



SHUDDER

STITCH TRILOGY BOOK 2

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PREFACE: FURY

The General slammed his fist on the table, the noise reverberating through the large room. “This is completely unacceptable.”

The Developer rested his elbows on the table, one lanky arm bending as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He let out a long sigh before leaning back in his chair, tossing his shaggy, unkempt hair back in an awkward motion. He waited for the grumbling to subside before he spoke – as the youngest billionaire on the planet, he’d grown used to having a captive audience.

“This rebellion has become more than a headache; it’s putting our plans for Paragon at risk, and it’s time we take more drastic measures to resolve the problem. We should never have let it get this far.” His whiny voice and slouching shoulders didn’t command much in the way of esteem, but the four other men in the room – the Engineers, as they liked to call themselves – sat rapt nevertheless. They had quickly

learned that what the Developer lacked in presence and age, he made up for with brilliance and guile.

“If I may...” The Economist cleared his throat. Though this was technically a group of equals, he often found himself deferring to the others, being more comfortable with books than he ever was with people. But if their plans for Paragon were ever to succeed, this group above all else needed to keep their focus on the end game, instead of allowing themselves to be sidetracked by minor setbacks.

He continued. “It’s only two people, and given the weather forecast, it’s unlikely that they’ll even make it through the week. How much trouble could they cause? I vote that we let them go and focus our efforts instead on reaching our goals for the collective. It’s been years since the deliberations have made any real progress and –”

The Doctor cut off his remarks with one biting look. “Only two people? And what *traits* might those two people be carrying that are essential to our race? Do you *presume* to know why they were chosen for Paragon? Presume to *decide* who here is expendable?”

“N-n-no... I just...” He took a moment to compose himself. “We’re supposed to be working toward a true communist society, and every day that the Ruling Class remains in power, we are one more step away from achieving that goal. The only reason the rebellion thrives today is due to the continued existence of the Ruling Class, so to me it seems that recapturing a couple of rebels is treating the symptom, not the cause. Let them go, and instead let’s put our energies towards

facilitating the deliberation process, thereby hastening the birth of the ideal society that was the entire *reason* for this whole undertaking.”

The Doctor’s silver hair glinted in the sharp artificial light as he devoted his entire head to the effort of rolling his eyes. “Save your pretty rhetoric, Ben. There won’t *be* any society if we don’t have the genes to support one.”

The Developer nodded vigorously in agreement. “He’s right. The algorithm was very specific in who was selected, and we need to trust that everyone here deserved to be chosen. Otherwise, what was the point of everything we did?”

Everyone took a moment to digest his last comment. They had agreed from the beginning that sacrifices would be needed to make this work, and indeed those sacrifices had been huge – the biggest the world had ever seen. But they had only agreed to the plan knowing that it was the only way to do this right, and that everyone would benefit in the end. Everyone who was left, anyway.

“So what are you suggesting?” The Draftsman – the oldest and most levelheaded of the group – spoke, as always, in a steady, reasoned tone, absentmindedly stroking his paunch.

Before the Developer could respond, the General chimed in with a suggestion of his own, his raspy voice filled with retribution. “We have the girl, the one that helped them escape. I say we make an example of her, send a message to the rebels that we won’t tolerate their insubordination any longer.” As he rubbed the scar across his lips, he muttered, “Stupid bitch.”

The Draftsman wondered if he was referring to the girl or to the rebel leader, but either way, he dismissed his comments as bluster. Over the years he'd come to despise the General's deep insecurities, and his resulting tendency to overcompensate. It was a shame, really – the man had a magnificent reserve of military knowledge, but his personal flaws marred his usefulness considerably. And at least the rest of them had actually *achieved* the titles they'd chosen for themselves – the General had never earned that rank at all, he'd just christened himself upon finding that he had the power to do so. To say that the Draftsman found the General trying was an understatement indeed. But much to the Draftsman's chagrin, the others had not yet come to the same conclusion.

The Developer, in fact, seemed to be seriously considering a show of force. Shaking his head, he reflected, "If only we knew where Regina Green were hiding... we could drop the girl's head right at her front door."

"That's sick!" the Economist blurted, appalled.

The Doctor once again shot him down. "Oh, please. Like you haven't agreed to worse."

As barbaric as it was, the Draftsman had to admit that the Doctor spoke the truth. "Eugene has a point there – we've *all* agreed to worse. 'The ends justify the means' has been a de facto tenet of our philosophy..."

"Thank you, Pascal." The withering glare subsided from the Doctor's face. "Now, as I said before, I don't like the idea of tinkering with the algorithm's selections, but in this one case, I

suppose we could make an exception. After all, she wasn't part of the original results set to begin with."

Chastised, the Economist held his tongue while the others nodded in agreement.

The Developer stood, signaling that the meeting had come to a close. "Then it's decided. We'll use the girl to send a message. Given that we *don't* know Regina's location, everyone think about what might be our most effective strategy and we'll reconvene in the morning to finalize the plan. And remember, as distasteful as this might be, the rebels haven't left us much choice."

He held his right fist at his shoulder in the customary gesture, and the others stood and followed suit. "For Paragon," he stated, accompanying the sentiment with an almost imperceptible nod of the head.

The room echoed in unison as the men added their response, each earnestly believing the mantra in his own way. "For Paragon, always."

1. MANIPULATION

Hundreds of acid voices swarmed about her, their derisive gibes poking at her ears as she shuffled her way through the crowd. Stumbling over a loose rock, she caught herself, steadying her breath as it dawned on her that they'd all been gathered here for one purpose: to kill her.

She couldn't see where they were taking her with the thick canvas bag slung over her head, and even if she managed to shirk the binds holding her wrists, she doubted she'd have anywhere to run. The rebels couldn't possibly risk a rescue; there were just too many people. And with this damn bag over her head, her allies probably didn't even realize it was her.

Resigned, she did her best to hold her head high through the mob's suffocating contempt, fighting the tug of the rope around her neck that propelled her ever forward. She knew he was enjoying this, having her on a leash. After all they'd done to her, everything they'd put her through, it was this one last

indignity that stung the most. She'd almost rather die than suffer their abuse again. Almost.

All too soon her feet ceased scraping against gravel and landed on wood. His footsteps ahead of her beat in time with her stock-still heart – thump, thump, thump – and she slowly ascended the stairs behind him, determined not to fall. He could drag her to her death like a dog, but she would follow with grace. That much she was determined to do.

As they mounted the platform, a heavy silence cascaded through the crowd. She straightened her spine and threw back her shoulders as the ominous hush threatened to crush her chest. For a moment, the world stood still and her only sensation was that of snow flurries drifting onto her clasped fingers where they rested behind her back. For a moment, the serenity took her breath away.

And then the peace was broken by the rasp of his voice, and she shot straight back to reality. That voice rang larger than life in her ears, and his face burned in her memory – a handsome face, if not for the cold, black eyes betraying the ugliness inside him. But she had done her best to mar that visage, to make his outside match the monster within. And the memory of the scar steeled her – she would face whatever he had in store with strength, never fear.

“People of Paragon,” he began. “You have been gathered here today to serve justice to one of your own.”

His words cut through the cool winter air, stirring the rancor of the mob into an audible hum. She braced herself for whatever lies came next.

“As a society of equals, we *all* have a responsibility to keep our community safe from the ravages of the outside world. As you know, the deadly virus that put us here still lurks beyond our gates. We are under constant attack from a vicious plague that would claim us all if given the chance. And this woman –” She felt him drop the rope and take a step away from her. “This woman would let it in!”

The crowd roared in response, spitting hisses and jeers in her direction. She could only imagine how much difficulty he was having suppressing his smile.

The venomous gruff of his voice filled her head once more, unnaturally blocking out all other sound; she would tear off her own ears if only it would bar the invasion of his voice. “She was caught scaling the walls, attempting to leave the compound and with full intention of coming back in. If she had succeeded, there is no doubt that she would have brought the virus with her, putting *all* of us at risk.”

Her ears burned, but she remained staid. She had done no such thing, and he knew it. But the crowd didn’t. And the people of Paragon were incensed.

“What we must decide today is her fate. Should this woman be forgiven her transgression, and be allowed to take her place among us once more?”

He paused, a menacing silence buzzing across the mob, the tension growing ever thicker as no one dared to speak. She pressed her shoulders back once more and gulped down her fear. These were her people – reasonable, normal, everyday people, people who had banded together to survive an

apocalypse, who had vowed to start fresh together and leave the worst of the old world behind. Surely, they would have mercy. Surely, they would give one of their own another chance. Surely, they would renounce the barbarism of a public execution, at the least. Someone would come forth, someone would save her.

Paragon was better than this.

But no one spoke. In a harsh whisper, he put the final nail in her coffin, slowly and deliberately taking pleasure as his mouth formed each solitary syllable: “Or should she be *punished?*”

The crowd replied with a deafening roar of condemnation, snarling and howling like a rabid animal just itching for blood. As the mob whipped itself into a frenzy, she could feel his wry smile branding itself into her back. His job was done – now all he had to do was watch.

Finally the tears came, a single drop of heartache snaking its way down her cheek. So that was his plan – he would use her to draw out the allies of the resistance, and if they didn’t save her from the wrath of the mob, so be it – one less rebel to deal with. She was glad then that her face was covered, that they could not see her break.

Because someone did come forth then, but not the savior she’d been holding out for. No, on the contrary – someone had cast the first stone.

A stinging sensation buried itself in her shoulder. And then another, in her gut. And another, on her thigh.

And then she was nothing but pain, every inch of her body pounding with the impact of each jagged rock. She tried to stand tall, to fight through the agony, but it was too much. The blows ripped the air from her lungs and she doubled over, trying in vain to shield herself.

Her mind shut off, all conscious thought leaving her body as the crippling ache took over, and some distant part of her prayed quietly for the torture to end.

And then one violent strike connected with her temple, and she was gone.

2. DISQUIET

Again. What *was* that?

Alessa whipped her head around in the direction of the movement and stood motionless, peering through the sparse underbrush. But despite what she was sure she'd seen from the corner of her eye, nothing was there... just like the last two times. Alessa swallowed back the alarm slowly welling in her gut, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that someone – or something – was toying with her.

It was hard to sense much of anything with the wind howling through the trees and the heavy snowfall adamantly slicing across her field of view. She cursed the storm and reluctantly went back to piling brush on the makeshift shelter to ward against the arctic weather.

How much time had passed since Isaac had left? It felt like hours, but she knew that couldn't be.

Something just didn't feel right to Alessa. A fleeting sense of panic had been mounting in her chest ever since he'd set out

to scavenge, but she couldn't make sense of why. Well, except for the mysterious movement she kept just missing in her peripheral vision. That was certainly reason enough to worry.

But it was more than that, too – she felt *confused* almost, and frustrated and scared. What she didn't understand was *why*.

It'd been days since they'd escaped from Paragon, and she and Isaac had been splitting up regularly without issue. Between the frigid weather and their minimal supplies, it was all they could do to stay alive, and neither of them had had any anxiety about leaving the other alone for a few moments; Alessa was as confident in her own abilities as she was in Isaac's, and vice versa. So why all of a sudden had that changed for her?

Then again, Isaac should really have been back by now. The snow had just begun to fall when he'd set out, an ill-omened stillness settling over the woods, no sound breaking the silence except the gentle pattering of heavy snowflakes against the frozen ground. It'd been clear that a storm was coming, but their food stocks were mostly depleted. So Isaac had gone out to forage for whatever he could, promising to return before the weather got dangerous.

But the weather was dangerous now. Alessa could barely see ten feet in front of her with the angry cloud of white pelting her face in the twilight, and with every minute the blizzard was only getting worse. The sense of disorientation she'd been feeling earlier only compounding with the fury of the storm, she pulled her hood tighter against the icy air and stopped for the first time to consider the chilling question that

she'd been stubbornly pushing out of her head all afternoon: what would she do if Isaac didn't return?

Before the bleak implications of that thought could settle through Alessa, another dash of movement from the other side of the clearing caught her eye.

She froze – her heart pounding in her ears – and took a deep breath. She was done with this game.

Throwing down the bundle of branches in her arms, she withdrew the knife from her side and concentrated through narrowed eyes on the stand of trees a few yards to her right. She listened closely, hoping without avail for a break in the savage moan of the wind. But with or without the storm's cooperation, she was not about to drop her guard again.

Waiting, Alessa watched the forest, ignoring the snowflakes gathering on her eyelashes and the stinging of the frozen shards scouring her face. With a slow, deliberate movement she raised the knife to her shoulder, coiling to strike.

Remembering her stealth training with the rebels, she waited with bated breath for the opportunity to come. A flash of darkness between two snow-covered trunks was all the signal she needed; one flick of her wrist sent the knife hurtling through the darkened sky, intent on its target.

A bloodcurdling shriek – part howl, part yelp – rang out through the wood, chilling Alessa to the bone. A desperate wave of pain washed through her as she struggled to place the sound – almost human, but not quite. And the perplexing confusion she'd been feeling earlier came back, this time tumbled with grim despair.

What just happened? Fighting through the sharp jumble of emotions and physical pain assailing her body, Alessa stumbled determinedly in the direction of the wail. Clutching at the tree trunks for support, she raked the forest for the source of the cry, hoping beyond hope that she'd incapacitated who or whatever had been stalking her.

But to her dismay, all that remained was her bloodied knife abandoned on the snowy ground. She scanned the floor for a trail – drops of blood, footprints, anything – but the swirling blizzard had quickly devoured any signs of the intruder.

Gathering up her knife, Alessa prayed that she had at least scared it – and she was fairly certain now that it was indeed an “it” – off. She caught her breath against the nearest tree as the startling pain and dismay she'd felt moments earlier faded, until she realized she could finally think with some clarity again.

She didn't understand what she was feeling, but she would have plenty of time to think about that later. If there was to *be* a later, she needed to get back to that shelter *now*.

Shaking the snow and muddled thoughts from her head, she pocketed the knife and felt her way into the clearing once more, burying her nagging worries about Isaac. First things first, she reminded herself – she was no use to Isaac dead. By this point she could barely see her own hands stretched out in front of her, but she combed the landscape searching for the warm glow of the fire burning at the edge of their shelter and made her way toward it inch by inch.

She'd almost reached the sanctuary of the lean-to when she was shaken with an overwhelming sense of not being alone.

She could feel a presence behind her – the creature – and she didn't hesitate. The blood pounding through her temples, with one swift motion she turned around and swung the knife down as hard as she could, an involuntary snarl issuing from her throat.

But she didn't connect – the monster had caught her wrist mid-swing and held her tight. She ripped her arm from its grip and prepared to strike once more.

“Whoa there, tiger!”

Alessa dropped the knife and brought her hand to her hammering heart as he released her. “Isaac!” she gasped.

Gently cupping her shoulders, Isaac bent forward, scooting his face up under the furred edge of her hood with a grin. “I know I took longer than expected, but I didn't think you'd be *that* mad.”

Still catching her breath, Alessa loosed a small giggle, her body now shaking in an almost pleasant sort of way from the aftereffects of the adrenaline. But her contentment was quickly snatched away as a thought occurred to her. “Oh my God, I didn't – are you hurt?” she implored, frantically checking him for wounds from the knife she'd thrown.

Grabbing her arms, Isaac held her still reassuringly. “No, no, I'm completely fine. Just a little cold. What's gotten into you, Less?”

Sighing deeply, Alessa collapsed into his arms as relief flooded her once more. Isaac was back, and it was going to be okay. “Let's get inside and I'll fill you in.”

3. CLATTER

Snuggling in the cozy shelter with Isaac, the storm suddenly felt far away and Alessa's disquiet faded into the distance as she recounted what had happened that afternoon.

"I'm not sure what it was, Isaac. But *something* was keeping tabs on me while you were gone."

Isaac took a moment to digest that comment, the unease evident on his face. "What do you mean, 'something?' What exactly did you see?"

"It's not what I *saw* exactly..." She paused, eyeing him uncertainly. "I didn't see much, just glimpses from the corner of my eye. It's what I heard," she clarified, "and... what I *felt*."

She watched for his reaction in the tangerine glow of the firelight, wondering if she could explain this in a way that made sense. She doubted it – she couldn't even explain it to herself.

Isaac furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

Alessa decided to start with the easier part – the howl. “At one point I threw my knife at it, and I think I hit it, because it cried out with this *wail*...”

“Was it an animal? Or a person?”

Alessa considered. “It didn’t really sound... like either. Or I guess it was almost like *both*. I don’t know, Isaac. It was inhuman, that much I’m sure of – like a cross between a howl and a shriek, but raspy almost,” she shook her head. “It’s hard to describe. But I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“Maybe it was a wolf? Or a mountain lion or something? One time when I was little I accidentally closed my cat in a door – the scream that came out of him was like a *banshee*. Animals can make some strange noises when they’re hurt...”

“It didn’t –” Alessa hesitated before responding. This was going to be the difficult part. “– *feel* like an animal, though. It felt vaguely... human.”

The wind howled outside as Alessa waited for Isaac to reply. The moment dragged as he visibly considered how to respond to this revelation.

“You *felt* it?” Isaac raised his eyebrows.

Alessa shrugged, a slight grimace crossing her face. “I can’t really explain it – and I know that doesn’t help – but the closest thing I can think of is when I used to see you, as a ghost, when we were back on the drama. I would get flooded with all these weird emotions, which I later figured out were feelings that I associated with seeing *you*, but for a while I wondered if they weren’t some sort of projection from the ‘ghost.’ It was kind of like that.”

“So you think you somehow telepathically got a whiff of this thing’s feelings?”

Alessa could tell he was trying to be supportive, but the expression on his face betrayed his skepticism. It was frustrating, of course, but then again, what she was telling him was pretty incredulous. After all, it’s one thing to have paranormal experiences when you’re secretly trapped on a TV show where the producers are subjecting you to whatever comes next in their twisted storyline. It’s a whole other thing to experience it in real life...

“Are you sure you weren’t just disoriented from the snow? Maybe having a mild panic attack? We’re both hungry, it’s cold – it can happen,” he soothed.

Alessa shook her head. It was times like these she wished she had her sister to confide in. Isaac tried, but he was still such a *guy* – he was always looking for the logical explanation, for a practical solution. But sometimes she just needed to talk to someone who would believe what she was saying, no matter how crazy or irrational it sounded.

Alessa understood why Janie had hung back on the drama and not blown her cover with the producers – after all, the rebels had very few people left on the inside to keep an eye on the Ruling Class, and it seemed Regina, the rebel leader, was relying heavily on Janie’s assistance – but that didn’t mean she didn’t feel Janie’s absence acutely. It was like a constant pang in her side, and a situation like this only intensified her longing.

“I know it sounds crazy, Isaac. But I know what I felt.”

Isaac held her hand tightly, an apology in his eyes. “I just don’t understand, Alessa.”

She smiled softly. “Neither do I. I thought the same thing as you at first – that maybe I was just freaking out – but then when the knife connected, I got a distinct surge of physical pain, even though nothing had hurt me. And I felt confusion, and fear, and sadness... all *human* emotions. But there was something primitive about them, too. Something... off.”

Isaac nodded and brought her chilly fingers to his lips before continuing. “I believe you, Less. I just wish I could tell you what it was.”

“I know,” she whispered.

They lay beside each other in silence for a few moments, draped in each other’s limbs as they turned the day’s events over in their minds, the storm still raging outside. Alessa concentrated on the rhythm of Isaac’s breathing and tried to relax, taking comfort in the fact that whatever had been stalking her was long gone.

Isaac turned toward Alessa. His blue eyes shone in the light of the fire as he lay propped on his side, his long lean body mirroring hers, a soft piece of tawny hair that had dropped forward on his forehead casting flickering shadows on his face. Alessa swept the strands from his eyes and trailed her fingers down the side of his jaw. Bringing her mouth to his soft warm lips, she closed her eyes and let the day’s tensions melt away in the heat of his body.

He kissed her back with intensity, sliding his hands down the small of her back and pulling her close, the electricity

buzzing between them. Alessa gasped at the feel of his body against hers, releasing a soft moan as he traced the line of her chin and then her neck with kisses. Her body shivered with anticipation.

Holding his face in her hands, she gazed deep into the sparkling oceans of his eyes, the ravages of the storm outside utterly forgotten. “I missed you, Isaac Mason,” she murmured.

Isaac rolled over suddenly, pinning her beneath him as she pulled her legs tight around his waist. The reflection of the flames danced in his eyes as if he were lit from within. He grinned wickedly.

“Oh, Less,” he growled. “I haven’t even *begun* to remind you what you’ve been missing.”

The next morning Alessa woke feeling contented and at ease. The warm press of sunlight caressed her shuttered eyelids through the opening of the shelter, the delicious aroma of roasting food mingling with the faint scent of wood smoke. She breathed deeply and fluttered her eyes open to find Isaac huddled over the fire.

“Hungry? I’ve been boiling these acorns for a half-hour and I think I finally got the bitterness out.”

“Acorns? *That’s* what smells so good?” She sat up to take a closer look at a large can sitting on the edge of the flames.

Isaac laughed. “No, those are the onions you’re smelling – I found a whole patch of them yesterday. They’re small, but very flavorful once you roast ’em up. Here, try.”

Isaac used a smooth piece of bark to scoop her up some food from the containers in front of him, which she gratefully consumed in one ravenous bite. She never imagined she'd be so happy to start the day with wild onions and acorns, but Isaac's cooking was certainly hitting the spot. "Mmmmm."

He smiled brightly. "You like?"

"Very much so," she nodded.

"Didn't realize I was a man of so many talents, did you?"

Thinking back to the night before, she had to admit she agreed. She knew Isaac was kind and smart and funny – and, as he'd proven last night, gifted in *other* ways as well – but she didn't know he could cook. It hadn't even been a week yet since they'd left Paragon, and thus far they'd been subsisting on the cold rations that Regina had packed in their supply kits. But the food was running out, which is why Isaac had gone off to scavenge the previous afternoon while Alessa built their shelter from the impending storm.

The frosty ground sparkled in the sunlight as Alessa wolfed down her breakfast, then she packed up their blankets and provisions while Isaac finished off the remains of the meal.

Isaac moaned suggestively, drawing Alessa's attention. "Mmm, I forgot how good it feels to have a hot meal."

Alessa laughed. Food, of course – her mother had always said that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Or had she? Sometimes it was difficult for Alessa to distinguish her real memories of her mother from the ones the producers had planted in her mind with the stitch, as part of the backstory

for her character on the drama. She wondered if Isaac had the same problem after his role as a wealthy landowner from 1917.

“You’re not planning on running back to that farm on me, are you?” she teased.

Isaac raised his eyebrows. “Please – I almost went stir-crazy. Though we did have some excellent breakfasts...”

Alessa thought back to all the meals she’d shared with Janie in the cafeteria at Eastern State University, the fake early 21st century college that her character on the drama had attended, back when she’d thought that Janie was just her best friend, and the fact that the year was actually 2114 had somehow slipped her mind. She shook her head.

“It’s still just so unbelievable to me that they were able to mess with our heads so much and us not even realize it,” she mused. “How could I not recognize my own sister?”

Isaac shrugged. “How could I let them replace my older brother with a little girl and not notice? I wonder what’s become of that poor kid,” he sighed. He shook his head in disgust. “Whatever technology they’re using to do this is dangerous, Alessa. That’s why we’re fighting, right? They need to be stopped.”

Alessa was still a little wary about the fighting part, but she agreed wholeheartedly that they needed to be stopped – she’d lost a year of her life to the machinations of the Ruling Class, and she still didn’t fully understand what they were up to. And neither, she suspected, did the people of Paragon, most of whom didn’t even know about the Ruling Class’s existence.

“I think the harder part,” she explained, “is going to be getting all the citizens on board once we *do* have a plan to stop them. Remember that their food is still being poisoned daily with those drugs, so between their work schedules and the nightly dramas, they generally don’t have any will left to look deeper at their lives. That’s kind of the point, I guess – to keep everyone in a mild state of pleasant distraction so no one notices they’re being played.”

Alessa liked to think she was sharper than most people, and it’d even taken *her* years to notice that anything was amiss. Like most of Paragon’s citizens, she’d just been happy to have escaped the scourge of the viral outbreak that had ravaged the planet, claiming everyone she knew except Janie.

“Yeah, but as soon as you realized what was going on, once you saw what they did to Joe –”

Alessa shook off the painful memory of her friend and old flame – and Isaac’s brother – being brutally murdered at the hands of Paragon’s secret guards, for the minor infraction of stealing food, no less.

“– you took a stand. I’m sure everyone else will do the same once we get them off the drugs long enough for their minds to clear.”

“I don’t know. Even once I found out about the Ruling Class, it took me a while to come to terms with what was going on, remember?” And, if she was being honest, she was *still* struggling to maintain the courage to take on their faceless enemies – she certainly didn’t want to end up back in Paragon’s nightmarish prison, or on another drama for that matter.

“Before Joe died, I stood on the sidelines watching him – and you – fight back for half a year almost. I was in denial. I kept thinking that the rebels must have it wrong, that we *needed* someone to figure out how to run our society so we didn’t make the same mistakes that got us here, and if the Ruling Class was doing that for us, maybe we should just let them.”

“But you didn’t realize then how bad it was – how corrupt they’d become. Or how many atrocities they’d committed along the way.”

“That’s true. Once I started training with you and saw it firsthand, I couldn’t deny it any longer. I guess we’ll just need to make sure we have proof, to convince everyone that *we’re* the good guys here, the ones that are trying to protect them.”

“Definitely,” Isaac agreed. “But first things first – we can’t do any of this while hiding in Paragon’s shadow. We need our own base – somewhere *outside* of Paragon’s control – where Regina and the rebel leaders can come up with a plan to confront the Ruling Class head on. And we’re gonna find them one, right?” He took Alessa’s hand, pairing his firm squeeze with a comforting grin.

Alessa returned his sentiment then turned back to gathering their things. When Isaac wasn’t paying attention, she let out a long sigh. Yes, they’d find a site for the command center and report back to Regina, as long as the cold or the hunger or the virus – or whatever was following her – didn’t get them first.

After hours of hiking, the sun lingered over the horizon, the sky rapidly darkening from blue to graphite in its wake. Isaac

fished the compass out of his bag and took note of the direction they'd come from, making sure to point their path directly away from Paragon.

"We'll probably need to settle in soon – in a few minutes it'll be too dark to navigate securely."

"No complaints here," Alessa replied, stretching her calves. "We must have walked, what, twenty miles today?"

"Yeah, great progress. Just wish I knew what we were looking for – nothing out here but trees."

Alessa did her best to reassure him. "I'm sure we'll find something once we get a little closer to the city."

"You think we're headed the right way – towards the city, I mean? I was only a teenager when we came to Paragon, back when it was a government quarantine zone. I don't really remember how we got there," he shrugged. "I think I spent most of the trip in shock over my parents – Joe handled the actual getting there part."

Alessa nodded in understanding – Isaac had only been 16 when he'd watched his parents succumb to the horrific virus. She'd been 18 when her family arrived at the quarantine zone a few weeks after Isaac and Joe, but her parents had navigated the journey. She hadn't paid much attention to their route because she hadn't foreseen a future in which they wouldn't be around to guide her. She'd been too preoccupied at the time trying to keep up Janie's spirits and comfort her little brother, who had fallen ill in their travels. The thought of him – and her parents – being wrenched from her and Janie at the gates

stabbed at her heart. It'd been eight years since she lost them, but it still felt like yesterday.

Blinking back tears, Alessa pressed on, Isaac guiding her from behind as she picked her way through the gloom. After a few moments, Isaac spoke up again, an unexpected note of hope in his voice.

“I know this hasn't been easy on either of us, but I do really feel like every step we're taking is heading in the right direction. I never really believed in fate, you know? But it's starting to feel like everything that happened with my parents, with Joe, was for a reason – to bring me here, so I can finally do something to help.”

Alessa didn't know how to respond. She was glad to see Isaac so positive, especially given his maddening tendency to blame himself for every bad thing that befell the world. But at the same time, she just didn't quite share his sunny outlook.

She *wanted* to help, that was for certain. She was *angry* about what the Ruling Class had done, and she wanted them to pay. But sometimes she still didn't really believe that she'd gotten herself caught up in all this. It was surreal, almost, to think that she – just a normal person like anyone else in Paragon – was playing this pivotal role in changing the only world they had left. What if she screwed it up? What if she failed?

Alessa's gloomy thoughts were interrupted as she stumbled forward, her foot kicking something with a clank. Stopping, her eyes struggled to focus through the dusk at the ground before her. She couldn't quite place the sound. Had she

clattered some old cans together? Maybe wooden dowels? Her brain struggled to resolve the source of the noise.

And that's when she saw.

It wasn't cans or dowels she'd kicked, but bones. Hundreds of bones in all shapes and sizes, littering the ground in every direction, picked dry and gleaming in the cold blue of the early moonlight.

Some primal intuition inside her kicked in, the panic coursing through her body and strangling the air from her throat.

She managed to choke out two words before instinct took over: "Isaac, run."

4. DASH

Isaac knew Alessa well enough to recognize the warning in her voice. He wasn't sure what she'd seen or heard – or maybe *felt* – but he didn't need an explanation. She wasn't kidding, that much he knew.

His body jumped into overdrive as Alessa took off ahead of him, his heart pounding and his breaths coming short and fast. Adrenaline tingled through his limbs and then he was off.

Alessa's tall form cut a swift path through the trees, her shiny dark bob of hair gleaming in the moonlight behind her. She looked back once to make sure Isaac was following and he caught a glimpse of the urgency in her emerald eyes. Even at a time like this, Isaac couldn't help but think how radiant she was against the snowy backdrop of the forest.

She ran, he knew, not because she was afraid, but because she knew it was sometimes better to run than fight. He loved that about her – her decisiveness and intuition. He always knew he could trust her instincts.

The icy air was a shard of glass in his throat, but he pressed on, pumping his legs as fast as they would go. He had caught up to Alessa now and ran immediately behind her, their long strides in unison as they dashed away from whatever threat she'd perceived.

Just as Isaac began to wonder if the danger had passed, he heard branches snapping to his right, rapidly coming up from behind. He risked a quick glance over his shoulder and was startled to catch sight of something big tearing through the trees maybe ten yards away. In the growing darkness, he couldn't tell what it was. But it was fast – too fast to be human.

His heart racing, he urged his body to pick up speed. He could see Alessa slowing, obviously tired from their mad sprint after the day's long hike. But now was not the time to give in to exhaustion, and the thought of losing Alessa to whatever was pursuing them made his heart clench in his throat.

“Go, go, GO!” he panted, the alarm evident in his voice. His entreaty worked to spur her – Alessa picked up the pace.

Whatever was moving on his right was still gaining on them, though. Concentrating on lengthening his stride, he caught wind of thumping footsteps and cracking brush coming up on the other side. A quick glance over his left shoulder told him they were being surrounded.

All conscious thought left Isaac's brain as instinct hijacked his system – the pain in his chest, the hunger in his gut, the aching fatigue in his legs, all faded away to the buzzing of the raging fear in his head. His vision narrowed until there was

nothing left except the woman darting ahead of him and the impossibly loud crashing to either side. They ran, he recognized, for their lives.

Just then a shrieking roar pierced the night, coming from his right side, followed by the thud of bodies hitting the ground. Isaac ran faster, pressing Alessa forward ahead of him, until he realized the sounds of pursuit on the right had dropped off.

He looked back quickly over his right shoulder and no longer saw movement through the trees on that side. Were their assailants falling back?

Before he could consider, he found himself flat out on his back, the world around him spinning impossibly. He could hear Alessa calling his name, but she sounded far away – so far away. The left side of his face was tingling oddly, and when he pressed his hand to it, sharp pains shot through him. He dropped his hand, the ache in his face subsiding, and tried to concentrate on Alessa’s voice.

“Isaac, get up!” He could barely hear her through the ringing in his ears. The world was a blur of trees and starlight and snow – cold, cold snow. He rested his throbbing left side against the frozen powder and relief washed through him.

But why was he lying here? Hadn’t he just been running?

Dazed, he tried to remember how he’d ended up on the ground.

And then from somewhere behind him and to his left, whatever had been chasing them finally caught up. A blur of movement leapt towards him, a vicious snarl ringing out from its throat. Time slowed, but in his muddled state, Isaac

couldn't think of what to do, couldn't react. The menacing mass of sinew descending over him, he felt alarm bells ringing somewhere in his gut, but couldn't remember what they meant.

In that same instant, as Isaac lay helpless, another form flew from his right, tackling the first in mid-air as they crumpled to the ground in a tussle of growls and yelps. His first thought was Alessa, but he could still hear her calling his name from the opposite direction.

And then someone had grabbed his hand and he was pulled upright, and suddenly his feet were moving and he was running again. Alessa looked back at him, her face pleading.

“How did you manage to run into a tree at a time like this, Isaac? I know it hurts, but we need to get away while they're distracted. Just a bit longer – keep moving.”

His head ached, but Isaac complied, not knowing what else to do. Holding Alessa's hand tightly, he followed her into the darkness.