

REGINA SHEN: VIGILANCE

LANCE ERLICK

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ONE

Richmond Swamps, May 31 Year 298 ACM:

The thrum of an engine sounded at first like pesky mosquitoes, energized by our ceaseless heat. This rumble was too smooth and muted to be scavengers or bounty hunters. It grew louder. After one's hearing tuned to the rhythm of the swamps, any stray noise got adrenaline flowing.

The sleek gray patrol boat motored up the channel along the north side of our island. Its flag insignia announced that this was not only a Department of Antiquities patrol. It was Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco, old Coarse-face herself. *She's back.*

"You know the drill," Mo-Mere called out. For two years this strict Hispanic had been our teacher and surrogate mom, opening her home island to those of us who'd lost our families.

The twins, Carmen and Kara, made a beeline to the main log cabin. Just fourteen, they were as thin as twigs yet fast.

I dropped an apple into the basket, took two from Wendy, and urged my companion toward the main cabin.

"Regina, go," she said. "I'll be right behind you. Don't let them take you."

A year older than me, Wendy was eighteen, slender, unable to build muscle, and behind me in school.

I ran for the cabin. Though the chief inspector hadn't visited in over a year, Mo-Mere enforced daily hiding drills. Yet all that practice didn't quiet my heart pumping in my throat or the fear that Demarco could destroy my new family.

I jumped three steps to the cabin's wood porch, and slowed to open the door. In the bedroom Wendy and I shared, I pulled out one of Mo-Mere's surgical kits and steadied my breathing before Wendy arrived.

In a rare glimpse at my image in a steel mirror, I barely recognized the face looking back. It hinted at memories of my Chinese mother, Zola Shen. Yet I strained to see myself. Mo-Mere had altered my nose, forehead, and ears as part of her plan to sneak me across the Great Barrier Wall into the World Federation. I also looked older, with a woman's body, leaner, and with something else: a loss of innocence even I saw. There were unmistakable imprints in my cheeks and mouth of my birth donor—Hispanic and possibly male—in a world rumored to have no more males. *No time for sour memories.*

Out of breath, Wendy appeared in the doorway. She nodded as if to convince herself to come in, and climbed onto her bed. She raised her faded green canvas skirt, lifted her leg, and closed her eyes. "Make it quick."

I clenched my fists. I loved Wendy as a friend, my best friend, and didn't want to hurt her. Yet if I didn't, that could hurt much worse. I steadied the sterile knife and studied her right leg. A cut in the wrong place and she could hemorrhage. Not deep enough and it wouldn't be convincing.

I located the spot I wanted at the base of her calf. "Relax the muscle."

She bit down on the corner of a towel and stared up at me.

"Three, two, one." I made a ragged cut, what a rock might do.

Her head twitched, bobbing her blonde curls. She didn't make a sound.

"Breathe." I dabbed the wound with cloth, put Mo-Mere's herbal ointment on the cut, and bandaged the wound. "It looks clean." Then I propped the foot up on pillows and kissed her forehead. "You did great."

"I'm fine. Go before they catch you."

I made sure her Antiquities tracking chip was unshielded. "If they make you walk, remember which leg to limp on."

Wendy forced a smile. "I'll be okay."

When I reached the great room, Mo-Mere had moved the wood-burning stove over the panel down to her cellar, where she'd hidden the twins. The underground room was infrared-shielded to lessen the likelihood of Antiquities agents finding them.

"Hurry," she said, and headed down to the dock to greet our visitors. I made one last check that no print books or other contraband were visible. "Vigilance," Mo-Mere would say. "No mistakes."

Each time we finished our studies, she made sure we secured her precious illegal print books and the e-readers I'd rebuilt to read old texts salvaged from ancient storage media. All this was to further my education so she could smuggle me into the Federation for university. But it wasn't education that made me yearn to cross the Wall. I longed to find my younger sister, Colleen, and make up for failing to save her from bounty hunters and the Federation's Department of Antiquities. After two years, Mo-Mere's dream of my crossing the Wall remained a fantasy.

I slid out the cabin's back door and jumped onto the grassy clearing. Chin raised, Mo-Mere approached our boat cove. Two gray-coated Antiquities agents waited, but Chief Inspector Demarco wasn't there.

I'd hated Coarse-face from the moment two years earlier when she shot me and Colleen with a tranquilizer gun and jabbed tracking implants into us. I figured Demarco wanted to use us to make a lucrative slave sale over the border. Then I learned the governor had a keen interest in our DNA, something to do with saving the Federation from extinction. *But why save a system that keeps us starving as outcasts?*

I avoided capture by digging out my tracking chip and casting it away. Mo-Mere removed Wendy's and kept it. We attached it to her upper arm, either shielded or not, depending on whether she needed to hide. For this visit, we hoped she didn't.

With the cabin as my shield, I sprinted away from the boats and hid in the thin band of woods that separated the clearing from shore. I checked the channel all around. No other patrol boats, unless they hid behind nearby islands.

From beneath a rock that hid a small cave, I withdrew a black wetsuit we'd recovered from a dead bounty hunter and pulled the outfit over my green canvas trousers and top.

I slid closer to the water's edge, checking for alligators. The Federation had genetically modified them so they would prey on us Marginal swamp rats, thinning out our population. Two years ago gators became scarce as bounty hunters and locals hunted them to near extinction for food, but it paid to be cautious.

Keeping watch on the sleek patrol boat, I waded around the island. A twentyish woman stood at the helm. No one else was visible.

Now that it was late May, the steamy air made my binoculars' infrared useless. I wiped sweat from my brow, ignored the mosquitoes, and scanned the island for Coarse-face.

I checked the patrol boat again. It carried distinct call letters painted along the bow. This was her boat. She had to be here. I aimed one directional earphone toward the cabin and another

toward the boat. Then I loaded the tranquilizer gun I'd taken from a dead agent.

There she is. Inspector Demarco hurried up the rocky path to join Mo-Mere. The other agents split up and headed toward the shore. I slipped into the water with two breathing bladders and my wireless earbuds tuned to the receiver. Through my goggles I checked beneath the surface for anything that might want me for dinner before moving into a hidden crevice. I slowed my breathing, hoping their infrared was as useless as mine.

Bass and catfish swam by. *Fish for dinner.*

"It's been a long time," Mo-Mere said in a cool tone not far from the cabin. "We hoped you'd lost interest."

Demarco cleared her throat. "None of your professorial trickery, old woman. You haven't delivered on promises. I've come for Regina Shen."

"From what I gather, you and she had an understanding: salvaged artifacts in exchange for leaving us alone."

"You haven't held up your end."

"You didn't pick up the items set out for you," Mo-Mere said. "Regina was concerned something bad had happened. She didn't want these treasures falling into the wrong hands."

"Forget the artifacts. I'm here for Regina, Wendy, and the twins. I know you're holding them. No more stalling."

"If you remove the delivered artifacts, I'm sure more will appear."

"Too late," Demarco said. "The governor has lost patience. So have I. You've had two years with Wendy." Coarse-face's voice grew stronger. They were near the cabin. "That's plenty of time to teach her your worthless knowledge and prepare for life without her."

"Regina isn't here, and I haven't seen twins."

"Then I'll take Wendy."

"She's accident-prone," Mo-Mere said. "She injured her leg this morning."

"We have hospitals."

"Can you place a lame Marginal in a good home in the Federation?"

A door closed.

"Let me see her," Demarco said.

Footsteps on wood sounded muffled by the cabin walls. The sound could terrify those hiding below in the dark cellar. Mo-Mere wouldn't let me hide with the twins for their comfort. She didn't want me caught if agents found them. She said I was special, a status I didn't want, never asked for, and would gladly have donated to someone else.

"Hi, Inspector," Wendy said for my benefit. The walls muted her voice, so I had to strain to hear.

"How did you do this?" Demarco demanded.

"I thought I saw a gator. I twisted my ankle and fell on rocks."

I hoped the story didn't sound too rehearsed.

Floorboards squeaked, muffled noises echoed. Wendy let out a yelp.

"That'll heal in a week," the inspector said. "Another storm's rolling through tomorrow night. This could be worse than two years ago. Don't throw girls' lives away over some romantic fantasy you're helping them. Poverty isn't freedom. Starvation isn't liberty."

"We're not starving," Mo-Mere said.

"After this storm you will. Let me help the girls."

"I'm sure the two of us will manage without you."

I smiled at how Mo-Mere weaved a story that excluded me and the twins.

"I'll return," Demarco said. "Bring me Regina and I'll make sure you have dry land and all the resources to live out your miserable life. Defy me and you'll face the full wrath of the Federation."

"You might want to remove the artifacts before the storm washes them out to sea."

"Don't test me, Marisa," Demarco used Mo-Mere's real name. "I'll be back tomorrow. Have the girls ready."

"I don't know where Regina is or if she's still alive."

"Yet you've been in contact with her."

"Not recently," Mo-Mere said. "What I do know is Wendy needs to stay off the leg so it doesn't get infected."

"You think braving the storm on your own will help?"

"Forcing Wendy to be a maid or childcare worker won't. Farm work and mines would kill her." I grimaced. My sister Colleen might be stuck in one of those places. Or worse, penned in a bio-lab as a Federation guinea pig. She was twelve when Coarse-face delivered her across the Wall, hoping Colleen was the key to their fertility crisis. Yet that hadn't satisfied her. She still wanted me.

"Wendy," Demarco said, "how about if I promised you and the twins a good home on dry land near each other so you could visit?"

"I want to stay with Mo-Mere," Wendy said.

"You'd be working in a nice house with food and shelter, nicer clothes. I can do that. But I need your help. Where is Regina?"

"I don't know."

"When did you last see her?" Demarco asked.

"She visits now and then. I'm sure you've frightened her away."

"So she's nearby."

"She doesn't say where she goes," Wendy said.

"This isn't a game. This storm will be cataclysmic."

I was surprised the inspector knew such a word.

"Mo-Mere is good to me," Wendy said. "She needs me. If you get her a home across the Wall, I'd go live with her."

"She burned that bridge," Demarco said. "Even I can't change that, but you have a future. Let me help. Where does Regina salvage?"

"I don't salvage. I have no idea where she goes. She never takes me."

"I can get special meds for your leg and make sure you never see another gator."

"Wendy gave her answer," Mo-Mere said. "Give me two weeks to heal her foot, and I'll talk to her."

"You have until tomorrow."

Floorboards squeaked and a door slammed.

My two breathing bladders ran out of oxygen. I swam outside the crevice, hid among cattails, and scanned the island. The two agents from shore joined the others on the patrol boat. I adjusted the directional earphones to pick up their conversation.

"Did you hear our chief inspector lost her entire crew out here?" one of the agents asked.

"Wasn't Demarco the only survivor?" the other said.

"She fled to the Gulf to put down some lame rebellion."

They weren't happy to have her back. I couldn't blame them. Instead of destroying pre-Collapse artifacts as Federation law required, Inspector Demarco collected them. Her Antiquities

crew tried to arrest her. She killed the captain and six crew members.

So there was continued dissent within the ranks. The talk of rebellion caught my interest. There hadn't been any reported resistance to Federation rule in more than 200 years.

Mo-Mere walked beside Demarco down the path. I couldn't hear their conversation; maybe they were out of range. When the inspector reached the boat, the other agents became quiet. Demarco climbed onboard and turned to Mo-Mere. "Tomorrow noon. Don't disappoint me."

With the binoculars' highest magnification, I stared at the inspector's pockmarked face, textured like a sponge. If only I could use my tranquilizer gun or Mo-Mere's fight training to stop Coarse-face for good, but Mo-Mere said others would come. Besides, there were five armed agents.

I refused to let Demarco catch me as she had my sister. I couldn't let her take Wendy or the twins, either. Ever since we all showed up on Mo-Mere's island, our teacher had shielded us from Antiquities patrols. Yet, with the Richmond swamps shrinking, it was only a matter of time.

* * *

Once again, Inspector Joanne Demarco had to cut short an important investigation to take an urgent call from North American Governor Gina Wilmette, impatient for results. It was pointless trying to explain to the governor how often she'd interrupted Demarco's plans to capture Regina Shen. Remarks like that were futile and could lead to career and personal suicide. The governor had plenty of scapegoats for her mistakes and no patience for those who pointed them out.

In the privacy of the captain's cabin, Demarco drank a slug of the captain's bootleg whiskey and activated her Mesh-reader. The screen displayed an oversized image of a puffy relic: the 362-year-old Grand Old Dame. The GOD had survived the wars, the Great Collapse, and countless medical procedures that had replaced every working component of the ancient woman.

"The purpose of carrying a mobile device is to pick up my calls," the heavily-made-up face said with little lip movement. Even stem-cell skin treatments couldn't conceal her advanced age, though they did make her look 120.

Demarco bowed, as befit her Marginal origins despite having risen to the top of the powerful Department of Antiquities and caught the Governor's eye. "Out here in the swamps, listening devices are everywhere. I wouldn't want the wrong ears to hear your voice, Your Majesty."

"Save it," the bloated face said. "Now that you've finished your twelve-month vacation to the Gulf, what do you have for me?"

Demarco bristled. That year was in hotter and more hostile swamps. "The so-called vacation involved putting down a rebellion, Your Majesty, and rounding up potential threats."

"You could have delegated."

"You asked me to handle it personally. There hasn't been a serious rebel threat in 200 years, because we take all threats seriously."

The governor waved her leathery hand. "Whatever. Don't bore me with trifles. My medical staff tells me they've used every bit of Regina's samples in testing and need more. I want Regina Shen delivered to me within the week for further testing."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"No more distractions; no more delays. Our fertility has collapsed. No one is conceiving except Marginals. If we don't solve this soon, we face extinction." Her ears turned pink beneath layers of makeup. Her fiery eyes added a ghoulish quality to the otherwise pale image. They rather looked like plump, pink-eyed lab rats.

The Federation had chosen to rely on EggFusion Fertilization to maintain a world without men. The process took skin samples from one woman, coaxed them into stem cells, and infused

the DNA into another woman's egg. The procedure was failing, yet no Grand Old Dame would ever own up to her role in making the Federation dependent on artificial processes.

"Two years ago," the governor said, "you promised if we waited to grab Regina, you'd deliver a dozen such girls. They were to provide genetic diversity. Where are these wonders?"

"Now that I'm back, it's my number one priority," Demarco said. *After I get my hands on Special Agent Volpe, that cow.* During her absence in the Gulf, Demarco had put Vikki Volpe in charge of the Richmond Swamps. Now the ambitious underling wasn't answering calls.

"This is your only priority," the governor said, "unless you want a career change." A euphemism for joining the other world.

That had happened to Demarco's predecessor. A dozen years earlier, the former chief inspector drowned in the swamps under suspicious circumstances. Two years ago, Demarco faced a similar challenge. She'd escaped by disposing of her crew and blaming their deaths on pirates.

As a child, Demarco lost her belief in any afterlife. There was no better place after death. She'd grown up in Marginal Hell and worked her way up through Purgatory. The only Heaven she could imagine was to become a full-fledged Federation citizen with retirement rights on dry land. Having grown up on the seaward side of the Great Barrier Wall, built to hold back rising seas brought on by abrupt climate change, the only island she wanted was in the middle of a pristine lake.

"Inspector! Am I talking to a brick wall?"

"I understand, Your Majesty. It's my only priority. I was interrogating suspects when you called."

"Then don't let me keep you."

The screen went blank, yet the image of the ancient GOD remained etched in Demarco's mind. Every ounce of caution screamed for her to arrest Marisa Seville and use the old teacher as bait to trap Regina. Demarco didn't have a dozen other girls for the governor, or even one with undamaged DNA. That story had been a crazy stalling tactic so she had time to deal with Regina on her own terms. Then the governor had called Demarco to the Gulf.

Regina was resourceful enough that Demarco wanted to hire her, not turn her over to the governor's bio-labs. But Regina distrusted Antiquities, the Federation, and the chief inspector.

The deal struck with Regina had proven profitable while Demarco dealt with the insurgents, though only if she lived long enough to enjoy it. The problem was fanatics who truly believed that destroying precious artifacts from before the Great Collapse was a good thing. Stashing loot had been tricky, with agents watching her every move. She was mindful that the next attack on her life could have a different outcome.

If helping the governor came with more defined benefits, her path would have been less ambiguous. Instead, as a Marginal, she knew survival depended on being useful to whoever held power. When her usefulness ended, so did any bartered security.

Demarco picked up her Mesh-reader and called Special Agent Vikki Volpe. Still no response. She left a message: "We need to talk."

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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.