

RENEGADES

PROLOGUE THROUGH CHAPTER TWO

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We were all villains in the beginning.

For hundreds of years, prodigies were feared by common man. Because of that fear, we were hunted. Tormented. Mocked and oppressed. We were believed to be witches and demons, freaks and abominations. We were stoned and hung and set afire while crowds gathered to watch with cruel eyes, proud to be ridding the world of one more pariah.

They were right to be afraid.

Hundreds of years.

Who would have stood for it?

Ace changed everything. He united the most fearsome prodigies he could find and together they rebelled. His group cared little for the loss of innocent lives, or mass destruction, or even what would come next once the old world crumbled. They cared only for change, so change they got.

He started with the infrastructure. Government buildings torn from their foundations. Banks and stock exchanges turned to rubble and ash. Bridges ripped from the sky. Entire freeways reduced to rocky wastelands.

Then he went after the people who had failed him. Failed all of them.

The entire government, gone. Law enforcement, disbanded. Those fancy bureaucrats who had bought their way into power and influence . . . all dead, and all in a matter of weeks.

Chaos rose up to fill the void that civilized society had left behind, and fear and distrust would go on to rule for twenty long years.

They call it the Age of Anarchy, but we think of it as the good old days.

Looking back now, people talk about the Anarchists and the other gangs who rose to power like they were the worst part of those twenty years, but they weren't. Sure, everyone was terrified of them, but they mostly left you alone as long as you paid up when it was your due and didn't cause them any trouble.

But the people. The *normal* people. They were far worse. With no rule and no law, it became every man, woman, and child for themselves. There were no repercussions for crimes or violence—no one to run to if you were beaten or if your family was killed. No

police. No prisons. Not legitimate ones, anyway. Neighbors stole from neighbors. Stores were looted and supplies were hoarded, leaving children to starve in the gutters. It became the strong against the weak and, as it turns out, the strong are usually jerks.

Humanity loses faith in times like that. With no one to look up to, no one to believe in, we all became rats scrounging in the sewers.

Maybe Ace really was a villain. Or maybe he was a visionary.

Maybe there's not much of a difference.

Either way, he and his gang ruled Gatlon City for twenty years, while crime and vice spread like sewage around a backed-up pipe. And the Age of Anarchy might have gone on for another twenty years. Fifty years. An eternity.

But then, seemingly overnight . . . *hope*.

Bright and sparkling hope, dressed up in capes and masks.

Beautiful and joyous hope, promising to solve all your problems, fix all the world's evil, rain justice down upon your foes, and probably give a stern talking to a few jaywalkers along the way.

Warm and promising hope, encouraging the normal folks to stay inside where it was safe while they fixed everything. Don't worry about helping yourselves. You've got enough on your plate, what with all the hiding and moping and turning-a-blind-eye you've been doing lately. You take a day off. We're superheroes. *We've got this.*

Hope called themselves the Renegades.

PROLOGUE

Nova had been collecting syringes from the alleyway behind the apartment for weeks. She knew her parents would take them away if they found out, so she'd been hiding them in an old shoe box, along with an assortment of screws, zip ties, copper wires, cotton balls, and anything else she thought might come in handy for her inventions. At six-going-on-seven years old, she'd already become aware of how important it was to be resourceful and thrifty. She couldn't exactly make a list and send her dad to the store for supplies, after all.

The syringes would come in handy. She'd known it from the start.

She attached a thin plastic tube to the end of one and stuck the opposite end of the tube into a glass of water she'd filled up in the bathroom sink. She pulled up the plunger, drawing water into the tube. Tongue sticking out through the gap where she'd recently lost her first tooth, she grabbed a second syringe and

affixed it to the opposite end of the tube, then dug through her toolbox for a strip of wire long enough to secure it to the pulley system she'd built at the top of her dollhouse.

It had taken all day, but finally she was ready to test it.

She tucked some of the dollhouse furniture Dad had fabricated onto the elevator's platform, picked up the syringe, and pressed in the plunger. Water moved through the tube, extending the second plunger upward, and setting the complicated series of pulleys into action.

The elevator rose.

Nova grinned. "Hydraulic-powered elevator. *Success.*"

A cry from the next room intruded on the moment, followed by her mother's cooing voice. Nova looked up at her closed bedroom door. They'd ran out of milk the night before and Evie had been fussy all day. Uncle Alec was supposed to be bringing more, but it might be hours still.

When Nova had overheard her father ask-

ing if Uncle Alec thought he might be able to find fresh milk for the baby, she'd considered asking for more of the fruit-flavored gummies he'd given her on her birthday last year, too, or maybe a pack of rechargeable batteries.

She could do a lot with rechargeable batteries.

But Dad must have seen the request developing in her eyes, and had given her a look that silenced her. Nova wasn't sure what it meant. Uncle Alec had always been good to them—bringing food and clothes and sometimes even toys from his weekly spoils—but her parents never wanted to ask for anything special, no matter how much they needed it. When there was something specific, they had to go into the markets and offer up trades, usually the fabricated goods her father made.

The last time Dad had gone to the markets he'd come back with a bag of reusable diapers for Evie and a jagged cut above his eyebrow. Her mom stitched it up herself. Nova watched, fascinated to see that it was exactly like how her mother sewed up Dolly Bear when her seams had come open.

Nova turned back to the hydraulic system. The lift was just shy of being level with the dollhouse's second floor. If she could increase the capacity of the syringe, or make some adjustments to the lever system . . .

But the crying went on and on. The floorboards were squeaking now as her parents took turns trying to comfort Evie, pacing back and forth through the apartment.

The neighbors would start to complain soon.

Sighing, Nova set down the syringe and stood.

Dad was holding Evie in the front room, bouncing her up and down and singing one of his goofy made-up songs, but she probably couldn't hear them above her wailing. Through the doorway into their tiny kitchen, Nova saw her mom digging through cabinets, muttering about misplaced baby formula, though they all knew there wasn't any.

"Want me to help?" said Nova.

Dad turned to her, distress shadowing his eyes. Evie screamed louder as he forgot to bounce her for two entire seconds.

“I’m sorry, Nova,” he said, bouncing again. “It’s not fair to ask you to do it . . . but if she could just sleep for another hour or two, Alec should be here by then.”

“I don’t mind,” said Nova, reaching for the baby. “It’s easy.”

Dad frowned. Sometimes Nova thought he didn’t like her gift, though she didn’t know why. All it had ever done was make the apartment more peaceful.

He crouched down and settled Evie into Nova’s arms, making sure her hold was secure. Evie was getting so heavy, nothing like the tiny infant she’d been a year ago. Now she was all chubby thighs and flailing arms. She’d be walking any day now, her parents kept saying.

Nova sat down on her parents’ mattress in the corner of the room and stroked her fingers through Evie’s baby-soft curls. Evie had worked herself into a tizzy, with real tears and everything.

Nova got them both comfortable, sinking into the tossed blankets and pillows, and placed her thumb against her sister’s cheek, scooping

away one of the warm tears. She let her power roll through her. An easy, gentle pulse.

The crying stopped.

Evie's eyes fluttered, her eyelids growing heavy, her mouth falling open in a shuddering O.

Just like that, she was asleep.

Nova looked up to see her dad's shoulders sink in relief. Mom appeared in the doorway, surprised and curious, until she spotted Nova with the baby tucked against her.

"This is my favorite," Nova whispered to them. "When she's all soft and cuddly and . . . *quiet.*"

Mom smiled at her. "There are days when I don't know what we would do without you, Nova."

"Find another place to live," her dad muttered. "Charlie's kicked people out for less than a crying baby."

Mom shook her head. "He wouldn't risk angering your brother like that."

"I don't know." Dad frowned. "I don't know what anyone would or wouldn't do anymore."

Besides . . . I don't want to be in Alec's debt any more than we already are."

Mom retreated into the kitchen to start putting away the cans and boxes she'd scattered across the linoleum, while Dad sank into a chair at the apartment's only table. Nova watched him massage his temple for a moment, before he squared his shoulders and started to work on some new project. Nova wasn't sure what he was making, but she loved to watch him work. His gift was so much more interesting than hers—the way he could pull threads of energy out of the air, bending and sculpting them like golden filigree.

It was beautiful to watch. Mesmerizing, even, as the glowing strips emerged from nothing, making the air in the apartment hum, then slowly quieting and darkening as her father let them harden into something tangible and real.

"What are you making, Daddy?"

He glanced over at her, then leaned down. "Don't tell your mom," he whispered. "I'm making a bracelet for her birthday next week." He got even quieter as he added, "She'll chastise me

for spending energy on something so silly, but then she'll wear it every day, you mark my word."

He winked at her, secretive and sly, and Nova winked back, because that was their tradition. But something was gnawing at her and it wasn't long before her brow creased.

"Daddy, why don't we ask the Renegades for help?"

A figment of copper energy spluttered and disintegrated in the air. Her father fixed her with a sharp look. "What?"

"We never have enough food, or enough milk for Evie, and you and Mom are always talking about where we're going to live . . ." She started to trail off as her dad's expression tightened, but then plowed on. "But maybe the Renegades can help us. They're helping everyone these days. Mrs. Ogilvie says a Renegade chased down a mugger who tried to take her purse, and I heard Mom talking about a group of Renegades that broke into a storehouse and took all the food to give to—"

"That's enough, Nova."

She blinked, unconsciously pulling Evie closer against her.

“You must never talk about them like that. You must never . . .” He inhaled sharply. “You just shouldn’t talk about them.”

“Why not? They’re superheroes, aren’t they? They’re the good guys. If they knew we needed—”

“Listen to me, Nova.” He set down the bracelet and turned to face her. “They are just people, and even they cannot solve all of society’s problems. This world is already too reliant on them, understand? And we—our family—we cannot rely on them for anything. All right?”

She swallowed.

“All right, Nova?” he said, more sternly now.

She nodded and nestled deeper into the pillows. She found Evie’s pudgy fingers and started to mindlessly count off each knuckle, while running through all the stories she’d heard. Renegades pulling a driver from an overturned delivery truck. Renegades breaking up a gun fight in a nearby shopping district. Renegades rescuing a child who had fallen into Woodrow Bay.

They were always helping, always showing up at just the right moment. That's what they *did*.

Maybe, she thought, as her father turned back to his work—maybe they were just waiting for the right moment to swoop in and help them, too.

Her gaze lingered on her father's hands. Watching them mold, sculpt, tug more threads of energy from the air . . .

Nova's own eyelids started to droop.

A door slammed.

Nova awoke with a start. Evie huffed and rolled over onto her side. Groggy and disoriented, Nova sat up and shook out her arm, which had fallen asleep beneath Evie's head. The shadows in the room had shifted. There were low voices in the hallway. Dad, sounding tense. Her mom, murmuring, *please, please . . .*

She pushed off the blanket that had been draped over her while she slept and tucked it around Evie, then crept past the table where a delicate copper-colored bracelet sat abandoned. When she reached the front door, she turned the knob as slow and careful as she

could, prying the door open just enough that she could peer out into the dim hall.

A man stood on the landing—stubble on his chin and light hair pulled into a sleek tail. He wore a heavy jacket, though it wasn't cold outside.

He was holding a gun.

His indifferent gaze darted briefly to Nova and she shrank back, but his attention slid back to her father as if he hadn't even seen her.

"It's a misunderstanding," said Dad. He had put himself in between the man and Nova's mom. "Let me talk to him. I'm sure I can explain—"

"There's been no misunderstanding," the man said. His voice was low and cold. "You have betrayed his trust, Mr. Artino. He does not like that."

"Please," said her mom. "The children are here. Please, have mercy."

He cocked his head, just slightly, his eyes shifting between them.

Fear tightened in Nova's stomach.

"Let me talk to him," Dad repeated. "We hav-

en't done anything. I'm loyal, I swear. I always have been. And my family . . . please, don't hurt my family."

There was a moment in which it looked like the man might smile, but then it passed. "My orders were quite clear. It is not my job to ask questions . . . or to have mercy."

Her father took a step back. "Get the girls. *Go.*"

Her mother immediately moved toward the door.

She had barely gone a step when the stranger lifted his arm.

A gunshot.

Nova gasped. Blood arced across the door, a few drops scattering across her brow. She stared, unable to move as her father screamed and grabbed his wife. He turned her over in his arms. He was trembling. Her mom was gasping and choking.

"No survivors," the man said in his even, quiet voice. "Those were my orders, Mr. Artino. You only have yourself to blame for this."

Nova's father caught sight of her on the other side of the door. His eyes widened, full of panic. "Nova. Ru—"

Another gunshot.

This time Nova screamed. Her father collapsed over her mom's body, so close she could have reached out and touched them both.

She turned and stumbled into the apartment, past the kitchen and into her bedroom. She slammed the door shut. Thrust open her closet. Climbed over the books and tools and boxes that littered the floor, too late thinking that she should have gone for the fire escape. Too late.

She yanked the door shut and crouched down in the corner, gasping for breath, the vision of her parents burned into her thoughts every time she shut her eyes.

She heard the front door.

Slow, heavy footsteps. Squealing floorboards.

Nova was shaking so hard she worried the noise of her clattering bones would give her away. She also knew it wouldn't matter.

It was a small apartment, and there was nowhere for her to run.

"The Renegades will come," she whispered, her voice little more than a breath in the darkness. The words came unbidden into her head,

but they were there all the same. Something solid. Something to cling to.

Bang. Her mother's blood on the door.

She whimpered. "The Renegades will come . . ."

A truth, inspired by countless news stories heard on the television. A certainty, patched together from the words of gossiping neighbors.

They always came.

Bang. Her father's body crumpling in the hall.

Nova pressed her temple against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut as hot tears started to spill down her cheeks. "The Renegades . . . the Renegades will come."

Evie's shrill cry started up in the main room.

Nova's eyes snapped open.

She'd left Evie out there.

She'd left *Evie*.

A sob scratched at the inside of her throat, and she could no longer say the words out loud.

Please, please let them come . . .

A third gunshot.

The air caught in Nova's lungs.

Her world stilled. Her mind went blank.

She sank into the mess at the bottom of the closet.

Evie had stopped crying.

Evie had stopped.

Distantly, she heard the man moving through the apartment, checking the cabinets and behind the doors. Slow. Methodical.

By the time he found her, Nova had stopped shaking. She couldn't feel anything anymore. Couldn't think. The words still echoed in her head, having lost all meaning.

The Renegades ... the Renegades will come ...

Doused in the stark lights from her bedroom, Nova lifted her eyes. The man stood over her. There was blood on his shirt. Later, she would remember how there had been no regret, no apology, no remorse.

Nothing at all as he lifted the gun.

The metal pressed against her forehead, where her mother's blood had cooled.

Nova reached up and grabbed his wrist, unleashing her power with more force than she ever had.

The man's jaw slackened. His eyes dulled

and rolled up into his head. He fell backward, landing with a resounding thud on her bedroom floor, crushing her dollhouse beneath his weight. The whole building seemed to shake from his fall.

Seconds later, deep, peaceful breathing filled the apartment.

Nova's lungs contracted again. Air moved through her throat, shuddering. In. And out.

She forced herself to stand and pick up the gun. The handle was warm. She slipped her finger over the trigger, though it felt awkward and heavy in her hand.

She took a step closer, one hand gripping the door frame as she left the sanctuary of the closet. She wasn't sure where she should aim. His head. His chest. His stomach.

She settled on his heart. Got so close to him she could feel his shirt brushing against her bare toes.

Bang. Her mother was dead.

Bang. Her father.

Bang. Evie ...

The Renegades had not come.

They weren't ever going to come.

"Pull the trigger," she whispered into the empty room. "Pull the trigger, Nova."

But she didn't.

She couldn't.

Minutes, maybe hours later, her uncle found her. She was still standing over the stranger's sleeping form, ordering herself to pull the trigger. Hearing those gunshots over and over every time she dared to close her eyes.

"Nova?" A plastic bag dropped to the floor, taking a carton of milk with it. Nova startled and turned the gun on him.

Uncle Alec didn't even flinch as he crouched before her. He was dressed as he always was—the black and gold uniform, his dark eyes barely visible through the copper-toned helmet that disguised most of his face. "Nova. . . . Your parents. . . . Your sister . . ." He looked down and reached for the gun. Nova didn't resist as he took it from her. His attention turned to the man. "I'd always thought you might be one of us, but your father wouldn't tell me what it was you could do . . ."

He met Nova's eyes again. Pity and, perhaps, admiration.

With that look, Nova fell apart, throwing herself into his arms. "Uncle Alec," she wailed, sobbing into his chest. "He killed them . . . he . . . he killed . . ."

He picked her up, cradling her against his chest. "I know," he murmured into her hair. "I know, sweet, dangerous child. But you're safe now. I'll protect you."

She barely heard him over the noise in her head. The tumult pressing against the inside of her skull. *Bang bang bang.*

"But you can't call me Alec anymore, not out there. All right, little monster?" He soothed her hair. The handle of the gun bumped against her ear. "To the rest of the world, I'm Ace. You understand? Uncle Ace."

But she wasn't listening. And maybe he knew that.

In the midst of her cries, he squeezed her tight, aimed the gun at the sleeping man, and fired.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten Years Later

The streets of downtown Gatlon were overflowing with fake superheroes.

Kids running around in orange capes, screeching and waving Blacklight-branded sparklers over their heads, or shooting each other with Tsunami-themed squirt guns. Grown men had squeezed themselves into blue leggings and painted shoulder pads to look like the Captain's armor, and now sat clinking glasses together inside the roped off beer gardens that dotted the main street. Gender-swapping was a big thing this year, too, with countless women having shown up in risqué versions of the Dread Warden's signature bodysuit, and plenty of men having strapped cheap replicas of Thunderbird's black feathered wings to their backs.

Oh, how Nova despised the Renegade Parade.

The street vendors weren't any better, hawk-ing everything from cheesy light-up wands to

tiny plush versions of the famous Renegade quintet. Even the food trucks were celebrating the day's theme, with Captain Chromium funnel cakes and Tsunami fish'n'chips baskets and one sign advertising "Dread Warden's Favorite Popcorn Chicken—get some now before they *disappear!*"

If Nova had had an appetite to start with, she was sure she would have lost it by now.

A great cheer rose up through the crowd and the noise of a marching band broke through the squealing and chattering. Trumpets and drums and the steady thumping of hundreds of synchronized musicians moved through the street. The music grew louder, baring down on them now. Cannons blasted overhead, dousing the crowd with confetti. The children went nuts. The adults weren't much better.

Nova shook her head, mildly disappointed in humanity. She stood at the back of the crowd, unable to see much of the actual parade, which was just fine by her. Arms crossed defensively over her chest. Fingers

drumming an impatient rhythm against her elbow. Already it felt like she'd been standing there for an eternity.

The cheering turned suddenly to loud, exuberant boos, which could only mean one thing. The first floats had come into view.

It was tradition for the villain floats to go first, to really get the crowd riled up, and to remind everyone what it was they were celebrating. Today was the ninth anniversary of the Battle for Gatlon, when the Renegades had taken on the Anarchists and the other villain gangs in a bloody fight that had ended with dozens of deaths on both sides. In the end, the Renegades had won. Ace and his revolutionaries were defeated, and the few villain gangs who didn't perish entirely that day either crawled away into hiding or left the city entirely. That day officially marked the end of the Age of Anarchy, and the start of the Council's rule.

They called it the Day of Triumph.

Nova looked up to see an enormous balloon, spanning nearly the width of the street

as it floated between the high-rises. It was a cartoon-like replica of the Atomic Brain, who had been one of Ace's closest allies before the Renegades had killed him nearly fifteen years ago. Nova hadn't known him personally, but she still felt a spark of resentment to see the balloon's treatment of him—the bloated head and grotesquely disfigured face.

The crowd laughed and laughed.

The tiny transmitter crackled inside her ear.

“And so it begins,” came Ingrid's voice, wry and unamused.

“Let them laugh,” Phobia responded. “They won't be laughing for much longer. Nightmare, are you in position?”

“Roger,” Nova said, careful to move her lips as little as possible, though she doubted anyone in the crowd was paying attention to her. “Just need to know which rooftop you want me on.”

“The Council hasn't left the warehouse yet,” said Phobia. “Stay alert.”

Nova glanced across the street, to the second-level window of an office building, where

she could barely see Ingrid—or, the Detonator, as the public knew her—peering out through the blinds.

The booing of the crowd started up again, more enthusiastic than before. Over the heads of the spectators, Nova caught glimpses of an elaborate parade float. On it was a miniature-scale version of the Gatlon skyline and standing among the buildings were actors wearing over-stylized costumes meant to resemble some of the most well-known members of Ace’s gang. Nova recognized the Rat and Brimstone, both killed at the hands of Renegades, but before she could be offended on their behalf, she spotted a dark figure near the top of the float. A surprised laugh escaped her, easing some of the anxiety that had been building all morning.

“Phobia,” she said, “did you know they were going to put you on the villain floats this year?”

A grunt came back to her through the ear piece. “We’re not here to admire the parade, Nightmare.”

“Don’t worry. You look good up there,” she

said, eyeing the actor. He had donned a long black cloak and was carrying an enormous plastic scythe with a bunch of rubber snakes glued to the handle. But when he opened his cloak, rather than being consumed by shadows, the actor revealed a pale, skinny physique wearing nothing but lime green swimming briefs.

The crowd went berserk. Even Nova's cheek twitched. "They may have taken a few liberties with your outfit."

"I think I like it better," said Ingrid with a snort, watching the parade from the window.

"It certainly inspires terror," agreed Nova.

Phobia said nothing.

"Is that . . . ?" started Ingrid. "Oh my holy bomb squad, they have a Queen Bee this year."

Nova looked again. At first the actress was concealed on the other side of the cityscape, but then she moved into view and Nova's eyebrows shot upward. The woman's blond wig was twice the size of her head and her sequined black and yellow dress could not have been more gaudy as it sparkled in the

afternoon sunlight. She had black mascara running down her cheeks and was embracing a large stuffed bumble bee to her bosom, wailing about the unfair treatment of her little honey makers.

“Wow,” said Nova. “That’s actually not a bad impersonation.”

“I can’t wait to tell Honey,” said Ingrid. “We should be recording this.”

Nova looked away from the parade, her eyes darting around the pressing crowd for what might have been the thousandth time. Standing still made her edgy. She was made for movement. “Are you offended they don’t have a Detonator?” she asked.

There was a long pause, before Ingrid said, “Well, I am *now*.”

Nova turned back toward the parade. She stood on her tiptoes, trying to make out if any of their other comrades were among the costumes, when a loud crash startled the crowd. The top of the tallest building on the float—a replica of Merchant Tower—had just blown

upward, and a new figure was emerging, laughing madly as he raised his hands toward the sky.

Nova clamped her jaw shut, the moment's amusement doused beneath a rush of fury.

The Ace Anarchy costume was the closest to reality as any of them—the familiar black-and-gold suit, the bold, iconic helmet.

The audience's surprise passed quickly. For many, this was the highlight of the parade, even more of a draw than seeing their beloved Council.

Within seconds, people had started to reach for the rotten fruits and wilted cabbages they'd brought with them for just this purpose, and started pummeling the villain float, shouting obscenities and mocking the villains on board. The actors took it with remarkable resilience, ducking down behind the buildings and screeching in feigned horror. The Ace Anarchy impersonator took the brunt of the attack, but he never dropped character—shaking his fist and calling the children at the front of the crowd *stinking rascals* and *little monsters*,

before he finally ducked down into the hollow building and pulled the top back over himself, setting up the surprise for the next street of onlookers.

Nova swallowed, feeling the knot in her stomach loosen only once the villain float had passed.

Little monster . . .

He had called her that, too, all those years ago.

The floats were followed by a band of acrobats and an enormous Thunderbird balloon gliding overhead. Nova spotted a banner being propped up on tall poles, advertising the upcoming Renegade trials.

Bold. Valiant. Just. Do you have what it takes to be a hero?

She faked a loud gagging sound, and an elderly woman nearby gave her a sour look.

A body crashed into her and Nova stumbled backward, her hands instinctively landing on the kid's shoulders and righting her before she fell onto the pavement.

"Hey, watch it," said Nova.

The girl looked up—a domino mask over her eyes making her look like a smaller, scrawnier, girlier version of the Dread Warden.

“What was that, Nightmare?” Ingrid said into her ear. Nova ignored her.

The girl pulled away with a muttered, “Sorry,” then turned and wove her way back into the teeming crowd.

Nova adjusted her shirt and was just about to turn back to the parade when she saw the kid crash into someone else. Only, rather than set her right as Nova had done, the stranger stooped low, grabbed the girl’s ankle, and turned her upside-down in one swift motion.

Nova gaped as the stranger hauled the girl, screaming and swatting his chest, back in Nova’s direction. He was roughly her age, but significantly taller, with dark skin, close-cut hair, and thick-framed eyeglasses. The way he strolled through the crowd made it seem more like he was carrying one of those cheesy Captain Chromium plush dolls rather than a ferocious, flailing child.

He stopped in front of Nova, a patient smile on his face.

“Give it back,” he said.

“Put me down!” the girl yelled back. “Let me go!”

Nova looked from the boy to the child, then took a quick scan of the nearby crowd. Far too many people were watching them. Were watching *her*.

That wasn’t good.

“What are you doing?” she said, turning back to the boy. “Put her down.”

His smile became even more serene.

“All right, little sticky fingers,” he said, somewhat scolding, “give it back, *now*.”

The girl huffed and stopped struggling. Her mask had begun to slip and was very near to sliding off her brow. “I hate you,” she growled, then reached into a pocket. She pulled out her hand and held it toward Nova, who uncertainly extended her own.

Her mother’s bracelet—*her* bracelet—dropped into her palm.

Nova looked at her wrist, where a faint

tan line showed where the bracelet had been every day for years.

Ingrid's voice rattled in her head. "What's happening down there, Nightmare?"

Nova didn't respond. Tightening her fist around the bracelet, she fixed a glare on the child, who only glared back.

The boy dropped her with little ceremony, but the girl rolled easily when she hit the pavement and had bounded back to her feet before Nova could blink.

"There's a children's home up on fourteenth," said the boy, shoving something into the girl's hand—money, Nova guessed. "Find something else to do with your life, okay?"

As a show of gratitude, the girl hurled some choice language at him, then turned and fled around the nearest corner.

Nova squinted up at the boy. "She's just going to rob someone else, you know."

"Probably," he said. "But she'll find someplace safe to stash that money first, and who knows? Maybe that'll be just enough time to make her rethink her options."

His eyes met hers briefly, then dropped down to her closed fist. “Want help with that?”

Her fingers clenched tighter. “With what? The bracelet?”

He nodded and, before Nova realized what was happening, he had taken her hand and started peeling open her fingers. She was so stunned by the action that he had freed the bracelet from her grip before she thought to stop him. “When I was a kid,” he said, taking the copper-colored filigree into his fingers, “my mom used to always ask me to help with her brace . . .” He paused. “Oh. The clasp is broken.”

Nova, who had been scrutinizing his face with wary bewilderment, looked down at the bracelet. Her pulse skipped. “That little brat!”

“It’s okay, I can fix it,” he said.

“Fix it?” She tried to snatch the bracelet away from him, but he pulled back. “You don’t understand. That bracelet, it isn’t . . . it’s . . .”

“No, trust me,” he said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a fine-tip black marker. “This wrist, right?” He wrapped the bracelet

around Nova's wrist, and again, the sensation of such a rare, unexpected touch made her freeze.

Holding the bracelet with one hand, he uncapped the marker with his teeth and bent over her wrist. He began to draw onto her skin, in the space between the two ends of the broken clasp. Nova stared at the drawing—two small links connecting the filigree and, between them, a delicate clasp, surprisingly ornate for a drawing made in marker, and perfectly matched to the style of the bracelet.

When he had finished drawing, the boy capped the pen using his teeth again, then brought her wrist up closer to his face. He blew—a soft, barely-there breath across the inside of her wrist that sent goosebumps racing up her arm.

The drawing came to life, rising up out of her skin and taking physical shape. The links merged with the ends of the bracelet, until Nova could not tell where the real bracelet ended and the forged clasp began.

No—that wasn't entirely true. On closer inspection, she could see that the clasp he'd

made was not quite the same coppery gold color, but had a hint of rosiness to it, and even a faint line of blue where the drawing had crossed over one of the veins beneath her skin.

The boy released her wrist and tucked his marker into his back pocket again.

Nova lifted her eyes.

His easy smile had taken on a subtle edge of smugness.

Obviously a prodigy. But was he also . . .

“Renegade?” she asked, making little effort to keep the suspicion from her tone.

“*Renegade?*” came Ingrid’s voice. “Who are you talking to, Nova? Why aren’t you—”

Before she could finish, and before the boy could respond, the crowd burst into a new frenzy of hollers and applause. A series of fireworks shot upward from the parade float that had just emerged, exploding and shimmering to furious cheers from the people below.

“Looks like the headliners have arrived,” said the boy, somewhat disinterested as he glanced over his shoulder toward the float.

Phobia's voice crackled. "West station, Nightmare. West station."

Purpose jolted down her spine. "Roger."

The boy turned back to her, a small wrinkle forming over the bridge of his glasses. "Adrian, actually."

She took a step back. "I have to go." She turned on her heel and pushed her way through a group of costumed Renegade supporters.

"Renegade trials, next week!" one of them said as she passed, shoving a piece of paper at her. "Open to the public! Come one, come all!"

Nova crumpled the flier in her hand without looking at it and crammed it into her pocket. Behind her, she heard the boy yelling, "You're welcome!"

She didn't look back.

"Target now passing Altcorp," said Phobia as Nova ducked into the shadows of an alleyway. "What's your status, Nightmare?"

Nova checked that the alley was empty before lifting the lid of a dumpster and hauling herself up onto its edge. Her duffel bag greeted

her, resting at the top of the heap.

“Just grabbing my things,” she said, snatching up the bag. She dropped back to the ground. The dumpster lid crashed shut. “I’ll be on the roof in two minutes.”

“Make it one,” said Phobia. “You have a superhero to kill.”

CHAPTER TWO

Nova slung the bag over her shoulder and reached for one of the weighted ropes she'd set up in the alley the night before. She wrapped her arm around the rope and untied the sailor's knot from the weights holding it to the ground.

The weights attached to the opposite end dropped, pulling it through the pulley on the rooftop above. Nova jerked upward, holding tight as the rope whistled past the building's concrete wall.

The second set of weights crashed into the ground below.

She stopped with a shudder, her hand only a few inches shy of the pulley, her body swinging six stories in the air. Nova threw her bag onto the rooftop, then grabbed the ledge and hauled herself over the top. She dropped down into a crouch and riffled through the bag, pulling out her uniform—black hood, weaponry belt, gloves. She attached her face

mask last, the swath of black material disguising the lower half of her face.

The rifle and a single poisoned dart came out last.

“Where are you, Nightmare?” asked Phobia.

“I’m here. Almost in position.” She approached the edge of the building and looked down on the celebration below. It was quieter up here—the noise of the crowd dulled beneath the whistle of the wind and the hum of rooftop generators. The street was a mess of confetti and color, balloons and costumes, laughter and music and cheers.

Nova loaded the dart into the gun’s chamber.

Phobia had concocted the plan, and it was beautiful in its simplicity. When he’d told the group, Winston had griped about not being included, but Phobia had pointed out that Winston, who most people knew as “the Puppeteer,” wasn’t capable of keeping anything simple.

So it was only the three of them on the field today. They didn’t need the others. Nova had

one dart handcrafted by Leroy Flinn, their own poisons master. She only needed one. If she missed, she wouldn't get a second chance.

But she wouldn't miss.

She would kill the Captain.

Once he was hit, Ingrid, the Detonator, would emerge from hiding and hit the Council's parade float with as many of her signature bombs—made from the hydrogen in the air—as she could get off. Phobia would focus on Thunderbird, as she usually took to the air during a battle, giving her a frustratingly unfair advantage. He'd heard that Tamaya Rae was deathly afraid of snakes, which was one of his specialties. He was banking on the rumors to be true. Worst-case scenario: he startled her long enough for Nova or Ingrid to take her down. Best case: he gave her a midflight heart attack.

And that was it. The Council, the five original Renegades—all eradicated at once.

But it started with Nova getting past Captain Chromium's supposed invincibility.

“Um . . . Nightmare?”

“I’m *here*, Detonator. Relax.”

“Yeah, I can see you up there. But . . . I’m pretty sure Phobia wanted you at the western station?”

Nova froze. She glanced at the rooftop behind her, then across the gap to the apartment building on the other side of the alleyway, where her second weighted rope sat waiting, unused. She squinted up into the midday sun, and cursed.

Phobia drawled in her ear, “Tell me you didn’t get on the wrong building.”

“I was distracted,” she said through gritting teeth.

Phobia sighed. “And we’ve just lost weeks of planning.”

“She can’t hit the target from the west rooftop?” asked Detonator.

After a brief silence, Phobia said, “She might still have a fair shot at Tsunami or Blacklight, but not the Captain. The parade route will have them turning before she’s in alignment.”

“Well then, we’ll take out one member of the

Council, at least. We'll come back for the others another time," said Detonator.

"Our priority was the Captain. This entire mission was built around taking out the *Captain*."

"One Renegade is better than none."

"It will not change the fact that we'll have failed."

Licking her lips, Nova looked across at the opposite rooftop, estimating the distance over the alley. "Everyone calm down. I can get to the other side. Phobia, how much time do I have?"

He grunted. "Not enough."

"*How much?*"

"Ten seconds before the float enters your prime target area, then perhaps thirty to make the shot."

Nova picked up the duffel bag and heaved it across the gap. It landed with a thud on the other rooftop.

Detonator's voice crackled. "Are you sure about this, Nightmare?"

"Let her try," said Phobia. "One less body taking up space if she falls."

“I won’t fall,” Nova muttered. She slung the rifle onto her back and pressed her thumbs into the switches on her wrists, sending a jolt of electricity through the black fabric, forming pressurized suction cups on her fingertips and palms.

She reviewed the distance one more time. Paced back to the far edge of the building. Inhaled.

And ran.

Her boots thudded. Air whistled past her ears, knocking back her hood. She planted her right foot on the edge of the roof and leaped.

Her stomach hit the edge. Pain jolted through her bones. She groaned and pressed her palms against the concrete to secure herself in place before she started to slip.

Detonator whooped shrilly in her ear.

Phobia said nothing until Nova had hefted her body onto the eastern rooftop, and then only, “Four seconds to visual.”

Nova switched the pressure on her gloves, letting the suction cups melt back into the fabric, and pulled her hood back over her face. She slung the gun off her back as she walked past

the building's utility elevator, coming to stand at the edge again as her pulse hummed through her veins. Though she couldn't see the Council's float, she could tell from the increased excitement in the crowd that it was close.

Ignoring the throbbing pain where her stomach had hit the wall, she knelt onto one knee and propped the barrel of the gun on the rooftop ledge. She checked the loaded dart. "Ready."

"Well done, Nightmare," said Detonator.

"She hasn't done anything yet," said Phobia.

"I know that, but isn't it nice to have a shooter on the team again?"

"She hasn't shot anything yet, either."

"Would both of you zip it?" Nova growled.

Below, the Council's parade float rolled into view. It was an enormous tiered structure with five pedestals rising from a dark storm cloud. A literal thunder-and-lightning-filled storm cloud, like they thought they were gods or something.

Strike that. They definitely thought they were gods.

Thunderbird—the inimitable Tamaya Rae—

stood on the first pedestal, her enormous black wings spanning the full width of the parade float and the wind catching in her long dark hair, making her look like the carved mascot on the mast of a ship. She occasionally sent bolts of lightning to further ignite the cloud at her feet.

Not to be overshadowed, Blacklight was on the second tier shooting fireworks and flashing strobe lights into the air as the crowd gasped and squealed. With his red beard and tightly curled mustache, Nova had always thought Evander Wade looked more like a six-foot-tall leprechaun than a superhero, but supposedly he had a dedicated fan following, and the girly shrieks from the crowd seemed to support the theory.

Above him, Kasumi Hasegawa might not have even been aware she was in the middle of a parade at all. That's how Tsunami always looked though—caught up in her own world, a cool, secretive smile on her lips. While she stood barely moving with her arms extended, the stream of fish-filled water she was manip-

ulating moved around her like a ribbon in a mesmerizing dance. A jet of foam and spray and angelfish constantly spinning, twirling, spiraling in all directions.

The fourth pedestal appeared, on first glance, to be empty, which meant that's where Simon Westwood was standing. And sure enough, as Nova watched, the Dread Warden flickered into view, posing like the Thinking Man. A second later, he vanished again, only to reappear posed in a handstand, which then turned into a one-handed handstand. A second later, he went invisible again. The crowd roared in laughter when he reappeared, not on his own pedestal, but on the fifth and tallest platform on the float, using his fingers to give bunny ears to Captain Chromium.

Beside each other, they were like night and day. Whereas Simon Westwood had olive-toned skin, a close-trimmed beard, and dark, unruly hair, Hugh Everhart, the city's beloved Captain, was the picture of boyish charm, complete with golden hair and dimples.

Captain Chromium rolled his eyes and

glanced at the Dread Warden over his shoulder. They shared a look that was disgustingly endearing. Nova had been too young to notice if there had been any shock or scandal when two of the original Renegades had announced they were in love, or if there had been any announcement at all. Maybe they just *were*, from the start. Either way, she suspected the world had been dealing with too much devastation to really care back then, and these days Captain Chromium and the Dread Warden were practically the world's favorite sweethearts. The tabloids were forever going on about whether or not they were planning to adopt another child, or if they were going to retire from the Council and move to the tropics, or if a dark, hidden secret from the past was threatening to tear them apart.

From their smiles, though, Nova highly doubted there was much substance to those rumors, and it made her teeth grind.

Why should *they* have such happiness?

She eased herself into position, calculating

the distance and angle as the gun warmed in her hand.

The Dread Warden disappeared again and returned to his own pedestal, leaving the Captain alone; a king before his dotting subjects. He was as familiar to Nova as her own reflection. Golden hair curling against his forehead. Blue shoulder pads jutting out from a broad, muscled chest. A winning smile with teeth so white they seemed to sparkle in the sun.

Then, as the crowd's cheers reached a deafening crescendo, he reached for the display stand at his side. His hand wrapped around a tall metal pike, and he lifted it overhead. One of Blacklight's fireworks burst then, lighting them all in a hue of coppery gold.

Nova's stomach dropped.

"Is that . . . ?"

"Don't think about it," said Phobia.

"Think about what?" asked Ingrid.

Nova swallowed around the lump in her throat, unable to respond.

Captain Chromium, beloved superhero and adored Renegade, had Ace Anarchy's helmet

skewered at the top of the pike. It had been driven through the skull, fracturing the bronze-tinted material that had once been dragged from the air by her father's fingertips, years before Nova was even born.

Detonator's voice came through the headset again, an understanding, "*Ob . . .*" as the parade float entered her view. Nova barely heard her.

She was six years old again. Afraid. Devastated. Staring up into the eyes behind that helmet, throwing herself into his arms.

The Renegades had not come, but *he* had. Maybe not soon enough to save her family, but still, he had come. He had saved *her*.

"I said, don't think about it," said Phobia, his voice practically a growl.

Nova squared her shoulders. "I'm not thinking about it."

"Yes, you are."

"It's all right, Nightmare," said Detonator. "We're doing this for Ace, aren't we? Use that anger. Do it for him."

Nova didn't respond. The world became still. Serene. Black and white.

She looked through the scope, lining up the sights.

It had to be in the eye. Anywhere else on his body and the tip of the dart would snap on the layer of chrome beneath his skin, and the poison would never make its way into his system.

Her aim had to be perfect.

And it would be.

She'd been preparing for this moment for years.

The street below seemed to fall silent, blanketed by the purpose drumming inside her head. The Captain's eye came into focus. Shocking blue and bearing faint wrinkles in the corner as he smiled. He wasn't young anymore, like when he'd first formed the Renegades. The Council were getting older, passing their legacy onto a new generation.

"Pull the trigger," she whispered to herself. The trigger pressed against her finger.

They were getting older, but they still held all the power. All the control. More, perhaps, than they ever had when they'd prowled the streets at night, searching for criminals and villains.

More than when he'd taken that helmet from its rightful owner.

“Just pull the trigger, Nova.”

The Renegades will come.

Nova flinched.

“What's wrong?” asked Detonator.

“Nothing.” Nova licked her lips. Lined up the sights again. The float was turning into the corner now. Soon it would pass out of sight. Soon he would turn away from her, his smile and charm greeting the next street of worshipers.

This was the best opportunity they would have to take down the Captain, and soon, the rest of the Council would follow.

And while the Renegades scrambled to replace them, the Anarchists would rise again.

All she had to do was pull the trigger.

A bug fluttered in the corner of her vision. Nova shooed it away.

Found her target again.

The Captain shifted, turning his head just slightly in her direction.

It was the best shot she would have.

Nova exhaled. Started to squeeze.

Something landed on the tip of the rifle. Nova paused and lifted her eyes, focusing on the gold and black butterfly, its wings opening and closing as it perched at the end of the barrel.

Nova's gaze lifted skyward.

A swarm of monarch butterflies clouded overhead—hundreds, perhaps thousands of vibrant yellow wings fluttering as they swirled and spiraled above her.

“We have company.”

A beat of silence was followed by, “Renegades?”

She didn't respond. The float was turning. Five seconds, maybe less.

Nova looked through the sights again, found the Captain, found his perfect hair, his perfect smile, his perfect blue eyes—

A bundle of balloons passed between them, each emblazoned with the iconic Renegade **R**.

She waited, frozen in time, sweat dripping down her neck.

The balloons passed.

Captain Chromium shifted his gaze upward, looking almost *right at her*.

She fired.

The Captain turned, just a hair.

The dart struck him in the temple. Through the sights, Nova saw the needle tip snap off.

Captain Chromium jerked to attention, already searching the rooftops, signaling the others. Nova let out a stream of curses as she ducked behind the ledge.

A red hook flew from the side of her vision, attached to a thin wire. It wrapped around the gun and snatched it away.

Nova leaped to her feet.

A pale, freckled girl stood at the corner of the roof, now holding Nova's gun in one hand, the glittering red hook in the other. She wore the Renegade uniform—form-fitting charcoal gray Lycra from her neck to her boots, piped in red and emblazoned with a small **R** over her heart. Her hair was a mix of bleached white and pitch-black, pulled into a shaggy ponytail.

The butterflies swarmed beside her, cyclon-

ing until their wings became a blur, then solidified into the body of a second girl. She wore an identical gray bodysuit, with long blond dreadlocks framing her face.

Red Assassin and Monarch.

Nova had met them once before, when they'd tried to stop her from robbing a small pharmacy for supplies Leroy needed, but there had been more of them that time.

Nova lifted an eyebrow. "Where's everyone else? Getting drunk in the beer garden?"

As soon as she said it, she heard a ding, and the metal grate over the utility elevator squealed open.

A third Renegade emerged from the elevator—a boy with light brown skin and thick dark hair. He walked with a cane and had a slight limp, faint tendrils of smoke following in his wake.

Smokescreen.

The corner of Nova's mouth curled upward. "That's a *bit* more like it."

Detonator's voice crackled in her ear. "What's happening up there?"

Nova ignored her.

“Nightmare,” said Smokescreen, with a subtle incline of his head. “It’s been a while.”

“You’re about to wish it had been longer.”
Nova reached for her belt and unclipped two of her heat-seeking throwing stars, an invention she had worked all last summer to perfect.

She threw them both at Red Assassin, knowing how dangerous she could be with that wire of hers. Red dodged. Monarch burst again into a swarm of butterflies.

Nova turned her head as a bolt of black smoke struck her in the face. She stumbled back, momentarily blinded.

“Nightmare, report,” said Phobia.

Snarling, Nova reached for the transmitter behind her earlobe and shut it off.

She forced her burning eyes open and saw a blur of yellow, and then Monarch was beside her. A knee collided with Nova’s side and she fell to the concrete, rolling from the force of the blow. Nova used the momentum to jump back to her feet, shutting out the pain

in her ribs, blinking through the hot tears that blurred her vision.

Something hooked beneath her chin, pulling tight against her throat—Smokescreen’s cane. He yanked her back against him. Though he wasn’t much taller than her, his arms felt like iron as his face pressed against the side of her hood. “You’ve been busy, Nightmare. Who are you working for?”

She felt around for his hands on either end of the cane, but the gloves of his uniform overlapped with his sleeves, leaving no vulnerable skin exposed.

In front of her, Red Assassin managed to catch one of the throwing stars on her wire, flinging it at a heat vent. It stuck with a metallic clang. The second star boomeranged over the alleyway and zipped back toward her. She pinwheeled the ruby hook in front of her, stabbing the star into the concrete with the gem’s point before it could rise again.

Panting, Red Assassin wrenched her gem free and turned to face Nova and Smokescreen.

She started to twirl the wire-tethered ruby like a lasso over her head.

Nova scowled. So much work, wasted.

Monarch formed again, arms crossed over her chest. "I believe Smokescreen asked you a question."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Nova. "I was busy day-dreaming about your funerals."

She grabbed the cane and kicked back her hips, launching Smokescreen over her head. He landed on his back with a grunt.

Snagging the cane from his hands, Nova hit the backs of Monarch's knees, knocking her off her feet.

Red Assassin threw the gem at Nova. The wire wound around her ankle, yanking her to the ground and dragging her across the gritty rooftop. Nova tried to dislodge another throwing star from her belt, but before she could get ahold of it, Red pulled a dagger cut from the same red crystal as her hook and pressed her knee against Nova's chest. She dug the point of the dagger against Nova's jugular.

“Who,” said Red Assassin, with careful enunciation, “are you working with?”

Sensing her own heartbeat against the gemstone, Nova couldn't help smiling behind her mask. “Your worst nightmare,” she whispered, jamming her fingertips into the cuff of Red's boot and finding the skin of her ankle. Her power rolled through her. The blade dug into her throat and she could feel the first drops of blood slipping down her neck, but then Red Assassin's eyes fell closed and she collapsed beside her.

A wave of hazy white mist drifted over the rooftop. Nova looked around, but the mist was already too thick to see Smokescreen. Sitting up, she unwound the wire from her leg and grabbed the dagger. It was lighter than any knife she'd ever held and looked like it had been cut from a single ruby, though she knew a real gemstone would have been much heavier.

Whatever material Red Assassin used for her specialized weaponry, it was sharp, and that's all Nova cared about.

On her feet again, she peered into the shroud of odorless smoke, listening for any sign of Smokescreen or Monarch. Her senses felt dulled in the fog. Infrared goggles would have helped. She would have to work on those next.

She spotted a dark shape—her duffel bag. With one more glance around, she bolted for the bag and threaded her elbow through the handles.

Monarch appeared from nowhere, her dreadlocks whipping behind her as she aimed a right hook for Nova's head. Nova ducked and rammed her shoulder into Monarch's abdomen. The Renegade bent forward and Nova stabbed upward with the dagger, but the moment she felt the blade pierce the flesh of her upper leg, Monarch exploded into fluttering wings again.

The smoke was beginning to clear, and Nova spotted the rickety fire escape on the next building. Tucking the dagger into her belt, she sprinted toward the edge of the roof and jumped. She caught the fire escape rail and vaulted herself over it and onto the metal stairs that shuddered and clanged beneath her.

Smokescreen's voice cut through the fog.
"Monarch!"

Nova paused long enough to look back and see Monarch reappear, though she immediately collapsed and pressed a palm over the cut in her thigh. The gray fabric of her uniform was darkening with blood.

Nova swung the duffel bag over her shoulder and hauled herself up the winding stairs, taking the risers two at a time.

She reached the roof and ran for the far side.

She was halfway across when a dark form leaped up from the street below, clearing the rooftop by at least twenty feet. Nova skidded to a stop, the cloth over her mouth fluttering as she gasped for breath.

The form landed hard in front of her.

Rather than a charcoal gray bodysuit, he was dressed in something more akin to armor—every limb protected, every muscle sculpted into the metallic shell, his face disguised behind a helmet and dark-tinted visor. The Renegade R was emblazoned on his chest,

but the armor wasn't like any Renegade uniform she'd ever seen.

Though she couldn't see his eyes, she could feel them piercing her. Nova took half a step back, scanning the figure from head to toe. There was no skin to be seen, and only narrow seams between the armored plates that might be vulnerable to more traditional attacks.

"You must be new around here," she said.

His head tilted. "I've been around long enough to know who you are . . . Nightmare."

Nova's fingers skimmed along the top of her belt, though she wasn't confident any of her weapons would be effective. "Should I be flattered?"

Before the figure could answer, a bout of high-pitched laughter echoed off the high-rise buildings surrounding them, peeling through the streets and alleys of downtown Gatlon. The sound was grating, shrill, and far too familiar.

Nova grimaced. "What is that idiot doing here?"