

Jessie felt the plug disengage from her skull and the straps loosen around her body. She sat up slowly. Alex was pressing his shoulder into the door and holding the handle. Shouts and yells were coming from the hallway.

Ernst was stuffing equipment into his bag then snapped it shut and threw it over his shoulder.

“You ready?” Alex said.

Ernst looked back at Jessie, annoyed, then grabbed her wrist and yanked her off the table. She stumbled then took her place next to his side. His hand was like a vice around her wrist. Ernst hair hung down in front of his face.

He nodded to Alex.

“Ok, stay close, this isn’t going to be pretty.”

He opened the door and the noise immediately became deafening. Jessie saw angry faces crowded around the door screaming and yelling in her direction.

“Back up,” Alex bellowed, but the crowd kept pressing forward. He shoved the one closest to him, which pushed the whole crowd back a fraction, but they were still trapped in the room.

One of the larger boys stepped through the crowd to face Alex.

“What the hell did your Coder do? We were almost to the tower!”

“Back up Mark, let us through!”

“Not until she answers for what she did!”

Alex pushed Mark back.

“One more chance,” Alex said.

Mark stepped forward to shove Alex, but just as his hands were going to connect, Alex stepped to the side and swung his right hand. It connected hard with Mark’s jaw and there was a loud crack. The large boy slumped to the floor.

Alex stepped close to the crowd, who backed up under his glare. Ernst hurried out of the room dragging Jessie with him. They stepped over Mark’s body as he exited.

Alex shoved the person closest to him who stumbled back and fell to

the floor, opening a swath in the crowd of trainees. Alex shoved his way through the rest of the people with Ernst and Jessie staying close behind him.

As soon as they broke free of the crowd, the three started running down the hallway. They had made it halfway to the turn when Jessie looked back.

She saw Mark on his hands and knees struggling to stand, and a part of the crowd had broken off to follow them.

“They’re coming!” Jessie yelled at Alex and Ernst, but they ignored her and kept running.

They turned the corner at the iron door and kept running passed the empty bays. A few of the trainees and mentors were in the hallway, but the trio flew by before they could react.

Jessie started to slow at the elevators, but the boys kept going full speed and Jessie hurried to stay up with them.

They reached the end of the hallway and Alex crashed into the door at the end, sending it flying open. The three of them poured into the stairwell. The metal rails and concrete steps ran up and down. Alex took off down the steps and Ernst and Jessie followed, taking them two and three at a time. Twice Ernst stumbled and almost crashed into the wall, but he managed to keep his footing.

After descending two floors there was a loud crash above them as the door swung open again. The trainees must have gathered themselves enough to start following in earnest.

“Here!” Ernst called out.

He had stopped at a landing and was opening the door. Alex was already several steps ahead of him and had to turn back. Ernst held the door open as Jessie and Alex dove through, then quickly but quietly closed the door behind him.

They were in a brightly lit hallway bustling with activity, but none of the people were dressed in the greys of the trainees. Many of them were in long white coats, the women pushing carts full of small tools and equipment around.

They forced themselves to walk slowly down the hallway, fighting to keep from gasping for air.

“Where are we —“ Jessie started to ask, but Ernst and Alex shushed her simultaneously.

Halfway down the hall, Ernst glanced into a room then opened the door for Alex and Jessie to enter.

Inside was not too dissimilar from the training bays. There was a bed and IV kit and some other medical equipment. There were no servers or terminals though.

“What are we going to do?” Ernst asked Alex.

“I don’t know, but we have to get her out of here. If they find her —“  
“I know.”

“If they find me, what?” Jessie asked.

They both turned to Jessie.

“Are you really this dense?” Alex asked.

“What?” Jessie said.

“You just hijacked the Severing,” Ernst said. “I — I don’t think this has ever been done.”

Ernst stopped talking and just stared into space.

“So,” Jessie said, shrugging her shoulders. “They should have built it better.”

“They?” Alex shouted.

Ernst immediately shushed him. Alex lowered his voice and kept going.

“The President himself coded up that Severing! The only reason we’re here, the only reason the faction is even functioning is because we won the Threshing! And we have to win it again. We have to. And the only way they figure out who should be in the Threshing is the Severings. And, oh my god, I can’t believe this happened. Why did you do that? How did you even think of that?”

“It was Balaam,” Jessie said. “He put it in my head.”

“Who the hell is Balaam?” Alex said.

Jessie cut her eyes between the two of them before speaking.

“I snuck down to the bay last night after hours.”

“What?” Ernst hissed out. “You cant—”

“I was freaking out!” Jessie said. “I needed some advice so I reached out to a friend of mine from the city. He reminded me of one of the jobs I was on two years ago.”

“You mean like the jobs that got you shamed right?” Alex said sarcastically.

Jessie ignored him and kept talking.

“I was in charge of hacking the security system. I was supposed to keep the cameras looking the wrong way and the right doors locked and unlocked. But instead of coded up a hack that deleted the security infrastructure of the entire city. I found a hole in their code so I just exploited it. I figured it would be fun to really screw with them.”

“What happened?” Ernst asked.

“Well, we were able to finish the job, but we also had to disband for three months and move our hideout because it brought down so much heat on us.”

“And what? He told you to do it again?”

“Yes. Well, not really. I just thought...”

Alex turned around and started pacing his hands on his head.

“We have to get her out of here,” Ernst said again.

“Get me out of here? Why?” Jessie said.

They both looked at her incredulously.

“Trainees have been banished for far less,” Alex said. “They’ll put you out of the city into the wild on your own. You wouldn’t last twenty-four hours.”

Jessie’s eyes went large. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again.

“Where are we going to take her?” Alex asked.

Ernst shook his head.

“I have no idea. There’s got to be places in the city to hide, but we have to get her out of the building first.”

“How long do you think we have?” Alex said.

“I don’t know. How could I possibly know? This isn’t something that has

ever happened before. And she's not exactly easy to hide," Ernst said motioning to Jessie's stubbled head.

"Ok, ok. Here's what we're going to do. I'll go out first to check the corridor, then we get her to the stairwell. Not the one by the elevator, but the emergency one at the back of the building. I can't imagine many people use that one. From there, we – I guess we just try to get to the first floor and figure it out from there. Ok?"

Ernst and Jessie both nodded.

Alex took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, but before he reached it, the door swung open from the outside revealing two faction guards.

Jessie could see her reflection in the dark masks of the two faction guards as they towered over her. They reached in simultaneously, grabbed her arms and yanked her out of the room. Alex step forward and reached towards one of the guards, but Ernst grabbed him and pulled him back.

The guards turned down the hallway and started walking quickly dragging Jessie's toes across the ground. She didn't bother to struggle. She just dropped her head and let them carry her.

They made their way through the giant corridors, the portraits of the president seemed to watch her move as she passed. Many of the other trainees lined the hallway and glared at her, but she ignored it. None of it mattered anymore.

There was no way she was going home. Ernst and Alex had made that clear. Would she become a Numbered here in the capital? Or would she be enslaved to the grid? Or would she simply be disposed of as another problem?

The guards approached the end of the hallway and dragged her into the waiting elevator. They let go of her arms and Jessie missed her feet, slamming her knees into the floor. The doors closed on the elevator without the guards pushing any buttons and the metal box began to descend.

Once the elevator was moving it was impossible to tell how fast or how far they were going. There were no lights or buttons on the panels.

Jessie struggled back to her feet and glanced up at the guards. They were looking directly forward, neither of them moving the slightest.

Eventually the elevator began to slow and came to a stop. The doors slid open to reveal a concrete room with low ceilings and harsh fluorescent lighting. The room was packed with old, broken down equipment stacked haphazardly. There was a small path down the middle that had been dug out of the junk through the room to a door on the other side.

Jessie looked up at the guards, unsure of what to do.

They both nodded at her to go through the door. Jessie stepped out of the elevator. As soon as she was clear the doors snapped closed behind her and she heard the elevator start to ascend.

Jessie stood, unsure of what to do. Was she banished down here? It seemed like a weird way to punish her.

Jessie heard a rattle across the room and the door opened.

A tall, thin man with wispy gray hair appeared in the door. He pushed the glasses on the end of his long nose up and smiled. He had on a old pair of dirty jeans and a bulky sweatshirt.

“Hi Jessie, come on in.”

Jessie stepped tentatively through the room.

“Don’t worry dear, I won’t bite.”

He held the door open as she stepped through.

“Have a seat. I’ll be right with you.

It was a wreck.

Old, beat up tables lined the walls and every surface that was covered. To the right, old computers were stacked so high that they threatened to fall over. They were all in varying states of disassembly. Wires hung out of cases. There were stacks of cooling fans, mother boards, and various other circuitry Jessie didn’t recognize.

Along the back wall were the working computers. Several different ones seemed to all be chaotically wired together and whirring loudly. Two large monitors sat next to each other on the desk in the midst of the stack of hardware. Windows were popping up, moving around, disappearing on the screen. Commands were printed out, the cursor flew around

the screen on its own.

The man was rattling and fighting with an old coffee maker. The entire desk was filled with junk that Jessie had only ever seen hawked in the town square by the scroungers. Several coffee makers sat stacked in the corner. There were a half dozen toasters. Jessie recognized a microwave, but she'd never seen one actually plugged in and turned on.

"Ah!" he said, he did something else to the coffee maker that Jessie couldn't see then turned around.

His thick, bifocal glasses sat on the end of his nose and he was slightly hunched over.

"Have you ever had coffee Jessie?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Ah, ah! Well you're in for a treat! I don't suppose there's much available in the cities these days. It'll be ready shortly. Why don't you have a seat?"

He motioned to the middle of the room where an old coach and several loungers sat all facing each other around a small table. The carpet was red and shaggy. It was stained in several spots and papers and stacks of folders were piled everywhere.

"Um..."

"Yes dear?"

"Who are you?"

"Why I'm President Marcus. Who else? Though I'd rather you call me Barry. That's my first name and I much prefer it."

"I've seen President Marcus and you aren't him."

Barry laughed.

"Oh the pictures and portraits everywhere? That's not me. I have a stand in that does the public stuff. It's much easier and... prudent to be a bit behind-the-scenes."

He opened his hands in front of himself.

"I've never had much of a presence myself, so he does all the public stuff for me. I don't exactly have the time to be flying around the entire Americas making appearances either. Now, sit, sit. I'll get the coffee and

then we have a few things to talk about.”

Jessie moved over and took her seat on one of the coaches. She sat just on the edge of the cushion.

Barry pattered around with the coffee a few more minutes then brought two steaming cups over. He sat one on the table in front of Jessie and then took a seat in the lounge across from her. He lifted his own cup to his face, dropped his nose to the edge, and inhaled deeply.

“Nothing quite like it,” he said then took a sip and placed it back on the table.

“Now dear, I was greatly impressed by your performance in the Severing. I’ve been doing this for, well, much longer than I care to think about, and never had someone hack the game quite like you did. Sure, a few always try some last ditch efforts when they know they’re going to lose, but you... you could have won and yet you burned it down. Care to explain why?”

Jessie shrugged.

“Seemed like a good idea.”

“But you could have gotten fried in the process.”

“That wasn’t how it was coded.”

Barry’s eyebrows lifted at this.

“And how did you know that?”

Jessie pressed her lips together and looked away from him.

“Now you’ve left me with a bit of a problem. That Severing was supposed to cut the amount of teams in half and I had coded the next one for only that many teams. It’s easy enough to fix. A minor inconvenience. I’ll still be able to pare the teams down to the number we need for the Threshing.”

Jessie’s eyes cut at him.

“You have a problem with that?”

“Why do you have to fry all of us?”

“It’s the only way to truly test you. We can only send the best to the Threshing.”

“Then why bring me in? I have no training. Why force me here instead



of just recruit me for the next one?”

Barry paused for a long moment.

“Let’s just say one of my advisors all but insisted on bringing you here now.”

“Who? Who here even knows I exist?”

Barry waved away the question.

“It doesn’t matter. All I’ve seen so far suggests he was right in his insistence. You say you have no training, yet you were the first to make it to the tower. That shows me you’re more prepared than at least some of the Coders that are much older and experienced. And your burning down of the tower shows me you’re thinking far outside the bounds of what is presented to you, which is what we’ll need to win the Threshing.”

Fear seized Jessie. She dropped her head and tried to keep from shaking.

“You’re sending me to the Threshing?” she asked quietly.

“Well we don’t know that yet do we? There’s still two more Severings left.”

“And what if I don’t want this? What if I refuse to play?”

Barry paused for a moment, then motioned to Jessie’s cup. She leaned down, picked up the cup and took a sip of the steaming liquid.

Her face screwed up as the taste hit her tongue.

“Ah yes, it’s a bit bitter at first. It’s an acquired taste.”

“Tell me dear,” he continued, “what is it that you want?”

“I just want to go home,” she said.

“All of the other candidates see it as an honor to be here. They’re the best of the best. And their families are rewarded with extra credits. And yet, you want to go back to the city. Why is that?”

“My brother,” she said.

“Your brother? What do you mean?”

“He came to Aeta and never came home.”

“What happened?”

Jessie shrugged.

“Surely you got a report back? Any casualties are reported to the fami-

lies.”

“We never heard anything. He just never came home.”

Barry sighed and sat back into the old couch. He lifted the mug to his lips and sipped on the hot liquid while staring at the ceiling.

Jessie sat quietly, waiting.

“Ok,” Barry said. “How about this. You stay for now and keep training. I’ll look into what happened with your brother and will get you a report before the next Severing. If you still want to go home, then I’ll get you on the next transport back to New York. But if I can change your mind, then you stay on as a candidate and we’ll see how you do in the next Severing. How does that sound?”

Jessie smiled at him.

“Really? You’d send me back?”

“Of course! We only want candidates here that want to be. So let me do some digging for you and I’ll get back with you in a few days. Deal?”

Barry stood and reached out his hand. Jessie stood and shook his hand.

“Deal!” she said.

Jessie turned back towards the elevator.

“Oh, one more thing,” Barry said.

Jessie turned back.

“Yes?”

“Let’s keep this meeting a secret. We can’t go having everyone know who the real President is, ok? I want to make sure you can go home if you want to.”

Jessie nodded and turned back towards the elevator.

The two guards escorted Jessie back to the elevator. This time there was no need to hold on to her. She stared off at the horizon as they made their way back down the corridor. When the elevator opened again, they didn’t follow her out and Jessie began walking back to her bunk. She fought to keep her face blank as they walked through the corridors.

The other trainees were obviously still angry with her. They all stopped and followed her with their eyes as she passed, their faces screwed up in disgust at her. But they stayed quiet and kept their distance.

The guards took her back to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and they walked past the bays. They turned the corner, but when they approached her bay, the guards kept moving. She opened her mouth to ask, but then closed it and kept pace with them.

Eventually they came to a new door. The guard swiped his hand across the key lock and it buzzed open. Jessie took a look at the guards, their blank masks pointed directly forward, then pushed the bay door open. Alex and Ernst were waiting for her inside.

Their eyes lit up when they saw her.

“Jessie! Where have you been?” Alex said.

He continued excitedly before she could answer.

“Oh man! I wish you could have seen it! Marcus read everyone the riot act. Railed about how this new recruit with no training was able to pull off such an upset. He individually called out mistakes all of the Coders made, and oh man, Az — that was the best part! He pulled Az to the front and berated him for a good five minutes on letting you not only reach the tower before him but burn it down while he was standing there. It was amazing!”

Ernst and Alex beamed at her, unable to contain their excitement.

“What about everyone else? They’re still glaring at me as I walk down the halls,” Jessie said.

“Oh that,” Ernst waved his hands as if that didn’t matter. “They’re just jealous. Marcus warned everyone that they better keep their hands off you and instead of attacking you they should probably try to learn something from you.”

Alex laughed at that.

“Oh you should have seen the other Coder’s faces! They *loved* being told to learn from the recruit that’s been here for a week.”

“And here’s the best part,” Ernst said. “Our equipment and credits have been upgraded. It’s pretty standard that the teams that pass the

Severings get new installs, but since we were the only ones to win, we got a bigger upgrade than normal.”

“Yeah, we have our own private bay with bigger stacks and much nicer medic equipment,” Alex said.

“Come on, let’s go take a look at it.” Ernst said, turning to the door.

“Wait,” Alex said to Ernst then looked down at Jessie. “Where’d you go during the briefing? Where’d those guards take you?”

Jessie paused. Everything that President Marcus had said raced through her head. She struggled to speak.

Should she tell them what he had said? Shame shot through her mind. She thought of Ernst and Alex’s families. What would happen to them if she went home? But she couldn’t think about that. Barry had said to keep him a secret and that means keeping their deal a secret too.

She looked between Alex and Ernst’s excited faces.

They had no idea. Their fate was tied to hers now.

“Um,” she said, trying to keep her voice relaxed. “Apparently Marcus knew the other trainees weren’t happy with me so he sent the guards to get me before anything happened. They just sat me in a room. I had no idea what was going on until I saw you two.”

She forced a smile on her face.

“This is great though. We’re one step closer to the Threshing. Let’s go take a look at the upgrades.”

The door slid open again and Harold walked in. His face was almost purple with rage.

“What kind of stunt was that?” he yelled at Jessie.

Jessie couldn’t find words to speak, but Alex stepped in between them.

“She won,” Alex said.

“She didn’t win! She melted down the entire Severing!”

“Didn’t you see Marcus’s address?” Alex said, still incredulous at Harold’s anger.

“You have no idea! No idea!” he screamed and slammed his fist down on the counter nearest him, rattling everything inside.

Jessie finally found her voice.

“I survived!” she yelled. “What else do you want? And look at what I got us.”

Harold took two deep breaths in and slowly exhaled.

“You’re on his radar now.”

“Who?”

“Marcus. He’s watching you now. You were supposed to lay low, get through the Severing, but not make a splash. Just move on to the next round. And not only didn’t you do that, you’ve become the only thing everyone in the entire city can talk about.”

“So?”

At this, Harold’s face went purple again and the three of them instinctively backed away. But instead of exploding again, Harold slumped into one of the office chairs nearby. He pressed on either side of his temple with his thumbs, closing his eyes against the pain.

“Why are you here Jessie?” he asked, just above a whisper.

Jessie looked at Ernst and Alex, confused.

“Because of the Threshing. Because the Mayor recruited me.”

“Yeah?” Harold asked, opening his eyes. “You haven’t wondered why you’re the youngest of all the recruits or why you were late to the party? Or even why you’re the second in your family to be recruited?”

Jessie’s eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean?”

Harold stood.

“It’s not for me to tell you, especially if you haven’t figured it out yourself.”

“No,” Jessie yelled, taking a step towards him. “You can’t just say that and then not explain.”

Harold smirked.

“Fortunately I can.”

“But—”

Harold waved his hand cutting her off.

“The only thing we can do now is get you ready for the next Severing.

It'll be coming in the next couple of weeks. Since you've already got everyone's attention, we'll need to figure out how to use that to our advantage."

"And how are we going to do that?" Jessie said. "I still don't understand most of what happened in the first Severing."

"What do you mean?"

"Clifton and Bill had compasses and were able to get me the lighter and gas. Az somehow had that flashy knife thing. Why didn't I have anything?"

Harold looked at Jessie like she was crazy, then back at Ernst and Alex. They all looked back at him, confused.

"Are you serious?" Harold asked Jessie. She just stared at him.

"And you two don't know?"

Ernst and Alex shook their heads.

"It's no wonder Randy didn't even make it to the first Severing."

Alex's face darkened at this, but he kept quiet.

"Do none of you even know how we won the last Threshing?"

Their blank stares answered his question.

"Come with me," he said and walked out of the bay.

The white light faded into almost complete blackness. She turned around slowly to get her bearings. Another training simulation. Harold had been pushing the three of them hard over the last week. Sixteen and seventeen hour days. Some of the sims were just a few minutes. Others lasted entire days.

*I'm in some kind of cavern, she said.*

*Right, said Ernst, this is an evade and avoid simulation. There are several Faction bots hunting you and you have to survive for the full hour.*

*And if they catch me?*

*Then you just log out. It's like a big game of tag. Don't let the bots touch you until the hour is up.*

Jessie took a step down the tunnel and rocks shifted under her feet. She stopped, listening, then began to move again.

She was feeling anxious. It wasn't the simulation, this was just like all the others. It was the fact that she hadn't heard from Barry. He had said to give him a few days and it had been over a week. The next Severing could come any day and he had promised to get back with her before it happened. What was taking so long?

Jessie took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

The President was a busy man. And he had promised Jessie that she would hear from him so she just needed to be patient.

*So what's the play here? Do I just find a place to hide or stay on the move?*

*Where are you now?*

*In the middle of a tunnel.*

*Then I would say at least keep moving until you find a good place to hide.*

Jessie nodded and kept walking. She hugged the sides of the tunnel trying to keep her feet light and make as little noise as possible. She would take a few steps, then stop and listen. As she moved, she ran her hand along the rocky wall to keep her bearings.

She had only been moving a few minutes when she heard the sound of boots crunching on rock moving her way. Quickly, she back tracked a few steps to a small indentation in the wall she had felt a minute before and crouched down, tightening herself into as small a ball as possible.

The boots continued to get louder as they approached. Jessie remained motionless as the came by her position. She ventured a peek as they went by and shivered when she saw the familiar black helmets and weapons of the Faction guards.

*Two Faction guards just passed by, she said.*

*They didn't see you?*

*I'm still here aren't I?*

*Ok, good. Can you stay where you are?*

*I don't think so. I got lucky they didn't see me. They'll definitely find me if they come back through.*

*Keep moving then.*

It was hard to tell how far she was going, but it had to be at least a couple hundred feet when she saw flickering light coming from ahead. She crept closer and saw that it was some kind of chamber. Her tunnel

connected to it and several others branched off. There were large, ornate carvings around each of the doorways into the branching tunnels. Jessie couldn't quite make out what the figures were from this far back.

Jessie froze as a shadow was cast across the wall. A figure had stepped into the chamber and stopped.

*What are these bots?* she asked.

*What do you mean? I think they're just Faction guards. You saw them right?*

Jessie looked ahead at the shadow. If it was a guard then it was down on its knees for some reason. The shadow kept jumping with the flames but the image was only a few feet tall.

Suddenly, whatever it was raised up on its hind legs and stuck its snout into the air for a few seconds before it dropped back down and disappeared.

Jessie stood frozen in place. What was that thing? When it was up on its legs it had to be seven feet tall unless the fire was playing a trick on the shadow.

She was unsure of what to do next but the sound of boots behind her spurred her into action. She walked quickly forward, hugging the wall and avoiding the loose rocks wherever she could.

She quickly surveyed the chamber as she approached then stepped in, looking around wildly for the direction she should go. There were four other tunnels branched off from the chamber besides the one she had been in. The carvings above each of the doorways were terrifying. Monsters of every kind were depicted. Huge beasts with fangs, claws, and enormous eyes.

The sound of the boots behind her was getting closer. With the position of the torches and the light, whatever shadow she had seen must have moved to one of the tunnels on her left, so she turned and entered the closest tunnel on her right.

*Forty-five minutes Jessie, Ernst said. You're almost there.*

Jessie didn't know whether to be relieved or not. On one hand, she had easily made it through with just one brush with the Faction guards. On the other hand, this place gave her the creeps. The carvings on the wall and whatever that beast was that she had seen in the corridor.

She continued down the tunnel until her hand found a large crack in



the wall to her right. It was too dark to see, but she felt her way along the edges and found that the space was a little over a foot wide. It would be a tight squeeze, but she could fit. It'd make a good hiding spot.

She decided to wait here in case the guards decided to head down the same tunnel she did.

She crouched down by the crack in the wall, waiting and listening. She had gone around a small bend right at the beginning of the tunnel, but could still make out the corridor in the fire light.

The sound of boots hitting the hard, smooth rock of the corridor carried down the tunnel and she heard voices. They must be discussing which way to go next.

Suddenly, there was a loud yell of alarm. Then a quick pop-pop-pop. Jessie had heard that sound before. It took her back to the square where she had been shamed. Except this time, it wasn't shamings. It was executions.

Jessie remembered being crowded into the square. She hadn't been able to see over the heads of the adults, but she knew what was happening. Someone had been caught stealing food or attacking one of the Faction guards or one of the other myriad of reasons an adult could be executed.

They would be hanging by their hands, tied to the top of poles. Their crime would be read over the loud speaker. Then Jessie would hear the pop-pop-pop of the Faction weapons and she knew the people were dead.

This time though, the pop-pop-pop kept coming as the guards screamed. Jessie crawled up the tunnel. She saw shadows moving quickly. The giant beast jumped on one of the guards. The scream became high pitched before there was a loud crunch and everything went silent.

Jessie gasped and started scrambling backwards towards the crack again. The shadow jumped up again and turned towards her. There was a loud growl.

She turned and scampered back to the crack. She pushed herself deep.  
*What is that thing?*

*What is what?* Ernst replied.

Jessie kept shoving her body as far as she could into the space. She heard the scratching of the rocks as the monster started down the tunnel after her. She froze as she heard the monster approach and then pass the

crack where she had shoved herself in.

*There's something here.*

*Right, the guards.*

*No, it's something else.*

*There's nothing else. Just the guards patrolling. All you have to do is evade them for another few minutes.*

*No! I'm telling you. Something just jumped the guards and killed them.*

*What?!?*

*And it's stalking—*

A loud growl filled Jessie ears and there was a searing pain ripping down her arm. Jessie screamed and shoved back further into the space. There were more growls and snarling. She heard the claws scraping against the rock.

The claws found her leg and tore through the flesh easily. Jessie screamed out in pain, but there was no more room in the crack. It had grown too tight to shove herself in.

The claws found her leg again and she screamed kicking out at the invisible attacker, but hit nothing.

She pushed with all her might into the crack. She clamped her eyes shut, tried to block the sound of the monster and pushed as hard as she could.

A loud tearing sound ripped through the space and she toppled over away from the monster. She slammed her head on the ground and stars exploded in her vision.

She shook her head trying to clear her thoughts and finally became aware that Ernst was yelling into her head.

*Jessie! What is going on? Jessie answer me!*

*I'm— I'm still here.*

She could hear the beast still growling and its claws scraping against the stone as it frantically reached for her, but it was further away now. She rolled over and tried to push herself up, but pain shot through her right arm and she collapsed back down to the ground. The pain from her leg and arm overtook her mind and she moaned.

With her good arm she reached down and felt along her leg. She could feel the wide wounds where the claws had tore through and feel the sticky

warmth of the blood.

*Ernst, I'm—*

Her head began to swim again.

*There is— When am— home?*

*Jessie, hang on! Alex is giving you something. You've got to stay awake just a couple minutes longer.*

Jessie nodded her head limply, but realized her eyes were closed. She dragged them open, but she could only see the blackness of the cave. The monster was sounding further and further away.

*Thirty seconds Jessie. You're almost there.*

Jessie closed her eyes again, leaning into the blackness until everything went white.

—

“What the hell was that?” Alex was yelling. “She almost died! She flat-lined right there at the end!”

“I don't know!” Ernst was arguing back. “It was just a training sim. Avoid and evade. It was the caverns with the Faction guards. If they found you, you lose and get logged out. That's it.”

Jessie was sitting up on the edge of the bench, shaking her head. She kept gripping her arm and leg making sure they were still intact. The sounds of the snarling monster and raking claws still reverberated through her head.

“What happened in there?” Ernst asked.

Jessie squeezed her eyes shut and tried to picture the cavern again. So many of these things would float away like dreams if she didn't concentrate.

She began recounting the cavern, hiding from the guards, and the shadows.

The door to their bay slammed open and Harold came in.

“You two, out!” he demanded.

“Why? She was just telling us—”

“Out!” Harold screamed. He grabbed Alex by the shoulder and shoved him towards the door. Alex shot him an ugly look but left with Ernst hurrying to catch up.

“Tell me everything,” Harold said.

“Couldn’t you watch in the public logs?” she asked.

“I did. But the public logs cut out halfway through. That’s when Ernst called me freaking out. So. You tell me.”

Jessie recounted the entire sim. She had to fight to remember the last few minutes before she was logged. Harold’s face stayed like stone as Jessie recounted everything.

Harold stood in silence after she finished for several long moments, his eyes darting back and forth before he spoke.

“I inspected the coding of that sim myself before Ernst ran it. There was no monster demon dog thing. It was just faction guards on patrol.”

“Then how—”

“I don’t know. There shouldn’t be a way for anyone to get into our sim code. This came from someone very, very savvy.”

“You mean like someone who could code up a lightning sword hack in a Severing?” Jessie said, thinking back to their conversation about Az.

“Maybe,” Harold said.

“He tried to have me killed?” Jessie asked.

“This is why I told you to stay under the radar,” Harold said, frustration thick in his voice. “Now they know you’re a threat.”

“Let’s report it to President Marcus,” she said. “He’ll take of it. He doesn’t want the candidates trying to kill each other outside of the Severings.”

Harold rolled his eyes.

“That’s exactly what he wants. He needs the strongest and most ruthless candidates to make it to the Threshing. Hacking into a highly encrypted and protected software like a training simulation would be exactly the kind of action they’re looking for.”

“I don’t believe it. Barry said—”

Jessie cut herself off but Harold’s eyes narrowed.

“Barry? You mean President Marcus?”

Jessie didn’t answer.

“What’s really going on Jessie?”

“Nothing. I just think Marcus will take care of the candidates.”

“You mean that man that churns through candidates every four years? The man that has kept a strangle hold on the Americas faction for forty

years? You were sent to the Numbered. You should know what he's capable of."

"He didn't do this," Jessie said. "Az did. He's the one that came after me. Not Marcus. That's who we should be worried about."

Harold sighed.

"Fine. But we need to get you ready for the next Severing."

Jessie nodded and hopped off the table.

"What's next?"