

I knew that I shouldn't have done it, but I did. If I get caught, I'll be killed. I clutched my bag containing my few possessions and continued my way down the busy city street. I didn't feel right. I was being followed; I knew it. Somebody saw me do it. I slowly picked up my pace, rushing through the crowd of people. I found the abandoned building that I was secretly living in and locked the door behind me.

I opened my bag, dumping the contents of it out. I took inventory and ate a small amount of my ration. I was trying to save up some extra food for winter, but I need all the calories from the government issued food I can get. I have gun, but I don't know how to use it. Besides, only officials can leave the city. I sat on the floor in the middle of a room of the small, empty house with creaking floors and yellowed walls.

I pulled out the items that I had recently stolen. I knew that I shouldn't have done it, but I had to. I watched her for months and found out about her life. She was a lot older than me, probably either in her late thirties or early forties. She was married to an official, who looked very well fed compared to her.

I found her this morning when she didn't look out the window like she usually does as her husband leaves for work. She wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway. She was getting thinner and thinner as the days went by. Part of it was probably the depression of losing her ten-year-old son, the other part was her malnutrition. Many women and children have died because men have either taken their rations or killed them.

I have been pretending to be a full grown male, but I'm not. I am sixteen and a girl. Women are not supposed to come out of the house without a man with them. Children are supposed to be taught by their mothers, but it is rare that they ever learn to read or do math or anything like that. I have been dressing in my father's clothes ever since he died, four years ago. I cut my hair every so often on a piece of broken glass and use my old clothes to hide my feminine features. I took everything that I could fit in my bag. I took food, blankets, a knife, a pair of shoes, an electronic reader, and the charger to it.

Then I heard a soft tapping sound. At first I didn't realize it, but somebody was at the door and they knew I was here. *Tap, tap, tap.* I peered through the dirty window and saw a boy who couldn't have been any older than me standing on the ground where a porch would have been. When the shortages came, people took the wood from the porch for shelter. He looked like everybody else who wasn't an official; brown eyes, brown hair, bone

white skin. Officials have brown eyes like everybody, but they bleach their hair and they get food at their work so they are a little fatter than the rest of us. I grabbed my knife and reached for the door.

“Sir,” the boy said when I opened the door. “Please, we need the food. You can keep everything else, but please, can we have the food that you took. My father is going to kill me next. Please don’t hurt me.”

I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him into the house. I slammed the door shut and pushed him into a corner. I held him at knifepoint and made sure that he didn’t have any weapons.

“Sounds like you don’t have that good of a life,” I said making my voice sound gruff. This was the first time that I had spoken at home for months.

“I do not have a good life. I have been trying to run away, but I’m afraid that I will die,” he said, stammering over his words.

“So, your best option is to come here hoping that a thief would return your food and not kill you,” I asked.

“Please, Sir, don’t hurt me. I’ll do whatever you want,” he was truly scared.

“Just a tip, don’t go back home,” I said in my normal voice.

“You’re a girl! How did you? But women can’t... I thought that...”

“There is nothing wrong with being a girl. You won’t go back to your house to tell someone about me because then you would get yourself killed.” I lowered my knife and started to dig through my bag.

“What should I do then? I have no place to go. I’m too young to work for my ration,” he said.

“And I’m a girl and even if I wasn’t, I’m only sixteen,” I told him. He watched me as I pulled out a small apple. He couldn’t see it though. My cloak hid it from his view. “You can stay here, but you have to get your own food.”

“Do I have to steal,” he asked.

“No, I have an actual job. Nobody knows I’m a sixteen-year-old girl. I work as an assistant to 00001.” Here we don’t have names. We have numbers. 00001 is the Officer’s daughter. The Officer is the equivalent to a dictator. His daughter is the only female allowed outside without a male accompanying her. She lives in a huge mansion in the center of the

city. My job is to fetch anything that she wants and do anything that she doesn't want to do. I knew that I had to lie to gain his trust. 00001 knows my secret.

"What type of job could I get, the rest are all physical labor. I'm not strong enough to do anything."

"Can you count?"

"Yes."

"Can you stand?"

"Yes."

"Can you see?"

"Yes."

"Go get a job as a ration inspector." Ration inspectors are people who stand at the ration center and make sure nobody is taking any extra food. "Go tomorrow," I said. "It's time to sleep."

I gave him two of my blankets and an old cloak, pushed him into a closet, and locked the door. I didn't trust him yet. I went around the house to make sure all the windows and doors were locked. Then, using my bag as a pillow and blankets as a bed, I ignored the boy's constant knocking on the door and went to sleep. In the morning, I let him out and gave him a piece of fruit. I took him down to the ration center and helped him apply for a job. As I had suspected, he got it and had to start work immediately. I headed towards the mansion in the center of the city to see 00001. She was already at the gate by the time I got there. She had brown hair and brown eyes, but she was very heavy set due to her father trying to mock the rest of us. She is a year older than me, but we are friends.

"Good morning," she said.

"Hello," I said back. I had to pretend to hate my job; the Officer and other officials would have it no other way.

"I want you to do my hair today. We'll do nothing else but my hair until your shift is over," she said. I nodded and followed her inside. I loved to see all the fancy furniture and elegant pictures. I followed her to her special room that she dedicated to doing her hair. When you live in a mansion all by yourself, you can do that, I guess. "I have something important to tell you, and I can't believe that I haven't told you yet. Do you know the reason that I don't give you extra food or anything like that?"

“No,” I said.

“I didn’t want you to stick out. I know your secret and the more that you look different, the higher a chance that you will get caught. Right now, you have bigger problems. An official found his wife dead and his son missing yesterday. I know it was you, but you wouldn’t have killed anybody, would you?”

“She was dead when I got there. I took some supplies and left. The boy followed me home. He is afraid of his father and is going to live with me now,” I said.

“The official is making a big deal about it. Somehow he tracked down your house. He is trying to blame his son. What’s the son’s number anyway?”

“I don’t know. I want him to trust me. He knows my secret. If the official finds him, he’ll find me too. I’ll get killed for both being a girl and stealing!”

“Go find him, Naomi,” 00001 said. I smiled. Naomi is what I always wanted to be called, but I’m stuck with 31336.

I left and headed directly for the ration center. I found him there and told him that 00001 requested his presence in my gruff voice that I had used when I first met him. I grabbed his wrist and pulled him through the streets. When we got back to my house, I told him everything.

“If my father finds me, I’ll be killed! We need to get out of here,” he said.

“No, if your father finds you, both of us will be killed,” I told him. “We are going to leave town.”

“How? We aren’t officials.”

“We don’t need to be. We just need to look like officials.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll work closely with 00001. She has the extra supplies to disguise us as officials. Then all we have to do is sneak out,” I said.

We sat down careful not to be seen from any windows and hoped nobody would come for us. We were silent, but after a few hours, he broke the silence.

“What’s your name,” he asked.

“31336,” I said affirmatively.

“No, your name. What would you want your name to be if you actually had one?”

“Naomi,” I said. “How about you?”

“My number is 08469. If I had a name, I would want to be called Freedom.”

“Freedom?”

“Yes, I would want everybody to know that I am not some slave stuck in a city with little resources. I would want to be Freedom.”

“I think I understand,” I said.

And then we were quiet again. We took shifts at sleeping to make sure that nobody would attack us at night. Then, early in the morning, we went to see 00001. I knocked on the door and the maid answered. I ignored the maid’s request to leave 00001 alone and went straight up to her room. 08469 stayed outside 00001’s room while I told her about my plan to escape.

“I will help you, but this might take a month or two. I can let you two stay in the spare rooms if you want,” she offered.

“Thank you,” I said. “We will do that.”

“I can get you disguises, but I think you might need to gain a little weight to be recognized as an official. I can give you extra food, but you might want to be careful that it doesn’t make you sick.”

We exited the room and found 08469 examining the decorative wallpaper in the hallway. We were led to separate rooms that had a door between them. The room itself must have been bigger than the house I lived in. It even had its own working bathroom. You don’t want to know what I had to do back at my house when I needed to go.

We spent the next month in those two rooms, eating and relaxing. Soon we had gained enough weight to pass as an official. Word was spreading about 08469’s disappearance. Search parties of officials were hunting the two of us down for high rewards. 00001 got us I.D.s, uniforms, a military car, and weapons. 08469 showed me how to shoot a gun, and I taught him to sew up rips in fabric. On the electronic reader that I had stolen, we looked up books on setting traps and making shelters.

People wanted me dead. I was a thief, a girl, and a murderer in the eyes of the officials. News headlines didn’t support my cause. Most of the common people were supporting me secretly, sending small gifts to help. 00001 gave us a solar powered charger so when we left we could still charge the electronic reader. She also taught us how to drive on a driving simulator that she had put in 08469’s room. I got some better padding to hide

my feminineness, as women cannot be officials. I finally got a chance to cut my hair with real scissors and take a real bath with warm water.

“Where are your parents,” he asked me one day.

“Dead,” I said. “My father was shot and my mother was malnourished.

“Why did you take me in?”

“You needed help. If my father taught me anything, it was to help all that I can.”

“Is that why he was shot? Helping someone?”

I nodded my head. “Yes.”

“I won’t leave you,” he said. “I know we’ve only known each other for a few months, but I love you.”

“I feel the same to you,” I said with a smile.

He kissed me.

Another week went by, but it felt like only a second.

It was time to go.

We loaded all of our things into the car along with a few tarps, sleeping bags, extra clothing, and food, lots and lots of food. We even got our hands on some seeds that we could plant if we ever found a stationary home. I made sure to grab some rope too. It is surprising what rope can do. Then, we got into the car and headed towards the only gate in the city. 08469 drove because he was better than me. I held tight to our I.D.s. and hoped that we would not be questioned. We had a whole story made up, but I was afraid they would find a flaw in our identity. As we approached the gate, an official pulled us over.

“What is your business leaving town,” he asked.

“We are going to the metal mine to retrieve some platinum for 00001,” I said in an extremely deep voice with the help of a small device that fit in my mouth.

“Do you have proof of this,” he asked. I shuffled around with the papers in my hand until I found a note that 00001 gave me and handed it to him. “Proceed,” he said, waving his arm to another official who opened the gate. We were corralled into a tight road. I got nervous. I looked at the barricade ahead as we drove up to a window. Another official was inside.

“We need to see your I.D.,” he said. I looked through my papers, but the small I.D. cards weren’t there.

"009484, don't you have the I.D.s," 08469 asked. 09484 was my fake number. I looked around frantically. Then I saw one of the cards on the ground. I bent over and saw the other under the seat. I tried to reach it, but since I put on a little weight, my arm wouldn't go that far under the seat. I used the edge of my knife, which was concealed in my boot, to drag it out. I handed it to 08469 and brought my head back up. He gave the card to the official. I almost let out a sigh of relief, but then another problem arose.

"Would you like to explain why there is a scratch on your card, 61032," the official asked.

"Sorry, sir," 08469 said. "One of those disgusting beings that try to pass as people attacked me while I was eating my lunch. It grabbed my knife and tried to kill me, but I snapped its neck before it could cause real damage.

"I know what you mean. They are such animals. Just last week I saw two fight each other for food. Proceed," the official said. We were about to pull away when the official yelled at us to stop. 08469 cried out as if he were in pain and stomped on the gas pedal. The gate ahead of us was slowly closing. Another official was trailing us in another car. We barely made it through, but we did.

I looked back at the giant wall that surrounded the city. Guns were pointing directly at us. I thought I would be killed, but I wasn't. Bullets rained on top of the car, but they didn't penetrate the steel that lined the top. 08469 swerved off the road and pulled into the woods. Dodging trees and roots, we made our way deeper into the mass of crowded trees. We must have been driving for at least an hour before we came across a huge lake. We pulled over and got out of the vehicle. The officials had stopped following us. They just gave up.

08469 collapsed where he was standing. I ran to his side.

"I think I'm going to die," he said. It was then that I noticed the wound on his left side.

"How did that happen," I asked.

"The guard that yelled at us threw a knife at me. I pulled it out before you could notice."

"You can't die," I cried out. "We are free now."

Then he said two simple words before he died: "Be strong, Naomi."

Naomi is not a word. It is a name. My name.

I cried. I never cry. I didn't even cry when my father died.

I grabbed a shovel and began to dig a shallow grave. It took me until dark before I could lay his body in it. I lit a fire to help keep warm. Then I grabbed a large rock and a chisel that we had packed. I carved the letters F-R-E-E-D-O-M one by one deep into the rock and placed it atop his grave.

I would have left right then and lived the rest of my lonely life, but I didn't. I spent about a year lingering around the area. I decided to set up a way to free more people. I snuck back and forth into the city, taking people with me. We started a community a few miles into the woods. We had houses and crops and animals; more importantly, we had names.

Freedom's grave became a symbol of the small town that I had started. He was dead, but he helped me gain exactly what he was, freedom.