

THE REBEL TRAP

LANCE ERLICK

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ONE

I won. I lost. I'm out. I'm in. I cannot tell a soul. It was enough to spin my head, to make me wish I was back in that zoo of a high school I just left.

My thoughts darkened with the implications of what I'd done and the commitment I'd just made. I hurried out of Commander Hernandez's sparse office; even the khaki-colored corridors looked darker than I remembered only an hour before. The drab lobby of the Tenn-tucky Mechanized Warrior compound brimmed with sister warriors, a gauntlet I had to squeeze through on my way out. Yet, I could no longer call them "sister" anything.

"Loser!" someone yelled. It sounded like one of Dara's girls. Defeating the amazon bully in the mech tournament final hadn't silenced her, or her posse.

"Hey, Annabelle," Dara yelled, "how's it feel to wash out?" She stood a head taller than the other girls like some ruling monarch.

Joke's on you. I took deep, steady breaths while I marched toward the exit. *Don't get into a fight*, I reminded myself. That was what she wanted, bringing up how, after the tournament, I'd refused to kill my male opponent in the separate arena final.

Hot, locker-room bodies surrounded me, sweat-soaked from their own arena fights to the death against boys pumped up with steroids and chemical enhancers to make the challenge even tougher. Some two dozen male corpses lay in the arena morgue, testament to the training and bravery of these recruits. Unlike them, I couldn't bring myself to kill Morgan for sport, even when I had him pinned in a chokehold. For that failure, they took my title and kicked me out of the Mech Corps. *Well, to hell with them.*

Things weren't that simple, though. They never were for me.

"You don't have what it takes," Dara shouted. The amazon's large face tightened like a monstrous fist. She growled, "Weakness finally caught up with you."

"They'll strip away your title," scrawny Margarite said from behind Dara.

I inched forward through the crowd, my eyes fixed on the tinted, bulletproof door that promised freedom. *Don't fight. Only a few more feet.*

Dara stepped in front of me to block my exit. "You know what that means? I'll have the title that's rightfully mine. All that work for nothing. Sucks, doesn't it?"

Not like getting a title you didn't earn.

Brandy, my closest mech friend, cowered in the corner, face hidden beneath auburn curls. She brushed the hair aside and glanced up, eyes pleading. I hated letting her down. During training, she'd latched onto me as her lifeline. I sensed she wanted to talk, to get answers, but I was a pariah. I embarrassed the entire program by winning the tournament and the arena contests, yet disqualifying myself on a technicality.

I wanted to reassure Brandy, and thank her for being a good friend, but that would make her life hell with her sister recruits. I couldn't do that to her. I looked for a path around Dara, one I could take without stirring a fight with one who needed no provoking.

"What ya do, fall in love with that redhead?" Rox yelled. The dark-complexioned loner must have decided to align herself with Dara now that I was out.

The jibe bit hard. *Yeah, I'd like to get to know Red—Morgan. Even if I didn't, I won't kill for*

sport. Maybe if I hadn't saved him several times before the arena match, I might have acted differently, but that wasn't it.

For the past six weeks as a mech trainee, I'd counted these girls as friends, with the exception of Dara. Now, their scornful looks reminded me of high school. Escaping at 16 had been a gift. Now I longed to return to a cage I understood.

I held my head high, squeezed between Dara and Margarite, and pushed the weaker girl out of the way. I ached to yell out the truth, but Commander Hernandez had been clear and insistent: "Tell no one you're still in the program."

Instead, I kept moving and endured jabs to my arms, already inflamed from my fight. Morgan had been a tougher competitor than Dara, and almost killed me twice. Yet, I couldn't hurt him. *Stay calm*.

Dara grabbed my arm and pulled me back. "I'm not finished with you."

"Yes, you are." I yanked free and pushed through the glass door into sticky heat. Haze drifted in from Knoxville. I was tempted to take my mech-cycle and race to the Outland border to make sure Morgan crossed safely. Then the mechs would follow me and catch him for sure. *Patience, Annabelle*. Besides, the commander took my electric cycle when she officially kicked me out of the program.

The forest-camouflage guardhouse across the concrete clearing seemed miles away. My adoptive mom and her electric sedan weren't waiting for me outside the gate, where the commander had arranged for her to pick me up. Nor was Mom's car among the line of other cars and buses leaving the arena parking lot. Sweat soaked my neck and beaded up on my forehead.

On unsteady legs, I moved toward the gate. It felt like nightmares where I reach for my birth mother while mech-warriors tear me from her arms and send her to prison for trying to help my dad escape. That happened when I was three. Yet the horrid ache returned to me nightly as a fresh wound. To spare me from an institution Mom adopted me and raised me as her own.

I picked up my pace to get away from the taunts that echoed from Dara and her crew on the steps behind me. I had to get outside the compound, which reminded me of a prison with its high concrete walls, concertina wire, and hidden cams.

Still shaken by the mess I'd gotten myself into, I also reeled over having just witnessed someone try to assassinate Tenn-tucky State Senator Cora Scott, my adoptive mom, in the middle of my life-and-death struggle with Morgan. What a cluster. I prayed no one would connect his escape to Mom or me.

She still wasn't outside the gate.

While getting out of here sounded great, I couldn't face Mom's disappointment at my failure or relief that I was out of the mech program. I wasn't out. Yet. But I couldn't tell her. I didn't need Janine's probing questions either, or her attempts to comfort me as if I were the younger sister. At least with me officially out of the program, she wouldn't feel the need to join the mechs to follow me.

Where are you, Mom?

I reached the guardhouse. Still no car.

The stocky guard with coal-black hair stepped out of the shadows and blocked my exit. Though shorter, she had the commander's solid build and looked ready to take my head off—me, the true winner of the Spring Mech Tournament. She probably could. Even though I'd gone through grueling mech qualifications, I hadn't completed my training yet.

I hung my head. "Sorry, Sandy."

She grabbed my arm and spun me around to face the building. "You will be. Commander

wants you back in her office.” She pushed me toward the mech building and that gauntlet of angry recruits.

“What’s going on?” I looked behind and still couldn’t see Mom’s car.

“Don’t cause me any grief,” Sandy said. Her thick fingers dug into my forearm, making me gasp.

She pushed me back to the building. “Whatever it is, I suggest you humble yourself. The commander has never recalled a washed-out recruit before.”

“Come on, Sandy, give me something.”

Dara, Rox, and Margarite glowered at me from the top step. They blocked the door.

“I don’t know, but good luck,” Sandy said. “For the record, I had my money on you.”

She pushed me up the steps. “Everyone out of the way.”

Dara looked like a giant next to Sandy, but the great amazon stepped aside. Sandy dragged me along the khaki-colored corridor back toward the commander’s office. My eyes watered. It was like getting a pardon from prison, only to have the judge reverse her decision.

“Haven’t you had enough?” Dara yelled after me. “Had to come back for more?”

I dropped my gaze to the concrete floor. Moving toward freedom had given me courage. Now, as my nerve bled away, I could only imagine what had gone wrong.

<Don’t be alarmed,> a muted bass voice said directly into my skull.

You know how when someone says think fast, you can’t? My brain scrambled to make sense of this male voice deep inside my head, given that I’d never heard a masculine tone until six weeks ago.

Sandy tugged me forward. “Don’t keep the commander waiting.”

I pulled back. *Morgan, what are you doing in my head?* It felt like the mech com-link that allowed you to hear another’s projected thoughts. I couldn’t imagine how to turn the blasted thing off, or how to talk to him without Sandy overhearing. I couldn’t let her or the commander think I was crazy on top of everything else. I considered that possibility.

<I haven’t much time,> Morgan said. <My brother hacked your com-link’s auditory implant. Your escape plan failed. Mechs are rounding up the other boys. Your mom’s in danger.>

I froze. I wanted to see Morgan’s face. Yet I didn’t trust all this craziness inside me, as if I wanted more than just to see him. His tone did sound comforting, though, the only really friendly voice since I ran the gauntlet.

Sandy yanked me forward.

<Sorry for being such a bother. I need your help,> Morgan said somewhere inside my skull.

I followed Sandy, shook my head, and mouthed, “No.” As if somehow, he could see that. I’d done my bit. I’d tried to help him escape.

The gravity of my situation sank in. Had Commander Hernandez caught the nurse helping the boys, or connected the escape to Mom? The entire idea had been stupid, a rushed effort because I really liked Morgan, despite having to fight him. I should have had a better plan, but I was not a planner.

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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?

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Living on the seaward side of barrier walls built to protect against rising seas, the only means of survival for Regina Shen is underwater salvage, which is banned by the World Federation. After a storm takes a friend's family and home, Regina is determined to help by defying the Federation

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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. 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.