Scene 48

Before the plug was even loose, vomit was spewing out of Craig's mouth. Gagging sounds erupted from him and shot the vomit even further.

"Flip him over before he chokes," Randy croaked at Craig's Comms and Medic. They struggled to get Craig up on his side as the bile continued pouring from his mouth.

Az lay panting in his chair long after the plug had released. Jessie was sitting up, but holding her head in her hands. Alex was double checking her vitals as Ernst gently rubbed her back, continually asking if she was ok.

Randy leaned back over the terminal and continued pecking at the keys.

A few days out of the grid had given him a bit of strength back, though he was still unable to walk on his own. Some color had appeared on his skin and what was left of his hair had been shaved off.

Lyla left his side to check on Jessie. As soon as Lyla touched her Jessie jerked away keeping her eyes on the floor. Lyla stayed close but refrained from touching her again.

After a few minutes, Randy looked up from the terminal.

"That could have gone better," he said.

Az cursed at him now that he had regained his breathing.

Randy chuckled and pushed back from the terminal. He struggled to push at the wheelchair wheels and finally motioned for Lyla's help.

Lyla walked over and wheeled Randy into the middle of the room.

"What you just faced in there was my recreation of the opening act of my Threshing. It's tough, I know, but we have to get you ready for far more tougher challenges than you've faced so far. I've said since my time here at the Capital that Marcus goes far to soft on the Coders."

The Capital guards standing behind Randy stiffened at the mention of the President, but remained at their post.

"Me and the other two Americas Coders," Randy continued, "were completely unprepared for what we faced in the Threshing."

Az sat up in his chair.

"But you won didn't you," he said.

Randy nodded.

"I did. But that had nothing to do with Marcus's training."

Jessie remained still, holding her head, her eyes on the floor.

"Why the spinning?" she asked.

Randy shrugged.

"Ask the Reapers. They're pretty good at coming up with new and sadistic ways to test the Coders."

Randy locked his eyes on Az.

"You move to quick Az. You're smart and you're fast, but you have to calm down, especially in the beginning. The Eurorussians are pushers. They're brutes. They will hunt you down and attack at full speed. If you try to meet that head-to-head you'll lose every time. They are trained under relentless pressure and the drugs their Medics have access to are able to push them further than anything we have. They are stronger and faster than you'll ever be. It's just a fact."

Randy pushed on the wheels himself to get a bit closer to Az. Az, despite himself, shrunk back under his approach.

"But they'll give out fast. Their plan is always a direct attack. They'll try to overwhelm you out of the gates, but if you can duck and give ground and stay calm, they'll wear out. Even the best drugs the Medics can pump into them can't keep them going at full speed forever."

Randy motioned towards Jessie with his head, and Lyla wheeled him in front of her.

"And Jessie, you're smart. And clever. But the Asians are more clever. They're usually the last ones standing because no one sees them coming. You're getting far too focused on the task at hand. That's when they like to slip the knife in your back. While you work, you have to stay aware. It's better to go slower and keep an eye out behind you than move fast but never get a chance to finish."

Lyla pulled him back to the middle of the room.

"What about me?" Craig asked.

Randy ignored him.

"What I just showed you was just the first act of the Threshing and none of you would have made it through.

"How many acts are there?" Az asked

"Usually three," said Randy.

"Usually?" Jessie asked.

"My Threshing didn't make it out of act two."

"You killed all the other Coders by act two?" Craig asked incredulously.

"The Reapers replicated one of the bombed out cities from the Fall as a setting. Too many places to hide but too many angles to defend. Both the Eurorussians and Asians were down a Coder so they ganged up against us. I still had the other two Americas Coders with me at the start of the second act. The Eurorussians had us pinned down in a basement way on the outskirts of the city. A basement we thought had no other entrances."

"Holding up in a basement with no exits seems like a bad way to protect yourself. Why'd you let yourself get cornered like that?" Az asked.

Randy smiled at him.

"So I could win the Threshing."

"And how'd you do that?"

Randy chuckled then motioned for Lyla to wheel him back to the terminal.

"You're not ready for that yet. Get through at least one of my sims and then maybe we can talk about it. Go get cleaned up."

Scene 49

Jessie continued sitting on her table after the others had left. Randy pushed back from his terminal and motioned with his hands for Jessie to come over to him.

She hopped down off the table but waited, cutting her eyes at Lyla.

Randy let out a long sigh then asked Lyla to wait for him outside, then he turned to the two guards by the door.

"Can you give us a minute?" he asked.

One of the guards walked to the Terminal, tapped a few keys to lock it down, then turned and left the room with the other guard.

After Lyla and the guards left Jessie ran across the room to her brother. She took his hand and knelt down in front of him.

"You have to start trusting her," Randy said. "This isn't going to work otherwise."

Jessie looked away from him.

"She was doing what was best for you Jessie. What I asked her to do. She kept you safe didn't she? She risked her own life for you that night."

"But she didn't tell me you were alive! She just pushed me to do my chores and made me suffer in the heat and let me hurt pour Sixty-one. If she had told me you were alive..."

"She couldn't do that. If Marcus had found out I was communicating with anyone it would have ruined everything."

Jessie stuck her lip out defiantly but stopped arguing. She rubbed the top of Randy's hand lightly.

"Why did he do this to you?" Jessie asked.

"He's just scared Jessie."

"Of what?"

"Everything. He's scared we'll lose the Threshing. He's scared I wanted to take over the Faction--"

"Did you?"

"Of course not," he said. "I just wanted to win the Threshing so I could go back home with you. I had no idea what he was going to do to me."

Jessie fell quiet, deep in thought. Randy reached up and ran his fingers through her short hair.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid of what will happen at the Threshing. What will happen to us if we win. If Marcus didn't let you go home, why would he let me?"

"I won't let that happen," Randy said.

"But how? How can you stop him?"

"I can't. But *we* can. This is why you have to trust her. I can barely function. She's here to help us. There's no way we can do this without Lyla."

"Do what?"

Randy cut his eyes at the door then leaned down to Jessie and whispered in her ear.

"We're going to lose the next Threshing Jessie. It's our only way out."

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