

BOOK THREE OF THE KENEGADES TRILOGY

SUPERNOVA

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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CHAPTER ONE



EVERYONE HAS A nightmare.

Nova was pretty sure her worst nightmare was walking back into Renegade Headquarters, wearing her Renegade-issued patrol uniform, less than twenty-four hours after her alter ego had infiltrated the building, stolen the most dangerous weapon of all time, stripped three Renegades of their powers using her stolen batch of the substance known as Agent N, started a fight that destroyed most of the building's lobby, and witnessed Max Everhart nearly bleed to death amid the shattered glass of his demolished quarantine.

It wasn't only surreal that she was returning to the wreckage in the first place, it was that she was doing so willingly. Nova had believed she would never come back here again. After months of working as a spy in the Renegades' midst, she had successfully stolen Ace Anarchy's helmet. She had what she needed to give Ace his power back, and together they would watch this organization crumble.

But things never went according to plan, and she hadn't known that while she was fighting for her life in this very lobby, a masked vigilante known as the Sentinel had discovered and arrested Ace Anarchy—the leader of the Anarchists and the uncle who had raised her.

Sweet rot, she hated the Sentinel. He was always around at the most inconvenient times, striking his ridiculous comic-book poses and spouting absurd catchphrases like “I’m not your enemy” and “You can trust me.”

Except, no one fully trusted the Sentinel, as far as she could tell. Vigilantism didn't fit with the Renegade code, and despite his attempts to seize criminals and aid the Renegades, his stunts had often made the organization seem incompetent and ineffective. Perhaps the only thing Nova liked about the vigilante was his uncanny ability to get on the Council's nerves. Meanwhile, his determination to hunt down Nightmare and his capture of Ace Anarchy hadn't made him any friends among the villain set, either. The only people who appreciated the Sentinel's efforts were Adrian, who seemed to have a rebellious appreciation for the guy, and the public, who saw him as a true hero, one who believed in justice and answered to nobody but himself. That reputation was solidified with his capture of Ace Anarchy.

Though she knew nothing was ever easy, Ace's arrest had almost been enough to make Nova throw her hands in the air and succumb to the inevitable. Anarchists and prodigies like them would go on being hated, villainized, and oppressed for all eternity. She was almost ready to give up.

Almost.

That had been hours ago, and now Nova was back, because . . . where else could she go? As far as anyone here knew, she was still

Nova McLain, alias *Insomnia*, a *Renegade* through and through. Her secrets remained the best leverage she had, and now that her enemies had *Ace*, she knew she would need every bit of it.

Nova hadn't realized the full extent of the destruction wrought upon *Renegade Headquarters* until she found herself moving shakily through the rubble. She was surrounded by *Renegades*, but no one was paying her any attention. Even the Council members were combing through the remains of the glass quarantine that had fallen from the second story and shattered the tiled marble of the main lobby. From where she stood, she could see *Captain Chromium* holding the glass clock tower that had once topped the courthouse from *Max's* miniature *Gatlon City*.

Now it was destroyed. All of it was destroyed.

The signs of battle were everywhere. Steel beams bent at odd angles. Wires dangling from the ceiling where chandeliers had been pulled from their sockets. The information desk mangled on one side. Plaster and tables and chairs and tile and glass—so much glass from where the quarantine had fallen. The glittering shards were almost mesmerizing, the way they caught the light streaming in through the front doors.

And there was blood.

Most of it was dried in a puddle where *Max* had fallen. Where *Frostbite* had driven a spear right through him.

Nova tore her eyes from the spot and saw *Adrian* picking his way toward her. His shoulders were hunched and there was none of the usual grace to his demeanor. He had a shadow over his features, one that served as a reminder that *Max*, who was as close to a brother as *Adrian* would ever have, was in the hospital. The doctors had put him in a coma to stabilize his vital signs, but they weren't filling anyone's head with false optimism. He was hanging by a thread. There

was only one saving grace—that Max had, in the last moments of the battle, managed to absorb all of Frostbite’s ability. He had taken in her control of ice and used it to stanch his own bleeding, to freeze over his own wound.

It might have saved his life.

Then again, it might not.

Nova swallowed the lump in her throat as Adrian drew closer. His dark expression was about more than Max. He was full of a new burning hatred, like nothing Nova had ever witnessed before . . . at least not on calm, cheerful Adrian.

A burning hatred for Nightmare, who he was convinced had been the one who attacked Max. No one had seen it happen other than Frostbite and her comrades, and they weren’t about to correct anyone’s mistaken beliefs. Nightmare was too easy a target to put the blame on.

And Nova, whose secret identity remained, miraculously, unknown, couldn’t exactly clear her alter ego’s name, no matter how she yearned to defend herself whenever she saw Adrian’s eyes smolder with restrained hostility.

“When you said Nightmare had infiltrated headquarters,” Nova said, once Adrian was close enough, “this isn’t what I pictured.”

Lying through her teeth, as usual. She was always lying these days. She hardly even realized she was doing it anymore.

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad.” Adrian’s focus was distant as he scanned the destruction. “They found the Silver Spear over there. We think Nightmare got it from the vault and used it to steal the helmet. And . . .” His voice caught and he coughed to clear it. “We’re pretty sure it was the weapon she used on Max, too. There was blood on it. They’re going to run tests.”

Her teeth ground.

Adrian sighed and looked down. For the first time, Nova noticed something in his hands. A sphere with a small crown on one side and an open seam around its circumference. Nova recognized it immediately—one of Fatalia’s mist-missiles, or so it had been, before she had stolen it from the artifacts department. She and Leroy had reconfigured the devices to release a gaseous form of Agent N, the noxious substance that had been developed using Max Everhart’s blood. Though harmless to civilians, it was poison to prodigies. As soon as they inhaled, imbibed, or were injected with the substance, they would permanently lose their powers.

As Nightmare, Nova had detonated two of the devices in this lobby. Those, along with a stolen dart loaded with Agent N, had resulted in both Gargoyle and Aftershock being stripped of their abilities. She had orchestrated the neutralization of Frostbite, too, though she didn’t need Agent N that time. She’d simply dragged the girl closer to Max and let the Bandit do what he needed to do.

Now she found herself staring at the shell of the device, already forming a series of lies she could tell when someone bothered to check them for fingerprints. She had touched the mist-missiles one day while working in the vault . . . that must have been before Nightmare stole them . . .

But the lies were flimsy.

The higher her lies piled up, the more precarious they became. Sometimes she felt that if she dared to exhale fully, the whole thing would topple.

“It looks like one of Fatalia’s mist-missiles,” she said, keeping her tone even.

“That’s what Callum said, too,” said Adrian.

“Callum? Is he here?” Nova’s thoughts turned back to the night before, when she had left Callum unconscious in the vault.

Adrian nodded. “He went back upstairs to check if the mist-missiles are missing.”

“Maybe Nightmare took them when she took the spear.”

Adrian’s brow furrowed over his dark-framed glasses. “I don’t think so. Mack Baxter said Nightmare had some sort of bomb filled with Agent N. That’s how she was able to neutralize Trevor. I think this is one of those bombs.”

Nova silently cursed Aftershock and Gargoyle, even if she couldn’t blame them for telling the truth. “Well, maybe she was inspired by the mist-missile design. She is supposed to be some genius inventor, right? She must have created these herself.”

Adrian hesitated, and she could see him battling with his own thoughts. Finally, he conceded, “Maybe. We’ll see what Callum finds.”

Unconvinced.

Nova wouldn’t have been convinced, either. No matter how hard she tried to deflect scrutiny away from herself, her arguments just weren’t all that convincing these days.

“The thing is,” said Adrian, tossing the empty device into the air and catching it again in his palm, “if Nightmare was setting off Agent N bombs . . . it would have affected her, too. Why wasn’t she afraid of losing her powers?”

“She wears a mask, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t a gas mask.”

She shrugged. “We don’t know that.”

“Okay, but she was also right next to Max when”—Adrian cut short, his gaze darting toward the blood on the floor—“when he was draining Genissa of her powers. He should have been draining Nightmare, too, but she ran out of here like nothing was wrong. No one is immune to Max.”

“Your dad is.”

He scowled. “No one other than Captain Chromium.”

“I’m just saying, there might be ways around Max’s ability and Agent N. Maybe Nightmare found something . . . like you stumbling onto that Vitality Charm.” The Vitality Charm was an artifact Adrian had discovered that could protect a person against disease, poison, and just about anything that would weaken them, including substances like Agent N. The artifact that was, even at that moment, tucked between the worn mattress and the wooden floorboards at Nova’s house on Wallowridge. “There could be dozens of artifacts that would protect someone’s ability and we just don’t know about them.”

“And you think that Nightmare and I happened to each find one around the same time?”

“Sure. Maybe.”

“Or . . .” Adrian’s voice dropped to a whisper, though all of the nearby Renegades were too busy sweeping up glass and pulling debris from the wreckage to care about their conversation. “Maybe Nightmare has the Vitality Charm.”

Nova had expected this rebuttal. It made so much more sense than her argument, after all. But she kept her expression neutral. “Don’t *you* have it?”

Adrian grimaced. “No. Pops had it last. I gave it to him so he could visit Max. You know, outside the quarantine for once. But now it’s missing.”

“So . . . you think she stole that from the vault, too?”

“It wasn’t in the vault. Simon swears he brought it back to the house. That’s the last we’ve seen of it.”

She cocked her head to one side. “So you think Nightmare broke into your house?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. In theory, she could have done it while we were all at the gala, but there’s nothing on any of our security cameras. And that doesn’t explain how she would have known about the charm in the first place. I haven’t told anyone other than you and Max, and I know my dads didn’t, either.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and she could tell he felt a little guilty to even ask—“You didn’t mention it to anyone, did you?”

“Of course not,” she said. “But Tina and Callum knew about the charm, too, and Callum can’t keep his mouth shut around anyone. Maybe they let something slip, not realizing how valuable it is.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I was actually hoping the team could get together later to discuss what we know about Nightmare. Maybe there’s something we’ve overlooked. It’s just . . . there seem to be some pretty strange coincidences.”

“She’s an Anarchist,” Nova said, daring to settle a hand on Adrian’s forearm. She felt his muscles tighten briefly beneath the fabric of his uniform. “She’s devious and cunning and probably has a lot of connections in the world of . . . *villains* that we know nothing about. If she could do all this, if she could even steal Ace Anarchy’s helmet, then who knows what else she’s capable of? Finding that charm or figuring out some other way around Agent N—none of it seems like a stretch.”

Adrian stared at her hand for a moment, before a wisp of a smile crossed his lips and he settled his own fingers on top of hers. His other hand, still clutching the mist-missile, dropped to his side. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said. But just as Nova’s heart began to flutter, he added, “I’m glad you’re on my side.”

She allowed a wisp of a smile in return. “What other side would I be on?”

“Adrian! Nova!”

They turned to see Ruby and Oscar slipping through the crowd. Ruby latched on to Adrian's other elbow. "How's Max?"

His jaw flexed. "Still in critical."

She shook her head. "I am so, so sorry. She's a monster, Adrian. How anyone could do that to Max—!"

Nova winced.

"I hate to say it, but I'm not surprised," said Adrian, as if this had been an inevitable attack. "Of course Nightmare would try to kill Max. Any of the Anarchists would. It's because of him they were defeated in the first place. They've probably been plotting his murder for the last ten years."

Heat rose in Nova's cheeks. The more she heard about Nightmare's attempt to kill Max, the more she wanted to scream the truth. It was Genissa who stabbed the kid, not Nightmare. She would never hurt him. Hell, she'd tried to save him!

But she bit her tongue. There was no point in trying to argue Nightmare's innocence. They wouldn't believe her, and it would only raise suspicion.

"We'll find her," said Ruby. "We'll put an end to this. And Max—he's going to be fine. He's a strong kid."

"I know," said Adrian. He sounded grateful and like he wanted to believe her. Like he'd been telling himself this same thing all night. But there was still an echo of doubt beneath his words.

Nova exhaled slowly. Adrian had come to her house early that morning, after the dust had settled, to tell her about Max being in the hospital and about Nightmare stealing the helmet. He had seemed so defeated, and yet, at the same time, bolstered by a new desire for revenge. She shuddered to remember his words, spoken even as she held him against her, trying her best to comfort him.

I'm going to find Nightmare, and I'm going to destroy her.

CHAPTER TWO



“HEAR NIGHTMARE really whupped Frostbite and her crew,” said Oscar as he took in the massive amount of destruction to the lobby.

“More or less,” said Adrian. “Frostbite, Gargoyle, and Aftershock were all neutralized.”

“I hate to say it, but . . . I mean, that’s sort of a point in Nightmare’s favor, right?”

Ruby smacked Oscar in the shoulder. “She almost killed Max, you dunce!”

“No, I know. But if anyone was going to get neutralized, I can’t say I’m sorry it was Genissa and her minions.”

“It’s okay,” said Adrian. “I’m not too upset about that, either. And like you said, Max is going to be fine.” He paused before adding, quietly, “He has to be.”

“Holy smokes, what is *that*?” Oscar barked. He lifted his cane, as if prepared to stab something on the shattered tile floor.

A tiny creature was scuttling toward them out of the mess of

broken concrete and plaster—a fierce little velociraptor, no larger than Nova’s thumb.

“No way,” muttered Adrian. “Turbo!” He crouched and scooped the creature into his palm.

It screeched and bit him.

“Ow!” Adrian yelled, dropping it. It landed on the floor and darted between Oscar’s legs.

Nova leaped after it, grabbing the creature by the back of its neck. It made a pathetic mewling sound and flicked its clawed arms at her, leaving tiny nicks on her fingers. “How is this thing still alive?” she asked.

It seemed like ages ago that Adrian had drawn the small beast onto Nova’s palm, in an effort to prove that his powers hadn’t been drained by Max when he’d gone into the quarantine to rescue her.

“Evidently.” Adrian bent down to inspect the tiny dinosaur as it squirmed in Nova’s fingers. “Alive, but not doing so hot. Look, he’s turning gray. And see how his movements are sort of awkward now, more like a machine’s? That always happens when I draw animals. Still—he’s lasted longer than I would have thought.”

“Excuse me,” said Oscar, eyeing the creature with trepidation. “But what *is* it?”

“A velociraptor,” said Adrian. “I drew him a while back, and Max has been keeping him as a pet. His name is Turbo. Here.” Stooping down, Adrian took out his marker and drew a palm-size cage on the white tile. With a swipe of his fingers, the cage emerged into reality, a three-dimensional carrier for a very small dinosaur. He held open the door while Nova dropped the creature inside. “I’ll take him to Max at the hospital. He’ll be happy to see him when he wakes up.”

When, Nova couldn’t help but note, and for the first time, Adrian

sounded truly optimistic about the possibility of Max coming out of his coma. Perhaps he was seeing Turbo's survival as a good sign.

"He's probably hungry," said Ruby. "I mean, your drawings still need to eat, right?"

"I guess so." Adrian looked like he'd never given it much thought. "Max used to share snacks with him."

Ruby nodded. "I'll run up to the cafeteria and grab him . . . I don't know, chicken strips or something. I'll be right back."

She was gone before anyone could speak, darting between the Renegades who were milling around the destroyed lobby.

"Uh . . .," started Adrian, too late, "I don't think they've reopened the cafeteria yet . . ."

"She'll find something," said Oscar. "They have turkey jerky in the lounge vending machines." The second the elevator doors closed and Ruby was no longer in sight, Oscar eagerly spun on Nova and Adrian. "Okay, now that she's gone, I need to talk to you guys. I mean, I know with Max and Nightmare and everything, this may not be the best time, but I was up all night thinking about what you said at the gala, and I have a plan." He fixed his attention on Nova, and she stiffened in response, wondering what on earth she had said. Though the gala had been just the night before, only a couple of hours before she'd broken into the HQ vault, it felt like weeks had passed since then.

"A plan for what?" she asked.

"You know," said Oscar, insistent. "Telling Ruby how . . . how I feel about her. Nova was right. I'm awesome, and I am ready to sweep her off her feet."

"Oh, that." Nova glanced at Adrian, who appeared equally relieved that Oscar's plan was for something so mundane. "That's great."

"Yeah, go for it, Oscar," said Adrian. "Way to take the plunge."

“Thanks, man. So, I’m calling it . . .” Oscar lifted his hand, as if highlighting invisible words in the air. “Operation Crown Jewels.”

Nova and Adrian gawked at him, speechless for a moment, before Adrian cleared his throat. “Uh . . . what?”

“You know. Crown jewels . . . rubies . . . get it?”

Nova’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “Isn’t that a euphemism for . . .”

Oscar waited for her to finish, looking so adorably emphatic that she stopped herself. “Never mind. Just . . . why is there an operation name?”

“Because I have ideas,” said Oscar. “Like, a gazillion ideas. This is going to be a calculated, multistep strategy.”

“So you’re not just going to ask her out?” said Adrian.

Oscar snorted. “Please. Ruby deserves better than that. There will be serenades, gifts, cloud writing . . . you know, some real grand gestures. The stuff girls go nuts for, right?” He looked at Nova, but she could only shrug. He sighed. “Okay, so I thought we’d start with a poem. I wrote it at, like, five o’clock this morning, so keep that in mind. But I was thinking of leaving a card on her doorstep some morning this week. Here’s what I’ve got so far.” He cleared his throat. “Rubies are red, your eyes are blue . . .”

“Stop,” said Nova.

Oscar froze. “What?”

“Her eyes are hazel,” she said. “And also, this is not really the time for poetry.” She gestured around at the destruction.

Oscar huffed. “But you didn’t even—”

A burst of red and blue sparks exploded over their heads. Nova ducked, panic rising.

Adrian squeezed her hand and sent her a look that bordered on teasing. “Just Blacklight.”

At the front of the lobby, the five Council members were standing on the street-level balcony, silhouetted by a wall of glass and the hazy afternoon sun. Shadows of journalists and curious civilians could be seen on the sidewalk, held back by caution tape and a handful of Renegades tasked with keeping out anyone who wasn't a part of the organization.

As the remnants of his fireworks dissolved, Blacklight angled his palm to the doors and dragged his fingers through the air, as if shutting an imaginary set of blinds. A veil of darkness fell over the windows, obscuring both the sunlight and the citizenry.

“Thank you, Evander,” said Captain Chromium, stepping to the front of the balcony, with the rest of the Council forming a semicircle around him. Nova scrutinized the Captain and the Dread Warden—the two adoptive fathers of both Adrian and Max. Though she could guess that neither of them had slept the night before, the exhaustion that was evident on the Dread Warden was lacking entirely from the Captain. His skin was as luminescent as ever, his baby-blue eyes as striking and bright. Only his slightly disheveled hair suggested he was less composed than usual.

But the Dread Warden wasn't the only one who looked exhausted. Thunderbird's black-feathered wings were drooping from her shoulder blades, and the ever-present serenity was, for once, gone from Tsunami's face, replaced with a taut brow and tense lips. Even Blacklight, usually the most laid-back among them, had his arms crossed tight over his chest.

“Fellow Renegades,” said the Captain, his voice booming through the lobby. “A great blow was dealt to us last night. I won't bother to sugarcoat the details—you can see the truth of last night's events for yourselves. It is”—his mouth tightened as he searched for a word—“discouraging, to say the least. That we could be infiltrated on such a

level by a single villain. That Nightmare was able to disarm our security system and defeat one of our best patrol units. That she could steal from us. That she could”—his voice snagged—“harm one of our own, in such a cruel, senseless way. And not just a Renegade, but a boy, a *child*, who is good and smart and kind. It’s unthinkable. It is a reminder to us all that there is evil in this world, and it is our responsibility to stand strong against it.”

Nova’s fists clenched as she resisted the urge to scream—*I. Didn’t. Hurt. Max!*

“But we are Renegades,” Captain Chromium continued, “and we do not cower before evil. No—in the face of evil, we stand taller! We fight harder! Adversity only strengthens our resolve to be the protectors of this world, the defenders of justice!”

A few whoops echoed from the audience.

“We will not dwell on our losses, but look to the future and how we can move forward into a brighter tomorrow. Because—there were losses yesterday. But there was also a great victory. I want to confirm that the rumors you’ve heard are true.” He paused, his attention sweeping over the room. “Ace Anarchy, who we believed to be dead these past ten years, is alive. And he is in our custody.”

If he expected an approving cheer, he must have been disappointed. If anything, the knowledge that their greatest enemy had survived the Battle for Gatlon was met with a murmur of concern, regardless of his capture.

“What about his helmet?” cried Alchemist. “We were told it was destroyed, but now they’re saying that’s what Nightmare came here for.”

The Captain curled his hands around the railing that divided them. “This, also, is true.”

Nova swallowed.

“After the Day of Triumph, I did my best to destroy Ace Anarchy’s helmet,” continued the Captain, “but it was indestructible. The Council and I decided it would be best to tell the world that the helmet had been destroyed, to ease the concerns of our people while we worked on rebuilding society. I convinced myself the helmet would be safe here at headquarters.” A flash of resentment curled his lip. “But it seems I was wrong. Nightmare did come for the helmet, and she did manage to escape with it last night.” A rustle of chatter flooded the room, but the Captain lifted his hands. “Listen to me. We must remain calm. Let me remind you—the Anarchists may have gotten the helmet last night, but they lost their leader. Without Ace Anarchy, that helmet is nothing but a costume accessory.”

Nova wondered if he believed that, and how many of the Renegades would believe *him*.

She didn’t know much about Ace’s helmet, but she had always assumed that it would amplify the powers of any prodigy, just as it had amplified Ace’s. Otherwise, why would the Renegades have been so determined to destroy it, once they believed that Ace was dead?

Nevertheless, the Captain’s words had an immediate effect. The crowd hushed. “I implore you,” he went on, “for now, news of this theft cannot reach the general populace. Do not speak to the media. Do not tell anyone. The last thing we need is for mass panic to spread while we’re on the verge of finally subduing the threat of villainous prodigies everywhere. From this point, we have two immediate matters of business to address. The first is undoing the damage that was wrought on our headquarters last night and initiating new security protocols. For that, my fellow Council members and I will be reaching out to our international syndicates, enlisting the help of any prodigies with powers that lend themselves to construction and

repairs, and we will be assigning those in our home organization tasks based on their skills in the days to come. We are grateful for all your cooperation as we rebuild. If you have any thoughts on this project, I encourage you to speak with Kasumi, who will be heading up this undertaking.” He gestured at Tsunami, who bowed her head in return.

“And, second,” the Captain continued, “by the end of today, we will have a date scheduled for the public reveal of Agent N, after which all active patrol units will be equipped with the substance. This will allow us to defend ourselves against future such attacks, and convey to our citizens how very seriously we will be dealing with prodigies who choose not to follow our code of protection and honor.”

Nova squeezed Adrian’s forearm, though she didn’t realize she’d done it until he took her hand, lacing their fingers together.

“Additionally, we have decided that part of the reveal will include a public neutralization of all prodigies who have been heretofore convicted of villainous behavior . . . including Ace Anarchy himself.”

Though a chill ran down Nova’s spine, his statement was predictably met with applause—albeit somewhat nervous applause. Agent N had seemed like an exciting development to most of the organization when it had first been unveiled, but that was before some of the substance had fallen into Nightmare’s hands. That was before three of their own had been neutralized, right here in this very lobby.

Now it seemed that everyone was feeling a bit more apprehensive about the Renegades’ newest weapon.

“And what about the patrols who refuse to cooperate?” rang out a voice, shrill and spiked with anger.

A flurry of interest passed through the crowd as Genissa Clark, formerly known as Frostbite, picked her way through the rubble.

Rather than the usual Renegade uniform, she was wearing draw-string pants and a loose T-shirt from the medical wing. Her bare arms were littered with bruises and scratches from her fight against Nightmare.

Nova tensed upon seeing one of the prodigies she had fought the night before. Though she had been hooded and masked, her heart still pounded to think that Genissa might have recognized her.

Genissa wasn't alone. The rest of her team followed in her wake: Trevor Dunn, who had been Gargoyle before his powers had drained away. He was still taller than an average man, but not as gigantic as he had been before, and his skin showed no hint of stone. Then there was Mack Baxter, no longer Aftershock, who moved with a peculiar gait, like he was so used to making the ground shake from his steps that he would have to relearn how to walk now without the ground swelling up to meet him.

Of their team, only Stingray—Raymond Stern—remained a prodigy. Nova had put him to sleep in the surveillance room before she disabled the security cameras, and he had missed the rest of the battle. His barbed tail slid behind him, scattering bits of glass as it flicked back and forth.

“What did I miss?” whispered Ruby, appearing behind them. She had an open bag of turkey jerky.

“Uh . . . we'll explain later,” said Adrian, taking an offered piece of jerky and stuffing it through the bars of Turbo's cage.

“Genissa,” said Thunderbird, stepping to the front of the balcony. “You have not been given clearance from the healers to—”

“Screw the healers,” yelled Genissa. “What are they going to do? Bring my powers back?” She snapped her fingers—as if ice crystals might burst from their tips—but of course, nothing happened. Her scowl deepened. “You said yourself. The effects of Agent N are irre-

versible. So I don't see much point in lounging around in a stuffy waiting room just so someone can pat me on the head and tell me it could have been worse. I could be *dead*." She paused in the middle of the room, where the red-tiled *R* had been decimated by one of Aftershock's quakes, and let her gaze travel around the gathered Renegades. "But let's all stop and ask ourselves . . . really, would that be worse?" She returned her attention to the Council. "I'm not convinced."

"Genissa—" started the Captain.

"*Frostbite*," Genissa snapped in return, her nostrils flaring. She drew herself to her full height, her bob of white-blonde hair swinging against her shoulders. "We were here, on duty, protecting your organization. Your headquarters. I believed in the Renegades. I would have done anything to protect what we stand for. And look where it got me. Where it got us!" She gestured behind her at Mack and Trevor. "We stood up against Nightmare. We risked our lives, because that's what superheroes do. But it wasn't exactly a fair fight, was it? Because somehow, she had Agent N. She had *your* weapon."

Nova's jaw tensed, irritation flooding through her. How convenient for Genissa to skip over the fact that she, too, had Agent N at her disposal—and illegally, as the Renegades weren't yet supposed to have access to it. Nova guessed Frostbite had swiped some during their training sessions, and she hadn't hesitated to shoot Nightmare with a dart full of the stuff last night. If Nova hadn't been wearing the Vitality Charm, she would be just as powerless now as they were.

"I want to know how," Genissa continued. "How is it that you manage to develop a substance that can sap our enemies of their powers, only for it to fall into an enemy's hands before we've even made a public announcement about it?"

Captain Chromium cleared his throat loudly. “Gen—Frostbite poses a fair question, and we will be investigating this at length.”

“Oh, you’ll be *investigating* it?” Genissa flung her arms to the sides and faced the crowd. Though the Renegades closest to her backed away, it was clear that they were hanging on her every word. Expressions were full of pity for the three former prodigies. To lose their gifts—it was what they had all feared from the start. “Just like you investigated Nightmare’s death after the Detonator supposedly blew her up?” Genissa said. “Or how about your investigation into the death of Ace Anarchy? Forgive me if I question your ability to figure out how Nightmare had access to Agent N, much less how you plan on keeping anyone else from getting it and turning it against us, just like she did.” Her voice rose as broken glass crunched beneath her feet. “It’s time we face the truth. Our leaders are incompetent. The Council is playing with things they don’t understand, things they have no real control over, and worst of all, they are risking our lives and our abilities in order to do it!”

Nova traded stunned looks with Adrian. But while she imagined that Adrian was shocked that anyone would dare speak to the beloved Council that way, *she* was shocked to think that she actually agreed with Genissa on something.

“That’s enough!” barked Blacklight, but he was silenced by the Captain lifting an arm across his chest, blocking him from moving to the front of the balcony.

“No, let her speak,” said the Captain. Though his jaw was tense, there was compassion in his gaze as it shifted between Genissa, Mack, and Trevor. “We do carry some responsibility for what happened here last night. Tell me, what can we do to make amends?”

“Amends?” Genissa laughed dryly. “That’s hysterical.” Shaking her head, she reached for the band wrapped around her forearm.

“Honestly, I don’t care what the Renegades do after this. I’m not one of you anymore. My time as a superhero is over.” Peeling the band from her skin, she threw it at her feet. Mack and Trevor did the same, tossing their wristbands into the rubble. “I hope everyone here realizes that they’re nothing but pawns to you. Just a bunch of pretty foot soldiers to do your bidding, so you don’t have to worry about a bunch of pathetic villains ever showing up to take your power away. Or worse . . . those pesky vigilantes. But let’s face it, we didn’t become superheroes to play by the rules. We became superheroes because we believed in our ability to change this world for the better, at any cost. Well . . .” She wriggled her fingers. “Almost any cost.”

Genissa marched through the lobby toward the main staircase. The crowd parted for her and her cohorts. “All I know,” she called over her shoulder, “is that any prodigy who willingly runs around with Agent N strapped to their belt is a damned idiot.”

No one moved to stop her or Mack or Trevor as they reached the balcony. Genissa paused once, seemingly surprised to have only two minions in her wake. She found Raymond Stern—Stingray—in the lobby, unmoved from where he had been standing at her side. A sneer twitched across her face, then she and her companions shoved through the waiting glass doors, letting in a blinding burst of daylight. An excited roar from the crowd outside greeted them, but was hushed the moment the doors shut behind them.

CHAPTER THREE



NOVA HAD BEEN to Adrian's home once before, and she hadn't fully recovered from the experience. Not only because this was where he had kissed her for the first time, a memory that still made her knees weak, but because there was something painfully unnerving about standing outside a palatial mansion and knowing to the core of her being how much she did not belong there. He lived in the old Gatlon City mayor's mansion, with more square footage than all the row houses on Wallowridge combined, and a lawn spanning almost an entire city block.

She tried not to think too much about it as she approached the gate and buzzed for entry. A device on a brick pillar scanned her wristband, confirming her identity, before the wrought-iron gate swung open.

By the time she reached the end of the walkway, Adrian was waiting for her on his front porch, framed by Grecian pillars and large urns with topiaries sprouting from them. The last time she'd

been here, he'd been wearing sweats. Now he was donning his Renegade uniform, and the difference in his demeanor was startling.

This was a business meeting.

Still, Adrian was smiling as she approached. "The others are already downstairs. Come on in." He held his arm toward the open door, ushering her into the foyer.

It was warm inside the house. Almost uncomfortably warm. The sort of heat put off by fireplaces in the dead of winter, first chasing away the chill in the air, before making everyone forget there had ever been a chill to begin with. True enough—as Nova walked past the formal parlor, she spied a fire raging inside a tiled fireplace. With sweat already sprouting on the back of her neck, she unzipped her hooded sweatshirt.

"My dads think it makes the place feel cozier," said Adrian, almost apologetically. "It's a lot cooler downstairs. Come on."

She followed him down the narrow staircase into his basement bedroom and froze on the bottom step.

Oscar and Ruby were there—Ruby perched on the sofa and Oscar facing backward on Adrian's desk chair.

But what made Nova hesitate was that Danna was there, too, in the form of hundreds of gold-and-black butterflies that filled every available shelf and table and the narrow sills of the high windows along the south wall.

Nova's mouth ran dry.

Seeing so many of them at once, and not in the blur of battle like Nova always had before, might have been a beautiful sight. Except they weren't moving. Not a beat of wings. Not a twitch of antennae. And though it was impossible to know for sure, Nova had the distinct feeling that all of their tiny bug eyes were fixated on *her*.

“She’s been following me around since we found Ace,” said Ruby. “Didn’t come with me to headquarters, but otherwise . . .” Her worried gaze flitted around at the butterflies.

“Has anyone contacted her dad, to let him know?” asked Adrian.

“I mentioned it to Thunderbird,” said Ruby, “and she said she’d have someone reach out and let him know that Danna is okay . . . sort of. I figured she’d go home by now, but maybe she thinks that seeing her stuck like this will make him worry even more?”

“Or maybe she doesn’t want to be left out of our exciting detective work,” said Oscar. “She’s still on the team, even in swarm mode, right?”

“Absolutely,” said Adrian. “She did lead us to Ace Anarchy. Maybe she’ll have more input to offer . . . however she can.”

“Why . . .” Nova paused to clear her throat and dared to take the final step into the room. “Why hasn’t she transformed back yet?”

“We figure she can’t for some reason,” said Adrian. “She needs all of her butterflies to converge. If even one is missing . . . not dead, but, like, trapped somewhere or too far away, then the others will be stuck in this form.”

“What I can’t figure out,” said Ruby, fidgeting with the wire on her wrist, “is why she doesn’t take us to that missing butterfly . . . or butterflies, if there is more than one. If she’s trapped somewhere, why hasn’t she helped us figure out how to help her, like she led us to Ace?”

Oscar shrugged. “Maybe she doesn’t know where it is.”

“But they all communicate with one another, even when they’re in this form,” said Adrian. “Like . . . a hive mind sort of thing. It seems unlikely that she wouldn’t know where the others are.”

Nova sat stiffly beside Ruby, thinking of the night one of Danna’s butterflies had been spying on her and the Anarchists inside the

catacombs. They had captured it in a pillowcase and held it prisoner, eventually bringing it back to the row house and putting it in a mason jar.

Like a blindfolded hostage, that butterfly wouldn't have been able to see where it was being taken. She supposed it made sense that it still didn't know where it was, and therefore couldn't call the rest of the creatures to it.

Still, she imagined she could feel the disgust emanating from the insects that surrounded her, making the hair stand on end all down her forearms.

Danna may not be able to speak to the others, but she did know the truth. She knew Nova's secret.

It was only a matter of time before she figured out a way to communicate it to the rest of the group.

"I'm glad she's here, at least," said Adrian. He paused then, studying the swarm. "I'm glad *you're* here," he corrected, because it was rude to speak about someone like they weren't even there, though Nova wasn't sure Danna could actually hear in this form. "We'll find a way to help Danna. There must have been a reason she knew about the location of Ace Anarchy's hideout." He drummed his fingers against his thigh. "I don't know this for sure, but I suspect . . . if we find Nightmare and the Anarchists, we might figure out how to help Danna, too."

"Wait, wait, wait," Oscar said. "I sense a transition into actual work coming up, but before we get there . . ." He reached behind himself and pulled out an old heart-shaped tin box. "I brought cookies!" Peeling off the lid, he offered it to Ruby first. Nova could see that the cookies inside were homemade. A few had burnt edges, and others had gooey, underbaked centers, all nestled into a bed of parchment paper.

“Thanks, Oscar,” said Ruby, picking one out. She held it up and paused. “Are these . . . ?”

“Lemon-coconut-shortbread cookies with white chocolate centers,” Oscar said, his ears turning pink. “Yes. Yes, they are.”

Ruby gawked at him. “That’s . . . my mom makes . . . these are my favorite!”

“Yeah, I know.” Oscar cleared his throat awkwardly and held the tin toward Nova. “I, uh, called your mom for the recipe.”

With little appetite, Nova waved away the cookies, while Adrian took three. Ruby continued to stare at Oscar, the forgotten cookie halfway to her mouth. He didn’t return the look. Instead, he slammed the lid back onto the tin and nodded at Adrian, as if eager to move on from what might have been the most blatant confession of adoration that Nova had ever witnessed. “Okay, then. Great. Let’s do this. Where do we start?”

Adrian shoved the first cookie in his mouth and approached a freestanding whiteboard. Grabbing one side of it, he pushed it away from the wall and swiveled it around so they could see the back side.

Nova’s stomach plummeted.

It was a corkboard plastered with notes and diagrams and evidence. A map of Gatlon City covered nearly the entire board, with locations circled where Nightmare had been seen. The buildings where she and the Sentinel had faced off during the parade. Cosmopolis Park with its abandoned fun house. Renegade Headquarters. Various subway tunnel entrances. The Cloven Cross Library was highlighted, too, with notes about the Detonator and the Librarian. And the cathedral, beside which was tacked a recent newspaper article about the capture of Ace Anarchy.

There was a grainy picture of Nightmare tossing the Puppeteer out of his hot-air balloon. A red circle was drawn around her

face, with a line connecting it to HQ, and another line drawn to Cosmopolis. Beside the line, in bold letters, Adrian had written: *FACE MASK?*

Another line connected headquarters to Adrian's house, along with the scrawled words: *VITALITY CHARM???*

Another line from the parade to the library. *WEAPONRY?* And in parentheses—(*sharpshooter*).

Another line, from HQ to the cathedral. *ACE ANARCHY HELMET?*

To the side of the map was a series of messy notes and asides.

How was she immune to Agent N and Max? Vitality Charm?? But how did she know about it? How did she GET it?

How did she get the helmet out of the chromium box?

How did she know the helmet wasn't destroyed? / Where it was kept?

Access to Agent N?

Agent N bombs—Fatalia's mist-missiles!

Each of the questions had a line drawn back to Renegade Headquarters.

Nova gulped, hard. Her skin prickled and her legs twitched with the urge to bolt for the door. It felt like a setup, but no one was looking at her.

Ruby stood, brushing cookie crumbs from her fingers, and approached the board. "Okay," she murmured, rocking back on her heels. "What does it all mean?"

Adrian's expression was dark as he inspected the map, too, as if waiting for a new clue to jump out at him and piece it all together. But he had already pieced together enough.

Nova knew what he was going to say before he said it.

Her heart hammered, waiting for the words.

"I do have a theory," he started, speaking slowly, his brow drawn.

"We're listening," said Oscar. In the same moment, a dozen of

Danna's butterflies lifted off Adrian's desk and twirled around the board, before settling on its top.

"For starters," said Adrian, "Nightmare knows too much—about Agent N and Max, maybe even the Vitality Charm—"

"Pause," said Ruby, holding a hand toward him. "What is the Vitality Charm?"

Adrian cleared his throat. "It's . . ." He hesitated again, and Nova could see his thoughts forming as he tried to reason through how best to explain to her this incredible object he'd discovered. "It's an old charm that was found in the artifacts departments." "Anyone who's wearing it will be protected from illness, poisons, venom, and even . . . something like Agent N. Or Max."

"You're kidding," said Oscar, cocking his head to one side. "Why haven't we heard about this before?"

"I wanted to tell you, but my dads asked me to keep it a secret until they knew more about the charm and its limitations. They were worried its existence might interfere with the launch of Agent N. And now it's missing."

"Missing?" asked Ruby.

"Simon had it last. He was able to visit Max with it. But we haven't seen it since before Nightmare broke into headquarters."

"So Nightmare stole this thing from the Dread Warden?" said Oscar. "What? Did she, like, pickpocket him?"

Adrian tapped his marker against his palm. "Pops said he left it here at the house, but I don't know. Maybe he forgot, and it was actually at headquarters. Because, listen, all of these things"—he swirled the marker around the board—"were at HQ. The helmet, the Silver Spear, and even those bombs she had. The Vitality Charm, if she did have it . . . maybe it was at headquarters, too. And oh, the mask!" He pointed at a grainy photo of Nightmare, showing the metal mask

across the lower half of her face. “Frostbite’s team said she was wearing it last night and it was identical to the one she used to wear. I’m convinced that it *is* the mask she used to wear.”

Nova sank deeper into the sofa.

“So?” said Oscar.

“So,” said Adrian, “her mask was found in the debris at the Cosmopolis fun house. I saw it myself, after the explosion went off that was supposed to have killed her. I talked to Magpie, and she swears it was collected by the cleanup crew and handed over to the artifacts department, but they have no record of it. And Stingray’s statement says that Nightmare was in full costume when she attacked him in the security room, even though that was *before* she went to the vault.” He pointed to a pieced-together timeline of the HQ break-in along the bottom of the board, where it was indicated that Nightmare had used Stingray’s wristband to access the vault’s door.

“Which brings up another point,” continued Adrian. “Nightmare went out of her way to make sure she hit the security room and disabled all of the surveillance cameras before she went after the helmet. But she wears a mask! Why would she care if she was caught on video footage unless she worried that someone might recognize her.”

Nova raised a finger, glad that this, at least, she could make a decent rebuttal against. “If she went into the vault while the cameras were still on, it would have triggered the security team to come after her right away. She would have had to disable the cameras to give herself time to complete the theft before anyone realized what she was doing.”

Adrian considered this, then gave a half shrug. “Maybe. But there’s also Agent N.” He tapped the large board enthusiastically. “I got the report a few hours ago. Those devices they found in the lobby

were definitely Fatalia's mist-missiles—gas bombs that were stored in the vault—and Nightmare had definitely reengineered them to release a gaseous form of Agent N, which not only means she had the bombs before she broke in, maybe even weeks before, but she also had a supply of Agent N, which is kept in a secure storeroom behind the laboratories. Either Nightmare broke into that storeroom *before* her attack on HQ the other night, or she was able to get her hands on Agent N some other way.”

“But who else has access to it?” said Ruby, stealing another cookie from the tin.

Adrian fixed her with a serious look. “*We do.*”

“Whoa,” muttered Oscar. “You totally just gave me chills. But what does that mean exactly?”

“We have access to Agent N,” said Adrian. “All patrol units. Everyone who’s been in training the past few weeks. And the Council, obviously. And everyone who works in the labs.”

Oscar rolled the chair forward, pushing off with the balls of his feet. “Go on. I feel like this is about to get really good.”

Adrian scratched the back of his head. “It might seem far-fetched, but I have this theory, and it answers so many questions. How she knew about Agent N, and how she was able to steal some before we’ve even announced it. How she had access to the vault. How she knew about Max, and the team that would be on security detail that night, and the helmet, and all of it. I think . . .” He paused to take in a deep breath. “I think Nightmare has been posing as a Renegade. I think she’s a spy.”

Nova flinched. She squeezed her eyes shut, only for a second. There it was. The remark that would unravel it all.

Still, she forced a mask of surprise onto her face as her fingertips dug into her thighs. “A spy?” she said, daring to speak, and hoping

that the slight quiver in her voice added to her apparent disbelief. “In the Renegades?”

As one, the hundreds of butterflies surrounding them opened their wings in perfect unison, and then closed them again and went back to stillness.

It was as much a confirmation as if Danna had been sitting on the couch between Nova and Ruby, ready to jut her accusatory finger in Nova’s direction.

“Yikes,” muttered Oscar. “That was weird.”

“Danna,” said Adrian. “I’m right? Do you know who it is? Or how we can find her?”

And though Nova had been sure that Danna wasn’t supposed to be able to hear, let alone comprehend spoken language, in swarm mode, they must have understood well enough. As one, the butterflies lifted into the air, circled once beneath the ceiling, then came to settle.

Directly on Nova.

She squeaked and stiffened as the butterflies and their dainty feet perched on her shoulders, her hair, her arms and knees and toes. Those who couldn’t fit on her body surrounded her, taking up residence on the cushions and the back of the couch.

Nova held her breath, suddenly too afraid to move. She wasn’t the only one who had gone motionless. Adrian was gawking at her, his mouth hanging open.

The butterflies lingered only a moment before they took to the air again and found their way to the distant corners of the room.

Heart thudding, Nova dared to look at Ruby. Then Oscar. And back to Adrian. They were all watching her . . . not accusatory, not yet. But uncertain, for sure.

Her brain scrambled for words . . . any words, and—“The vault!”

she said, launching to her feet so fast Adrian took a hesitant step back from her. “I think Danna is telling me . . . us . . . that’s it. It makes so much sense. So many of the clues pointing toward Nightmare lead to the vault. And I work in the vault!” She forced a grin, as brilliant as she dared. “I can search the records. Talk to Tina and Callum. If Nightmare knew about the mist-missiles and . . . all that other stuff . . . then she must have left some sort of trail. Either in the paperwork or on the security tapes . . .” She pounded a fist into her open palm. “If she’s been there anytime in the last six months, I can find out about it. If she is a spy, then I can figure out her identity. I know it.”

Adrian relaxed. “You’re right. Danna’s right. By pinpointing the exact items she used and stole, we should be able to track who it is.”

“Also,” said Ruby, “we can compare them with the trial records. Probably Nightmare hasn’t been in our ranks for long. She might have just joined up at the most recent trials . . . or maybe last year. We can compare what Nova finds with the newest recruits.”

Nova’s head started to bob as if it were no longer attached to her spine. “Great. Yes. Excellent. I won’t let you down.”

All the while, her head was throbbing. Panic surging through her veins.

Time was running out. She would be discovered any day, any *minute*.

How was she possibly going to free Ace before it happened?

CHAPTER FOUR



“HERE’S WHAT WE have,” said Nova, clearing mason jars full of honey from their small dining room table. Leroy, Honey, and Phobia stood watching as Nova took the rubber band from a large roll of paper and spread it out across the surface. She replaced a couple of the honey jars at the corners to hold it down flat.

The paper, which she had printed at a twenty-four-hour, low-budget print shop the night before, showed old blueprints of Cragmoor Penitentiary, downloaded from the Renegade database. They were, however, very old blueprints, and Nova knew they weren’t accurate. Still, she had been unable to find updated records. If anything, it appeared that the Renegades had intentionally kept records of any penitentiary remodels secure and private . . . perhaps to avoid prison breaks.

“These exterior walls are unchanged,” she said, pointing to the outline of the prison cell block and the stone security wall that enclosed it. “Satellite imagery confirms it, as well as the placement of these guard towers and the boat dock. There are still buildings

here and here . . .” She pointed to two structures just inside the wall. “But I can’t say for sure what they contain. They used to be administration, guard housing, a small medical office, and the cafeteria, but we can’t confirm any of that. We do know that prisoners are transferred to terrain vehicles just off the dock and taken up this road onto the island, where they pass through this security checkpoint, manned by Renegades. Let’s assume they’re heavily armed.”

“Possibly,” said Leroy. He was leaning against the kitchen counter, sipping from a snifter glass full of brandy. He did not imbibe regularly, but this bottle seemed to be one that he had sequestered for years, and Nova had noticed him emptying it faster than usual these days. “But it’s more likely they choose prodigies who have powers that can act as long-distance weaponry, rather than arming them with guns that could potentially be taken and used against them.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Honey. “A few doses of Agent N will solve that problem.”

Nova didn’t respond. The same thought had occurred to her, but she didn’t want to get cocky. After her infiltration of Renegade Headquarters, they knew that Nightmare and the Anarchists had at least some supply of Agent N, and that they’d found a way to weaponize it in gas form. They could be expecting it. She doubted she would get the chance to surprise them with their own substance again.

“And where is Ace in all this?” said Honey. Leaning over the table, she drew a bloodred fingernail along a line of cells inside the block. “Somewhere in here?”

“Doubtful,” murmured Phobia. He swirled the blade of his scythe once over his hood, before tipping it forward and touching the point to the blueprint. “They will have him here.”

Beneath the blade’s edge was a short hallway tucked away in the

building behind what may or may not be the cafeteria. Only four tiny cells were printed there, along with the word SOLITARY.

“If that’s where they still keep solitary confinement,” said Nova. “We know the Renegades have made extensive renovations to the prison, but I can’t find any records of what they’ve done.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming on. “And as far as current security protocols, cell placements, areas of restricted access . . .” She shrugged. “We can make guesses, but that’s all they’ll be. Guesses.”

“So if we’re going to get Ace out of there,” said Honey, “we’ll be going in blind.”

“Exactly.”

Honey hummed as she surveyed the blueprints. “I’m beginning to understand the value of our little butterfly friend’s ability more and more.”

Nova’s cheek twitched, though she tried not to let the others see her discomfort. She tended to flinch every time Danna was mentioned. She’d done her best to ignore the glass jar that sat on Honey’s vanity in their shared bedroom, with pinprick holes for oxygen punctured into the tin lid, and the occasional cutting of ironweed dropped inside so it wouldn’t starve. Nova’s guilt over keeping Danna imprisoned was profound. She often wondered if Danna’s consciousness was somewhere inside that tiny little insect brain, experiencing what it experienced.

Trapped and suffocating.

But Danna knew too much, and she could not be allowed to escape. As long as they kept the one butterfly separate from the others, she would be unable to re-form into her human self and tell everyone Nova’s true identity and the location of the Anarchists.

Nova knew, logically, that she had no other choice. For her own safety and that of the others, she couldn’t set Danna free.

But still. Having her own aversion to small, enclosed spaces, she couldn't deny the guilt that pressed in on her to think of the pretty winged butterfly stuck in that jar. Not even kept like a pet. More like—a science experiment.

"It would be helpful to have, well, any sort of idea of what we're walking into," said Leroy, half of his face crinkling with a knowing smile. "Any hope for it, *Insomnia*?"

Insomnia. Her Renegade alias.

"I . . . don't know," she admitted. "I've been trying to come up with a valid reason to go there. To interview Ace, or one of the other prisoners. To conduct some sort of research . . . or . . ." Her shoulders drooped. "I can't think of anything that wouldn't be suspicious. But maybe an opportunity will present itself."

Honey's lip curled. "We don't have time to wait for an opportunity."

Leroy fixed Nova with a concerned frown. "How much longer do you think we have?"

"Before they neutralize Ace? Hard to say. They're still trying to figure out—"

"Not that," he interrupted. "How much longer do we have before they figure out who you are?"

Nova tensed. With that seemingly innocent question, a floodgate of panic surged through her body.

Every wrong turn.

Every arrogant mistake.

Every piece of evidence that had been piling up against her over the past months.

They all blurred in her mind. A thousand missteps flashing through her memory at once.

The time she had put Danna to sleep in the medical wing. How

Winston had seemed to recognize her when he'd been interrogated by Adrian, as had the Librarian's granddaughter, Narcissa Cronin. All the things she had ever taken from the vault. How she had flaunted her shooting skills more than once. How she had left the Renegades' gala early, on the same evening that Nightmare had stolen Ace's helmet.

And, perhaps most condemning of all, how she had helped Max when he was dying.

After seeing the board at Adrian's house and listening to his theory, Nova realized that in some terrible way, she was lucky that Max was in a coma. It might have been in Frostbite's best interest to lie and say that Nightmare had attacked the kid, but when he woke up, would Max tell a different story? Nova wanted him to wake up—of course she did—but she also hoped that his memory of the night would be too befuddled to make sense of.

Because it made no sense that Nightmare would help him, and yet, that's what she'd done. Instead of leaving him for dead, she had tried to stop the bleeding, even going so far as to force Genissa Clark to give him her powers so he could freeze over the wound.

Nova had been through those moments in her head a million times. She knew she should have left Max. She should have grabbed the helmet and run.

But he was *dying*.

She couldn't have just left him. Even now, with all the rationality of hindsight plaguing her, she knew she'd made the right choice.

The truth would come out eventually, and the truth would be her undoing. At this point, any number of truths could be her undoing.

"Perhaps this moment calls for a bit of cold honesty," said Honey, drumming her nails on the table. "I want to rescue our poor Acey

as much as anybody, but none of this is very promising. Even if we could get into that prison, the chances of getting him and us *out* again are relatively scarce, and the moment the Renegades realize who Nova is—which, judging from the abject terror on her face, I suspect could happen in the next five minutes—they’ll have this place surrounded and we’ll be done for.” She fluffed her hair as her focus shifted from Nova to Leroy and Phobia and back again. “Has anyone considered maybe that we don’t rescue Ace, and instead steal a nice yacht and go live out our days on a tropical island somewhere?”

Phobia made a disgusted sound.

Honey wiggled her fingers at him. “Don’t worry, darling. I’m sure we can find one with a cemetery.”

“We’re not leaving Ace,” said Nova.

Honey sighed. “It’s time to consider other options.”

“Honey has a point,” murmured Leroy. “I hate to admit it, but . . .” He gestured at the blueprint. “This isn’t giving us enough to even concoct a plan, much less execute one.”

“We’re *not leaving Ace*,” Nova repeated, harsher this time. “He wouldn’t leave us.”

The others shared uncertain looks and Nova bristled. “Well, he wouldn’t leave *me*. And besides. Even if . . .” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Even if we can’t get to Ace in time, that doesn’t mean we’ve lost. He had a vision, and that vision lives on inside us. The hold the Renegades have over this city is weakening every day, as people are becoming aware of their failures and their hypocrisy. Whatever happens with Ace, we need to keep fighting for the world he believed in!”

Nova shut her mouth as tears began to pool in her vision. Feeling infuriatingly melodramatic, she turned her face away, but there were still words left unsaid. Still a deep loathing that burned in her chest.

It wasn't just about Ace's hope for the world—for the freedom and autonomy he felt all prodigies deserved. The right to not be hunted down and killed for what they were, but also the right to use their powers however they wanted, without fear of persecution, even from other prodigies like the Renegades. That was a part of it—it had always been a part of why she fought at Ace's side.

But the deeper reason she hated the Renegades, and had always hated them, was because they had not come to her rescue when she needed them most. They had sworn to protect her family, and they had failed. Her parents were dead. Her little sister, Evie, was dead. Nova would be dead, too, if she hadn't used her powers to put the assassin to sleep. Ace had found her standing over his unconscious body, trying, but unable, to pull the trigger on her family's killer.

All because of the Renegades and their empty promises.

She would not forgive it. And she would not let it happen to anyone else. People believed that the Renegades could save them, but they were wrong. The Renegades made mistakes. They broke their promises. They lied.

And they could not be left to rule the world unchecked.

"All right," Honey said, once their mutual silence had stretched thin. "We'll try it your way, little Nightmare." She tipped her chin toward the blueprint. "But we all know your secrets won't last much longer. We should probably have a contingency plan in place, for when you're discovered."

Leroy nodded. "I've been thinking that, too. If Nova is found out, we'll need to leave this house and destroy as much evidence as possible that we were ever here. And as it so happens, I've been working on just the thing. A cocktail of chemicals that, when combined, will decimate nearly everything they touch. It would at least keep the Renegades from combing through our stuff once we're gone."

“Fine,” said Nova. “If necessary, we’ll take what we need, destroy everything else, and go into hiding.”

A loud thump from the second floor drew their attention to the water-stained ceiling. Nova’s body tensed and she felt the rest of her companions go still, except for Phobia, who dissolved into a cloud of inky black smoke and swirled like a hurricane toward the staircase.

Grabbing the nearest weapon—a rather dull knife from the kitchen drawer—Nova charged after him with Leroy and Honey close behind. But when she reached the bedroom that she and Honey shared, she saw only Phobia awaiting her amid the bees and wasps. Honey’s creatures were always coming and going through the small window, which was left cracked open to allow them freedom, even when torrential rains soaked the rotting windowsill, as happened more and more as autumn tipped toward winter.

Phobia’s cloaked presence felt like a black hole in the center of the room. He was facing Honey’s vanity, one skeletal hand idly spinning the blade of his scythe.

Nova’s feet paused on the matted carpet. Honey and Leroy crowded beside her.

Nothing on the vanity appeared to have been disturbed, though it was difficult to tell, as the mess of makeup and costume jewelry was generally disheveled. Among them was a mason jar, its lid newly cluttered with bobby pins and a single rhinestone earring. Inside was the monarch butterfly, currently hanging upside down from the lid. Traces of dust from its wings were streaked along the inside of the jar from its attempts to get free, and four yellow wasps were picking their way around the lid, trying to get at the tasty snack inside.

But it wasn’t the butterfly or Honey’s trinkets that held Nova’s attention. It was the mirror, glinting their stunned expressions back

at them. Written upon its surface, in black marker and all caps, were the words:

BRING ME THE HELMET
QB'S ROOM—BLACKMIRE
48 HOURS
OR EVERYONE WILL KNOW
WHO YOU REALLY ARE

Nova had barely begun to digest the threat when Leroy moved past her and stuck his head out through the window, scanning the yard and alleyway behind the house. However, even if the perpetrator was out there, lurking in the shadows, Nova doubted Leroy would be able to see them in the darkness.

She read through the words again. She knew that so many Renegades, Adrian among them, had been closing in on her secret for months now. Had one of them finally figured her out? But most Renegades would take the information straight to the Council. She doubted many of them would have the guts to blackmail her for Ace's helmet, even if it was one of the most powerful objects of all time.

Who could it be?

"Well," said Honey, "with Ace gone, it's not like we have much use for the helmet as it is."

Nova scowled at Honey's reflection, cut through with the scrawled words. "We're not giving up the helmet. I risked too much to get it. Besides, we are going to find a way to free Ace, and when we do, he'll need the helmet to get his strength back. I'm not going to watch him waste away to nothing because we gave up the one thing that could restore him."

"I agree," said Leroy, apparently not having seen anything, or anyone, out the window. "But I don't think we should take this as

an idle threat. Someone knows your identity, Nova. Not just that—they know where you are. Where we all are.”

Nova crossed her arms. “Yeah, but they’re a coward, whoever it is. To leave a threatening message and not dare face me in person. Who does that?”

“Cowards can sometimes be the most dangerous of all,” said Phobia.

“Phobia’s right,” said Leroy. “We can’t ignore this.”

Nova glanced at his face, scarred and disfigured, and thought of the teenage bullies who had dumped acids on him after chemistry class. Cowards, the lot of them. But still dangerous.

Nevertheless, she wasn’t about to relinquish the helmet to someone who didn’t have the nerve to fight for it themselves, and she didn’t have time to be running errands and making deliveries for anonymous stalkers, either.

But she needed more time to figure out how to free Ace from that prison.

Her wall of lies might be ready to collapse on its own, but she wasn’t about to let someone take a wrecking ball to it now.

The threat on the glass blurred before her.

48 HOURS
OR EVERYONE WILL KNOW