



STUCK

STITCH TRILOGY BOOK 3

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PREFACE: OMEN

It was coming for her. She could feel it. Some dark instinct shivered up her spine, and she picked up the pace, the gentle clacking of her boots echoing down the barren corridor with each hurried step.

Bright overhead lights bathed the long, straight, antiseptic hall with the uniformity of artificial daylight, but it might as well have been the blackest midnight for all the comfort it brought. A creeping sense of isolation and dread tightened in her chest, and she stole a quick glance over her shoulder to ensure she was still alone.

The corridor seemed to stretch out to infinity in both directions, and on either side of her, silent, sealed doors blinked their mocking red lights. Locked. They were all locked.

With no escape in sight, she had no choice but to keep moving, her ears straining back for any sign of pursuit.

And then her heart quickened – there it was, illuminated in green, an activated door looming up ahead. Salvation was in sight. She just had to make it there.

With her arm outstretched, she jogged the last few paces, wincing at the rap of her own heels ricocheting off the bare walls. Please, please, please be open, she pleaded.

Crash.

Just as she reached the keypad, one of the overhead lights shattered behind her at the far end of the hall, glass and metal showering the tile as a large mass fell through to the floor. She couldn't quite make it out from this distance, but she could see something unfolding with purpose, all sinew and fury.

Her heart pounding out a silent prayer, she pressed her body flat into the doorway and frantically swiped her shaking fingers over the scanner, beseeching it to work.

A faint, menacing growl pricked her ears from down the hall just as the door beeped and slid open with a whoosh of relief.

She tumbled into the dimly lit room and spun quickly around, jabbing at the lock button as the inhumanly-fast hammering of footsteps accelerated up the corridor. The door slid into place with a clank, entombing her in silence once again, and the light on the keypad flipped in confirmation from green to red.

She allowed a deep breath to escape her lungs as she pressed her forehead and fingertips into the cool wall. Heaving, she gave her drumming heart and blaring nervous system a moment to recover.

Only once the blood throbbing through her temples had subsided did she hear it – the rasp of heavy breathing from the other side of the room.

Her blood iced over. She was not alone.

Adrenaline pulsing through her limbs, she straightened up and whirled around, taking in her surroundings for the first time.

Rows of wire mesh lockers dissected the room, each open cubby hung with an identical set of protective gear and weapons, and a shiny placard affixed above. Maneuvering around the nearest bench, she tentatively stepped deeper into the room, searching for signs of the interloper.

Passing by the nearest lockers, she glanced up at the names printed on each sign, a jolt of recognition searing through her. Faltering, she paused, peering up at each plate to look more closely.

That couldn't be. Baffled, she read them again. She wasn't mistaken – she knew those names.

Her sister. Her boyfriend. Her best friend. Even her brother, her parents. They were all there, even though half of them were dead. Why?

And then she heard it again, just around the corner of the nearest locker. Someone – or something – was there.

She reached silently into the nearest cubby, groping for some form of defense, but came up empty-handed. She waited with bated breath.

Terror shuddered through her as a set of long, mangled fingers tipped with razor-sharp claws curled around the corner

of the lockers, near the floor. Large bulging eyes rounded the edge of the row next, peering curiously up at her as a second clawed hand reached out.

She watched, frozen with terror, as it pressed against the nearby bench for leverage, locking eyes with her as it uncurled from a crouch to standing.

It wasn't until the creature had stretched out into its full upright form that a tandem strike of horror and realization pummeled her. She didn't know *how* she knew it, but she did: this *thing*, somehow, was her sister.

The creature's face twisted into a grotesque approximation of a smile and beckoned to her.

Recoiling, she fell back against the locker, her mind spinning.

And that was when the others each peeked out from behind the rows surrounding her, in the order she'd read their names, each more monstrous than the last.

She shrank back into the cubby as they slowly encircled her, her fingers clutching at the woven steel as they whispered her name in their menacing refrain, the harsh melody of their distorted voices abrading her ears.

As the ghastly, contorted faces of all the people she loved crowded her field of vision, the whispering abruptly ceased, and her favorite bright blue eyes locked with hers.

"We've been waiting for you," he growled, an impossibly fiendish version of his voice somehow ringing through her mind, even as an indecipherable snarl escaped his lips.

His lips curled back invitingly, revealing jagged, bone-crushing teeth, and a vice-like grip closed on her wrist.

Her heart shattering with disbelief, she sank into a suffocating ocean of despair, a knot of terror sealing off her throat.

“It’s time,” he intoned with a dark, foreboding pleasure. “Join us.”

1. TRAITOR

It wasn't working. Lizzie had tried for two solid months to convince someone – anyone – that they should consider a peace with Paragon. But no one wanted to listen. They just wanted blood.

On the one hand, Lizzie understood – the Engineers had made some choices that were... questionable, to say the least. Secrecy, lies, mind control through the stitching and the drugs, mass murder...

But that was also reductive. The Engineers had done some terrible things, yes – but had they really had a choice? Lizzie didn't want to hear it at first, either, but the more she thought about it, the more it seemed that the Engineers just did what needed to be done. Everyone was going to die *anyway*. Instead, the Engineers had saved the entire human *species* from itself, had given humanity a place where they could live comfortably, securely, and in harmony with the world around them for a long and prosperous future.

And of course the people weren't satisfied with what they'd come up with. No one was ever satisfied. But the Engineers had only tried to make it work, even if their methods were misguided. Yes, they were controlling the populace against their will, but that was only for their own good.

Rubbing one of the scars on her temple, Lizzie remembered what the people did when left to their own devices – remembered their true nature. The Engineers were only protecting them from themselves. They really *did* mean well.

And at least the Engineers weren't ruling the people through fear. They'd given them food, entertainment – even drugs – to make them happy. What more could anyone want?

The rebels *thought* they wanted freedom, thought they wanted a say. But they'd all seen what had become of the “free” world – war, poverty, devastation. If that was the price of freedom, it was something Lizzie wasn't sure she wanted.

The only way they could avoid the same fate as their predecessors was to give up that supposed “freedom,” put aside their individual aspirations, and work together toward a collective good. They needed to put *society* before themselves, for once.

And that was exactly what the Engineers were proposing. They were giving everyone an opportunity to try something different, something new and hopefully better. And sure, they'd made mistakes – the Engineers were only human, after all. But they'd owned up to those mistakes, and were *still* trying to set them right.

The same couldn't be said for the rebels.

For eight weeks now, the rebel force had been diligently toiling away under Regina's command, dashing out to the woods and the city for training expeditions, plotting and scheming to take Paragon down; each tiny cog churning away in the well-oiled machine of war her mother had built.

And not one of them would stop for even a *moment* to consider what they were actually fighting against. What would happen when they returned to Paragon to fight? How much collateral damage would they inflict?

How could the rebels attack the city, knowing full well that innocents would die along with Paragon's leaders? The others may not realize it, but Lizzie knew that that could be utterly detrimental to their future, to their viability as a species. Everyone in Paragon had been chosen. Everyone deserved to live. Everyone *needed* to live.

And there were other considerations as well. Whispers raged throughout Raptor about the monsters that plagued the soldiers on their missions into the woods, along with horrifying stories from civilians who'd witnessed what had happened the few times those monstrous things had somehow gotten *inside* Paragon's gates. Would the rebels tear down Paragon's walls and set those harrowing creatures loose on the compound?

There was too much at stake. Lizzie had to do something to stop it. But how?

She'd tried to reason with the rebels, tried to make them see sense – but they were too enamored by Regina's visions of vengeance to listen.

No, reason never stood a chance against her mother's machinations. Lizzie had spent her entire life watching Regina weave her tangled webs, somehow manipulating everyone around her to do exactly as she wanted, half the time without them even realizing it.

Regina had a way – that much Lizzie had to admit. It'd driven her mad as a child, watching everyone bend to her mother's will. Somehow Lizzie herself had been immune to Regina's charms – she guessed she simply knew her mother too well, knew her in a way the guarded rebel leader never allowed of anyone else. That was the magic of being a daughter – her mother couldn't hide from her if she tried.

But how could Lizzie ever convince the rebels to return to the place that her mother had so skillfully twisted them against?

There was only one way she could think of – she would have to unmask Regina for the master puppeteer she was.

In Regina's exploits to keep the rebels under her wing, there was one thing she hadn't considered, one loyalty she'd never questioned: Lizzie's. And that would be her downfall.

Lizzie loved her mother – she truly did – but the Engineers had helped her see that sometimes things were more important than one's individual allegiances. Sometimes a person had to give up what they most cared for to do the right thing – just as all the Engineers had done. And Lizzie was willing to sacrifice her mother's love if it meant the survival of the human race.

Lizzie knew Regina was lying to the rebels. She knew Regina was using their fear of the virus to manipulate them into

fighting instead of fleeing. And Lizzie was going to expose her deceit.

Lizzie had overheard Alicia and Regina discussing the dying infants. Even though Regina kept warning the rebels about the virus, Lizzie knew Regina suspected that they were all immune. But she'd convinced Alicia to keep quiet about this, claiming that it wasn't safe to tell everyone until they knew for sure it was true.

Really, though, Lizzie knew Regina had her own reasons. If the rebels understood that they had a choice – that they could be safe from the virus away from Raptor, and Paragon, and all of it – some of them might just decide to leave. Regina needed to make sure that didn't happen – and so she'd kept her suspicions about immunity hidden from the rebels.

But Lizzie was going to tell. And once she did, she would take the disillusioned rebels with her back to Paragon and put this war to an end.

There was only one person standing in her way – Isaac.

For now, though, that was under control. Lizzie had something over Isaac, a bargaining chip he wasn't willing to risk.

Isaac had heard the Developer's revelations, and he'd quickly realized the same thing Lizzie had: that there was something special about the girl. She was too young to have received the vaccine through the civil service program as the Developer had described, and yet somehow she'd survived anyway.

Lizzie had not told Regina that the Engineers were behind the virus, and she had no intentions of doing so. She knew Regina would only use the information to fuel the rebels' fire.

But Isaac couldn't keep a secret like that for long, Lizzie knew. And if he told the rebels, they wouldn't care *what* Regina had done – they'd want retribution, and Lizzie's plans to save them all would be ruined.

So she'd made sure that Isaac had understood what would happen if Regina found out about the girl and the vaccine.

Knowledge of the vaccine would only confirm Regina's suspicions about immunity. And it wouldn't be long before she realized that the vaccine didn't work on the very young – Regina would surmise that obviously that would have been the first thing the Engineers tried. And so she'd recognize that they needed something else to survive, a *true* cure to save the little ones from a horrible death.

And the child was the key to that cure.

"If you don't want to see her turned into a science experiment," Lizzie had warned, "you'll keep quiet about what you know."

Isaac had agreed, reluctantly. But she knew it was only a matter of time before his conscience got the better of him.

The problem was, Isaac wouldn't stay silent for long. He'd probably already told Alessa – and Alessa would have told her sister. The threat to the girl would convince Isaac to keep them in line for now. But not forever.

And Lizzie couldn't let the child fall into Regina's hands. If she was going to turn the girl over to anyone, it would be the

Engineers. They were the ones with the knowledge and equipment to do this right, to find a real cure. They were humanity's only hope.

But the minute those three – Isaac, Alessa, and Janie – realized that Lizzie intended to bring the girl back to Paragon, they would spill everything they knew. Then there would be no chance for peace. Paragon would be forced to crush the rebellion. And the entire survival of their species could be put in jeopardy.

Lizzie couldn't let that happen. She would turn the rebels against Regina, and she would deliver them – and the girl – to the Engineers. Regardless of what it cost her personally, she would do her part to ensure a future for her people.

But first, she needed to get rid of Isaac.

2. CONTRITION

The walls were gray. The floors were gray. The bedframe was gray. The sheets, the blanket, the bedside table. The wardrobe door, and behind it, all her gear, and most of the utilitarian clothing hung inside. It was fifty shades of gray in this barracks – in this entire facility – in the most mind-numbingly literal sense possible. Alessa rolled over and sighed, her mood as gray as the rest of it.

She'd had the dream last night again, of course.

Stretching her arms, she sat up and glanced around the room, shaking off the disturbing visions that ravaged her unconscious mind. She needed Isaac, needed the warmth of his crystalline eyes and his firm embrace to bring her back from her nightmare, set her feet on solid ground.

But he was gone already, probably headed to the mess hall for a quick bite before the early morning scrum. The man really could not function on an empty stomach, Alessa sighed to herself. Her stomach growled in accord, but she knew she

didn't have the time. Regina would have her head if she was late to another meeting.

Alessa dressed quickly, grabbing a dark green bandana to tie back her still-too-short-to-ponytail chocolate locks, and headed down the hall to freshen up in the communal bathroom.

Drying her face and glancing up at her bright emerald eyes in the mirror, she reflected that in some ways living in Raptor felt an awful lot like a subterranean, military version of her sorority house back on the drama set of the Eastern State University campus. Life imitates art? She laughed darkly to herself, taking the stairs two at a time down to B3, where she knew she'd find the rest of the rebel leaders gathering.

Exiting the stairwell into the long, straight, narrow (of course, gray) hall, Alessa shook off an involuntary shudder as the familiar surroundings conjured visions of her nightmare – the same one that had plagued her almost every night since reaching Raptor's sanctuary. Only a dream, she reassured herself. She smoothed down the raised hairs on her forearms for good measure.

Then again, she mused, she felt like she was having trouble telling fantasy from reality lately, ever since her brief encounter on the train with the monster that she could only think of in her head as Joe. Could that terrifying creature *really* have been her best friend? The whole thing felt too surreal to be true, like a few moments out of time – and certainly out of the realm of possibility. She must have just dreamed it.

But no. Rubbing the raised scar on her palm – left by a splinter from the broomstick she'd broken into a makeshift

spear to protect herself from the bloodthirsty beast – Alessa knew she had not imagined it. Yes, it had only been a few seconds of horrible realization thrumming through her psyche before the train braked into the station and Joe, or whoever it was, pounced out the broken gap in the train car’s wall. But it had happened. She was sure of it, as much as she wished she were wrong.

Passing through the crowd of rebels thronging across the tight corridor, Alessa tried in vain to swallow back the memory of the alien feelings that had bathed her in the railcar, her ability to read the creature’s emotional state a “gift” that the damned stitch had somehow unlocked in her mind. The frustration, the confusion, the fear... the overwhelming struggle to contain that aching thirst. And through all of this, an undercurrent of something that felt very much like an apology.

An apology! Alessa shook her head. She could drown in her own shame just thinking of it. If anyone was apologizing, it should have been *her*. For leaving him, for all those years, to rot in Paragon’s grasp. For moving on, for forgetting about him, for being so goddamn *dense* as to not realize it’d been *him* the entire journey last winter, watching her, following her, protecting her –

“Morning, sunshine!” It was Janie, peeling off the back of a pack of idle dawdlers milling in the hall, her short messy bob swinging with just a *tinge* less energy than Alessa would normally expect.

In the last two months Janie had thankfully mostly recovered – physically, at least – from her months in captivity.

But Alessa still felt like Paragon's prisons, and particularly the failure to rescue Nikhil, had taken their toll on her sister's usual spunk. But then again, maybe it was just early.

Locking arms with Alessa, she smirked, "Ready for another rousing rendition of 'Who's Regina Gonna Chew Out Today?'"

Alessa laughed under her breath. "Hey, as long as it's not me... I'm on time this morning."

"For once," Janie teased.

Having been locked up in solitary for so long, Janie had had no problem adjusting to the simulated sunlight ("Better than 24/7 darkness!") and aesthetic monotony of their underground bunker. She was just happy to be around people again.

But Alessa had been spoiled – between the gorgeous ESU campus set and then the freedom of the open forest, and even the desolate beauty of the city's semi-ruins, the rebels' new base was starting to feel like a prison all its own – and an overcrowded one at that. Alessa could not wait for some fresh air on her next training mission tomorrow – especially since Isaac was on the same assignment. Speaking of...

"Hey, have you seen Isaac anywhere?" Alessa asked her sister.

Janie gently nudged Alessa's ribs then pointed her elbow further down the corridor. Off to one side stood Isaac, chatting with Lizzie.

Though on closer look, maybe "chatting" wasn't quite the word. Isaac's body was turned away from Lizzie, his lips drawn in a tight line, the oceans of his eyes cold. And he was nodding rigidly in assent, but begrudgingly.

“That doesn’t look good,” Alessa murmured quietly.

“Nope,” Janie agreed. “That’s why I was standing here, so I could keep an eye on them. When Lizzie approached him she was making her beer pong face,” she offered by way of explanation.

Alessa knew what she meant – she well remembered the intimidating scowl that ultracompetitive Lizzie would don whenever someone broke out a drinking game back in their sorority days. She didn’t like the idea of her turning it on Isaac.

“Hmpf,” Alessa grunted.

They watched for a moment longer and Janie leaned her head in close to Alessa’s. “You think she’s threatening him about, *you know*, again?” she whispered.

Alessa couldn’t imagine what else this could be about.

Isaac would do anything to protect Josephine, his sister – well, faux-sister from the drama, but still the closest thing he had left to family... besides monster-Joe, Alessa reminded herself, immediately dismissing the thought. And Lizzie knew it, and she was using it to control him; though to what end, Alessa still wasn’t quite sure.

“I don’t know what she expects him to do,” Janie murmured. “Even if he *doesn’t* tell Regina that Josephine is naturally immune from the virus – which is setting himself up for some *real* trouble if, or rather, *when* Regina finds out – doesn’t Lizzie realize that everyone’s going to put two and two together on their own eventually anyway?”

“Well,” Alessa breathed back, “not if no one else knows that we were all vaccinated before the outbreak. And right now Lizzie and Isaac are the only ones who know that.”

“Besides us,” Janie pointed out.

“Yeah, but we can’t say anything without hurting Isaac. If we tell anyone, Lizzie’s almost certainly right that they’ll immediately start experimenting on Josephine, which would kill Isaac – and if that doesn’t do it, Regina will. You know she doesn’t take kindly to being kept out of the loop.”

Janie breathed out an exasperated sigh. “But what is Lizzie’s endgame here? How long does she plan to draw this out? I know she keeps talking about peace, but does she really think she’ll be able to reunite the rebels with Paragon again, after all they’ve done to us?”

Alessa shook her head. She definitely could not imagine anyone here willingly returning to the colony, not after realizing they’d all been drugged and lied to and exploited for their labor for years. But then again, most people didn’t even know the half of it.

“She seems to think it’s important enough to try,” Alessa reflected. “Plus, again, no one else knows just *how* bad the Engineers really are.” Thinking of Paragon’s clandestine leaders – and the secret architects of the entire apocalypse – made her want to spit. “No one knows they’re responsible for the virus, the genocide, all of it. I know Lizzie has told Isaac they had their reasons, but –”

“But how can we continue to keep this from everyone?” Janie interjected. “It’s not right. They deserve to know!” she hissed.

Alessa shrugged in defeat.

Yes, she thought, just like Isaac deserves to know that his brother might still be alive – but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything about that, either, knowing the guilt would eat him alive. She at least had to be sure first. She had to know it was *really* Joe.

And in the same vein, she couldn’t put Josephine in harm’s way until they at least had figured out what Lizzie was intending to do with the knowledge that everyone was immune, and that the Engineers were behind it all. Maybe she had some kind of plan. If only Alessa could win Lizzie’s trust, maybe there might be some kind of solution here...

But before Alessa could finish her thought, there was a commotion at the far end of the hall.

“Coming through!” a frantic male voice yelled. “Clear the way!”

The rebels all reacted at once, spinning towards the hubbub and obediently pinning themselves against the walls to make space. Two soldiers bounded down the corridor, a bloodcurdling moan emanating from the makeshift stretcher suspended between them. It looked like they were headed towards the infirmary.

As the trio overtook the crowds of onlookers, the hallway erupted in hushed alarm. Many lifted their hands to their

gaping mouths or averted their eyes, out of respect or fear or both.

“Oh my god,” Alessa heard someone nearby gasp.

And then they passed her, and she understood: the poor guy’s clothes – and skin – could only be described as “shredded.” He was writhing in pain, and his innards looked to be held in place by a blood-soaked towel, as if he’d been mauled by a bear.

But not a bear, she thought, gulping back guilt. Not a bear at all.

A creature, Alessa knew.

A creature like Joe.

3. PROGRESS

Before she could dwell on the thought of Joe ripping apart another human being, the soldiers disappeared into the sick bay, and the masses in the hall resumed their previous level of anticipatory chatter, albeit with a lingering undercurrent of unease.

Swallowing to relieve the dryness in her throat, Alessa looked up just as Isaac took this opportunity to exit from his conversation with Lizzie. He held Alessa's gaze, shaking his head ever so slightly to signal his exasperation as he paced up the hall towards her and Janie.

Reaching them, Isaac slid his hand around Alessa's hip and planted a quick, soft kiss on her lips in greeting.

Pulling away reluctantly, Alessa murmured, "Was that about what I think it was about?"

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Lizzie was just 'reminding' me that if what we know gets out, not only will Regina be livid with *me* and make *Jo's* life hell, she'll *also* almost certainly find some way

to make Martha and Al pay for telling me about what's going on with the infants."

Ruthless, Alessa thought to herself, shaking her head. Of course Lizzie wouldn't forget about Isaac's soft spot for his faux-parents from the drama.

"How thoughtful of her," Janie sneered.

Alessa took a heavy breath. "I hate to say it, but Lizzie's probably right."

"I know," Isaac sighed. "I just can't stand all these secrets."

Alessa nodded in understanding. She didn't like it either, but she was sure Regina was just trying to avoid inciting a panic by keeping all this from the rebels. After all, it would be horrific enough watching every newly born baby be taken by the virus in a matter of days – but if they also knew that they, as parents, were immune and that their immunity for some reason could not pass to their future children? Especially with no cure in sight, it would be existential bedlam.

So far Regina had managed to shield most everyone from these terrible truths, with the exception of Alicia and Martha, whose medical expertise was needed to try to find a solution, and Isaac and Lizzie, whom Alessa was fairly certain Regina didn't even know about. Lizzie had revealed to Isaac during one of her threats that she'd overheard Alicia talking about it to Regina, and Isaac of course had been sworn to secrecy by Martha and Al.

"I'm sure Regina has her reasons," Alessa consoled him.

"She'd better," Janie retorted. "Because it's pretty messed up not to tell everyone that they're already vaccinated against

the thing they're most petrified of – oh, and by the way, that same virus was released *deliberately* by our enemies. Doesn't she realize we could be using this to rally everyone?"

Alessa had to agree that it did seem out of character for Regina to keep such monumental information to herself, especially when she could be using it strategically. But maybe she was worried people would be so angry they wouldn't maintain order. Or so relieved that they'd go and accidentally create a whole generation of doomed babies.

Or maybe – like Alessa's suspicions about the monster being Joe – she just didn't know for sure, and wanted to be positive before she said anything. After all, the only reason Isaac or Lizzie were certain of any of this is because they'd heard it out of the Developer's mouth verbatim.

"You know," Alessa pointed out, "we've been assuming Lizzie told her mother everything, but maybe she didn't. Maybe Regina doesn't know anything except that the infants are dying and she can't seem to stop it from happening. Even if she has suspicions about immunity and the origins of the virus, it wouldn't help to tell everyone if she wasn't positive."

Janie considered for a moment before issuing a begrudging groan.

"Well, whatever it is," Isaac concurred, clenching his jaw in exasperation, "as Lizzie has been *so kind* as to point out, we certainly can't ask Regina about any of it without putting Jo, Martha, Al, and ourselves in the line of fire. So we don't really have a choice regardless. We just have to trust that Regina knows what she's doing."

“And that Lizzie isn’t up to anything shady,” Janie added, a tinge of skepticism in her voice.

“Come on.” Alessa gently pushed them both towards the meeting room, where everyone was beginning to file in. “Let’s grab our seats.”

The three of them shuffled in to the back of the room and, noticing most of the chairs were already filled, perched together on the edge of a desk that had been shoved against the far wall. Having once been some kind of open workspace, large whiteboards and projection screens adorned the gray walls, and it was equipped with several desks and tables, most of which had been pushed aside to make room for additional chairs. Thirty or so high-ranking rebel officials met here for a briefing each morning before setting out to the day’s assignments.

Regina’s silver-blond hair flashed as she stood up at the front of the room, the deepening lines around her eyes crinkling as she glanced around, waiting for everyone to quiet.

“Good morning.” She loosed a quick smile – brisk and efficient, like everything else about her – before continuing.

“It should be a quick scrum today, as our plans are progressing on schedule and,” she cleared her throat and shook her head in sympathy, “besides that unfortunate business in the hall just now, for once, no *other* unexpected impediments have surfaced in the past 24 hours.”

Someone let out a half-joking “whoop!” and Regina narrowed her eyes at the disruption, but her usually withering glare was softened, and she seemed pleased nonetheless. Isaac caught Alessa’s eye and raised a bemused eyebrow – things

must really have been going well for Regina to tolerate any degree of disorder.

“All right, all right. Status, please,” Regina commanded.

Usually Carlos, the rebels’ head of militia, went first, but Alessa couldn’t seem to locate him. Instead, an athletic dark-skinned man in the front row stood up. He looked familiar to Alessa but she didn’t know his name. “Carlos is leading a training mission until tomorrow,” he explained, “so I’m filling in for Military. In-field training is on track, despite some surprises from those... creatures. All units have had at least four assignments and many are on their fifth. We should be complete by the end of next month, per the schedule. Next mission leaves tomorrow.”

“Great, thank you,” Regina replied. “Personnel?”

Michael, one of the core circle of the rebellion – and the first resistance ally Alessa and Joe had made contact with, way back when in Paragon – cleared his throat and smoothed the front of his shirt down over his slight paunch. “Morale is steady, no crises to report.” An empathetic social psychologist, Michael had taken charge of treating anyone who was having trouble adjusting to life in Raptor. “And I believe, until a few moments ago at least, everything was clear in Medical as well.” Like the others, Alessa scanned the rows of chairs looking for the medical lead’s gorgeous poof of natural kinky hair, but came up empty-handed. “Alicia is a bit tied up at the moment,” Michael explained. “She sends her apologies.”

Regina nodded gravely – of course, Alicia would be attending to the wounded soldier from the pre-meeting commotion in the hall.

After a pause, Regina continued. “Facilities?”

A middle-aged woman in the center of the room rose. “Fully operational. Rotations are set through the next four weeks and have been communicated to residents. Maintenance has been running smoothly.”

“Did we get access to the weapons storeroom on B2?” Regina inquired.

“We did,” the woman replied. “But there’s a small snag...”

Sato, the rebels’ mechanical expert, straightened up from her characteristic slouch and waved a tattooed arm. “I’ll take this one.” The older woman nodded and sat down.

“We’ve got the weapons cache,” Sato explained, “but it seems there’s some kind of lock on the devices themselves. Bioscanners, I believe. So I need to go into the system and figure out how to reprogram them. It might take a day, or might take a month – I’m not sure yet. If we have the necessary codes, it will be an easy job. But if I have to break the encryption, it might take some time.”

“Thank you, Sato,” Regina nodded. “Please prioritize this over your other work – we need every functional weapon we can get before we initiate the operation to liberate Paragon.”

At that, the room began to buzz with excited chatter.

Regina smiled. “Yes, we’re getting close. You’ve all been hard at work the past couple months in preparation, and it hasn’t gone unnoticed. We’ve made massive strides in getting

this facility up-to-shape and utilizing its resources to transform a mostly-civilian body of refugees into trained and skilled fighters.” She paused for emphasis. “I am very proud of the efforts of everyone in this room.”

Alessa couldn't help but feel a faint glow in her chest at the rebel leader's words – she knew she and Isaac had played a significant role in the rebels' success, and it felt good. Against all odds, she'd actually made a difference. Maybe the people of Paragon wouldn't be suffering much longer.

Isaac seemed to be having the same thought. Without looking at her, he reached down and squeezed Alessa's hand, his lips curling up at the corners in satisfaction. They made a good team.

Admiringly, Alessa reflected on how Regina truly valued everyone around her, and she made sure they knew it. Glancing across the room, she observed similar smiles adorning the faces of the myriad rebel officials in attendance, everyone basking together in Regina's praise.

Everyone, that is, except Lizzie. She hunched in the far corner with a dejected scowl on her face, looking defeated. Not for first time, Alessa wondered what exactly was up with Lizzie.

But whatever it was, Alessa reasoned, it couldn't possibly take away from all the rebels had accomplished. Things were finally looking up – and Alessa, for one, was eager for the next step.

4. CITIZENRY

“Seriously, Alex?”

Deion chuckled and shook his head at the sight of his best friend – shirtless, sweat gleaming off his abs – precisely positioned so that anyone passing by the construction site would get an eyeful of his chiseled physique.

“First of all, it’s only 50 degrees out –”

“58,” Alex argued, heaving another stone on top of the wall he was building for this set of Paragon’s latest drama. “That’s almost in the sixties.” He paused to swipe a dusty, rippling forearm across his brow, brushing the fringe of straight black hair from his striking, angular eyes, which were narrowed against the sun.

“– and you *do* realize that any woman that might come by here is too busy floating along on ‘happy pills’ to notice anything you’re doing, or wearing, or *not* wearing. Right?” Deion finished, raising a wry eyebrow. Alex had come a long

way from the scrawny exchange student he befriended in the year leading up to the outbreak, but still.

Alex shrugged. “You never know. Besides, maybe this is just what the ladies need to wake ’em up.” He flexed his pecs in Deion’s direction with a smirk.

Deion just rolled his eyes and laughed. Pushing the jumpsuit sleeves up to expose his own smooth ebony forearms, he had to admit the sun did feel good on his skin. He was just grateful that because of he and Alex’s shared lactose intolerance – something they’d bonded over back in prep school, before it and everything else in their town was transformed into Paragon – they hadn’t been affected when sedatives started getting added to the heavier, dairy-laden foods served in the colony’s communal food halls. He was certain he wouldn’t care enough to appreciate the warmth of the sun’s rays – let alone notice anyone of the opposite sex – if he was on that stuff.

“Do you need a hand with that?” Deion offered. “I’ve got a few minutes left on lunch before I need to head back.”

Alex held up another large stone and eyed it carefully, turning it this way and that until finally he saw something that satisfied him, then fitted it perfectly into the gap between two other rocks. “Nah, you’ll just mess up my flow. Thanks, though.”

Studying the wall, Deion had to admit that Alex truly had a gift – every stone, no matter how irregular the shape, fit neatly and securely amongst its neighbors, and even the colors formed a pleasing, uniform pattern. Deion did *not* possess an artist’s eye; if he were in charge of this wall, it would probably just look

like a pile of rocks. He supposed that was why Alex was assigned to set design, and Deion to serving on the buffet line or digging irrigation ditches or whatever other rudimentary task he found next to his name on the big display screen in the common room each morning.

Stepping back to scrutinize his work, Alex nodded contentedly, then untied the top half of his standard-issue jumpsuit from around his waist and shrugged it back over his shoulders. Zipping up the front, he turned to Deion. “I’m just about due for a break – I’ll walk back with you and grab a drink.”

They turned together down the mostly-deserted street heading back towards the nearest food hall, passing the neatly maintained but spartan buildings on either side. The old post office served now as a repository for clothing repair and replacement, the market as one of many sorting and storage facilities for the colony’s food supply. Normally there would be several other workers out and about, but everything was shut down as this block was being used temporarily for filming for the drama.

“So, what’d you think of last night’s premiere?” Alex asked.

Deion grinned – Alex was always fishing for compliments on his work. “The army headquarters looked very convincing.”

“How about those topographic maps on the walls? Hand-lettered, you know.”

“I would have guessed they were computer generated,” Deion granted.

Alex tried to temper his grin with a modicum of modesty, but Deion could see right through it. And anyway, he didn't need to – he was glad his friend had found something meaningful to do with his time. He wished he could say the same.

“The best part, though, was that *train*, huh?”

“Did you design that, too?” Deion asked, impressed.

“Oh, no, no. I'm not sure where that was filmed. Actually, I'm wondering if it might have been simulated since all they showed was a few shots from a grainy security camera. Keep the costs down, you know?”

Deion nodded. “Makes sense.” But then he remembered something. “Wait, no, it must have been real – remember when we heard that train rumble through town a couple months ago? They'd said that was from the filming.”

“Oh, yeah – you're right. Well, that was before I was involved, so I don't know. I'd like to meet whoever came up with the idea to retrofit a steam engine with a nuclear power cell, though – not sure if that would work in real life, but certainly looked cool.”

“Yeah,” Deion agreed. “Wish we could have gotten a better view of it.”

“I think they do that on purpose – only show glimpses of the ‘resistance’ to punch up the suspense. From what I've heard, sounds like most of the filming will be done from the army characters' point of view. The rebel side is just snippets: intercepted audio, security footage, that sort of thing. Though I haven't seen any of those shoots, so I'm not positive.”

“Cool,” Deion replied, thoughtful. He liked to hear about the “behind the scenes” from Alex – he always enjoyed the dramas, but knowing a little of what went into creating them gave him a deeper appreciation. This new one in particular was a pretty unique concept – the first show that supposedly took place *inside* Paragon, pitting a misguided rebellion against a military trying to protect the colony’s citizens.

“I liked that it was so action-packed,” Deion reflected, “but I’m still a little skeptical of the premise. I mean, why would anyone want to leave here, knowing what’s out there?”

He motioned towards the city walls in the distance, far beyond the boxy silhouette of the onetime warehouse store where Deion and Alex were now housed with several hundred others. He was quite content with his assigned efficiency unit, which included a cozy bunk on one of the warehouse’s many high, spacious shelves. Even knowing what they knew about the “special sauce” being added to the food, he couldn’t imagine wanting to give up the security of the colony and venture out into the barren wasteland of the world just asking to be infected.

“For sure,” Alex nodded vigorously. “I hope they explain the rebels’ perspective a little better in future episodes – I just don’t really get it.” He paused for a moment before adding, “Also, I hope they introduce a little more eye candy.”

Deion laughed. “Yeah, like that sorority/ghost one a few seasons ago.”

Alex sighed dramatically. “I *miss* that show. That *blonde* – remember?”

“How about the friend, the one with the messy short hair.”

“It’s called a ‘bob.’ I think.”

“Whatever it was, I liked it. That girl was on fire.”

“They *all* were,” Alex reminisced. “Way too many guys on this new show.”

“Definitely,” Deion sniggered.

Alex smiled to himself, then abruptly pursed his lips. “Shame what they did to my set, too.”

“You mean the ghost guy’s house?”

“Yeah – there was some kind of gas leak further down the set and it blew a good portion of the ‘farm’ to smithereens. Thankfully the house was untouched, but I put a lot of work into those fields, too.” He sighed.

“I can’t imagine they’re going to take much better care of this season’s location – they must be gearing up for an attack or a battle of some sort, no?” Deion wondered.

Alex turned up his empty palms. “Never seen a script – I just build what they tell me.”

Typical, Deion thought. If there was one thing he could change about Paragon, it’d be the communication – he and Alex didn’t even know who to ask about the tranquilizers in the food, so like everything else, they eventually just accepted it and moved on with their lives.

“Well, here’s hoping that masterpiece of a wall you’re working on at least makes it on film before they blow it up.”

“Cheers to that.”

5. RENDEZVOUS

Isaac reclined back on the shore absentmindedly digging his fingers through the grass, enjoying the scent of fresh pine needles, the unseasonably warm spring sun stroking his face, and – especially – the view.

Alessa stood with her back to him, her tall, curvaceous form poised on the edge of a large boulder, the afternoon sun reflecting off the water of the lake onto her long, bare limbs, her skin glowing luminous against the forest. Isaac groaned hungrily to himself, and she paused, her gaze dancing to him over her shoulder, before she leapt off and slipped into the water.

Surfacing with a yelp, she swam hastily towards the shore, visibly shivering under the gentle waves.

The spell broken, Isaac chuckled and called out, “I don’t know what else you were expecting in *March*.”

She waded in the neck-deep water, teeth chattering, until she could find her footing. “It’ll be April n-n-n-next week,” she argued, hissing through clenched lips.

“And April is swimming weather since when exactly?” Isaac laughed and shook his head. “Come here and let me warm you up.” He narrowed his sapphire eyes at her enticingly.

Alessa grinned. She worked her way towards him, the water slinking over her limbs as her smooth, porcelain skin broke the surface with each stroke. Isaac’s stomach clenched with desire.

Dipping her face under, she came up standing and tossed her dripping hair back. The lake now at her shoulders, she treaded slowly forward, Isaac’s heart rollicking in anticipation as the water inched down, down, down over her chest.

And then, just before it reached the promised land, she went rigid, her features twisted in concern.

Isaac shot up. “What is it?”

Alessa’s eyes darted across the shoreline, searching. “I’m not sure. I felt something.”

Isaac grimaced. “I *told* you there were snakes in there.”

“No, not snakes.” Alessa waved him off. “I think it might be... *them*.”

Understanding, alarm prickled down his back. “The creatures.”

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