

# **REBELS DIVIDED**

LANCE ERLICK

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## ONE

Sticky sweat trickled down Geo's neck as he inched forward. *Tracking Pa is like tracking a rattler*, he thought. He didn't want to sneak up, startle, and risk being attacked.

Shifting his backpack and rifle, Geo applied more of Pa's home-brewed mosquito ointment and cursed the suffocating heat. It was hard to visualize how last winter's snows seemed like they would never end. Pa called it the worst winter in South Appalachia in the two decades since the Second Civil War. Now, being outdoors was like sitting too close to a campfire. *Why can't the weather settle somewhere in between?*

Geo eased forward, careful to keep leaves from crunching beneath his worn leather boots. Across a clearing stood the village of Pumpkin Patch with a dozen log cabins. No sign of Pa. Had he gone inside?

Dense, saturated air carried the stench of rotting food, oils, and other refuse. Civ city-folk from Knoxville dumped their garbage on the Appalachian side of the border to evade their own tight environmental regulations. This close to the barrier, locals scavenged dumpsites for anything they could use. Despite their poverty, they opened their homes to travelers, though with border tensions rising, it was risky to approach unannounced.

A large hand grabbed Geo's shoulder and shoved him down behind a clump of yellow forsythia.

"I told you to wait at home." Pa's whisper thundered in Geo's ears.

Geo seethed inside but tempered his voice. "I'm nineteen, Pa. I want to see more of the world than our glen."

"Most of it's not worth seeing. Besides, if Thane Edwards and his Rangers draft you, you'll see a lot you won't like. Look beyond the village in the woods."

Geo raised his binoculars and spotted a dull black mechanical exoskeleton, one of Civ's Mechanized Female Warriors. "A mech?"

"Careful. They work in threes."

Mosquitoes buzzed as Geo picked up the scent of mech hydraulic oils and perfumed sweat. A different hum hovered overhead. He raised his rifle and sighted a Civ drone with thin body and wide wings. It swooped over the borderlands and into the clearing. Before Geo could shoot, Pa lowered the barrel. The pilotless plane dropped its load of incendiaries, climbed, and disappeared above the treetops. Explosions burst in all directions, spewing orange flames and setting cabins ablaze. It was the second attack on villages helping refugees since the last full moon.

With the swiftness of wolves, three black insect-like mechs sprinted into the clearing and encircled the village. Geo wanted to see the faces of the girls inside the mechanical suits, to know his enemy.

He started to rise. "We have to help the villagers."

Pa's tanned arm pushed him down. "Too late. Look in the woods to the left."

The beefy men were almost invisible in camouflage. "Rangers? Why don't they help?" Villagers' land tithes supported the Appalachian Rangers who were supposed to protect against Civ mech attacks.

"Wait, son."

The air filled with smoke and crackled like a campfire. Yet the Rangers didn't plunge in, didn't fire a shot, and Pa's powerful arm held Geo down.

Three bearded men, wearing rags scavenged from dumpsites, emerged from a flaming cabin. They fired rifles into the nearest mech, to no avail. Geo knew from experience with a variety of homegrown weapons that even armor-piercing shells didn't stop mechs. You had to strike a vulnerable spot in their black-coated titanium-polymer shields.

Dozens of men flew out of other burning cabins and fired on all three mechs, stunning them for an instant before the mechs sprayed machine pellets that shredded men's guts. Riddled with shot, men splayed across the clearing. More followed. Still, Rangers didn't intervene.

It was like shooting chickens in a pen. The villagers didn't stand a chance.

"We have to help, Pa."

Pa tugged Geo toward the narrow path away from the village. "We can't."

Three boys not much younger than Geo sprinted from the nearest cabin.

Geo yanked free of Pa and fired his .50 cal into the nearest mech, aiming for where the helmet fastened to the neck-plate. That stunned the mech for a moment, while a slender boy ran and reached the cover of woods. Geo waved him toward Pa, dropped a remote controlled grenade, and kicked leaves over it. He fired a second shot at the mech's faceplate hinge as two bigger boys reached the path.

The mech spun and fired a volley, missed. Geo sprinted down the path, urging the boys along.

When Geo caught up, Pa grabbed him by the collar. "This is why I don't bring you. Think before you act. Now go. I'll provide a diversion."

"I'm not leaving you, Pa." Geo steadied his rifle.

A mech entered the woods, shoving shrubs and tree limbs away from her bloated mechanical shell.

Geo fired into the neck-plate. The mech stopped and raised her weapons. He wondered if this was how David felt when he faced Goliath. After all, Civs were like Sodom and Gomorrah with their godless wicked ways: dishonoring their men, destroying the sanctity of marriage, denying the one true God, at least according to Thane Edwards' broadcasts.

Geo jumped off the path and triggered his two-phase grenade. The first explosion blasted up like a shotgun, spewing shrapnel into the mech's most vulnerable spot, the groin-plate. Even though the titanium-polymer plate could withstand the blast, its clasp and hinges were poor quality, allowing the plate to shift and drop.

The first charge weakened the grenade's phase-two protective coating and ignited a fuse. The second explosion spewed pellets into the mech-plate opening. The mech froze and toppled forward without firing a shot. Geo said a prayer for the mech girl.

Another mech stood behind her downed companion. She had a clear shot at him yet she didn't raise her weapons. With no effective weapon of his own, Geo stared back. Then he shook himself and disappeared into the brush.

\* \* \*

Sweltering in the oppressive heat of another global warming day, nineteen-year-old Lieutenant Annabelle Scott entered the concrete bunker of the mech base east of her Knoxville home. She carried a plastic body bag with the remains of Karen, a sweet new recruit Annabelle had helped train. The explosion had liquefied Karen's torso, spilling her onto the ground like vomit. With the help of Lieutenant Dara Moore, Annabelle had scooped what residue she could off the dirt path. Oh, how she wanted to strangle the boy who did this.

Willing away tears, she tugged off her helmet and shucked her mech gear to escape the sauna within. She would have maintenance check the air conditioner, though she knew the answer: it wasn't designed for oppressive heat.

While Dara rushed off to clean up and change, Annabelle lingered. She and Karen had planned to sneak away to an illicit party to let off steam. Now there would be no party for Karen, because a filthy Outlander had liquidated her. Despite three years in mech service, and countless funerals, Annabelle couldn't help feeling each loss rip away part of her soul. Yet, she couldn't force herself to kill the boy who did this.

Commander Samantha Hernandez approached and gave Annabelle a hug. "Don't blame yourself, Lieutenant. You couldn't have anticipated the rebel ambush."

The hug was comforting, though it seemed odd coming from a husky Hispanic with facial scars from the Second Civil War and a body honed by weightlifting and kung fu. Sam wiped her brow. "The mission was a success. Outlanders will think twice before harboring runaways and poaching wildlife. Get cleaned up for the briefing."

Mission guilt suffocated Annabelle like her water-boarding training. Before the drones swooped in, she had recognized Bret Shaw with someone who might have been his son, George, the one who killed Karen. Three fugitives escaped, Karen was dead, and Annabelle failed to shoot. That wasn't success.

Leaving Karen's mech suit and scooped-up remains on a concrete slab for autopsy, Annabelle went to wash up. She vowed not to vent with sister warriors. Their warrior ethic didn't permit questioning missions or tactics. Grumbling could land her back in psych reconditioning, and she'd had enough for three lifetimes.

In the locker room, Dara was stripping out of sweat-soaked undergarments. A tall, thickly-muscled amazon the other girls looked up to, this fierce warrior was clearheaded in battle but far too bossy. She hugged Annabelle, intertwining her frizzy brown hair with Annabelle's sagging blonde curls. "I want to put all Outlanders through a meat grinder for what they did to Karen."

Annabelle pulled away; Dara's hugs were unwelcome.

Dara grabbed a towel. "You know I've got your back."

"Thanks." Annabelle yanked off her top, dropped her blue uniform trousers, and shivered.

"Karen would want us to celebrate her life, not drown ourselves in sorrow." With a towel over her shoulders, Dara helped Annabelle with her sweaty bra.

Annabelle ripped her bra off, while being careful not to antagonize a sister warrior. "I'm exhausted." Plus, she couldn't take another mission if it meant watching friends die. She bit that one back.

She grabbed a towel, and followed Dara into the showers. She set the dials to cool, let water cascade over her, and hoped it would wash away the guilt. It didn't.

"You and me against the world," Dara said. "Come to the party tonight."

"I promised a night with Janine."

"Sisters are always welcome." Dara scowled. "Shake out of it. You can't let the others see even a flicker of weakness."

Annabelle forced a smile. Peer pressure was a powerful tool, though lack of private time had her aching to flee into the wilderness, even to the Outland. She turned off the water, toweled dry, and longed to blow off steam.

## TWO

Geo followed Pa and the three boys through dense forest. His mind buzzed. Why did that mech pass up a chance to shoot him? Knowing that mechs always pursued, he kept alert for possible traps while balancing his pack and gun.

The three compadres needed his help keeping up. Coming from Civ, they weren't used to running hills in oppressive heat with hyperactive mosquitoes.

Without slowing, Geo took a swig from his canteen and handed it to one of the younger boys, a twin. Dirk stopped to drink.

"Keep moving." Geo grabbed the canteen and handed it to Dirk's brother. The muscular twins looked sixteen, yet they were dragging. "Not much farther."

Mickey, a scrawny older boy, had sweat streaming down his thin face. "Thanks for saving us."

"Save your breath," Geo said. "We're not out of the woods."

"Funny." Mickey panted.

When Pa stopped, Geo motioned for the compadres to get down while he crept forward. Four log cabins stood in a clearing: the Grahams. Using binoculars, Pa scanned all directions. "Clear."

Geo nodded.

"Stay down and keep your eyes sharp." Pa dropped his pack, slipped his rifle over his shoulder, and marched into the clearing toward the nearest cabin with hands in front of him. He called out, "I've come to parley."

Geo trained his .50 cal on the door as it opened. A scruffy, white-bearded man leveled his shotgun at Pa. "Ya come alone?" Geo wished infrared worked in this heat so he could see how many were inside.

"I come with my son and three refugees." Pa's hands reached behind his back for his sawed-off shotgun.

"Just being careful, Mr. Shaw." The bearded man lowered his shotgun and bowed. "Haven't see ya 'round since last full moon. Come on in. Did ya bring any o' your Shaw whiskey?"

"I'll send some along." Pa motioned for Geo and went into the cabin.

The refugees hesitated. After what they had been through, Mickey seemed ready to throw up. The twins looked shell-shocked.

"The Grahams are okay when you get to know them," Geo said. "We need to find you a home." He led them toward the cabin.

"Why can't I come with you?" Mickey asked. "I've never had a brother."

Before Geo could shut him up, Mickey told him he was eighteen, his father left when he was a baby, and he had been on the run three months before crossing the border.

Inside, the log cabin felt like a furnace with a thick odor of grease. The only air came from an electric fan in the window, one of Pa's designs, run off solar panels on the roof. Geo despaired at how few of the innovations written about thirty years ago were here today.

He introduced the boys to the Graham family: the old man, three sons, two grandsons, and six boys they had adopted.

“Mi casa ‘n all that.” The gray-haired Graham cleared space on a grease-covered table. “Yur welcome to what vittles we got.”

Flies swarmed the greasy stove and dirty dishes. If Geo let things go like this at home, Pa would tan his hide. Geo led the compadres to the window fan.

Pa stood by the door. “Can’t stay. I know the risk of helping refugees, but these three arrived a couple days ago. They need a place until I find something permanent.”

“Don’t that beat all?” Old man Graham scratched his gray beard. “Can’t feed what we got with Civs gettin’ ornery about poaching deer, even though they’re on our side of the border.”

“I know, but there are few safe havens,” Pa said.

Graham poured coffee for Pa. “Rumor has it Thane Edwards don’t like ya helping runaways. Says they should come to him. Ya know our allegiance is to you, Earl, but the forest has eyes.”

Geo wondered if Earl was Pa’s middle name. Geo had heard it now and then, though when he had asked, Pa just shrugged.

“You heard about Pumpkin Patch,” Pa said.

Graham winced. “Good people. I don’t want no trouble. I can’t help ya. Can’t hardly keep from starving already.”

The price of freedom in the Appalachian Secession was that you reaped what you sowed, less whatever Thane Edwards took.

“I won’t press,” Pa said.

“Bless ya. Ya know we’d do most anything for ya, but it’s getting harder.”

Pa smiled.

Graham took Pa’s hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed. “Bless ya and yur son for all yur days.”

Pa backed up toward the door. “Best we go before the all-seeing forest starts rumors you’ve taken the refugees.”

\* \* \*

Annabelle dried and fluffed out her blonde natural curls and tied them back to keep them regulation. She applied lotion to her tanned skin before changing into a clean uniform. Although she loathed makeup, she applied light shading to make sure her blue eyes didn’t look puffy from crying all the way to base. Only then did she follow Dara to the briefing room.

In a rectangular hall, vid screens and dense electronics that were linked to satellites monitored drones, warriors, border cams, millions of Union males, and Outlander activities. Ninety-six mech warriors sat ready to do their duty for the Federal Union, for President Tatiana Zell, for America’s welfare.

The warriors became an all-female force during the Second Civil War, when many men sympathized with the rebels. It remained all-female after the nation split. The only males in the mech compound were geeks. They worked in isolation on tricky software in exchange for a livelihood they couldn’t otherwise expect, or so Annabelle heard. She had never seen them. Mech Command and sister warriors frowned on fraternizing as a breach of their solidarity. Once the geeks trained women to take their places, Annabelle could only guess what would happen to them.

Settling into a stiff wooden seat, Annabelle scanned screens for hints of tonight’s missions amid beautiful mountain foliage across the border. After the Patriots hijacked the Tea Party Rebellion, they lost at the polls and seceded. They achieved their paradise with no taxes and no government, yet even that didn’t bring peace.

Several cams showed the quarter-mile-wide stretch of land denuded of vegetation that surrounded the forested Appalachian Outland, no man's land.

Commander Sam Hernandez took the podium, commanding their attention despite her compact figure. She had created the Tenn-tucky mech corps during the war. "I want to introduce ten new recruits tasked with protecting the Union and females, while maintaining the peace."

"Hoo-rah!" mech warriors responded.

After introducing the recruits, Sam continued, "For the benefit of new warriors, I'll cover material known to veterans. Bear with me. We are one unit and we will stick together."

"Hoo-rah!"

"For twenty years we've patrolled the anarchy the Outlanders created. Why anyone chooses to live under such brutal conditions is beyond me, yet every day escapees cross the border. Our job is to limit the chaos that threatens our beloved Union."

"Hoo-rah!"

Annabelle mouthed the chant with growing discomfort. If only they had seen what was left of Karen....

"President Zell has pledged to eradicate rebel strongholds," Sam said. "The burden falls to us."

"We stand ready to deliver," warriors said.

Prickly heat swarmed Annabelle. She did not sign up for this gung-ho nonsense. The Union had tracked her from age twelve into the security career path in the name of harmony. Then her tomboyish pranks forced her into a decision: mechs or exile. Her prospects were dismal if Sam booted her out. She bit her tongue until she tasted blood.

Sam used an old wooden pointer to direct the warriors' attention to a screen showing mountain terrain. "Another attack on Union high-speed supply rails through the mountains, the second in a month."

Sam described the situation, assigned a team, and moved to the next screen. "Two boys without papers eluded Knoxville police and may head for the border." Despite active and passive sensors with infrared, boys still managed to cross, which meant more males to track, and ultimately more armed rebels.

Screen three. "I know this sounds trivial, but Outlanders continue to poach deer from state and national parks. Although the deer are on their side of the border, they represent part of our national treasure. President Zell wants this stopped. We identified another village harboring escapees and poaching deer to feed them."

Screen four. "We caught two Outlanders transporting drugs, probably Medallion Cartel. We need to shut this down."

The next screen showed mug shots of a boy and girl. "Police caught her helping this boy over the border. He will be imprisoned. Governor Battani has asked us to deliver her to Biltmoor."

Groans from the floor. Maybe the girl deserved punishment, but three months as a paid companion in the Outland capital was obscenely excessive.

"Okay, warriors." Sam raised her hand to quiet the room. "President Zell wants us to move the barrier two miles east every year until we meet up with North Carolina mech units. We need warriors to guard the barrier for logging crews. It's not glamorous, but the scenery's great."

Everyone looked down while Sam made assignments.

"Final mission," Sam said. "Three more girls kidnapped last night, probably cartel."

Warriors grumbled, mirroring Annabelle's anger and worry for her sisters at home.

"This has to stop," Sam said. "If we can't protect our citizens, then we've failed as a unit."

Volunteers' hands flew up. Sam finished selecting teams and returned to the front of the room. "I don't have to tell you how dangerous it is out there. We lost Karen. Nothing can bring her back or make up for her loss. Our mission is to defuse danger so our citizens can enjoy the bounties of living in the Union."

"We stand ready to deliver."

"The good news: we've not had a rape, assault or other crime by Union males in 18 months within our great state of Tenn-tucky. A cold front will push through tomorrow afternoon. Until then, our infrared is not effective, so stay alert. Remember, we're here to protect and rescue females, capture or terminate escapees before they become armed rebels, enforce borders, and patrol Outland parks.

"Keep your eyes open to threats from our Underground Railroad helping escapees. Make sure your inoculations and contraceptive implants are current, and remember to work together. Harmony brings success and happiness."

"Hoo-rah!"

*Harmony also leads to bland boredom*, Annabelle said to herself. The real purpose of rescuing girls was to deprive rebels of the ability to reproduce.

\* \* \*

Once Geo got the three compadres into the forest, thin-faced Mickey pulled him aside. "What was that all about?"

"Folk want to help, but they can't." Geo led the boys along a deer path, keeping his rifle ready and the cabin in view. He tried not to think about the mech girl who didn't shoot, hoping she would return to her big city and leave them alone.

"I mean kissing your father's ring. It was weird."

Geo sighed. He'd had to explain local customs to Civ boys before, but he had his own questions for Pa. "He helps villagers and they give him support. Now, take the twins up the path. I need to talk to Pa."

While the boys shuffled along the trail, the wiry Mickey dwarfed by the twins, Geo waited, expecting another scolding. When Pa kept going, Geo followed. "I don't understand why those Rangers didn't help."

Pa shifted his backpack and kept his rifle ready. "I'm as baffled as you are."

"Unless they're working with Civ." Geo prayed that wasn't so.

"Makes no sense. Our population has dropped since the Secession. Edwards should want all the men he can get." Pa overtook the three boys and headed east.

Geo walked faster to keep up. Seeing the boys reminded him of family he didn't have. "Why did Mom leave?"

Pa sighed. "Must we do this now?" He picked up his pace.

\* \* \*

Pa hurried along the path. He couldn't blame Geo for wanting to know what had happened. They both still felt the hurt, even after 16 years. The right time to explain just never seemed to arrive.

Geo kept up. "You treat me like a kid, but I killed a mech today."

"Never celebrate a kill. Inside every mech is a girl with a family and people who care about her. This isn't male vs. female." *Or at least it wasn't until the Progressive Reunion took power.*

"Then why did Mom leave?"

"She didn't. You had no future in Civ, so we agreed you would join me. Now quiet."

"But I remember Mom at the cabin."

Pa winced and kept moving. Geo was only three at the time. I removed all pictures of his mom so Geo wouldn't dwell on the past. I guess that isn't working.

"Before the war, this was our weekend retreat," Pa said. "Our home was in Knoxville. After the war, I brought you here to be free. She had to stay behind. I know it's hard. She does love you. This is just the way the world is."

"Why?" Geo asked.

It's always "why?" Always. Well, the boy is smart. He even reads between the lines in Edwards' online library, too. The party line on "rugged individualism" doesn't mean much when everybody's starving.

Pa reached the ridge overlooking the Grahams' place and headed into the next valley. He sighed. *Neighbors died today and Geo wants to talk philosophy.*

"People get crazy with their ideology," Pa said. "It's a long conversation for later." He shifted direction and walked faster.

"This is about the Progressive Reunion, right?"

The Progressive Reunion had promoted every group except white males, because a few alphas still held power. But the world changed. Men's physical abilities were no longer valued. Boys dropped out of school. Jobs went to women, who had the required social and educational skills. "When the Union limited growth to preserve the environment, men got squeezed, all men, not just alphas."

"Is that why men aren't respected in Civ?" Geo persisted.

Pa nodded. Behind them, the boys huffed along. *Helpless* and *inevitable* were words that stuck in his throat. When the Progressive Reunion seized power, men got suckered into supporting the Patriots; they saw no alternative. After war broke out, they learned that entrepreneur Adrienne Picard secretly provided the Progressive Reunion with mech gear and drones. The war ended quickly. Radical Patriots clung to Appalachia and limited government.

"Both sides carried things too far," Pa said. The Progressive Reunion called for a safety net. More was better, and complete government control was ideal. Patriots decided that lower taxes were better and zero taxes best. Neither side could step back and ask if something in between better served the people without being branded traitors to their side. The Patriots delivered on zero taxes. Ironically, while Edwards preaches no government and no taxes, he holds absolute power.

"Enough chatter for now," Pa said.

Geo gave him a funny look. Pa realized: *The chatter is all in my head.*

"Stay focused," Pa told him. "We're being followed."

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Written as a standalone story, *The Rebel Trap* follows Annabelle's adventures from *The Rebel Within*.

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### **REBELS DIVIDED (Rebel Series book 3)**

The first time Geo sees Annabelle, they meet as enemies and she doesn't kill him, which mystifies them both. It's after the 2nd Civil War with the nation divided into an all-female Federal Union and a warlord controlled Outland. The Outland warlord kidnaps Annabelle's sister and kills Geo's pa. Can Annabelle and Geo overcome mutual distrust and work together to rescue her sister and gain justice for his pa's murder? Will their feelings for each other derail or further their goals?

Written as a standalone story, *Rebels Divided* is also part of the Rebel series, three years later.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lance Erlick writes science fiction thrillers for young adult and adult readers. He is the author of *The Rebel Within*, *The Rebel Trap*, and *Rebels Divided*, three books in the Rebel series. In those stories, he explores the consequences of Annabelle Scott following her conscience. He authored the Regina Shen series—*Regina Shen: Resilience*, *Regina Shen: Vigilance*, *Regina Shen: Defiance*, and *Regina Shen: Endurance*. This series takes place after abrupt climate change leads to the Great Collapse and a new society under the World Federation. A related short story is *Regina Shen: Salvage*. His latest novel is *Xenogeneic: First Contact* about encounters with an alien race aiming to take over Earth. Lance is also the author of unrelated short stories.

Find out more about the author and his work at [LanceErlick.com](http://LanceErlick.com). Go to the website or sign up [here](#) to receive occasional email newsletters with links to free short stories, and updates on new releases and other writing developments.