RENEGADES



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We were all villains in the beginning.

For hundreds of years, prodigies were feared by the rest of the world. We became hunted. Tormented. Feared and oppressed. We were believed to be witches and demons, freaks and abominations. We were stoned and hanged 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 Anarchy changed everything. He united the most powerful prodigies he could find and together they rebelled.

He started with the infrastructure. Government buildings torn from their foundations. Banks and stock exchanges turned to rubble. Bridges ripped from the sky. Entire freeways reduced to rocky wastelands. When the military sent jets, he plucked them from the air like moths. When they sent tanks, he crushed them like aluminum cans.

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

Whole governments, 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.

The Anarchists cared little for what would come next once the old world crumbled. They cared only for change, and they got it. Soon, a number of villain gangs began to crawl out from society's ashes, each hungry for their own slice of power, and it wasn't long before Ace Anarchy's influence spread across the globe. Prodigies banded together for the first time in history, some full of wrath and resentment, others desperate for acceptance that never came. They demanded fair treatment and human rights and protection under the law, and in some countries, the panicking governments hastened to cater to them.

But in other countries, the rebellions turned violent, and the violence dissolved into anarchy.

Chaos rose up to fill the void that civilized society had left behind. Trade and manufacturing ground to a halt. Civil wars erupted on every continent. Gatlon City was largely cut off from the world, and the fear and distrust that prevailed would go on to rule for twenty years.

They call it the Age of Anarchy.

Looking back now, people talk about the Anarchists and the other gangs 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 robbed. 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 were 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, the gangs 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, 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 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 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 sat back with a grin. "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. Evie was sick again. It seemed she was always running a fever these days and they'd run out of medicine for her days ago. Uncle Alec was supposed to be bringing more, but it might be hours still.

When Nova had overheard her father asking Uncle Alec if he might be able to find a children's ibuprofen for the baby's fever, 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 Papà must have seen the request brewing 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 things her father made.

The last time her 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 came 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 . . .

Beyond her door, 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.

Papà was holding Evie in the front room, bouncing her up and down and trying to press a cool washcloth against her flushed brow, but it only made her wail louder as she tried to shove it away. Through the doorway into their tiny kitchen, Nova saw her mom digging through cabinets, muttering about misplaced apple juice, though they all knew there wasn't any.

"Want me to help?" said Nova.

Papà turned to her, distress shadowing his eyes. Evie screamed louder as he forgot to bounce her for two whole 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 . . . rest would be good for her, and Alec might be here by then."

"I don't mind," said Nova, reaching for the baby. "It's easy."

Papà 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 not quite 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 the mattress in the corner of the room and stroked her fingers through Evie's baby-soft curls. Evie had worked

herself into a tizzy, big tears rolling down her plump cheeks. She was so feverish that holding her felt like holding a miniature furnace.

Nova sank 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 fell 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's face softened. "Thank you, Nova. Maybe she'll feel better when she wakes up."

"And we won't have to start looking for another place to live," Papà 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." Papà 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 Papà 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 quieting and darkening as her father let them harden into something tangible and real.

"What are you making, Papà?"

He glanced over at her, and a shadow passed over his face, even as he smiled at her. "I'm not sure yet," he said, his fingers tracing the delicate metalwork. "Something . . . something I hope will put to right some of the great injuries I've caused this world."

He sighed then, a weighted sound that brought a frown to Nova's face. She knew there were things her parents didn't talk to her about, things they tried to shelter her from, and she hated it. Sometimes she would overhear conversations between them, words passed through the long hours of night when they thought she was asleep. They whispered about falling buildings and entire neighborhoods being burned to the ground. They murmured about power struggles and how there didn't seem to be any safe place left and how they might flee the city, but that the violence seemed to have consumed the whole world now, and besides, where would they go?

Only a week ago Nova had heard her mother say—"They'll destroy us all if no one stops them . . ."

Nova had wanted to ask about it, but she knew she would get only vague answers and sad smiles and be told that it wasn't for her to worry about.

"Papà?" she started again, after watching him work for a while. "Are we going to be okay?"

A figment of copper energy spluttered and disintegrated in the air. Her father fixed her with a devastated look. "Of course, sweetheart. We're going to be fine."

"Then why do you always look so worried?"

He set down his work and leaned back in his chair. For a moment she thought he might be on the verge of crying, but then he blinked and the look was gone.

"Listen to me, Nova," he said, slipping off the chair and crouching in front of her. "There are many dangerous people in this world. But there are also many good people. Brave people. No matter how bad things get, we have to remember that. So long as there are heroes in this world, there's hope that tomorrow might be better."

"The Renegades," she whispered, her voice tinged with a hint of awe.

A wisp of a smile crossed her father's features. "The Renegades," he confirmed.

Nova pressed her cheek against Evie's soft curls. The Renegades did seem to be helping everyone these days. One had chased down a mugger who tried to take Mrs. Ogilvie's purse, and she'd heard that a group of Renegades had broken into one of the gangs' storehouses and taken all the food to a private children's home.

"And they're going to help us?" she said. "Maybe we can ask *them* for medicine next time."

Her father shook his head. "We don't need that sort of help as much as some other people in this city do."

Nova's brow furrowed. She couldn't imagine anyone needing that sort of help more than they did.

"But," her father said, "when we need them . . . when we *really* need them, they'll be here, all right?" He swallowed, and sounded more hopeful than convincing when he added, "They'll protect us."

Nova didn't question it. They were superheroes. They were the good guys. Everyone knew that.

She found Evie's pudgy fingers and started to 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 Harrow 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.

Even in her dreams she could see her father's hands, only now he was pulling falling stars out of the sky, stringing them together like glowing golden beads . . .

A DOOR SLAMMED.

Nova awoke with a start. Evie huffed and rolled away from her.

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. Papà, sounding tense. Her mom, murmuring, *please, please* . . .

She pushed off the blanket that had been draped over her and tucked it around Evie, then crept past the table where a delicate copper-colored bracelet sat abandoned, an empty space in the filigree waiting to be filled with a precious stone.

When she reached the front door, she turned the knob as slowly 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 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 Papà. He had put himself 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, his eyes shifting between them.

Fear tightened in Nova's stomach.

"Let me talk to him," Papà repeated. "We haven'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. "Tala, get the girls. *Go.*"

"David . . . ," her mother whimpered, moving 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. Papà screamed and grabbed his wife. He turned her over in his arms. He was trembling while her mom wheezed and choked.

"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, into her bedroom. She slammed the door shut and thrust open her closet. Climbed over the books and tools and boxes that littered the floor. 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. Too late she thought that she should have gone for the fire escape. Too late.

Too late she remembered—

Evie.

She'd left Evie out there.

She'd left *Evie*.

A shuddering gasp was met with a horrified cry, though she tried to swallow both of them back. Her hand fell on the closet door and she tried to gauge how fast she could get out to the living room and back, if there was any chance of snatching the baby up without being seen . . .

The front door creaked, paralyzing her.

She pulled her hand back against her mouth.

Maybe he wouldn't notice Evie. Maybe she would go on sleeping.

She listened to 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 radio. A certainty, patched together from the words of gossiping neighbors.

They always came.

Bang.

Her father's body crumpling in the hall.

Nova squeezed her eyes shut as hot tears spilled down her cheeks. "The Renegades . . . the Renegades will come."

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

Nova's eyes snapped open. 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 rub the tears and snot from her face.

She picked up the gun, though it felt awkward and heavy in her hand, and slipped her finger over the trigger.

She took a step closer, one hand gripping the doorframe 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 going to come.

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

But she didn't.

"Pull the trigger."

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 plastic medicine bottle 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 shot 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, my little nightmare?" He smoothed 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.