from her.

She ignored them, grabbed the hand hold on the hatch and yanked it open.

The circle around her quickly widened as everyone backed as far away from the opening as possible. Several people gasped.

Jessie looked around at the crowd, then stepped down into the hole and pulled the hatch closed behind her.

# # #

Scene 2

Jessie kept her hands shoved in her pockets and her head low as she wound her way down the street. She had pulled off the headphones and stored them in her bag and replaced it with the hood from her coat.

Technically, it wasn’t illegal for a child to be out unsupervised, but it was definitely something to be noticed. The mass of miners were all crowding the streets pushing their way to the food stations. The summer months meant everyone only had five hours to take care of their lives before the sun chased everyone back inside and they had to report to the grid.

She glanced at the lines of people that wound around the food stations, then looked away, shaking her head. You could see through the front windows into the tables where each one had to stop and scan the tag on their wrist before getting a pale bit of food slid under the glass to them.

Jessie wasn’t sure why they scanned the wrists. Nobody ever fought over the food or tried to steal extra. Food isn’t what the miners cared about. Only credits.

She hurried around the block and kept heading heading north on 3rd avenue. She slowed her pace again, forcing herself to take her time. A small girl might go unnoticed, but one in a hurry definitely would not. After everything that just happened, the last thing she needed was to draw attention to herself.

Eventually, she rounded the corner onto East 66th and then ducked into an alleyway. She checked behind her to make sure nobody had followed he in then pulled out and lit her small lamp. She kept the damper mostly closed so she was letting out as little light as possible. She stayed close to the walls, walking slowly in the dark until she came to the back door. “The Beekman Theater” could still just be made out painted on the back door.

She yanked the door open and stepped through.

A hundred or so years ago -- it was hard to find precise history about these things -- global warming had finally tipped. The Burning began. There wasn’t the hurricanes and crazy weather that everyone had been afraid of. It just got hot. So hot that all the important resources like food and water started becoming harder and harder to come by.

That’s when the wars had started. Those with the biggest armies seized power as quickly as possible and the Factions were born. It came down to the last three super powers fighting over the waining resources.

And the only place left that had a great supply of resources was in Scandinavia. It’s northern placement on the globe along with the shifting weather patterns made this the last temperate place where crops could easily be grown and animals wouldn’t die from the extreme heat.

Finally, after a decade of war, the Truce was created. The Reapers were given control of the resources and they in turn created the grid.

Now all the wars for the resources were fought digitally.

But even with the Reapers in charge, there wasn’t enough. Electricity went off line, water stopped flowing, and everyone started crowding into the major cities, the further north the better. The Factions jumped on this opportunity and quickly began manipulating the grid to seize power and game the system so they could get more resources out of the Reapers. Now, the more people mining on the grid meant more power for the Faction.

And it was worse this year than ever. The Threshing was coming.

Jessie slowly closed the door behind her, careful to not let it slam. Once the latch had clicked into place, she turned and started walking down the hall. She climbed a short set of stairs then opened the door to the projector room.

She still didn’t fully understand why the theaters were left empty throughout the city. All of the apartments and office buildings had been retrofitted for the masses of people connecting to the grid. The local Faction leadership had setup shop in the theaters on Broadway. Maybe that was why. Maybe all the miners were scared to go into any of the theaters now.

Either way, this is where Jessie and her Rats had found a home.

There were several lamps flickering when she walked in, but three of the five kids were already asleep in the corner in the piles of blankets. Only Libby and Mark were still up.

Even though they were the only people in the theater, they had crammed everything in this little room. It felt safer than spreading out through the building. Desks lined the right side of the room where Mark and Libby where standing. Mark was seated at one of the two terminals they had pieced together. The rest of the tables were overflowing with random circuitry, hardware, and wires. Boxes were shoved under the tables and everything was filled to overflowing.

In the back of the room was where they slept. The rest of the room was filled with torn up coaches and chairs.

This was their den. They slept and worked here. This is where they mounted their attacks on the Faction.

“You should be offline,” Libby said, looking over Mark’s shoulder as he tapped at the keyboard. “It’s not safe.”

“I know, I know,” he said.

He finished a few more commands then powered down the terminal and sat back in his chair. This is when they finally noticed that Jessie had come in.

“Cutting it close on that one,” Libby said.

Jessie shrugged and dropped her bag by the door.

“Worth it. My parents could eat for a week on what those fat slobs probably threw away today. They’ll be down with the miners by week’s end.”

She grabbed a food pack and plopped in the office chair and started spinning back and forth as she bit off chewy mouthfuls.

“What if you get reported?” Mark said.

“What are they going to report? That a girl was running around?” Libby said.

“I don’t know. It just worries me. A bunch of them saw you.”

Jessie shrugged.

“We got the credits,” she said. “That’s what matters.”

The silence hung for a minute then Mark started yawning.

“I’m getting some sleep,” he said. “Come on.”

Libby stood and stretched but Jessie shook her head.

“I haven’t been home in a couple days. I’m sure mom and dad are worried about me by now.”

Mark and Libby cut their eyes at each other.

“Plus,” Jessie continued, “I got some credits for them now so maybe they’ll log on a little late tonight.”

Libby’s face dropped a bit.

“Jessie...”

“What?” Jessie said.

Libby opened her mouth to answer, but Mark cut her off.

“Look, we’ve got one more door code from Balaam. It goes bad after tomorrow’s security reset. You need to get some sleep to be ready. Just stay here tonight then you can head home to see your folks tomorrow.”

Jessie spun all the way around in the chair a couple times then stood and shoved the rest of the food pack into her mouth.

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m going home tomorrow no matter what you say.”

# # #

Scene 3

Jessie hesitated, holding the tablet wires just under the lock on the door.

“Everything ok?” Mark’s voice came through the headphones.

Jessie glanced down the hallway.

This wasn’t near as nice as the place the day before, but it was still the upper floors where the richest Elites lived. The plush red carpet was actually clean and the lamps in the hallway where lit and extinguished by the staff.

The Rats were hoping for another big score. It was doubtful they would hit five figures again -- that had only ever happened once before -- but they might hit five thousand credits if their luck doesn’t run out.

“Yeah,” Jessie said, plugging the wire into the lock. “All good. Just thought I felt something.”

Jessie chewed her lip as the tablet ran through the paces. Twice she over rode the algorithm with her own commands, speeding up the process.

After two minutes, the light on the door blinked green and unlatched. Jessie gently pushed the door in and blocked it with her foot while she stuffed everything in her bag.

She threw it over her shoulder and gently pushed the door open.

Even though she knew everyone in the apartment was logged on and oblivious to the world around them, Jessie still tended to walk softly.

The shades were drawn in the living room and kitchen. These Elites must not be able to afford the UV protection on the windows.

Maybe it’ll only be three thousand credits.

Jessie made her way back to the bedroom. This time the panel was right where it was supposed to be. She logged right in and pulled down all of the credits.

Two thousand six hundred and seventy-two of them.

Half of what they were hoping but still worth the trip. After Balaam’s cut they’d still have plenty. The job the night before ensured that for awhile.

Jessie finished packing up her equipment and checked the watch. She still had an hour until sunset.

“Raid the pantry this time,” Mark said. “You’ve got plenty of time.”

Jessie nodded and turned to the kitchen. She pulled open the pantry and her mouth fell open.

It was packed with food. Cans of meats and vegetables were stacked to the point that the shelves were sagging. There were several loaves of bread and even some cheese wrapped up in wax paper.

“I can’t believe this,” she said.

“What? They have some good stuff?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

Jessie dropped her bag on the floor. She shoved the cheese and a couple loaves of bread in first. That took up most of the available room, but she was still able to fit a few of the cans. She picked the varieties that were harder to come by on the streets.

“You out yet?” Mark asked.

“Almost,” Jessie said. She grabbed another armful of cans and carried them to the end of the counter. She reached up with her foot and caught the handle of the trash chute, pulled it open, then dropped the food in. She watched it tumble down out of sight.

“What’s taking so long?”

Jessie ignored him as she grabbed another armful of food and deposited it into the trash.

She went back a third time.

“Hello Jessie,” the deep voice seemed to boom through the quiet apartment.

Jessie immediately dropped to her knees and scurried to put her back against the cabinets under the counter.

There was a long moment as Jessie could only hear her gasping breath.

“Come on out dear, no need to be afraid.”

Jessie crawled to the end of the counter and peeked around. The room was almost black in the darkness but, now that she was looking, she could just make out the shape of a man sitting in the lounge chair.

She ducked back around behind the cabinets as the figure stood. She heard a flint scratch a couple times and the room filled with light. The light scratch of metal as the flame was adjusted.

“Jessie, please don’t make me ask again. Stand up or I’ll have to call in the Faction Guards that are right outside the door.”

Jessie slowly stood, her legs shaking. When her eyes adjusted to the brightness of the lamp, she gasped and had to steady herself against the counter.

She knew that face. The bald head. The jowels. The familiar black uniform. Everyone in the Faction new that face. It was plastered in posters on every wall, billboard, and stairwell.

“I trust you recognize me,” he said.

“Of course,” she answers.

“Ah ah ah,” he said, turning his head towards her and tapping his ear.

“Of course, President Marcus.”

“Wonderful! That makes it so much easier when we stick to the proper formalities. Now --“ he pulled out a chair at the long, glass dining room table, set the lamp down on the table, then took a seat. Jessie could hear the old wood squeak under his weight.

“-- let’s have a discussion, you and I.”

He motioned to the chair across from him.

Jessie instinctively picked up her bag as she passed by it. Her hand shook as she pulled out the chair. She sat sideways, but turned her torso to face Marcus.

“Jessie!” Mark’s voice crackled through the headphone. “What’s going on? Why haven’t you left yet?”

“Please remove those silly things so we can have a proper conversation.”

Jessie pulled the pink headphones off her head so they fell around her neck.

“Ok, so you know who I am and where I’ve come from?”

Jessie nodded.“

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. We both know the punishment your facing. The amount of Orders you’ve broken just in the last five minutes is pushing capital offenses. That’s not mentioning your little foray yesterday. You know that, right?”

Jessie nodded again.

“Well no need to fear my dear. I’ve come to offer you a formal invitation to join, on a full scholarship of course, the Elite Coder Program. This is a very prestigious offer and one we’ve never made to a miner 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 credits...at no cost to you or your family.”

He glanced at the bag 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.”

Marcus 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 Faction President. 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 stealing from the Elite -- it alone a capital offense -- not to mention the fact that they are logged in, the food destruction, and a score of other offenses I could name.”

“I’m a minor,” Jessie said, her chin raising just a bit. “The order says you can’t --“

Marcus’s fist slammed onto the table. Jessie cowered in her chair.

“I am the President of the Americas Faction. I make the orders that you live under. And that means, even though you are only twelve, there where still be a Shaming for you. So the choice becomes get on the jet with me and this all is forgotten or stay here and face your punishment.”

Jessie sat quietly, thinking. Marcus took a deep breath.

“There’s still one thing I haven’t mentioned” he said.

Jessie narrowed her eyes.

“You know, you and your Rats aren’t as good as you think you are. Sure, you have some skill. 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 upcoming 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 credits you earn each month will continue to be applied to their account. Who knows? You do well they might even find their way into the Elite. 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.

Jessie lifted her eyes to meet his.

“No.”

# # #

Scene 4

The din of the crowd filtered through the front of theater. The rows of seats were still in pristine order in the ornate theater. Here the electricity worked fine and lit up the entire room. Faction guards, dressed head-to-toe in black, stood around the edges of the large room. Their body armor stood out as a dull grey and their faces were unseen behind the dull black masks.

Jessie sat on the edge of the stage, her feet dangling above the floor, idling swinging back and forth.

"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 who was squatted down next to her.

"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, we 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 stood back from them shifting her feet back and forth, eyes darting around the room. She was always like this whenever she wasn’t in the apartment. Being in one of the Faction’s headquarters only made it worse.

Sound momentarily amplified from outside as one of the doors to the street open and closed. Jessie looked up and saw Mayor Charles step into the theater. He removed his hat as he approached them, exposing 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.

“It’s time,” he said.

Jessie's father stood.

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Not according to the Faction orders. She was caught stealing from the Elite while they were logged 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 Faction guards and taken with them to the Preparing.”

"That's what we should do then," her father said. “Let’s do that. You have my permission.”

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 over with."

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 towards the back of the stage.

"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?"

Shame passed across the father's face, but he turned and led the mother into the shadows.

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.

“One last thing,” he said. “The President says at any time you want to change your mind, just get word to the Faction Enforcement.”

The mayor took a deep breath, then pushed the door open and led her out into the street. The crowd immediately erupted in angry shouts and jeers. Jessie squinted against the light. The faction was obviously trying to make a example out of her. All of the lights and billboards in Times Square were lit up. She couldn’t imagine the credits that was costing the Faction. And her crimes had been broadcast to all of the miners when they logged in today to ensure the biggest crowd possible.

The guards formed a barricade directly through the crowd so the mayor could lead her to the center of the square. Jessie glanced up, just for a moment, so she could see the lights flashing and blinking throughout the square.

She’d never seen this much light in one place. It really was beautiful.

--

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.

“Plug her! Plug her! Plug her!" they yelled.

Charles let out a deep sigh.

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

Jessie could only nod.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out the small black piece of metal. The bottom was shaped the same as the plug that all the miners used to plug in, 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 swept across Jessie's head. She screamed a short, high pitched scream, then clinched her teeth down. The scream became a guttural 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 got close enough to spit on her. She felt another rock bounce across her back.

"Allright!" the mayor 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 sun’ll be up soon.“

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 out of the square.

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.

“Wait here,” he said. “They’ll come collect you.”

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.

The lights around the square blinked off and darkness fell in around her. She waited as the light slowly began to drift into the square. Sweat began to mingle with her tears as the heat quickly began rising with the sun.

A man and a woman appeared from around one of the buildings. They walked slowly towards Jessie, keeping an eye out for anyone that might still be milling around. They were dressed in baggy white clothes that were shoved into boots and covered by gloves. They had large white helmets on and white masks that cover their faces.

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 reflected off the white of their uniforms 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.

# # #

Scene 5

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 noises 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.

“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 normal 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 door with a red exit sign above it.

“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 white helmet 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 door and shoved it open. The two of them stepped out onto a platform. Jessie instantly recognized the rails running along the ground about six feet down.

“You live down here?”

Eighty-three cut her eyes at Jessie.

“Come on, they’re waiting for us.”

Jessie hurried after her.

After they walked down the platform, she saw the cart. It was sitting on the rails and it was packed with the Numbered, all sitting shoulders to shoulder in their white suits, their legs hanging over the side. There was one long bar running the length of the cart connected in the middle to a triangular box. The bar had handles on each end.

Eighty-three crouched down and jumped down off the platform. She turned and helped Jessie down. The Numbered scooted over a bit to make room for Jessie as she climbed up next to them. She turned and sat down, her legs dangling as well.

“Allright,” Eighty-three said, “everyone have their assignments?”

Everybody muttered their assents.

“Ok, I’ll be with the newb training on her lines today so I’ll be out and about. You have any problems, radio on the open line and help each other out.”

Everyone nodded.

“One-o-three, Seventy-seven, let’s get going.”

Two of the larger men were still standing down on the ground and as Eighty-three took her seat next to Jessie, they climbed up on either end of the cart and grabbed the handle. As the first pulled up on the bar, Jessie could see the veins on the side of his neck standing out. She turned to see the other standing at full height, arms outstretched above him, pulling down on the other end.

Slowly, with loud creaks and scrapes, the cart began to move down the tracks. As it picked up speed, the two men, still pumping up and down, seemed to relax into the rhythm.

Within seconds the cart was plunged into darkness.

Jessie reached out instinctively for Eighty-three. The woman took Jessie’s hand in hers and wrapped her other arm around her small shoulders. Jessie relaxed a bit at this, but still tensed up overtime their was a sway or bump along the way. She tried to look around in the dark but all she could see were the small green pinpoints of light at the base of all the Numbered’s skulls.

After what seemed like a long time, Jessie heard the men stopped pumping. She could hear them breathing hard above the noise of the cart against the rails.

Jessie turned to look ahead and could just make out another platform that was coming into view out of the darkness. A single lamp was flickering in the dark and bouncing off the old tiled walls and floors.

“23rd!” one of the men shouted out.

Jessie could feel shifting and movement as two of the Numbered stood and made their way to the left of the cart.

The cart had slowed considerably but was still moving at a good clip. As they approached the platform, Jessie could make out the two standing, holding the shoulders of those still sitting. They were squatted low and as they came by the platform, they both jumped up. One of them landed on their feet and stumbled a bit. The other fell and slid a few feet before regaining his feet.

As soon as the two were off, the two men were back on the handles pumping up and down. Within a few seconds they were back in the dark.

Jessie leaned over to Eighty-three and whispered to her above the noise.

“23rd?” she said.

“That’s right,” Eighty-three answered. “We’re the six line Numbered. We’ve got from Washington Square Park up to the top of Manhattan, 125th street.”

“What do you mean? What have you got?”

Jessie felt Eighty-three shake her head and there was no answer.”

“28th!”

A couple more of the Numbered stood and approached the left side of the cart. Again the men stopped pumping and the two jumped to the platform as they passed.

As darkness set in again, Eighty-three leaned over to Jessie.

“We’re the next stop,” she said. “33rd. Get ready.”

Terror fell over Jessie. Get ready? Get ready to jump?

“33rd!” the voice called out. The pumping stopped and Eighty-three pulled Jessie up by the back of her suit as she stood. She kept her hand clinched on Jessie as they neared the platform. It still seemed like they were going much to fast and Jessie wasn’t even sure she could clear the gap.

Eighty-three leaned down close to Jessie’s ear.

“I’m going to count to three and then we jump. Ok?”

Jessie nodded. Her mouth was much to dry to speak.

“1... 2... 3!”

Eighty-three and Jessie both jumped, but Jessie didn’t make it all the way to the platform. She landed on her stomach on the platform but her legs were dangling off. Eight-three had held onto her suit, but when Jessie didn’t make it, she had slipped on the floor with the change in weight and crashed hard onto her side. The impact jarred her grip loose.

Jessie frantically kicked trying to find a foothold. Her body slipped a little bit and she screamed.

Eighty-three army crawled over to her, grabbed her hands, and pulled her up onto the platform.

Jessie rolled onto her back, breathing hard.

“Let’s go,” Eighty-three said.

She was already on her feet and walking towards the gates. Jessie could just make them out in the soft, flickering light.

She scrambled to her feet and hurried to catch up with Eighty-three.

The woman easily jumped the turnstiles and Jessie had to crouch down and squeeze underneath them.

Eighty-three kept walking. Jessie could feel the temperature change as they approached the stairs. She could see the light filtering down.

Eighty-three stopped a few yards from the stairs and turned to Jessie.

“Goggles on,” she said as she pulled her own goggles up from around her neck and positioned them over her eyes.

“Wait,” Jessie said, “where are we going?”

“Up the stairs.”

“Outside?”

“Of course. How else are we getting to the miners?”

“Miners? Why are we getting to the miners?”

Eighty-three sighed and pulled back her sleeve to check her watch.

“Look, I don’t have time to answer all your questions. Put on your goggles, cinch your hat down, and stay close to me.”

Jessie nodded slowly then pulled on her goggles. She finished cinching her hat around her chin as she followed Eighty-three up the stairs.

By the time they were halfway up, the heat was already suffocating. Jessie had to force herself to breath in the air.

As the two of them stepped to the top of the stairs, 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, easily piercing through her white suit. Wind swept in gusts and threw dirt against her, clattering against her suit.

Eighty-three walked to where there were a half dozen carts scattered along the sidewalk. 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 her own cart down the sidewalk.

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 Eighty-three 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 as well.

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 two buildings 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 on the smaller side as far as apartment buildings in Manhattan go, probably only a couple dozen stories. She had to look away quickly as the light reflecting off the windows 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.

“This will get you into your buildings and your apartments, no where else. It also tracks where you are at all times while above ground.”

She pushed the cart up to the doors of the building. She swiped the card against the lock and it blinked green. She pushed the cart inside, let Jessie enter with her own cart, the closed the door behind them.

Immediately Jessie was plunged into darkness.

“Take off your goggles.”

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

The lobby was still very dark. The windows were all covered in tinted film, but Jessie could still see the rows and rows of miners sitting tightly packed in their chairs. Cables were running from the ceiling to the base of their skulls and the tubes were running to the edge of the room.

Jessie squeezed her nose shut with her fingers.

Eighty-three cracked a smile at her.

“We’ll get them last,” she said, then turned her cart to the stairs access. She left her cart outside the door then pushed open the door to the stairwell. Jessie followed closely as they ascended the stairs. Once they reached the second floor, Eighty-three pulled open the door and approached the apartment door. She swiped the key again and stepped into the apartment, Jessie close on her heals.”

“Let’s start in the kitchen,” Eighty-three said pointing. “The trash can is under the sink.”

She opened the cabinet, pulled out the trash can, and set it on the counter. She began rifling through the contents.

“Here we go,” she said.

She pulled out a chunk of bread. It looked to be about a third of a baguette. Eighty-three set it on the counter and kept going through the trash.

“Ok, that’s it on this one.”

She handed the trashcan to Jessie.

“Go dump this in the shoot in the hallway.”

“What’s that for?” Jessie asked, pointing at the chunk of bread.

“That’s for the cart. That goes back with us.”

Jessie opened her mouth to speak, but Eighty-three raised her hand to cut her off then pointed to the door.

Jessie hurried down the hall to the trash shoot and dumped the can, then headed back to the apartment. She replaced the can then walked down the short hallway looking for Eighty-three.

She 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 cleans up after the miners and the elites?”

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. Just as she was about to enter the bedroom, she saw the panel and cable running into it.

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 suit.

She tried to take a step back to regain her balance, but caught her foot against the 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 6

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 panel. 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 a lot of apartments to hit and we’re even further behind. We have to be done and off the streets by dusk.”

Eighty-three headed for the front door 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 apartments 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 reached for the door handle.

“No! I want to talk about it now. I want to know when I’m going home. My parents live just a few blocks from here. They’re in one of the elite’s apartments too. I want to go see them. They’re going to be worried about me.”

Eighty-three sighed and let go of the handle.

“Honey, you’re not going home anytime soon. You were caught stealing credits 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?” Jessie asked.

“Look, it doesn’t matter --“

“Tell me!”

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

“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, we’ve got a lot of work to do,” Eighty-three said opening the door to the hallway. “Let’s keep moving.”

# # #

Scene 7

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 had already dipped below the buildings and, while it still wasn’t technically nighttime, a few people were already emerging from the buildings. These had to be the Elites since the miners didn’t have the clearance level to log themselves off.

She could see two men walking directly across the square talking and gesticulating wildly with their hands. It was hard to tell if they were arguing or agreeing.

Jessie had hated coming back to Times Square. First of all, it was out of her way which means it would take longer to get to Hell’s Kitchen. Second of all -- her eyes fell on the stocks sitting in the middle of the street. She ran a hand over her head and shuddered.

In a few minutes, the streets would be packed with miners as they poured out from the buildings and started making their way to the ration posts.

The two men continued moving across the square and disappeared down a side street.

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 into Times Square 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 square while keeping her eyes roaming back and forth.

She was almost to the her turn out of the square when their was a loud "beep". Jessie froze and looked around wildly. Her eyes cut back across the square.

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.

Jessie again stopped beside a building and flattened herself against the wall. She surveyed the street. By now the sun would be below the horizon. The heat of the daylight was dissipating quickly. It wouldn’t be long until the streets filled up.

She stepped out and moved at a fast walk across the street. She circled behind the small apartment building and found the service access point. She dragged the door open and took a step in.

"Beep."

Jessie fell back out of the doorway 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 stepped back into the doorway and pulled the door closed behind her.

She moved through the pitch black confidently, feeling along the wall as she went. When she reached the stairs, the quickly entered and started climbing them two at a time. She reached the third floor and stepped into the hallway.

She walked to the end of the hall to the door marked 301. She pulled out the grey keycard Eighty-three had given her and swiped the door.

The light turned green and unlatched.

Slowly, Jessie opened the door just enough for her to slide in and then gently shut the door behind her.

The apartment was small. A one bedroom, one bathroom about six hundred square feet. Jessie cracked open the door to the closet off the hallway. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the small lighter she’d nabbed before heading out for the night. She flicked it on.

An empty sleeping bag was 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 clicked the lighter off, then stepped back into the hallway.

"Beep."

Jessie froze. This time she didn't look around, but a worried expression was on her face. She shook her head and headed down the hallway. A clang came from ahead and a hushed voice muttered. Jessie hurried towards the voice.

The hallway 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 the 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 a 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 Training!”

"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.

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 down the hall 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 8

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 had 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. Jessie reached the end of the hall, ripped open the window, and dove out onto the fire escape.

"Beep."

She scrambled up to her feet and started running down the stairs. Below on the street, the handful of miners that were milling about stopped and looked up at the noise.

"Jessie stop!" a voice cried out behind her, but she kept pumping her legs. She heard more voices yelling to each other behind her. A set of feet hit the fire escape above her. They were coming after her.

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

Jessie didn't slow down. She got to the bottom of the fire escape and grabbed the final ladder, riding it to the ground. As soon as her feet hit the ground she was running again. The few people in the street jumped out of her way. She cut around the back of the building, and then down a narrow alleyway.

About halfway down the alley she dropped to her knees next to a metal grate. She grabbed the slats with both hands and pulled it loose.

"Beep."

She turned around and backed into the small space pulling the grate close behind her. She felt around behind her and found the small foldable lantern and flint set she kept stashed here and shoved them in her pocket.

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 pressed her face against the wall trying to see. She could just make out the three Numbered standing at the end of the alley in the middle of the street. She fought to keep her breath calm.

The two men stayed with 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."

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."

Eighty-three 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 green.

"We're hearing the beeping too. That means we're out of bounds. The beeps and the yellow light are warnings. That’s how the Faction tracks us. 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 several other people yelled their angry ascent.

Eighty-three ignored them. She stood, waiting.

"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 shifted anxiously inside the small space. She grabbed the grate, then let go, then grabbed it again.

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

Jessie took a deep breath, grabbed the grate with both hands, then pushed it open. As soon as the sound of the grate scratching on the ground reached her, Eighty-three started sprinting down the alley with the other Numbered close behind.

Jesse froze and backed further into she space as Eighty-three approached. The woman dropped to her knees next to the grate, reached in and dragged Jessie out of the hole. She lifted Jessie onto 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, turned down the alley, and began running.

# # #

Scene 9

The three of them tore off out of the other end of the alley. When they hit the street, they paused for a moment as Eighty-three looked around to catch her bearings.

Eighty-three cursed again.

“50th and 9th,” she muttered.

She looked at Sixty-one.

“51st street entrance?”

“That means we’ll have to go through --“ he answered.

“I know.”

“That’s a lot of people.”

“We don’t have time for anything else.”

He shrugged.

“Let’s do it.”

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 down the middle of the 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.

Suddenly Eighty-three stopped. Jessie almost ran into her. She looked up ahead and saw why.

There was a massive crowd ahead of her. Jessie looked around, then up.

“Roch center? This is the biggest --“

Eighty-three cut her off with a wave of her hand.

Besides having the largest food station, this was the one place that the miners were allowed to actually buy and sell things. Scrapping was technically illegal, especially for the crazy ones that ventured off the island, but here in the marketplace you could actually spend your credits to get a few luxuries. There were appliances like dented toasters and cracked coffee makers. These were almost useless since the electricity they used cost more credits than most miners made in a week. But it was also where you could buy additional blankets or out dated food or clothes that were less ragged than your own. All of it heavily taxed by the Faction of course.

Several people at the edges of the crowd had already seen them. It was hard to miss their bald heads.

Eighty-three reached back and grabbed Jessie’s hand. She cut her eyes at Sixty-one then started pushing her way into the crowd cutting straight across square.

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.

At first people went silent when they saw them, but it only took a few seconds before that turned into anger.

The first person to shove Eighty-three was a gaunt old man missing most of his teeth.

“Filthy hackers,” another yelled behind them. When Jessie turned to look back she saw Sixty-one try to cover his head as a woman lunged at him swinging her fists wildly at his head.

Now the crowd started pressing in on them. Jessie gripped Eighty-three’s hand tighter and grabbed her wrist with her other hand too.

She felt a fist land on her back, then another on her head. She tried to keep her head down, but didn’t dare let go of Eighty-three’s hand.

They kept pushing through the crowd as the yelling and cursing continued to rise.

Jessie chanced a glance up and saw they were almost across the square. She dropped her gaze again, but then she was stopped by a hand on her arm.

Before she could react, she was yanked hard and she lost her grip on Eighty-three’s hand and started screaming. She turned to see who had her. A tall lanky man towered above her. His lips were pulled back to show his bright red, empty gums. His eyes were bloodshot and dilated wide.

He pulled back his fist and Jessie through her hands up, but instead of a blow to the face, she was thrown to the ground. She rolled over to see Sixty-one on top of the man pounding his fists over and over into his head.

Eighty-three came back out of the crowd and grabbed Sixty-one by the back of the shirt.

“We have to go!” she yelled at them.

Jessie scrambled to her feet and looked around to see that the crowd had backed away and quieted down at the sudden violence.

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

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

Jessie and Sixty-one took off after her.

They continued for couple blocks. Jessie’s legs were growing tired and she was struggling to keep up. She watched Eighty-three disappear around the corner onto 51st street. As Jessie made the turn, she tripped over something in the road 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. Jessie gritted her teeth against the pain as the barbs stabbed and scratched her legs. Eighty-three came running back and joined them. She worked to get their feet loose. Finally, she grabbed Jessie under the armpits and pulled her up. Sixty-one clawed at the wire and Jessie’s feet popped 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 the another block then jessie skidded to a stop. Up ahead at the subway station entrance she could see a crowd of Numbered gathered at the top of the stairs. They were packed in tight, but none of them stood on the sidewalk.

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 on the top step, 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 on the sidewalk.

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 down onto the stairs. They laid him down gently. He wasn’t moving. Jessie pushed through the mass of people for a better look.

“Light!” Eighty-three yelled.

Jessie pulled the small lantern out of her pocket and snapped it open. She tried to light it with the flint, but her hands were shaking too much.

Eighty-three snatched the lantern out of her hand and lit it with one flick. The jumped out between them and she put it close to Sixty-one.

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 put the lantern close.

Eighty-three sat back on her legs and sighed.

“Ok, let’s get him into bed. You two, carry him down to the cart.”

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 through the Numbered down the stairs leaving Jessie alone with them.

# # #

Scene 10

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, and 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 wa 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 it’s shadows across the cots.

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, crinkled plastic cup and brought it back to him.

Sixty-one sat up and swung his legs over the side of the cot. He took the cup from Jessie and drained it. He held it out to her, and she hurried to fill it.

He drained it again.

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.”

He sighed and rubbed his face with his calloused, cracked hand.

“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 dear.”

“Were you a miner?”

He shook his head.

“Believe it or not, I was a Coder.”

“For the faction?” Jessie said, shock plain on her face.

“Yes mam.”

“And you were there? At the Farm?”

“Mmhmm,” he said nodding.

“What was it like?”

Sixty-one’s eyes glazed over a bit as a stared off at the wall.

“It was wonderful. All deep underground where it’s cool so we could be out and about all day. ”

“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 miners they bring in think because they were decent in the city and scored high on some test that they’ll come right in and win the next Threshing 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 grid 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. Like digging ditches. You can be really good at it, but it’s still just digging ditches. 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 get zapped on the grid?”

“Well yeah, everyone does.”

“Right, you wander where you’re not supposed to be and you get zapped.”

“But that’s the grid. And it doesn’t kill you.”

“Maybe not for the miners. But it’s different for the Coders at the Farm. They’re running at the edges of the grid. You get zapped there and 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 past 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,” he gestured around him.

“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 Threshing. If they win, it’s 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 Coders in the run up to the Threshing and then 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. Cocky little queller. So I went after him. Back fired on me though. 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 city 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 11

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.

She had taken to long on her chores and missed the cart ride back home. This meant a long walk through the tunnels on her own. She had already been sweating from the heat, but walking through the tunnel by herself in the dark had added to it.

Jessie turned into the common room then 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 rattled around 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 richie's apartments 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.

One of the Numbered went over to the large cabinet in the corner and fiddled with the knobs for a couple minutes. Music began whining from speakers in the cabinet. Jessie didn’t recognize any of it, but the other Numbered obviously did as several of them had already hopped up and started dancing.

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 or someone made a particular fool of themselves while dancing, she even smiled herself.

After almost two hours, Sixty-one stumbled out of the dancing crowd 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 know 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.”

“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 ever in the Farm?”

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 with a screwdriver 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 maybe 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 12

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 of the Numbered greeted her. Sixty-one put a mug in her hands. She sat and sipped, waiting for everyone to start heading out for the cart ride to their drop off point.

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.

They looked around at each other, unsure of what to do. Finally, Eighty-three took a step towards the door, but before she could get there, a heavy thud hit the door. A sharp crack came from the door frame.

Everyone froze.

A few seconds later another heavy thud hit the door. This time the door flew open, splinters flying as the thin wood blew apart.

Immediately three figures stepped quickly into the common room. They were dressed in full matte black body armor. Gloves covered their hands and the armor disappeared underneath helmets with dark, featureless masks covering their entire faces.

They spread out around the room with their weapons pointed at the Numbered.

A few seconds passed before Mayor Charles came through the door. His hat was pushed down low over his eyes and his shaking hands clutched a tablet in front of him. Two more guards followed him in.

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

Charles looked up briefly at them, then back down at the tablet. He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice cracked on the first word. He cleared his throat and spoke again.

He glanced down at the small tablet in his hand.

“I need to speak with Numbered 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.

“Ok, um, I have been sent here to discuss recent breaches in the Numbered code of conduct. Um, we can do it here, or--“ he glanced around him.

“Here’s is fine,” Eighty-three said.

“Ok. Ok, yes. We can just do it here.”

Charles cleared his throat again and tapped the tablet screen with his middle finger.

“Now, recite your role as head Numbered of this batch. Please.”

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

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

“Yes, ok. Almost word-for-word. And for this extra responsibility, what is it that you get in return from the Faction?”

“A shorter sentence.”

“Yes. For each year of service you get a year off your days as a Numbered. Is that correct?”

Eighty-three nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Charles said, “I am supposed to require audible answers.”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir to the years off your sentence?”

“Yes.”

Charles nodded and looked back down at the tablet. He tapped it a few more times then began reading.

“The Faction enforcement have received multiple reports of Numbered infractions. Charges include the following. Trespassing outside of prescribed hours. Trespassing outside of allowed boundaries. Trespassing in High Miner living quarters. Assault on various Miners. Theft. Destruction of Faction property. Reports were filed by dozens of Miners including close relatives of a Numbered.”

Charles looked up at Eighty-three, then back down at his tablet.

“As Numbered Manager you are solely responsible for the conduct of your assigned squad. What say you to these charges?”

Eighty-three stayed silent.

“I’m so sorry, but I’m going to need an answer.”

“It’s true.”

“And who among your batch was responsible for this 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 his head at her.

Charles had noticed the movement though and he locked eyes briefly with Jessie before looking back to Eighty-three.

He moved close to her and whispered something softly. She shook her head, no. Charles’s jaw tightened. Two of the guards turned towards the Mayor, but he ignored them.

Again, Charles whispered something. And again, Eighty-three shook her head.

Charles stepped back from her.

“It was me,” she said. “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,” Charles said, looking again at Jessie. “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. He tapped a few more times on the tablet. When he looked back up it seemed the lines in his face had deepened. He cleared his throat again.

“The Faction enforcement cannot let such an egregious breach of Numbered regulations stand without discipline. And as the Batch head and perpetrator of said breach, you will be held personally responsible”

“I understand time will be added to my sentence. I accept that.”

Jessie cringed at this.

Charles’s face hung lower. He met Eighty-three’s eyes.

“Unfortunately, that is not what the Faction Enforcement has decided.”

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

“That’s the standard punishment.”

“Yes, however President Marcus himself stepped in on this matter to override the standards of punishment. I’m so sorry. I’m supposed to read this note from the President directly.”

He took a deep breath before looking down at the tablet and continuing.

“‘Though I normally would not step in on petty infractions by those of the Numbered, both the nature of this breach and those involved have called my direct attention. Since my invitation continues to be ignored, the punishment must be that much worse. The punishment for those involved is to do your normal line of chores at your normal time.’”

Eighty-three looked up, confused.

“‘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 Charles.

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

“No!” she yelled. “It was my fault!”

Mayor Charles gave her a sad look. Eighty-three turned and 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. Jessie struggled against Sixty-one, kicking out at his shins and squirming violently.

Charles looked back at Eighty-three. “The sentence will be carried out today. These guards here will accompany you to make sure you are not aided in anyway by your fellow Numbered here. I will return this evening to ensure that the punishment was enforced.”

With this, Charles clutched the tablet to his chest and turned towards the door. Two of the guards followed him out, but the other three stayed behind.

“Allright,” one of them barked at Eighty-three, it’s voice robotic through the helmet. “Let’s go.”

# # #

Scene 13

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 had 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 grid. Locked down underground like rats. There’s nothing you could have done. You didn’t know.”

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

“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. President Marcus stood with a warm smile on his face. They had not heard him and his guards enter.

“Who’s evil?”

Sixty-one quickly looked at the ground. Jessie held her eyes on Marcus 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, “Sixty-one is it? Who do we think is evil today? Is it the giant rats you claim attack you throughout the city? Or the grid that tries to eat baby’s brains at night?”

“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?”

Marcus looked around the room as if he couldn’t find someone.

“Who are we talking about here?”

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

“Her?” Marcus 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 Marcus, 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?”

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

“They don’t know?”

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.”

Marcus 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 the President 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 young child to be Numbered in all of its years and we have no intention of doing so.”

“Yes, she went through the Shaming and she has been plugged and she 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 was invited to the Depot to participate in the Preparing. An honor I’m sure any of you would immediately. All Jessie has to do is say the word, and she is pulled out of here and put aboard the next transport to the Depot. 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 Marcus 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 Marcus. They were on her.

“So while she may sleep and eat and work along side you, she is different in one very important way.”

He looked down at her, smiling.

“She can leave anytime she wants.”

Somebody gasped behind her.

“Wonderful,” Marcus 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 Marcus, 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 guards followed him out.

Jessie’s eyes were glued to the floor.

“Is this true?” Sixty-one asked.

She looked up at him. His face was red with rage. He was shaking.

“Tell me!” he screamed at her.

Jessie nodded.

He let out a growl and kicked the cot in front of him, sending it skittering across the floor. He stalked out of the room. The noise in the room grew as Jessie looked back down at the floor. The other Numbered all started shouting at the same time. Some of them to each other, and some directly at her.

After a few moments, Jessie lifted her eyes to where Eighty-three was laying. The woman’s eyes were open. Tears were running down her blistered and cracked face as she stared directly at Jessie.

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