

Scene W

STATUS

Marcus: Dead, killed by Lyla.

Az: Dead, sacrificed himself so Jessie could win the Threshing.

SETTING:

Randy has locked himself in a bay with Jessie who is plugged into the Threshing. It's just Jessie and Craig cornered in a cave. Az sacrificed himself to give them time to seal the exit.

Jessie stood staring at the caved in ceiling. She could still hear Az's screams in her head. Craig sat behind her, his back against the stone. He was slobbering and muttering as he cried.

"What now, what now, what now," he repeated.

Where are you Jessie, Randy said. What happened.

Az, she said, he, um, detonated it by hand. We're, Craig and I, we're trapped in here.

That's good. We don't need to get you out, you're exactly where you need to be.

Good? But Az?

You have to forget about him for now. We can mourn later, but it's time Jessie. It's time to end this once and for all.

But how?

By winning the Threshing.

But you said we were going to lose. That that was the only way to take Marcus down.

Marcus isn't a problem anymore.

What do you mean?

Lyla took care of him. It's done. I'm going to take over as Faction president and you'll win the Threshing and we'll be done. We'll have everything.

President? What do you mean? I thought we were going home?

We can't Jessie, there's bigger things at play here.

What about Mom and Dad?

Randy didn't answer.

Randy?

You mean the people that shipped their children off to be tortured and killed? Those people? Those are who you want?

I just want...

Stop acting like a little girl with broken toys! We will win. You and I will be together. I'll be President. We'll have

everything you could possibly want. Now, are you going to do what I ask or are you going to keep arguing?

Jessie looked at Craig, who continued crying into his hands. She looked around the dark cave, trying to make out what was around her.

Yes Randy, what do I do now?

Scene X

Randy typed furiously delivering the instructions to Jessie. He continued ignoring the banging and screaming from the bay door.

After several minutes he pushed back from the terminal and slowly wheeled around to Jessie's monitors. He tapped on the screen a few times then began opening and rummaging through the medical drawers.

He extracted two small vials, unwrapped a syringe and pulled the contents in. He shook the syringe up then added it to the IV tube leading to Jessie's arm.

"Randy!"

This voiced caused Randy to stop and turn.

Lyla was standing at the window, her face was filled with confusion. Ernst and Alex stood slightly behind her. Alex's face was red and angry, while Ernst's was streaked with tears.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Is it done?" Randy said.

Lyla cut her eyes at Alex and Ernst before answering.

"Yes," she said.

A smile stretched across Randy's face, pulling the already taut skin tighter against his skull.

"What's done?" Alex asked.

"Nothing," Lyla answered quickly.

"Well don't hide it from the boys," Randy said. "They'll find out soon enough."

"What?" Ernst said, looking between Lyla and Randy.

"President Marcus has come to an unfortunate end."

The boy's eyes went wide and Lyla looked hard at Randy.

"You're looking at the new Faction President," he said, opening up his hands wide.

"What?" Alex said, "You can't just name yourself President. You have to..."

"The hell I can't!" Randy said. "There's a power vacuum and it will be replaced by the one who can take care of things. And since I'm about to lead us a second win of the Threshing, I am the only one that can do it."

"But how'd you get close enough?"

"Do you think everyone just bows down and kisses Marcus's feet?" Randy yelled. "He is an incompetent old fool that has no business running things. He took the one person that helped him solidify his power and locked me up for four years while he continued running the Faction into the ground. And I'm not the only one that's seen it. His guards have seen it. The town mayors have seen it. They saw us when the Threshing and then their lives stay exactly the same. Everybody knew Marcus was a

disaster but no one had the guts to stand against him. And here's the thing. I would have *helped* him. But he was too scared of me. Too scared of what I was capable of. And his fear led to his downfall."

"So things will be different now. The Americas Faction will grow it's power and it's reach further than ever before. We're not just going to win this Threshing, we're going to destroy the other Factions. Our towns will have prosper beyond anything we've seen since the Fall. I won't hoard everything for myself like Marcus did, I'll give it to the people. And they will mine more than ever giving us everything we need to secure our power."

Randy was breathing hard raspy breaths as he finished, his body shaking under the strain.

He pushed at the wheels turning himself back towards the Terminal.

"Randy," Lyla said, quieter now, "please let us in."

Randy ignored her and continued to struggle with the wheelchair, trying to get it to turn with his atrophied muscles.

"Why won't you let us in? I don't understand. We all want the same things."

"I can't risk it he said."

"Risk what?"

Randy didn't answer, his raspy breaths coming in and out as he finally got the wheelchair moving.

Alex answered Lyla, loud enough for Randy to hear.

"Risk us stopping him from what he's doing to Jessie."

Scene Y

"What is that?" Craig asked.

"Stay back," Jessie said. "I'll need your help in a little bit, but for now, stay where you are."

Jessie had used her flashlight to pick her way back through the cave. Craig had hurried to follow us he was left alone in the dark.

After they had walked for a few minutes, they came to a dead end. A sheer wall of rock stood in front of them, but it seemed out of place. It was too sudden, too steep, too flat. All around them the cave was ragged and jugged. But here it just stopped.

Jessie had knelt down and started emptying her pack onto the ground.

Craig took a couple steps back.

"But what is it?"

"It's the end."

"Of what?"

"The Threshing sim. We've made it to the edge of the code."

"How does that help us?"

Jessie ignored him, stood straight and faced the wall.

She reached out her hand and pressed on the rock. She pressed harder but nothing happened.

She stepped to her left sliding her hand slowly up and down as she moved.

"What are you--" Craig started.

"Shut up," Jessie barked at him.

She closed her eyes and continued moving her hand, pressing hard against the stone.

Suddenly her hand dipped through the rock and disappeared up to her wrist. A loud crackling sound came from the spot. Jessie's body went rigid and she jerked back from the wall and sprawled on the ground. Craig ran over to her, but as he knelt down her eyes were already back open and she was struggling to sit up.

"I'm ok, I'm ok," she said.

She motioned to her bag.

"Can you bring me my stuff?"

Craig hurried over and carefully picked up the wires and tools she had laid out and brought them and the bag to her.

Jessie carefully got to her knees and shook her head.

"Jessie," Craig started hesitantly.

She looked up at him annoyed.

"What?"

"Your nose," he said, "it's bleeding."

She quickly wiped the back of her hand under her nose and a long smear of bright red blood came away. She wiped it on her pants, then pulled up her shirt to wipe the rest of the blood away then stood and walked over to Craig. She grabbed a couple of the tools, reached in the bag to pull out the small portable terminal and walked back to the spot on the wall where her hand had slipped through.

She opened up the telescoping metal piece and started feeding it into the wall. Once it reached its full length, she set it down and took the wire running from the end of it and plugged it into the back of her terminal.

Ok, I'm ready, she said.

As Randy gave her instructions, she fed them into the terminal. Her fingers flew over the keys for several minutes before she stopped and looked up.

The wall in front of her was still there, but there was a thinness to it. Something had changed.

She stood and took a step towards it.

"Jessie?" Craig said, he was breathing hard.

"Where have you been?"

"I was just checking on the entrance and--"

A muffled boom echoed through the cave.

"They're working on something. They're trying to get through to us."

"How long do you think we have?"

He shook his head.

Jessie started shoving all of the equipment back into her bag.

"With their firepower, not long. Five minutes? Ten, tops."

"Ok, you stay here and warn me when you hear them getting close."

Jessie slung her bag over her shoulder and stepped up to the wall.

"Warn you? Where are you going?"

With a deep breath, she stepped through.

Scene Z

As soon as Jessie pushed through the wall she found herself standing along a narrow metal pathway. The walls of the pathway were crowded with thousands of different color wires. She looked up and the ceiling was covered the same way.

This place seemed so familiar, yet she was sure she'd never been anywhere like it before.

She described this to Randy.

You're in a part of the grid that doesn't have visual gui, he said. *Your mind is coding this up on the fly which is why it feels so familiar.*

So how do I find where I'm supposed to work?

That's what's amazing about this. Anybody else but you would have died trying to get in here. You're now acting as a system admin. There's no security. Every spot is the right spot. As soon as you hook in and start running commands, the grid will do what you need it to do.

Jessie quickly pulled off her bag and dropped to her knees. She rummaged through and pulled out to wire tappers. She clamped them on two random wires running across the wall and plugged them into the back of her terminal.

She immediately began typing in commands.

You need to setup and get to work, Randy said. The Reapers will start attacking if they realize where you are.

Ok, give me a couple minutes to get hooked in.

It shouldn't take that long.

Jessie's fingers continued flying over the keys.

Well I've never done this before. I'm moving as fast as I can.

Fine, just let me know when you're hooked in. It will take a good twenty minutes to upload the virus.

Jessie continued working furiously.

After a couple minutes, Randy spoke.

Jessie, come on. It's a simple tap into their system. That should be done by now.

Jessie didn't answer.

Jessie?

I hath found my path of entry, a voice said.

Who is that? Randy said. What is going on?

Ignore him, Jessie said. I've almost got you full access Balaam. Hang on a sec.

Jessie, what is going on? What are you doing?

She answered as she kept working.

What are you going to do once we win the Threshing and you're in charge of the Faction?

What do you mean? What is he doing?

What are you going to do? How are you going to make the towns better? What are you going to do with the credits and supplies we get from the winnings? You said you would do everything better, but what does that mean?

I'll-- first, I'll have to solidify my -- our power. Then we'll begin work for the next Threshing to make sure our power isn't taken. Then--

Which is exactly what Marcus has done for the past eight years! You'll be no different. The towns will still suffer. The people will still be hooked into the grid. The Numbered will still be slaves. How will it be better for them?

It will be better for us!

Jessie paused. Her fingers were still over the keyboard. She stared off into the distance.

Remember that day in the woods five years ago?

What?

I barely do, but it's become clearer in the last few hours. I remember you running and carrying me. I love it. I felt safe and warm in your arms. I liked being held by you. It felt good to be outside. But then I saw your face. The terror. The tears. And I got scared and said your name. You screamed and stumbled and fell, almost dropping me.

It's always been this weird memory that I couldn't quite understand. But I get it now.

What are you talking about? Randy asked.

Do you remember what we were doing before that? That was the piece that was always weird to me. We were playing your games in the grid. The ones where you would give me puzzles to solve. I remember something happening and getting zapped and the next thing I knew I was in your arms in the woods.

Jessie stop. You're remembering this wrong.

Why is it, Jessie said, that the one request you had before getting released from the grid was that I be cremated?

Because I wanted mom and dad--

Stop it! Jessie said. Stop lying! You don't care about them. You even said you weren't going to bring them to the Capital once we won the Threshing. Why would you worry about making sure they knew I was dead? That doesn't make any sense.

Jessie...

Tears began to roll down her cheek and drip onto the terminal. She wiped them away with her sleeve, transferring some of the blood back onto her face.

And why would you send my body to be cremated when you knew I could come back?

That's not what happened! I can explain!

Ok Balaam, Jessie said, your direct link should be live.

You see it?

There was a brief pause before he answered.

I seeth it.

Get started, she said.

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