



First Look Access

(Episode 7: Abby J. Reed)

BREAKER

“Test . . . Test . . . Testing for real. Let’s see if you work now, baby.”

I released my pinky from the transmit button and pushed Circuit, my metal prosthetic leg, against the table. My chair squeaked-squeaked-squeaked across the concrete floor. Extra motors, hinges, cables, coils, driveshafts hung from ceilings, trailed from drawers. The furnaces stored down the hall flavored the air with musty smoke. I bet two corn rations a claustrophobic wouldn’t have lasted more than five mins. Despite Lewis’s constant mess, his tech repair workshop was a dark hovel of sexy.

I wheeled around my completed projects crammed along the walls until the floating four-meter-long MapScreen on the other side of the room came into view. The diction software I just finished rewiring scrawled the words I spoke earlier across the Screen’s clear surface.

Right beautiful.

Lewis entered, not bothering to look at the Screen. “Ahead of schedule again, Breaker?” Lewis wiped grease and grit off his hands onto a half-apron, then tossed it into a bin with the rest of his filthy cotton bibs. Most had never been washed. As the only male in my immediate circle that believed in laundry, my aprons hung in a row above the container, clean as a newly bathed baby’s ass.

I plopped the comm on the table and—*thook*—placed my feet next to it. “Would it be me otherwise?” The leather harness strap cut into my waist, thanks to the awkward angle of Circuit. I named him after the second attempt of rigging old mismatched project debris into a right leg, since he empowered me to get around. This Circuit was the 7.0 version.

If the shot had hit a bit lower, I would’ve had enough leg left to strap Circuit to the stump itself instead of my waist, but it didn’t. The harness system I’d rigged six solarcycles ago to hold Circuit up was a spark of brilliance and the best solution I had come up with.

I moved my blaster out of my holster to take some of the weight off my waist. “Some wannabe-genius tried to fix the Screen first. I had to rewire the—”

“Spare me.” Lewis held up a hand, grime still lining the cracks of his chapped palm. “How far out can the comm reach?”

“Fifteen clicks.” Military scouts stationed at sections of the boundary fence routinely called in their observations. The recon reports were mapped on the Screen while transcribed records appeared in another column for reference later.

Whenever the Screen broke, which happened almost every half cycle, we lost our ability to record our surveillance. The thing was so ancient, it’d probably been around before Chief Malvyn. Which was saying something. He’d been in charge of the compound for so long not even my Grandma could remember his first dia. No problem if the scouts didn’t report anything suspicious. But if they did, the whole compound could strap on guns and be ready to fight in an hora flat. We had drills for this.

The MapScreen also showed our section of the planet Scarlatti—our valley and the surrounding mountains, which both protected and trapped us. Differing colors marked the territories and their bloody important boundary lines. Green to our left. Blue to our right. Our red compound in the middle.

Our land. And *their* land.

If either of our two enemy tribes attacked, it would be them, not us, who would die.

Like I said: surveillance and boundary lines. The key to surviving Scarlatti.

“Can you double that?”

I glanced at the ever-growing pile of tech waiting on the to-fix table for my attention. “Can I breathe?” I didn’t like having to backtrack on repeat projects. I picked up a dwarf wire, a small scrap from a stripped cable, straightening the kinks. Not straight enough. I rubbed it against the table’s edge.

Lewis glanced at the skylight above. The sky had darkened a couple shades, blurring jagged shadows on the walls. “Storm’s coming.”

I held the wire to the fading light. Better, but still not quite perfect. “And?” Storms didn’t come through our valley very often. But when one did, you couldn’t see through the downpour. Easy to be mistaken for one of them. Best to lock up and stay put ‘till it passed.

“Storm means things get broken.” He gave me a pointed look. “And one time there’ll be something even you can’t fix.”

“Hasn’t happened yet.” I shrugged with one shoulder. “Doubt it ever will.”

Lewis gave me a look filled with one of his unspoken lessons, then walked over to the MapScreen. “How do you erase it?”

“Swipe your hand.”

Lewis waved his palm in front of my words on the MapScreen. Nothing happened. He waved harder. Nothing. His gut jiggled from another round of arm pumping. Still nothing. “What the hell you have to do, dance in front of it?” His lips barely showcased his metal tooth.

I slid the wire into my calf pocket and limped to the MapScreen, Circuit thinking. “You gotta touch it.” My fingertips skimmed the screen’s surface until the words dissolved into pixels, then vanished.

“Show off.” Lewis gave me an affectionate cuff on the head. “Did you record your scouting results yet?”

I pushed the comm into its designated spot in the Screen’s dinged metal frame. All fixed. “I was waiting until I got to the center.”

“Best hurry up. You don’t want the storm to catch you. And if there’s something to report and you’re not there . . .”

I switched off the stabilize setting on the MapScreen's frame. It sank in the air a couple centis, bobbing free. "I know, I know." I yanked on the frame and limped my way out of the workshop with the Screen drifting slow behind me.

We all knew what could happen if we didn't do our jobs.

We could die.

This time of dia, our two suns glowed copper. Our asteroid filled the sky above the Elik Mountains in the east. Our planet's ring cut a distant pink stripe behind the asteroid until it disappeared into the distance. Next to it was the tiny dot of Carmesi, the only other planet in the Gemelos System. When our two moons were also raised, the sky in our corner of the Sirkel Galaxy was a pretty crowded party. With the growing storm clouds blowing in from the east, the airy expanse looked downright majestic.

Sometimes I wondered what the sky would look like without the big-ass rock and other celestial paraphernalia blocking our perfectly good view of the stars. Our tablets said an infinite amount dotted the universe, but I'd only ever seen the sliver of stars in the west.

Shoot. The closest I'd ever been to Carmesi was a view through a 'scope.

Circuit's clunks echoed throughout the mostly empty streets. Everybody was inside, preparing for rain. A couple cycles back, a flash flood swept through and killed four people. Nobody wanted to be outside in case of a repeat. The concrete three-story apartment buildings always looked like they were blushing rust. They formed the maze leading to the square, the big open area in front of the center where we held our festivals and markets. Whoever attempted to beautify the compound by planting scarlet trees in the coppery clay failed. You could only improve a place smothered in shabby solapanel so much.

Sounds of marching drifted from the square. I'd reached one of the entrances when the sounds solidified into Luka and his band of teen troops-in-

training. They maneuvered right in front of me, blocking the sides. Which only left open the square's middle.

My lungs sagged to greet my stomach. *'Stroids.*

I'd need to walk straight through the middle of the square to reach the center. *Not good.*

You see, the square was shaped funny. The four sides lining the square were flat, but the middle was shaped like a bowl. Circuit didn't do downhill. Uphill was manageable, but going downhill prevented pressure from applying to my hydraulic knee, which ensured Circuit's collapse. Unless I planned on holding on to someone the entire time to avoid eating a face full of rock and concrete, I only walked along the edges.

To get the Screen to the center to make sure our borders were still safe, I needed Luka, the same Luka who pretty much hated my ass, to move his trainees.

Bloody wonderful.

The wind increased in speed, stirring the telltale scent of the oncoming storm—damp wood and crisp mountain air—through the compound.

"All right, you idiots," Luka hollered, his too-big teeth poked out like a skull's. He looked right creepy sometimes, and ugly was an ongoing struggle. "Just a routine march. Nothing special." He swaggered along the lines of teens. Most of them had lost their shakiness by now. Those who hadn't acclimated appeared orange from the suns illuminating their bloodless skin. The youngest, Frell, turned sixteen yesterdia. He clutched his gun, but the tremor in his hands caused it to click against his collarbone.

In the compound, weapons were as commonplace as shoes. As soon as a kid could wobble upright, you handed him his needle packet, sheath of arrows, maybe a knife. But no guns until after basic training.

Safety first.

Chief Malvyn said guns used to discharge metal. Funny. It wasn't as though we had a lack of metal, but we needed all we could get for real uses, like tools and bots. Why waste it on projectiles? Besides, chemical bonds hold the body together. Sever the bond between atoms and the body fell apart, or that specific area you hit fell apart. And, for some weird reason, smoke from the fission shot smelled like cinnamon.

But the body still bled.

I swallowed. "Captain Luka." My tongue caught on the 'L' and it was all I could do not to tear out the insubordinate muscle. Technically, Luka was my superior because every person helped out in the military after basic. I worked for Lewis in the workshop, but I also doubled as a scout, though I mostly recorded recon results. People forgot an amputated leg didn't affect the vision.

Luka turned to me. "Breaker." He said my name like an insult. His mouth twitched into a nasty smirk.

The sides of the buildings closed in and squeezed me until my insides twisted. Maybe I shouldn't have rewired his cleaning bot three septdias ago. I programmed it to spit dirt into his bed and grind mud across any reflective surface in his apartment—including his guns. Now my moment of laughter came back to chomp my ass.

Do it. Just ask him.

"Can you move your troops?" I gritted my teeth as though grinding would keep my face free of humiliation. "Sir?"

Just bang me.

Luka put his hands on his holsters and flexed, showing off every kilo of muscle he put on in the past cycle. "And why should we move?" His fists curled like they were prepped to take a swing at my head.

The heat of embarrassment burned my cheeks, my neck, my back. I focused on the rows of use-only-as-needed solabikes parked and locked at the base of the

center steps. Their dented-up shells showed the amount of action they got over time. If only I could hop on one and drive it straight at the jarhead.

Bang me now.

He wanted me to admit Circuit wouldn't function well on the downhill. He wanted me to admit I had to take a different route. I'd rather chew out my tongue. "I need to drop off this screen for Chief Malvyn, and I can't when Captain Luka's two-cycle-olds insist on playing with their new toys in my way."

"Too hard to find your way up the middle?"

"I imagine your ex-girlfriend said the same thing."

A spurt of cackles erupted among his trainees. Luka silenced them with a glare. He turned that glare on me, and I knew he dreamed me baking in a fire pit and watching my flesh curl.

I flicked my gaze upward. The clouds had morphed to black and were bulging with rain. If I didn't want the MapScreen or Circuit damaged by the water, all that work wasted plus a reaming from Lewis, I needed him to move *now*.

I wouldn't—couldn't—ask him again.

We stared at each other. The air between us sizzled with another type of storm, one that had been building for cycles. Thirty whole secs passed when finally Luka's comm buzzed. He pressed to receive the call and nodded once. It wasn't a *let-me-get-on-that* nod but a reluctant *only-because-I-was-interrupted* nod.

I didn't show my relief. The last time one of our spats brewed into a fight, I ended with a black eye and couldn't tell the live end of a wire for a septdia straight. It almost got me fired.

A voice spoke over the comm. "*Captain Luka? Where are you? Over.*"

He pressed the button. "*On our way. Over.*" He gave me a final, alpha-male glower then gave orders to the trainees. They fell into formation and marched out for their routine border check, completely ignoring the brewing storm.

I waited until they were long gone before I moved toward the edges of the square. One close encounter with Luka was more than enough. I wasn't sure I'd be so lucky next time.

Maybe there was a better way to have handled Luka. Maybe if I had thought faster, I could've come up with a better option than humiliating the lunkhead in front of his trainees. I needed to watch for his retaliation.

I tugged the Screen up the steps, through the center's massive double doors, and onstage. The concrete center was designed for functionality over beauty. Our ancestors misjudged the population growth when they built it, so the amphitheater-style benches weren't nearly enough to stuff in five thousand people gathering for boring community updates. I maneuvered the Screen around the Chief's chair. Whoever built his seat-o'-power was not going for subtlety.

I finally powered the Screen on and opened the map of the compound and our boundaries. Nothing suspicious happened during my scouting shift earlier todia, so I used the brown-mark mode and drew along the southern border where I was stationed. Then I wasted time reprogramming the comm link like Lewis wanted.

"Border along the northern edge near River Run looks fine. Over."

I flinched. Frell's voice sounded different over the embedded comm. Less like Frell. Fighting will do that to you, make you less like yourself. His words appeared in a separate column like tiny marching soldiers.

"Received. Over." I smudged brown along the map at that spot.

The front double doors creaked open. A head of frizzy hair poked through the crack, followed by a body of sinful curves.

Happiness filled me. Tahnya came to visit! Then dread drowned it. *Tahnya* came to *visit*. I'd only ever been in one relationship, but I was pretty sure feeling dread when your girlfriend came for a surprise chat wasn't a good sign.

She slid down the aisle. "Breaker? Is now a good time?"

She wanted to talk about our last quarrel. But I didn't. I just wasn't ready to address it yet. We hurled a lot of hurtful words. I glanced toward the stage exit. "Um."

Her voice softened, tentative. "Are we—?"

The front doors slammed against the walls. "Breaker!" Cal sprinted down the aisle, knocking Tahnya into the seats. His corkscrew curls stuck to his sweaty forehead and his widespread dark eyes were huge and shifting and panicked. "Breaker, I'm sorry. So sorry, man. I didn't know."

Despite the sudden gratefulness that Cal came to distract our inevitable conversation, my chest hardened like my ribs were casted from iron. I clutched at the Screen's frame. I knew every expression my best friend had. Something was really, really wrong. "What is it?"

He fidgeted with the facial hair on his chin, and his pupils seemed to shrink. "It's Brody."

I stumbled off the stage. My hands vised on his shoulders and I shook him. His head wobbled back and forth. Brody. My little brother. "What. Happened?"

He grabbed my arms to wrestle free. "I don't know, man. I took a piss. I only stepped away for a min. I didn't know he was there." His words spilled out so quick I almost couldn't follow them.

"What the hell happened?"

"First, there isn't anything suspicious. I didn't see anything suspicious. And I came straight here to you. But I saw him when I came back from my piss. Sneaking by the west fence, man, right near the path. He broke boundary."

I took off in an awkward skip-run up the aisle. Tahnya reached out to me, but I blew by her grasping hand. "Cover for me, Cal!" I burst out of the center and bolted toward the row of solabikes.

“Are you sure that’s a good—” Tahnya called. The shutting door closed off the rest of her concerned words.

Too slow. I moved too slow with Circuit.

I scanned my palm on the gravlocks, yanked one free of its slot. The bike slipped from my sweaty palms and bounced into the air. I snatched the handlebars again and swung my good leg over the seat. We hovered together a meter from the ground. A crack of thunder split across the compound and the first flecks of rain fell. The storm had begun.

I revved the bike and drove off before sitting. My heart beat a presto tempo in my skull:

Please not. Brody. Please not. Brody. Please not. Brody. Too.

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