EVERYONE HAS A nightmare.

Nova was pretty sure that 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 at the same time 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’ efforts, his stunts
had often made the organization seem incompetent and ineffective.
About 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 Anarchy, 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 that had been a part of 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 that 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 her lips twitched to defend herself whenever she saw Adrian’s eyes smolder with hatred.

“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 chromium pike 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, not looking at her. “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, and 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 and was 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 pike.”

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 frowned and 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 in to 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 spot of 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 released another heavy sigh. “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.”

Adrian rubbed a hand over his cropped hair. “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. I mean, look around. 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 softly. 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, her expression full of sympathy. “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 last night, 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 eclipsing need 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 kill her.*
“Hear Nightmare really whopped 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.”

“Huh. 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.

Nova followed the look. 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 bit him.

“Ow!” Adrian yelped, 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 mewing sound and flicked its tiny clawed arms at her, leaving tiny nicks on her fingers. “This thing is still alive?” she said, gaping at Adrian.

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 more closely as it squirmed in Nova’s fingers. “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 . . .”

Oscar shrugged. “She’ll find something. 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 looked directly at Nova, and she blinked 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, right, that.” Nova glanced at Adrian, who looked 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 turned to her, looking so adorably emphatic that she stopped herself and smiled. “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 started writing 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?”

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

Oscar huffed, visibly annoyed. “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.”

She turned toward the front of the lobby, where the five Council members were standing on the street-level balcony, silhouetted by a wall of glass and the hazy late-morning sun. Shadows of journalists and curious onlookers 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 in the air, Blacklight turned his outstretched 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 looked from the Captain to 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. Nova glanced around at the crowd of superheroes amid the rubble, all looking to their Council for direction and hope. “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 gaze 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 . . .” She glanced at the Renegade beside her. “But
someone said 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 maintain our calm and our conviction. 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, and from where she stood, Nova saw the Captain release a relieved breath. “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 nodded 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 here-tofore 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.

The crowd turned to see Genissa Clark, formerly known as Frostbite, picking her way through the rubble. Rather than the usual Renegade uniform, she was wearing drawstring pants and a loose T-shirt from the med wing. Her bare arms were littered with bruises and scratches from her fight against Nightmare.

Nova swallowed upon seeing one of the prodigies she had fought against 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 tiny bars of Turbo’s tiny 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 irreversible. 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 cascade of white-blond hair tumbling down her stick-straight back. “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 turned in a circle, and 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 of 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 of 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 shoulders were tense, there was compassion in his gaze as it shifted between Genissa, Mack, and Trevor. “We do shoulder 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 being 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 just 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 looked down at her bare hands. “Almost any cost.”

Genissa marched through the lobby, heading toward the set of stairs that would lead up to the balcony. 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 and, glancing back, seemed 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 swung shut again.
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 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 atmosphere 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 homier,” 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 swallowed.

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.

The effect was horrifically creepy.

“She’s been following me around since we found Ace,” said
Ruby. “Doesn’t usually come with me to Headquarters, but other-
wise . . .” She was frowning as she said it, her worried gaze flitting
around at the butterflies.

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

Ruby nodded. “I mentioned it to Thunderbird 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 detect-
ive 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 are more than one. If she’s trapped some-
where, 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 communicate with 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 let them know.

“I’m glad she’s here, at least,” said Adrian. He paused then, and looked around at 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 looked around, meeting each of their gazes in turn. “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, under-baked centers, all nestled onto a bed of parchment paper.
“Thanks, Oscar,” said Ruby, picking one out. She held it up and paused, her head cocked to the side. “Are these . . . ?”

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

Ruby blinked 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 turned toward 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 funhouse. 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 were 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 mist-missiles!*

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

Nova swallowed, 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 enough together, Nova could tell, just from glancing at the diagrams.

She 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.

Adrian nodded. “For starters, 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 stared at her for a moment before inhaling a long breath, followed by clearing 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,” he finally said. “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 the night Nightmare broke in to 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 chromium pike, 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 looked just like 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 funhouse. 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 there’s no record of it turning up there. 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.

Nova’s saliva suddenly tasted of bile.

“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.”


“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 inhaled a deep breath. “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 breath, meeting each of their gazes in turn. “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 nod of 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, his brow furrowed. “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 staring at 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 pressed a hand to her chest and forced a smile, as brilliant as she dared. “I can look through our 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 any time 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’s shoulders relaxed and he smiled. “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?
“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 . . . in theory, to avoid possible 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, of course, 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, her head cocked to the side as she surveyed the blueprints. “I’m beginning to understand the value of our little butterfly friend’s ability more and more.”

Nova’s eye 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 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. “But 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.”

Ignoring Honey, Leroy fixed Nova with a concerned look. “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, it felt like 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 med wing. How Winston had seemed to recognize her when he’d been interrogated by Adrian, as had the Librarian’s granddaughter, Narcissa Cronin. All things she had ever taken from the vault. How she had flaunted her shooting skills more than once. How she had left the Renegade’s 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 had been 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.

Even if she knew 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 it’s all looking a bit unlikely. Even if we could get into that prison, the chances of getting him and us our again are relatively scarce, and the moment the Renegades realize who Nova is—which, judging from the look of 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 gaze 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 pitiably. “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 even if Ace is gone, that vision can live 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 eyes. Feeling infuriatingly melodramatic, she turned her face away, but there were still words left unsaid. Still a deep loathing burning 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 big part of why she wanted to fight 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 won’t do much in favor of your innocence, but it would at least keep the Renegades from combing through our stuff once we’re gone.”

Nova nodded. “Fine. 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 turned toward Honey’s vanity, one skeletal hand idly spinning the blade of his scythe.

Nova followed the direction of his gaze.

Her 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
a 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 this time, 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, in slanted 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 swallowed and 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 a longing sigh, “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 once 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 guts 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.
ADRIAN WAS CONTEMPLATING invisibility. There was no question that, as superpowers go, it was one with infinite uses, particularly when one spent a great deal of time sneaking and spying, as he tended to do these days. His dad, Simon—the Dread Warden—could turn invisible. So could Max, having absorbed some of Simon’s ability when he was a baby, albeit he could only go invisible for short periods of time. There was one Renegade who had trained in Gatlon City a number of years ago who was always invisible, which Adrian had found slightly disconcerting when they’d been around. (To this day, he still wasn’t sure of their gender, and the alias, the Wraith, didn’t offer any clues.) But they had been sent to a syndicate across the ocean and Adrian hadn’t given much thought to them or their power since.

He was giving it plenty of thought now.

Because of all the powers he had given himself using tattoos inked into his body, none of them offered much in the way of stealth. Quite the opposite—the armor that burst forth from the zipper
tattooed over his sternum was big and bulky, shiny and reflective. It made him feel invincible when he wore it, but also very, very visible.

He couldn’t quite picture the sort of tattoo that might allow for full invisibility, though. He figured such a tattoo would have to cover him nearly from head to toe to be effective, but maybe he needed to think outside the box. Maybe he just needed inspiration.

He wondered if Nova would have some ideas, except she didn’t know about the Sentinel or the tattoos and he wasn’t sure how to go about telling her, or even if he wanted to, especially given the outward loathing she demonstrated for his vigilante alter ego.

But standing on a ledge outside a hospital window, five stories in the air, in broad daylight in his heavy, glinting armor, he decided it was time to start considering other means of sneaking in to see Max. And invisibility would have made it so much easier.

Plastered against the building’s side, he angled a small handheld mirror toward the window, following the movements of a nurse as she checked Max’s vital signs and noted information onto a tablet. She adjusted something on an IV drip beside the bed, smoothed the blanket across his thin chest, signed her initials on a sheet of paper by the door.

Finally she left, leaving the door barely cracked behind her.

The moment she was gone, Adrian crouched and dug his gloved fingertips beneath the window. It opened as easily and silently as it had the last two times.

He stepped inside, cringing at the loud thump of his boots. He pressed a finger to the breastplate, retracting the armor into the pocket beneath his skin. On much quieter feet now, he crossed the room and shut the door the rest of the way. There was no lock, but the movements of the nurses were kept to a tight schedule, and by
now he was familiar enough with their methods to know that no one would be back to check on Max for a couple of hours.

And, sadly, the kid couldn’t expect many visitors. Having been quarantined inside Renegade HQ for most of his life, he had no friends or acquaintances beyond the Renegades, and there were only two Renegades who could be near Max without him absorbing their powers into himself.

Captain Chromium was one. He was invincible to everything, even the Bandit.

And Adrian was the other—though no one other than Max knew about it.

After he’d discovered the Vitality Charm and what it could do, Adrian had been inspired to design a tattoo that could offer the same measures of protection, even against a power like Max’s. And it had worked. He could finally be near his little brother without a glass barrier dividing them.

But until he found a way to explain the tattoos to everyone, especially his dads, he had to keep even this tattoo a secret. And now that the Vitality Charm was missing, he couldn’t use that as a foil for visiting the kid.

But there was no way he could stay away completely.

He just had to be careful about it.

With the door shut and the blinds facing the hallway closed, he stepped to the side of the bed and peered down on his little brother. At least, he thought of Max as his brother, and he’d thought of him that way since the first day he’d met the kid. His dads had rescued Max as a baby, after his biological parents—members of the Roaches—had tried to throw him into a river. Max had probably already absorbed their powers by that point, and no doubt the rest of the gang would have threatened expulsion if they didn’t get
rid of the little bandit before he did any more damage. To a lot of prodigy parents, Max would have been seen as a threat long before he was seen as a child worth loving. For months after, Max had lived with a civilian foster family who cared for him until Hugh and Simon could figure out what to do. From the start, Hugh had felt it was important for him to be kept close, not just because he was a prodigy who deserved to be surrounded by other prodigies, but also because to have him out on his own could make him either a target for the villains, or a weapon that they could someday use against the Renegades.

Which is when they’d started to consider a quarantine.

Construction had begun almost as soon as the Battle for Gatlon was won, and some months later, Adrian had met his foundling baby brother on the other side of a glass wall. He was walking by then, toddling around the wide-open space, exploring the mess of blocks and train sets Hugh kept bringing for him.

Adrian had used a red marker to draw his best shark on the glass wall—not a living creature, but a toy that Max could play with. The drawing was rudimentary and rough, but it had quickly become the kid’s favorite toy.

Adrian had loved him immediately.

Pulling a plastic chair beside the bed, Adrian slumped into it and inspected Max’s face, ten years older than that innocent baby, and about a hundred years wiser. He told himself the kid was looking less pale than the night before, though it might have been wishful thinking. His breath was as steady as ever. His hair as messy. A faint shade of blue was cast across his eyelids, making his skin appear to be made of rice paper.

He had always been small for his age, and now he looked like he could fade right into the white sheets of the hospital bed.
Adrian tried not to think like that, though. It might have felt like Max had been lying here for weeks, but it wasn’t true. Adrian had to forcefully count out the time that had passed.

Three days. Three nights. Some people were in comas for years and managed to pull out of it.

Besides, Hugh had spoken with the doctors, and they claimed that Max was actually improving at a startling rate, especially when one considered how few people would have survived to begin with. The pike had gone clean through his abdomen, just below his rib cage. They credited the ice that had hardened over the wound, stanching the blood both internally and externally—a power he’d absorbed from Frostbite during the battle.

If it had been possible for a healer to tend to him, he probably would have been back on his feet by now, good as new but for a couple gnarly scars.

He couldn’t be tended to by the healers though. In fact, any prodigy remotely associated with the hospital had been instructed to stay away from the room, even the entire wing, where Max was being cared for.

Nevertheless, he had been put under the care of the best civilian doctors the hospital had to offer, and he did seem to be recovering. They were tentatively optimistic.

Those were the words they kept using, that Hugh had parroted back to Adrian and Simon. Tentatively optimistic. It was something, but it wasn’t enough.

If only Adrian had captured Ace Anarchy sooner. If he’d gotten Max’s message. If he’d been just a little faster getting back to headquarters. He could have stopped Nightmare. He could have saved Max.

“Don’t worry, kid,” he whispered. “I’ll find her. I’ll make her pay for this.”
Then he inhaled a deep breath and started to tell Max everything he and the team had discussed. His suspicions that Nightmare could be a spy within the Renegades, and the evidence that seemed to confirm the theory. He wished he had a suspect in mind, but the only Renegade who struck him as villainous enough was Genissa Clarke, and she couldn’t be Nightmare for obvious reasons.

Part of the problem was that powers were public record, and no one in the Renegades had an ability like Nightmare’s: to put people to sleep through touch. The closest thing Adrian could find were records of a prodigy who went by Lullaby and had the gift, enviable only to new parents, of singing restless children to sleep with her soothing voice. Lullaby, however, had never been a Renegade, just a prodigy who was a popular babysitter for parents who wanted to stay on patrols.

Which meant that Nightmare was hiding her ability from the rest of them. He thought it was likely that she was posing as one of their civilian contractors. About ten percent of the Renegade’s workforce were not prodigies, including plenty of the lab personnel and administrators.

It made sense, actually, that it would be one of them. After all, they didn’t have to pass trials. Though they would have undergone some rudimentary background checks . . .

Still, it seemed like as good a place to start as any.

“Thanks, Max,” he said, leaning back in his chair as his words and ideas faded out. “Talking this out with you was actually really helpful.”

Though Max couldn’t respond, it did comfort Adrian to work out his thoughts this way. Max had been often been a sounding board for him, with ideas and perspectives that were often far past his years.

Adrian didn’t know what he would do without him.
A noise caught his attention and Adrian jerked head upward. He could hear voices coming toward the room, and one boomed louder than the others.

His dad, Hugh Everhart. Captain Chromium.

Cursing, Adrian sprang to his feet and shoved the chair back to its place in the corner.

Again. Invisibility. He really had to work on it.

He climbed onto the windowsill and slipped around to the ledge on the outside of the building’s facade, a perch that was beginning to feel all too familiar. Except he’d never been out there before when he wasn’t wearing the Sentinel’s armor. It was shocking how different the sensation was. How vulnerable he felt with the gusts of wind buffeting his skin and the rough stone of the building’s wall scratching against his palms. He wasn’t afraid of heights, but it was impossible not to imagine what would happen if he fell and his body struck the pavement five stories below.

He dared to glance down and saw, with a small shred of relief, that he would actually land in a flower bed. Not as great as, say, a trampoline, but still better than pavement.

Hugh’s booming voice reached him, though it was barely audible over the wind whistling past his ears. Was it his imagination, or had he heard his dad mention the Sentinel?

One side of his mouth twitched down. Adrian shook his wrist, flicking out the marker that he kept inside a pocket of his sleeve. He uncapped it with his teeth and started to sketch onto the building’s wall, but the textured stone was too rough for the marker to complete any clean lines, and bits of debris kept sticking to the felted tip. Scowling, he glanced down, ignoring the sheer drop mere inches behind his heels, and drew instead on the thigh of his jeans.

He had learned, over the years of being Sketch, the Renegade
who could turn any drawing into reality, that complex, detailed drawings might be impressive, but it was the simple ones that tended to work the best. He could have drawn some sort of high-tech hearing aid with a radio antenna and background-noise dulling capabilities, but why muck around with all that? Instead, he drew an old-fashioned ear trumpet, pointed at one end and open wide at the other to take in sound waves and funnel them toward his ear canal. It was something the elderly might have used hundreds of years ago, and it didn’t exactly make him feel too sexy to pull the drawing from the denim fabric and hold it up to his ear.

But it worked. Suddenly, his father’s voice was coming through as if he were standing right beside him.

“—a great debt,” Hugh was saying, in a calmer tone than when he’d first entered the room, “which is putting us in a hell of a position.” He sighed heavily. “You’re sure he would have died if the Sentinel hadn’t gotten him here so fast?”

“Nothing is certain,” said another male voice—Dr. Sutner, Adrian recognized. The civilian doctor who had taken on Max’s care when none of their on-staff prodigy healers could get close to him. “He might have pulled through on his own, especially with the ice stanching the bleeding. But . . .” He didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t have to.

Adrian felt a tinge of warmth in his chest to know that he had done something right, at least. He had been tempted that night—so very tempted—to go after Nightmare when she had run. But he had chosen Max instead. He had chosen to try to save his little brother rather than exact vengeance on his attacker.

Vengeance could wait.

“Well . . . if I ever meet him, he’ll have my gratitude,” said Hugh, though there was a heaviness in his words. “Even if he does
need to be stopped.”

“Stopped, Captain?” said the doctor. “But . . . isn’t he working for you?”

“Of course not. He’s a vigilante—he hasn’t followed our code from day one.”

“Right. Yes. The media says that. I’d just assumed . . .” Dr. Sutner trailed off.

“He’s not a Renegade. He’s not one of us,” Hugh’s voice took on an edge of resentment. “Even if he did manage to rescue my son . . . and capture Ace Anarchy. Maybe he’s done some good for us, but . . . it’s hard not to criticize his methods. He should have joined the organization, rather than going off on his own. It’s given people a lot of ideas about heroics and crime fighting, and that’s dangerous when it isn’t left in the hands of the professionals. People have been getting hurt, and it’s going to get worse.”

Adrian wished he could break out his mirror so he’d be able to see his dad’s expression, but he couldn’t use both the mirror and the ear trumpet. Still, he had a feeling he could tell what his dad was thinking. There had been a lot of talk about the Sentinel’s capture of the world’s most revered villain. It felt a little unjust, as Oscar, Ruby, and Danna had all helped him do it and should have gotten part of the credit. But after finding out that Adrian was the Sentinel, it had been Ruby’s idea to leave the Renegades a note for when they came to get Ace Anarchy. It had read:

ACE ANARCHY IS YOUR ENEMY.
I AM NOT.
—THE SENTINEL

That way, as Ruby explained, they would know that the Sentinel was on their side. That he wasn’t a villain. That they needed to stop hunting him.
Despite her good intentions, though, the note only seemed to have irritated the Council more. People thought that maybe the Sentinel wasmocking them by tracking down their worst enemy, an enemy the Renegades had long believed dead. On top of that, the rise in vigilantism had skyrocketed these past months, as news of the Sentinel’s victories over criminals had spread. People were beginning to feel like the Renegades and their code weren’t enough. There needed to be more drastic measures taken if they were ever going to stop the spread of crime in their city.

It would have been flattering, except not everyone was made to be a superhero, and plenty of good intentions had led to civilians being severely wounded. One ambitious man had nearly been killed while trying to stop a carjacking, and an innocent woman had been shot in the arm when an enthusiastic vigilante had wrongly assumed that she was trying to steal his neighbor’s dog. (In reality, the neighbor had asked her to dog-sit for a few days.)

The more people tried to take matters into their own hands, the more stories like that emerged.

It wasn’t that Renegades never made mistakes, but for the first time since Adrian had donned the Sentinel’s armor, he was beginning to understand why the Council placed so much importance on their code.

“Your staff knows to keep an eye out for him?” said Hugh, drawing Adrian’s attention back to their conversation.

“Just like you asked. There’s been no sign. Though . . . of course, if he were to come to the hospital, we probably wouldn’t recognize him.”

“I know, but I just have a feeling he will . . . It’s common heroic behavior, to want to see the people you’ve rescued. I see it in Renegades all the time, how they want to maintain connections
to the ones they’ve been personally involved in helping. Something tells me the Sentinel will try to see Max again.”

“Which begs the question, Captain,” said the doctor, sounding a bit hesitant. “How was he able to bring Max all the way here without being affected by the boy’s powers?”

Hugh was silent for a long time, though Adrian sensed it was more because he was debating what information to reveal, rather than mulling over the question itself. Finally, he admitted simply, “We don’t know. There are a lot of things about him that we don’t know.”

“I see,” said Dr. Sutner. “Well, we will inform you immediately should anyone make attempts to see the patient. And of course, I will alert you if there is any change in Max’s condition.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I know he’s in good hands.” Hugh’s voice softened, and Adrian couldn’t resist tilting his head a bit closer to the window, just enough to peer inside. Just long enough to see the Dr. Sutner respectfully ducking out of the room, while his dad bent over Max’s body. Just long enough to glimpse his dad brushing the hair back from Max’s forehead and kissing his brow.

Just long enough to notice that the world’s strongest superhero was crying.
CHAPTER SIX

It was Nova’s first time returning to the weapons and artifacts department since the night she’d stolen Ace’s helmet. Her stomach was knotted as she rode the elevator up to the warehouse endearingly known as the vault. Her Renegade uniform felt like it was strangling her, the fabric tightening slowly around her limbs, digging into her chest and throat until she could barely breathe.

The words on the mirror were etched into her thoughts, and there was a part of her, a big part, that wondered if maybe Honey was right. Maybe it was time to give up. She didn’t really think she could save Ace, did she? Especially not before she was discovered. And now to have some unknown jerk stalking and threatening her made her wonder if it was all worth it.

Though she toyed with her own fate often enough, she loathed the idea that someone else now held her fate in their hands. That simply wouldn’t do.

She had gone over a lot of scenarios in her mind the night before, most of which ended in her discovering who the blackmailer was
and dousing them with one of Leroy’s most painful concoctions. Because the idea of giving in to their demands, even if just to placate them temporarily, disgusted her. She was an Anarchist. She was one of the most feared villains of Gatlon City.

She did not placate.

And she certainly didn’t follow the orders of phantoms who broke in to her bedroom and left annoying messages.

But every time her anger ran away with her, she gritted her teeth and reeled it back in. She didn’t need retribution right now. She needed time.

The elevator dinged and she squared her shoulders, dragging in a breath until it felt like her lungs would pop.

She was still holding it when the doors opened, revealing the small reception area outside the warehouse, Snapshot’s desk, as cluttered as ever, and the desk that was mostly Nova’s, as barren as ever.

Snapshot wasn’t there, and neither was Wonder Boy, as Nova had taken to calling Callum in her head.

She released the breath and moved toward the desk.

She wasn’t ready to see Callum, though she knew she would have to eventually. Not only because they worked together most days, but because she needed to pretend to pry him for information about Nightmare. It would require a careful dance. Letting him know about Adrian’s suspicions, leading him on to believe that, yes, Nightmare might be a spy in their midst, one who may even have had access to the vault. All while keeping his suspicions away from her.

She wasn’t sure she could pull it off. She’d gotten good at lying, but she didn’t know if she was that good.

Maybe it wouldn’t matter today. Maybe she wouldn’t see him. Maybe she wouldn’t have to look him in the eye and force herself to
smile, all the while remembering the moment when he had tried to stop her from taking the helmet and she had been forced to put him to sleep because of it.

She didn’t usually have guilt when she used her power, especially on Renegades, but with Callum it had been different. He had used his power on her to make Nova see how maybe the world could be different. How maybe her life could be different, if she chose a different path. And the worst thing was knowing that it wasn’t Callum putting the thoughts into her mind, it was knowing that they’d been there all along.

And knowing that she wasn’t going to do anything about it.

When she had chosen to continue with her plan and take the helmet, it had felt like a betrayal of Callum and all his annoying goodness. It had also felt like a betrayal of some small part of herself. The part of herself that still sometimes dreamed of living a life without vengeance. A life where she and Adrian had a future. Maybe, even, a life of peace.

But that dream, she knew now as strongly as ever, would never be. The truth was closing in around her. Her lies couldn’t go on forever. Besides, peace and acceptance wouldn’t bring back the family she had lost.

No matter, she told herself, again and again. Taking the helmet was supposed to be the end of this charade. At the time, she was sure that she would never have to face Callum again—or Adrian, for that matter.

But nothing ever went according to plan, and now there were consequences. There were always consequences, and she couldn’t stop to think about it. She had to keep moving. Keep going through the motions. Lie. Steal. Betray.

Because that’s how she would free Ace.
That’s how she would destroy the Renegades.

That’s how she would end this ongoing battle in her thoughts. The war between Nightmare and Insomnia. Hero and villain. She had already made her choice.

Nova fell into the chair at her desk and woke up the computer. She opened a memorandum template and quickly typed up the text she’d already planned out in her head. She scanned the text when she was done and decided to add a small typo, because Tina, the director of the artifacts department, was always a little scatterbrained and it seemed more authentic that way.

After printing the page, Nova turned to the second empty desk and grabbed a pen out of a coffee mug by the keyboard, one with purple ink and a giant purple daisy on its tip. She scrawled a signature across the bottom of the page.

Tina Lawrence
Snapshot
Director

Replacing the pen, she spent a moment riffling through the desk drawers, searching for the stamp Tina sometimes used for official documentation for the weapons and artifacts department.

She had gone through every drawer twice before she gave up with a growl, slamming the final drawer shut. Exhaling, she inspected the clutter on top of the desk more closely, but there was no stamp.

With the paper in one hand, she headed into the filing room. She hadn’t taken two steps inside before her eyes fell on the stamp, left behind on a pile of empty manila folders.

“Honestly,” she muttered under her breath, marching over to the stack and slamming the stamp down on the memo beneath the forged signature. Setting it aside, she folded the sheet into crisp thirds.
“Hey, Nova.”
Heart launching into her throat, she cursed and spun around.
Callum started, too, surprised at her overreaction.
“Sweet rot, you scared me!”
“Sorry,” he said with a sheepish grin. “I didn’t know anyone was in here.”
“Right. It’s fine.” She cleared her throat. “I’m just not used to people sneaking up on me.”
It was a bit of an understatement. How had she not heard him come up behind her?
The answer came to her a second later. In the weeks she’d known Callum, she’d never not heard him. If he wasn’t pushing around a squeaky-wheeled cart laden with artifacts, then he was jabbering away in the incessant way he had, somehow managing to be both charming and obnoxious at the same time.
“I wasn’t sure you’d be in today.” Callum cocked his head, and she realized he was looking at the folded letter in her hand.
“Why wouldn’t I have come in? I was on the schedule.”
He met her gaze and held it for a beat too long before he smiled.
“I must have forgot.”
Callum’s expression wasn’t judgmental, per se, but there was something amiss. Something suspicious.
Something very un-Callum-like.
Nova swallowed, staring back, gripping her smile like a weapon, already concocting a lie about the letter in her hand.
But he didn’t ask about it.
That was stranger than anything. The fact that he still wasn’t talking.
“Oh!” she said, feigning a gasp. “I heard about your run-in with Nightmare. Are you okay?”
His mouth twitched. Still smiling . . . almost. “Yeah, yeah. She did her sleep thing on me. You know, I’ve heard that a lot of people have killer headaches after she’s put them to sleep, but I was fine. Felt pretty well rested the next day, actually.”

“Oh . . . well, that’s good,” she said. She hoped she sounded confused. “Maybe you’re just more resilient than the rest of us.”

*Or maybe I was being nice.*

“I seriously doubt that.” His brow furrowed, the grin fading for real this time. “Is it weird to think that maybe she was going easy on me?”

Nova guffawed. It was as fake as she feared it would be. “Nightmare, go easy on someone? That seems out of character.”

“Yeah, I know.” His eyes took on a strange squint, peering at her like he knew something. Her pulse thundered. “I know this sounds weird,” he added, “but she seemed familiar.”

Nova’s eyebrows worked their way toward her hairline. “Funny you should say that,” she said, stepping closer to Callum and lowering her voice in what she hoped would inspire conspiratorial confidence. “It might not be as weird as you think.”

He blinked, clearly surprised, and for a moment he looked like a startled rabbit ready to bolt. Clearly he was thinking that they both knew exactly why Nightmare would seem familiar to him. And if he suspected her, as Nova was sure he did, then he was right.

But she had to convince him otherwise.

“My patrol unit had a meeting yesterday,” she said, crossing the room to him. His expression was a study of both curiosity and nerves. He should have been wary of being so close to her. If he really did believe she was Nightmare, then he knew how dangerous she could be. How easily she could put him to sleep again. Though maybe that’s what he was hoping she would do.
It would certainly prove his suspicions.

“Adrian has a theory,” she went on. “And at first it seemed a little far-fetched, but now I’m not so sure.”

Callum’s shoulders sank as it became clear that this was not about to become a confession after all. “What sort of theory?”

“About Nightmare. He’s been investigating her for months now, ever since the attack at the parade. He’s compiled a shocking amount of information and . . . well.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. Callum leaned in closer. “He thinks she might actually be a Renegade.”

He said nothing. After another strangely silent moment, his expression turned suspicious again. Trying to see right through her.

Finally, he said, simply, “Oh yeah?”

“I wasn’t sure at first, but when Adrian started listing all the coincidences . . . like that she knew about the helmet, and had access to Agent N . . . and oh! The mist-missiles? It kind of starts to make sense, right? What if she’s a spy?”

His head cocked to one side. “What if she’s a spy,”

“It would explain a lot.”

“Yeah, It would.”

“So . . . you think Adrian could be right?”

Callum opened his mouth, but hesitated. Where she had sensed certainty before, she could sense it faltering now. A fault of his own optimism. His belief in humanity.

She realized that Callum didn’t want her to be Nightmare. He was looking for a reason to doubt his own suspicions.

It was the crack she needed to find.

“Callum?” she said again. “Do you think she could be a spy?”

“I think it’s possible, yeah.”

She let herself look worried. “Then it should be easy to figure
out who it is, right?” She gestured toward the front reception area. “We can look through the rental history. Figure out who might have shown interest in those mist-missiles. We could go over some of the security tapes. Whoever she is, she must have left a path. Some clues we can follow. Ruby suggested we start by looking at recent recruits, but I think it’s more likely to be a civilian. Someone who’s pretending she doesn’t have superpowers at all.”

“She’s short,” said Callum.

Nova’s words, whatever rambling thing she was going to say next, evaporated on her tongue. “Excuse me?”

Callum was close to Adrian’s height himself, and Nova had never sensed how much he looked down on her, literally, until that moment. But that wasn’t unusual. Practically everyone was taller than her. “She’s short,” he repeated. “Like you.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. She tried again. “That’s . . . good information. That will help narrow it down. I’ll see if we can get more details out of Genissa Clark and her team, too. Compare notes. Um . . . was there anything else you noticed about Nightmare? Anything that could help us . . . pinpoint her . . . exactly . . . ?”

He stared at her. Really stared.

And she could feel the words hanging between them. It’s you, it’s you, it has to be you.

But it was eclipsed with doubt, and then a self-conscious smile. “I don’t know. It was pretty dark and . . . it all happened really fast. Plus, you know, she has the mask.”

“Of course. But . . . if you think of something . . .”

“I’ll let you know,” he said, nodding. “I’ll definitely let you know.”

“Okay. Great. And I’ll mention the height thing to Adrian. I think they keep pretty good health records on all the patrol units,
and those might include measurements, so we can start there. Thanks, Callum. That’s helpful.”

She started to walk away, the sheet of paper crinkling between her fingers.

But just before slipping out the door, she paused and turned back. Her expression softened. “You know, I really am glad you’re okay.”

On the uppermost floor of Renegade Headquarters, standing beneath a massive blown-glass chandelier, beside an enormous painting that captured the falsified death of Ace Anarchy, Nova handed the memo to Prism, the personal receptionist to the Council. Rainbow-colored lights danced over the desk, reflected off Prism’s crystal fingers, as she unfolded the paper and read through the note.

She frowned. Not suspicious, but confused. “Snapshot wants you to take the forgery down to the artifacts department?”

“She’s worried that having it on public display right now will create unnecessary drama,” Nova explained. “Given the theft of the real helmet, people are going to become curious about the forgery. Some might feel that the Council’s been lying to them all this time, telling them the helmet was destroyed.” Because they had, Nova added silently to herself. “Snapshot feels it would be prudent to keep the forgery out of the public eye until the real helmet has been recovered . . . or until the Council has had time to decide the best course of action.”

Prism considered this for no more than three seconds before she shrugged. “All right, go ahead, then. The case is unlocked.”
Nova was eager to put this charade behind her. As soon as she left headquarters with the fake helmet tucked into a plain tote bag, she marched straight for Blackmire Station, one of the defunct stations on the old Gatlon City subway line. She and the Anarchists had lived down there for years following the Day of Triumph, and Nova hadn’t realized quite how much she hated it inside the dank, stifling tunnels until after they’d been chased out by Renegades and forced to seek sanctuary inside the decrepit row house on Wallowridge instead.

Though they hadn’t left by choice, and they never would have left Ace by himself if they could have helped it, she couldn’t deny that the housing situation was an improvement. She wasn’t enthusiastic about going back down there now, but the blackmailer’s instructions could only mean one thing.

QB’S ROOM, BLACKMIRE

Queen Bee’s room, Blackmire station.

Honey, who was known as Queen Bee to most of society, had
transformed an old maintenance closet off the main line into her private quarters. It wasn’t cozy—nothing in the tunnels could be described as *cozy*—but she had done it up as nice as she could, draping scarves on the walls and bringing in a vintage shaded lamp that cast a pleasant glow over the concrete walls. And of course, there had been her hives. Everywhere, hives, and the constant thrum of the bees who had flown agitatedly up to the surface in search of nectar and pollen every day, only to dutifully, if crankily, return to their queen as the sun was setting.

Nova was on edge as she made her way through the tunnel, the path lit by the beam of her flashlight. Her Renegade-issued boots clopped against the train rails. Rats squeaked, their eyes flashing in the light before they scurried into their holes. Familiar aromas accosted her. The musty air. The rank odor of standing water. The faint scent of decades-old urine. It was met with new smells, too. Sulfur and smoke and the acidic tang of Cyanide’s poisons, lingering from the day the Renegades had attacked them.

Beyond the smell of war, and the fact that all their belongings had been confiscated by the Renegades, not much had changed.

Her nerves were tingling as she reached Honey’s room. The heavy iron door was parted, but only shadows spilled forth from it.

Nova reached for her shock-wave gun, half expecting a trap. It wouldn’t surprise her at all if the blackmailer accosted her the moment she stepped into the room, because that’s just the sort of thing a nameless villain would do. Her finger slipped over the trigger as she kicked the door open and shone the flashlight into the room.

Empty.

Not only of the blackmailer, but also empty of Honey’s things.

Which was unsettling, if not altogether surprising. Nova knew
that all of the belongings the Anarchists couldn’t take with them had been packed up and taken to Renegade Headquarters, and were at this moment sitting in a temporary storage room at the back of the artifacts department, waiting to be sorted through. She had seen Honey’s dresses there, boxes of jewelry, even the pretty vintage lamp.

The only thing the Renegades had left behind was an old dresser, on which sat a mirror with a chip in one corner and paint peeling off its trim work. The drawers were all missing and it was pulled a few feet away from the wall, no doubt so the Renegades could get behind it in their search for clues and evidence to be held against the Anarchists. They must have figured the dresser itself would be too much work to take back up all those steps. Nova wasn’t sure how Honey had managed to get it down here in the first place.

Holstering the gun, she took the fake helmet from the bag. In the dim lighting, the hole in its cranium was almost imperceptible, and no one would be able to tell the faint difference in color, which most people didn’t even know to look for. It was this helmet’s lack of luster that had first tipped off Nova to its fraudulence. A lot of prodigy artifacts, including everything her father had ever made, had a unique sheen to them. A luminescence that was hard to detect unless one was looking for it.

Lately, Nova had started looking.

“It’s all yours,” she muttered to the shadows, setting the helmet down on the vanity. Probably her blackmailer was lurking just around one of the tunnel bends, waiting for her to leave so they could sneak in and claim their prize.

Which was just fine by her. She couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

But the moment she stepped back through the door, a body
slammed into her. A hand grasped the back of her neck, shoving her against the gritty wall.

“T knew you’d come back here!” roared her assailant. “T knew—” He cut off quick. “No—?”

She slammed her heel into the arch of his foot and he howled, lurching back from her. The stun gun still in hand, Nova spun around, her finger pressing against the trigger—

“No-va . . .”

She froze. Her arm fell limp at her side. “Adrian?”

“I’m sorry,” he gasped, sinking down to the ground and crossing his injured foot over his knee. He undid the laces of his tennis shoes. “I thought you were Nightmare.”

She blinked, gaping at him as he removed his shoe and rubbed his foot where she had stomped on him. “You’re not . . .” She glanced back into the room, where the helmet still sat innocently on top of the dresser. Was Adrian the blackmailer?

No. That didn’t make sense. Did it?

Her thoughts churned and she shook her head, trying to sort them. “What are you doing here?” she asked, holstering the gun.

He flexed his toes a few times, rubbing the arch of his foot as he did. “I’ve been down here a few times since the raid, seeing if there were any clues left behind. I mean, the cleanup crews are good, but you never know.” He started to put his shoe back on. “I’m really sorry for grabbing you like that. I saw the flashlight, and in the dark, you sort of looked . . .”

“It’s okay. That’s what I get for creeping around dark tunnels, I guess.” She nudged the door closed behind her, hoping Adrian wouldn’t bother to go inside. She wasn’t sure how she would explain what she was doing with the forged helmet down here, of all the random places, or why she was leaving it behind.
“So what are you doing down here?” said Adrian.

“Same thing as you,” she said. “After our meeting the other day, I’ve been thinking a lot about whether or not Nightmare could really be posing as one of us. I wondered if maybe there would be something down here that would indicate . . . you know, one way or the other.”

Adrian nodded and climbed back to his feet. “Actually, there is something the cleanup crew missed.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure how much it helps us at this point, but come on. I’ll show you.”

He pulled a flashlight out of his back pocket and, to Nova’s relief, led her away from Honey’s room, toward an intersection of the tunnels where her train car stood against a wall. There were sheets of paper taped around the tunnel and on the windows of the car, “exhibits” left behind by the Renegades, indicating anything that might have seemed noteworthy at the time.

To her surprise, Adrian didn’t head for Nightmare’s car, but rather into the adjacent tunnel. The beam of his flashlight danced over a wall of old advertisement posters lined up side by side, each one taller than Nova. Her heart squeezed when she realized what he’d discovered.

Approaching the last poster, an ad for a thriller novel, Adrian dug his fingers beneath the corner of the frame. The poster swung outward toward them, as it had swung toward Nova hundreds of times when she’d gone to visit Ace.

“Wow,” she mused, stepping forward as she pretended to get a closer look. She shone her flashlight into the narrow tunnel, the sides showing scrapes and scratches where she and the other Anarchists had passed. “Where does it go?”
“To the catacombs under the cathedral,” said Adrian.

“Really? That’s has to be at least a mile away.”

“Only about two-thirds of a mile,” he said. “The tunnel is a straight shot. It would take a lot longer on the surface. I think this tunnel might have been used after the Battle for Gatlon. It’s probably how the Anarchists managed to get away. And how they’ve been going back and forth, visiting Ace Anarchy and taking him food and supplies.” He shook his head. “You know, I came down here weeks ago, when I was looking for that puppet Winston Pratt wanted? I saw this poster and . . . I had a feeling about it. I was so close to finding it, way back then. We could have found Ace Anarchy.”

She forced a small chuckle despite the sourness roiling in her stomach. “Good thing you didn’t. To just stumble onto Ace Anarchy like that? You would have . . .” She trailed off, not wanting to hurt Adrian’s feelings. But they both knew he wouldn’t have stood a chance against Ace, even if Ace was a lot weaker than he’d been ten years ago. At least, she hoped Adrian knew that. He was talented, but not that talented. “I’m shocked the Sentinel was able to capture him.”

Adrian’s mouth twisted into a frown and she could tell he wanted to say something—probably defend his own abilities—but he resisted. “Well,” he said finally, “they say Ace Anarchy was pretty weak when they found him. Without the helmet, he’s just another telepath.”

Now it was her turn to resist the urge to argue. “If you ask me, the Sentinel got lucky.”

Adrian grunted, but she didn’t think he agreed with her.

“So . . . ,” she started, rocking on her feet. “You’ve gone to the catacombs, then?”
“Just once. But I didn’t learn anything that we didn’t already know. I’ve been down here a few times since then, though. I just keep thinking that Nightmare has to show up here again at some point, right?”

She smiled at him and shrugged. “Maybe not. Maybe she knows the Renegades are watching it too closely.”

“Maybe.” He fit the poster back into place. His expression changed then, the start of a teasing smile appearing at the corners of his lips. Nova immediately tensed. “Nice bracelet, by the way.”

She blinked.
Then blinked again.

She reached for her sleeve and tugged it down instinctively, but of course it was too late to cover the star that was inexplicably set into the prongs of her bracelet—and glowing far too obviously in these dim tunnels.

“I didn’t steal it,” she said hastily. “At least . . . I didn’t mean to steal it. It just kind of . . .”

Adrian chuckled. “I’m not mad. You can have it.” He cocked his head, eyes still twinkling behind his glasses. “I realized it was missing after you left, but you didn’t say anything, so I thought maybe I shouldn’t either. But the curiosity is killing me.” He took her hand and gently pushed up her sleeve, revealing not just the star, but the delicate bracelet that her father had made years ago, the last thing he had ever made. “It fits the setting perfectly. Like it was made for it.”

Adrian’s face was awed.

Nova was more awed by the rush of electricity at his touch. It was hardly the first time he’d touched her, so how did it still affect her this way?

“Did you know it would fit the bracelet? I mean, was the bracelet part of the dream you had?”
“No,” she said. “I had no idea it was going to . . .” She looked at the star, not sure how to explain what had happened. “I went back into the room to see it, after you fell asleep. I just wanted to touch it, to see if it would do anything. And it . . . flashed, sort of? And the next thing I knew, it was there, in my bracelet.” She grimaced apologetically. “I probably should have told you, it’s just . . . it was in your house. It felt a little bit like stealing.”

“As far as I’m concerned, that room was made for you,” said Adrian. “You’re welcome to anything in it. The parrots, the wildflowers, the noise-canceling headphones . . .”

She flushed, remembering all too clearly the muted sound of their heartbeats slowly falling into sync as she drifted off to sleep for the first time in ten years. It was quite possibly the most magical moment of her life. There were still times when she wondered if she’d imagined it all, sure that it had been too fantastical, too surreal, to have actually happened.

But Adrian was here, his fingers laced with hers, their toes practically touching, and it had happened.

“Well, thank you,” she said, inching just a bit closer to him. “I have become a little attached to the star, and . . . it really does seem like it was made for this bracelet.”

“I’m glad you like it. It was my first time giving a girl jewelry, which is sort of a big deal, so . . .”

She squinted one eye at him. “You didn’t give me jewelry. You gave me a jungle.”

He laughed. “That, and almost a full day of blissful sleep.”

“Okay, stop fishing for compliments. I admit, you’re a pretty good gift giver.” She leaned forward, lifting up onto her toes.

“I’m trying,” Adrian said, bending down to meet her.

The kiss was everything she remembered. Warmth tingling
through her limbs. Shooting stars glinting behind her eyelids. Somehow being so perfectly content, while still yearning for more.

A crash startled them both—something heavy falling to the hard floor. They jumped apart and spun toward the darkened subway tunnels where they had come from.

Nova’s heart drummed, her pulse racing beneath her skin, and she knew that it had been the helmet. Had the blackmailer realized it was a fake? Had they thrown it?

“Just a rat, probably,” she said, breathless for more reason than one.

“I don’t think that was a rat.” Still holding her hand, Adrian started back toward Honey’s room.

Nova dug in her heels. The last thing she needed was a run-in with someone who knew her secrets and wouldn’t hesitate to give them up, especially to Adrian Everhart himself. “Hold on! What if it’s . . . what if it’s Nightmare? Or another Anarchist? Shouldn’t we call for backup?”

Adrian shot her a baffled look, and even in the dim lighting she could see his confusion. “You want to wait for backup?”

He was right. It didn’t sound like her at all.

“It’s just . . .” She swept her other hand toward him. “You’re not wearing your uniform!”

His head shifted to one side, briefly, then he shook it and started dragging her again. “Come on.”

She cursed inwardly and followed. She would play dumb. She would deny anything the blackmailer said. If she had to, she would take desperate measures, silencing him or her before anything could be given away.

Or maybe she could knock Adrian out, right now, before he saw them and had a chance to learn anything. She eyed the bare flesh
at the back of his neck. She could make up a story—say that it was Nightmare in the tunnels, and she jumped out from the shadows and put them both to sleep before Nova could stop her.

Yeah . . . that might work . . .

Her fingers twitched. They were nearly to the maintenance closet where she’d left the helmet. Adrian was rounding the corner. There was no sign of anyone yet, not even the beam of a flashlight or the thud of footsteps running away. Just the scuffle of their own feet along the tracks.

Was the blackmailer still in Honey’s room?

The door was cracked open, just as Nova had left it. Only shadows spilled across the tracks.

Adrian nudged it open the rest of the way, gripping his marker in one hand. Nova hadn’t seen him take it out.

Holding her breath, she reached for the back of his neck. But something made her stop. A movement in the room. A shadow moving toward them.

Adrian ducked, then flew forward, sending his fist at the attacker.

A crash reverberated through the room. Adrian let out a stream of curses. Nova shone the flashlight toward him.

There was no attacker, no blackmailer. Their assailant had been Adrian’s own reflection in the dresser mirror, which had shattered from the punch. Nova directed the beam of light at his hand and saw blood on his knuckles. He was cradling it against his chest, his face twisted with pain.

“Okay,” he grunted, “I’m officially done attacking people before I get a good look at them.”

“That might be for the best,” said Nova, but her words were distracted.
Her attention had snagged on the top of the dresser, where a few chunks of broken mirror had fallen to the surface.

The helmet was gone.