Scene 44.2

Randy stood motionless next to the empty chair, his hands clasped behind his back. He stared straight ahead at the door through the thick plastic partition that ran from floor to ceiling, wall to wall.

Several minutes passed.

He shifted his feet a bit, then returned to his rigid stance.

The door slammed open.

President Marcus stepped into the room, followed closely by a tall woman with long brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail.

Marcus stalked up to the partition and stared at Randy.

Neither of them spoke. The woman shuffled nervously behind Marcus.

"Jessie's dead."

Randy's jaw clinched and unclenched.

"I know."

"Randy..." the girl said.

"Shut up!" Marcus growled at her, then turned back to Randy.

"What are you going to do with Az?" Randy asked.

"We don't have much of a choice do we?"

"He killed her Marcus. He has to be..."

"Don't give me that," Marcus scoffed. "You know exactly what is going on here. You would do the same."

Randy didn't answer.

"You need to help me get them ready. I'm down to two teams."

Randy glanced behind him, then pulled up the chair and sat.

He lifted his eyes to Marcus.

"No."

Marcus rolled his eyes.

"Really? We're going to do this again?"

"What's the point? Jessie's... she's gone. You're going to keep me trapped in here. You keep making promises, but I don't believe you any more. Let me out and I'll keep helping--"

"Helping? Where exactly has your help gotten me? I'm down to two teams for the Threshing, only one of which has what it really takes to win. You keep holding out on what you'll actually teach them. I brought in your old trainer," Marcus motioned to the woman behind him, "to be your go-between to the teams. That's all you get."

"Then I'm done. If you won't let me out now, why would you after the Threshing?"

"Like I've told you, I'll have no reason to keep you then. And I'll also have no more reasons to keep such a close eye on your parents. And your friends," he glanced over his shoulder at the woman.

Randy stood and stepped to the partition.

"Then at least open up access so I can directly train them on the grid. Teaching through Lila will be slow and prone to errors."

Marcus opened his mouth to answer, but Lila stepped forward to speak.

"You can monitor him the whole time. You'll know everything he does, but he's right. He needs direct access to do the training right."

"You've only got two teams," Randy said. "You don't have any time to waste."

Marcus chewed on his lip. He glanced between Randy and Lila.

"Fine," he said. "But the first move you make that is out of spec and you're locked back down. Understand?"

Randy nodded.

"Good. I'll logoff and put through the commands."

Marcus turned to leave. He stopped and leaned close to Lila.

"Randy's family," he whispered, "isn't the only one at risk. Keep him in line or you'll answer for this too."

Lila nodded and Marcus opened the door and left. She waited for the door to close then ran up to the partition and put her hands against it. Randy mirrored her hands with his.

She leaned close.

"Randy I'm so sorry for... for Jessie."

"It's not your fault."

"Randy..."

"Stop, we can mourn later, but we have to keep moving forward."

"But she was..."

Randy shook his head and stepped back from the partition and turned his back to her.

"Any luck on finding me?" he asked.

"None," she responded, he hands dropping from the glass. "Marcus has you tucked away good. I've searched as much as the capital as I can without raising suspicion, but any reference to you or your location is nowhere I can find."

She paused.

"You can't remember anything?" she asked.

"We've been over this."

They were silent for a few moments. Lila glanced quickly over her shoulder at the door.

"We need a new plan," she said. "I was thinking maybe we could turn Az."

"No way. He's a true believer. He'd turn us in just to prove to Marcus how dedicated he is."

"Maybe the other one? Craig? But he's an unknown entity. And he would probably be crushed pretty easily by Az. We could also..."

Randy waved his hand to cut her off and she quieted down.

"What would we do if Jessie were still alive? If she had won the Severing? If we had someone in the Threshing," he said.

"Uh, well, we would go on with the first plan."

"But we were already set back on the plan since I've been unable to communicate with her."

"Yeah, but that's why you had Marcus bring me in right? So I could communicate with Jessie."

"Right, so what would our next step be?"

"Jessie and I would install the trigger on the mainframe so she could fire it during the Threshing and give you the access you need."

"Exactly."

"But we can't any more. Even if I could install the trigger myself, there's no one in the Threshing that could fire it for us. Which is why we need a new plan."

Randy thought for a few moments.

"We have another option."

"Ok..."

"I need you to do something."

"Anything."

Randy turned back to her and stepped close. He put his hands back on the partition.

"You're not going to like it."

Scene 45

The bay sat silent. It was like the aftermath of a hurricane. They were all dealing with a cocktail of emotions from stunned and horrified to distraught and angry.

Finn's body had already been removed and his Comms and Medic were no where to be found. The plug from Finn's chair was laying on the floor and it looked like one of his team had started freaking out as the medical supply cabinet had been tipped over, its supplies strewn across the floor, and the terminal had a crack running across the screen.

Catharine's body was still there. A sheet had been thrown over it. Her Comms and Medic were gone too. Mark was laying on his table, his lips already turning a light shade of blue.

Az stood off against the wall huddled with his team. He still held the ice pack against his cheek where it had swollen and turned red. Craig floated near him with their Comms and Medics, constantly casting nervous glances towards Alex and the door.

Three Capital guards stood in the middle of the room.

Alex had started attacking Az before he'd logged out. Az's Comms and Medic had tried to fight him off, but he had pushed through them without a problem.

He had landed several blows, including a vicious one to Az's face, before the guards could get to him.

Now he sat, breathing heavily, his eyes locked on the group across the bay from him. His hands were behind him, held together by plastic ties.

He never let his eyes stray to Jessie's body which still laid in the chair to his left.

The door slid open and Alex jumped to his feet.

Arnold stepped in, immediately followed by Ernst who was shoved roughly in by another Capital guard.

He stumbled and barely caught his balance. His hands were behind his back, held together by the same type ties as Alex.

Ernst ran over to Jessie's body and stood for a moment, stunned, as if his mind couldn't register what was going on. Then his chest lurched as the first sob rippled through him.

He cried out and slid to his knees next to Jessie's chair and continued crying loudly. Alex moved close, but stopped, standing behind him, unsure of what to do.

Arnold stood just inside the door. He tried to maintain an impassive stare ahead, but his eyes kept cutting over to Jessie's body.

A half hour passed as everyone waited.

Ernst never got up from his knees, but he quieted down. Alex returned to his seat, and continued his glaring at Az's corner of the room.

Az was nervous too.

He tried to hide it, but his feet kept shuffling and he kept casting glances towards the door.

"What's the matter Az?" Alex said.

"Alex..." Arnold warned.

"No," Alex continued, "I'm just wondering why Az is so nervous. I mean, he proved his bravery in the Severing by murdering a little girl that had out smarted him."

Az scowled at him but remained quiet.

"Shut up, Alex," Arnold said.

Alex quieted down for a minute then spoke up again.

"There's no reason to be nervous Az. You're a cheating, low-life hack. You'll fit right in with the Fact--"

Alex was cut off when Arnold stepped quickly forward and backhanded him across the mouth. The chair tipped over and Alex fell hard against the floor, unable to catch himself.

Arnold grabbed the plastic ties holding his wrists together and lifted them roughly, twisting Alex's shoulders and getting a yelp of pain from him. Arnold put the chair upright and dumped Alex back in his seat. Blood was smeared across Alex's lips.

"Sit there and shut up," Arnold said, then he turned back to the door.

Before he could regain his post, the door slid open and President Marcus stepped in.

Az immediately backed up against the wall placing his Comms and Medic, along with Craig, between him and Marcus.

One look at Marcus explained why.

All of the congeniality was gone. There was no smile. There was nothing laid back about him.

The facade was gone. Written across his face was every reason he had been able to seize and maintain control of the Americas Faction for the past decade.

He looked slowly around the room at the barely contained chaos. His eyes stopped on the group of boys huddled against the wall.

"You two, here, now."

Az and Craig stepped tentatively forward at first, then hurried to obey at the look Marcus shot at them.

They lined up.

Marcus looked at each one in turn, then stepped forward and slapped Az across the face. Az dropped the ice he had been holding at his side and put his hands up over his face, cowering.

"Stand up," Marcus growled.

Az slowly straightened up, and put his shaking hands down by his side.

Marcus hit him again, this time with his fist. The force behind the blow was more than you would think the small, older man could muster.

Az fell to the floor. A gash had appeared across cheek and began bleeding freely.

"Get up!" Marcus yelled at him.

Az stood slowly as Marcus turned his back to him and stepped away, working to constrain himself.

"It's been decided by powers outside of my control that the two of you will represent the faction at the upcoming Threshing," he said. "Even though we're down to you two idiots..."

Marcus turned back to face Az, who flinched under his stare.

"It's the only choice we currently have, so we are going with it."

He stepped forward to face the two boys.

"The Threshing," he continued, "is in four weeks. Looking at the two of you, I would say our chances of winning our almost none. However, we're going to move forward and start your training right away."

Marcus stepped close to them and raised his hand a finger outstretched in their direction.

"Now get the hell out of here, clean yourselves up, and get to the training bay now."

Az and Craig hurried out of the room, followed closely by their Comms and Medics.

Marcus turned to Alex and Ernst.

"On your feet," he said.

Ernst struggled to his feet, but Alex remained seated and stared up at Marcus.

A small smile played at the edges of Marcus's mouth.

Arnold stepped behind Alex and grabbed his wrists again and yanked up, forcing Alex to his feet.

"And you two..." Marcus began.

"We know," Alex said. "We get sent home with nothing."

Marcus looked at them with mock surprise.

"What? Did Jessie not tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Ernst said.

"Well I made a promise to her weeks ago. Right after the first Severing."

Marcus nodded at the guards and two of them moved behind the boys and grabbed their shoulders.

"I told her if she didn't make it to the Threshing, then you two would be scrambled as punishment."

Both the boy's eyes went wide.

"And I sure do hate to break my promises, especially with the trainees that let me down so spectacularly."

"But we won!" Alex shouted. "It was Az--"

"You shut up!" Marcus roared. "Your team lost. Again. Two Coders you've failed to protect. You've had more than enough chances."

He nodded at the guards again.

"Take them to the infirmary. The doctors are expecting their newest patients."

Alex bucked and kicked against his guard, but the man held fast. Ernst simply dropped his head and walked out of the room.

Arnold and Marcus were left with the last Capital guard.

Marcus stepped forward and looked down at Jessie's body. He stared at her face for several minutes. Arnold finally spoke to break the silence by clearing his throat.

"What would you like us to do with her... with the bodies?"

"The incinerator," Marcus said. He turned and looked at Arnold.

"Same as the others."

Scene 46

Lila watched from a distance as the two guards rolled the metal cart covered in a sheet out of the Severing bay. When they turned the first corner, she started down the corridor in their direction. She walked at a quick clip, trying to keep the distance short enough as to not lose them.

She reached the corner and turned.

One of the guards was tapping on the lift button. The other was waiting behind them.

Lila walked up and joined them waiting. She stared down at the cart until she realized one of the guards was looking at her, so she lifted her head to look straight ahead.

When the lift stopped, the two guards pushed the cart out.

Lila stayed still as they turned right down the hall and let the door begin to slid shut.

At the last second, she hit the button to open the door again and she stepped out and peeked around the corner.

She watched as the two guards rolled the cart to the end of the corridor, then left it and entered one of the doorways off to the side.

Lila stepped out of the lift and walked quickly towards the cart. She kept her eyes roving from side to side as the made her way down the hallway.

She reached the cart. Pulled back the sheet.

And cursed.

"What are you doing down here?"

Lila spun around. The two guards had returned and were less than happy to find her here.

"I'm just..."

"What do you want with this trash?" the other guard asked.

Lila stiffened her spine and looked them in the eyes.

"What's it to you?" she said.

"President Marcus sent us to dispose..."

"And he sent me to retrieve something. You want to keep arguing with me? Because I can let you finish disposing of everything and when he asks where the --" Lila turned and quickly scanned the items on the cart. She grabbed two of the unused IV bags that were stacked on the heap of used Medic equipment from the Severing and turned back to the guards, "-- Coder's IV bags are, you can let him know that you gave me a hard time and wouldn't let me retrieve them."

The guards looked at each other.

"I mean," she continued, "as you saw, he seems to be in a great mood. I'm sure you wouldn't end up Numbered."

The guards faces both paled slightly and they took a step back.

"That's what I thought," she said, then tucked the IV bags under her arm and began walking back towards the lift.

She turned back.

"By the way, I also needed to check something on one of the failed Coders. Where would the incinerator room be? I'm still new to the facility."

"Two floor doors down," the first guard said.

Lila nodded then turned back towards the lift.

"You better hurry," the second guard called. "They should have already started."

Scene 47

Lila stepped off the lift and tossed the IV bags in a trash bin nearby, then turned left and started hurrying down the corridor. The first guard she came across she asked for directions. He pointed her back the other way.

She took off.

All pretense was gone and she was running down the hallways.

She reached the incinerator room, scanned her hand, and the door slid open.

The heat and smell poured over her as she stepped in. The whole room seemed to glow.

She could feel the heat coming from the back of the room, but couldn't see the source. All around her were large receptacles, taller than her. Some of them sat open and empty. Some of them were closed and filled to the brim with refuse from around the Capital.

Lila walked quickly between the bins and the room finally opened up. There was a long conveyor belt along the back of the wall. It ran slowly to the right. There were empty bins lined up along it.

The conveyor led to the source of heat in the room.

A huge metal broiler sat towards the back of the room.

It was the size of a house. At least two stories tall and plenty wide enough. The conveyor ran to a large hole in the side. That's where the glow and the heat came from.

Lila took a step towards the conveyor, but immediately shrank back. Three men were in the back of the room, towards the front of the conveyor. They were gathered around several carts. Three of them were empty. One still had a sheet over it. The men were chatting and sipping from bottles. They were dressed in the Capital worker overalls.

One of them said something, and the others chuckled.

Lila pulled down at the edges of her uniform, straightening it out. She stiffened her spine and walked at a fast, rigid clip towards the men.

They quieted down as she approached and turned towards her.

"I'm here to retrieve the bodies of the Coders from the final Severing," she said.

The men looked at each other, then back to her.

"We had orders to dispose of them," one of the men said.

"What's your name?" Lila asked sharply.

"Chuck, mam."

"Well, Chuck, I'm here to rescind the orders and retrieve the bodies."

"What for?" one of the other two men asked.

Chuck shot him an angry look.

"I don't think that's any of your business," Lila said.

"I agree," said Chuck and looked back at Lila.

"I'm sorry mam," he said, "we've already carried out the orders."

He motioned to the broiler with his bottle.

"Just waiting for the body to burn down before we do the last one."

Lila looked at the broiler and swallowed hard. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked back at Chuck.

"President Marcus isn't going to be happy about this."

"I'm so sorry mam, we were just following our orders. We got the last one here."

Chuck backed out of the way and the other two men made a path to the last cart.

Lila stepped between the men to the cart. She grabbed the sheet by the corner, took a deep breath, and pulled back the sheet.

She swallowed down her gasp. She made as if to wipe the sweat off her face again, but wiped at her eyes instead.

After a moment she turned back to the men who were now giving her a strange look.

"That's fine," she said. "I'll take her... I'll take this one with me."

"Again, I'm so sorry mam, but could you explain again why you need this body and where you're taking her? Because my orders were clear."

"Well I'm telling you that your orders have changed. I've been sent..."

"Right, by President Marcus. You said that. I just don't understand why he didn't send us a notice first. That would have stopped us quicker than you coming all the way down here in person."

"So? Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem. Just don't really make sense. I'm just gonna need to call my foreman and double check."

"Why's that?"

"Cause, with all due respect, he's the one I report to. Not you. I just have to double check before I allow a change of order."

"Fine, call him," Lila said, "But I'm taking this one with me now."

She turned and grabbed the cart, but one of the other men placed his hand on it.

"I'm sorry mam," Chuck said. "That can't happen. Why don't you come with me and we'll give him a quick call and clear this up. I'll have you out of here in two shakes."

Lila shrugged.

"Fine, I just hope President Marcus doesn't get annoyed that you're holding me up."

"I'm sure a couple minutes confirming the order won't cause too much trouble. Come on."

Lila followed him as he weaved through the bins towards the back of the room.

"We set our office up back here. Keeps the heat down when we're taking breaks," he said.

Lila smiled at him, and continued following him. Her eyes scanned the floor as they walked.

"You ever been down here before?"

"Nope," she said without looking up.

Her eyes caught on something just a couple steps ahead, underneath one of the bins.

She glanced up at Chuck to make sure he hadn't turned back to look at her, then knelt quickly and picked up the foot long piece of piping and quickly tucked it inside of her jacket.

"Yeah most people haven't. It's one of the few places where we ain't on the grid," he said, instinctively lifting his hand to the base of his skull.

Lila looked at the back of his head while he walked and saw the plug and familiar green light.

She didn't take her eyes off of it the rest of the way back to the office.

They reached the office and he held the door open for her, then followed her in.

He tapped a few keys on his terminal, then leaned over and reached for the receiver. His back was to Lila. She reached inside her jacket, then paused. She quickly withdrew her hand and put in on top of his just as he lifted the receiver.

"Please don't," she said.

Chuck paused for several seconds before putting the receiver down.

He straightened up and looked at Lila.

"You weren't sent here by Marcus were you?"

Lila didn't move, she just met his stare.

"I just need that little girl's body."

"What for? She's dead. I checked it myself."

"To be honest," she said, "I don't really know. All I do know is right now our only hope of saving the Faction and winning the Threshing is lying on that cart right now."

"A dead body?"

"Look, I know it sounds crazy. I suppose it *is* crazy."

Tears appeared in the corners of Lila eyes.

"But..."

Chuck waved his hands in front of her.

"You know what," he said. "when my foreman reads me the riot act and wants to know what happened, the less I know the better."

Scene 48

How do you wake into a dream?

Her eyes were open but there was nothing there.

*Jessie? Can you hear me?*

The words appeared in her mind. She tried to answer, but nothing came.

Time passed. Jessie waited.

*Ok, Jessie, I'm pretty sure you can hear me. It might take a bit until you can answer. That's fine. You've been out awhile. And I'm... Well, I'm not with you.*

*I've been gone almost eight years. There was a big part of me that worried you wouldn't even remember me. That your memory would just be a patchwork of stories from Mom and Dad more than your own.*

*I wish we had more time to talk. To remember. The only happy times in my life were when we were together.*

Jessie smiled as a memory flashed in her mind. Her brother was running, carrying her through the woods. She was bouncing in his arms.

*You used to play games with me,* Jessie said.

*Yes! Jessie, welcome back,* Randy said.

*You used to give me all those games in the grid to do.*

*And you were always so good at them.*

Randy had stumbled and fallen as he ran, but held her tight. He looked down at her. Fear was plastered across his tear streaked face.

Jessie winced at the memory.

*Are you ready to wake up Jessie?* Randy asked.

*Why were you afraid?*

*Afraid of what?*

*When you were carrying me through the woods that time. You were afraid. And crying.*

*What are you talking about?*

*I just remember...*

*Jessie, we'll have plenty of time to reminisce when this is all over. I need you to focus now.*

*What happened?* Jessie said.

*Az hurt you. Really bad.*

*Az? But I won...*

*Which is why he hurt you.*

*Oh.*

*And President Marcus just let it happen. He doesn't care about you. Just like he doesn't care about me. All he wants is to win the next Threshing. And if you do, you'll get locked down just like me.*

Jessie didn't answer.

*We have to stop him Jessie.*

*Ok.*

*That's the only way I can be free. That's the only way we can be together. That's the only way we can go home. Then we can finally be together. We can get Mom the help she needs. We can play our games again Jessie. Don't you want that?*

Jessie nodded, then realized he couldn't see her.

*Yes. So much.*

*I need your help to make that happen Jessie.*

*What do you need?*

*We have to win the Threshing.*

*I don't think...*

*You don't need to worry about that now. But it's even bigger that just winning the Threshing.*

Randy let the silence hang.

*Jessie. We have to kill President Marcus too.*

Jessie had heard people say their blood ran cold but had never understood what that meant. Until now.

*Kill him? I don't understand.*

*I know. And I don't want to do it either. I really don't. But there's no other way. If you don't win the Threshing then, well, I'll lose you and he'll scramble me. If you do win, he'll just lock you down with me and make loads of false promises to get us to help him win again in four years. It will never stop.*

*But how...*

*You don't need to worry about that. Lila knows the entire plan. She's going to help you.*

*Lila?*

*Oh right, you don't... She's a friend. She helped train me for my Threshing and I had Marcus bring her in to help train for this one too. But she's here to help us.*

Jessie waited, still floating in the nothingness. But it didn't feel like a dream any more.

*This will all be over soon and we can finally be together.*

*I know.*

*Isn't that what you want?*

Jessie wanted to cry. She wanted the tears to form. She want to feel them running down her face. She wanted that release. But instead, she kept floating. Waiting.

*Are you with me Jessie? I know we can do this.*

*Yes, of course.*

*Good.*

Randy paused.

Jessie waited.

*There's one more thing Jessie,* he said. *When I wake you up, people are going to... be surprised.*

*Why?*

*Az didn't just hurt you*.

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