

REGINA SHEN: DEFIANCE

LANCE ERLICK

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ONE

Virginia Mountains, July 20, Year 298 ACM:

Soon we would light up infrared sensors like fireflies.

The sun setting over the lush, green mountainside was beautiful, but we were climbing too fast to enjoy it. Temperatures were dropping from a humid 100. Soon they would fall below levels that ghosted the Department of Antiquities' drone and land-based infrared equipment. Even our thermal insulating suits couldn't prevent them picking up our images.

We'd been out longer than expected. Worse yet, we'd failed to rescue my sister.

I sipped from my canteen, mopped sweat from my eyes, and followed Tabitha Rundle and her scout up the slope. Over their thermal suits, they wore Marginal swamp-green canvas clothes and hats instead of their caste-required Working Stiff blue, allowing them to blend in with our surroundings. Despite being three times my age, they set a blistering pace in the heat.

A sky-skimmer drone buzzed above the tree canopy, waiting for us to appear on its scanners. At least the bee-like hum announced its presence for those of us with sharp hearing.

I crawled up a steep incline onto another narrow rocky path. "Sorry," I said.

"Regina, save your breath," Rundle said without slowing. "We should've gotten your sister last month."

My fault. I'd hoped leaving Colleen with Aunt Margo would have given her a shot at becoming a Professional, while I sorted out the World Federation's obsession with me. Now the Department had taken her again, though we had no idea which of various Antiquities factions had her.

We neared the disguised entrance to the cave. Sweat stung my eyes. The thermal insulators reflected back the heat until I was ready to pass out. Rundle and her scout slowed.

"I have to rescue her," I said, gasping for air.

"Not today. This place will be crawling before—"

"Regina Shen." The speaker blared from above the treetops like a voice from heaven warning about our sins. "I know you're down there." The raspy voice had to be Chief Inspector Demarco of the Department of Antiquities. Coarse-face herself.

My original sin was being born a Marginal swamp rat after the Federation cast my mom over the Great Barrier Wall into the sinking Richmond Swamps. Hers had been speaking out against the Federation's treatment of Marginals and other outcasts. I'd narrowly escaped Coarse-face several times. I couldn't give her another chance.

"Sooner or later I'll find you," she said. The amplified voice reverberated off the trees and rumbled through the mountain like ground tremors. Rock fragments, dirt, and pebbles cascaded down the mountainside in a mini avalanche. "You're better off surrendering to me."

Shaking her head, Rundle continued to climb. I mopped sweat from my eyes and hoped the heat held on a little longer to confuse their infrared sensors.

* * *

Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco piloted her vertical-takeoff-and-landing sky-jumper over a tree-covered mountain north of Charlottesville. Convinced that Regina Shen was hiding down there, Demarco cursed the loss of the last surveillance satellite and the politics that prevented

launching a replacement. In her efforts to capture seventeen-year-old Regina, she had to make do with spies, aerial drones, and what equipment an army of agents had hastily assembled.

Joanne Demarco prized her investigator's sense about finding people, a trait she attributed to her own humble Marginal past. For thirty days, she'd canvassed every farm between Charlottesville and the Barrier Wall to the east. Despite thousands of sightings, Demarco had uncovered no evidence Regina had visited any of those farms.

Someone was helping the girl.

"I know you distrust me," Demarco said through the sky-jumper's loudspeaker, "but I didn't hurt your sister."

Yesterday, Demarco had stumbled on an abandoned car and tracked footsteps partway up this mountainside to where rains had washed away the trail. Her agents and even North American Governor Gina Wilmette said she'd gone mad to concentrate resources on a month-old clue and a single mountain.

Demarco's instincts told her otherwise.

Drone electromagnetic spectrum ground analysis showed underground springs and passageways beneath this mountain, some big enough to crawl through. She stationed agents, local police, and guard units in a wide perimeter with motion sensors, infrared cameras, and cameras with regular and night vision.

"Turn yourself in, Regina. We'll let your friends go. We'll even pardon them." She couldn't without Governor Wilmette's okay, but that didn't matter. She scanned thick tree cover in the desperate hope of spotting the girl through infrequent gaps.

In the process of setting up the perimeter and installing listening posts, Demarco's agents had captured a dozen runaway Working Stiffs foraging this mountain. They claimed to know nothing about any underground hideout or Regina Shen. Then, in the middle of the night, they escaped from custody, up onto the mountain, and vanished from the department's infrared sensors.

Regina may have found shelter among a clever group of scavengers, but when she came out for food or fresh air, Demarco would grab her. She was sure Regina hadn't left the mountain. All roads were blocked. An hour ago, one of her agents spotted three people dressed in Marginal green. They disappeared under the tree canopy.

"Surrender or we'll bulldoze the mountain." Demarco hesitated to do that. If the tunnels collapsed and Regina died, all this was in vain.

Regina's DNA was vital to reversing a worldwide fertility collapse, but only if she was alive. There was nothing left of the blood samples Demarco had already delivered, and apparently blood didn't provide everything the governor's labs needed. If Demarco caused the girl's death, not only would the governor not reward the chief inspector for finding the girl, she would prolong Demarco's execution over a period of weeks. Of course, failure to find the girl could bring the same penalty.

"Regina, give yourself up. I'll keep you and your sister safe and well cared for." Demarco used the vertical lift capability of her sky-jumper to hover over the mountain not far from the peak.

After two years of matching wits with this now seventeen-year-old girl who knew the inspector couldn't harm her, dealing with a rival who had tried to assassinate Demarco, and Governor Wilmette's interference at inopportune times, it felt good to be back in the driver's seat. That illusion would vanish unless she found Regina soon.

The governor was impatient for Demarco to deliver the girl. Worse, Inspector Vikki Volpe had checked herself out of medical rehabilitation and vanished. In a bungled attempt to grab

Regina and kill Demarco, Volpe had suffered life-threatening injuries. Now she'd gone rogue. There was no telling what lengths Vikki Volpe would go to in order to claim credit for Regina's capture and discredit Demarco. The chief inspector's sole command of the Department of Antiquities was in jeopardy.

"Regina," she said. "Inspector Volpe took Colleen. I told her you were too clever to return, but she wants vengeance."

That'll bring Regina out of hiding.

"End this now and I'll tell you where Volpe took your sister."

* * *

I followed Rundle up the last steep incline with Demarco's voice grating on my nerves. She acted confident of capturing me, which wasn't good for my hosts and friends. While I hated Coarse-face for taking my sister two years earlier, Inspector Volpe was worse. The one time I'd met her, she seemed possessed by devils.

The thought of her holding Colleen twisted my heart. It had been a mistake leaving my sister with Aunt Margo. There could be no normal life for her or my friends until I stopped the Federation from hunting me for good. I needed to find something they wanted more than me.

Tabitha Rundle led us through a camouflaged cave opening into darkness. We passed through a set of doors that led to a tunnel system dating to the American Civil War. Rundle's mother had told her that back then, her Scottish ancestors fought to escape Union troops. Then three hundred years ago, before and during the Great Collapse, others of her ancestors expanded this into an underground bunker. Rundle had inherited the hideout from her parents, along with medical training. Yet these caves, which had sheltered people for 500 years, couldn't help us fool Coarse-face for long with so many agents on the ground.

Rundle panned her flashlight around the cave to make sure we had no guests. She unlocked and opened a second set of doors.

"It's time I left," I said, removing my hat to fan myself.

We entered a small room with tables in the middle and hiking gear hung along the side walls.

"Where would you go?" Rundle removed her cap. Her blonde hair looked muddy in the dim light, her face weathered from fifty-plus years spent outdoors. I could see the Viking heritage she was as proud of as her Scottish ancestry.

Her scout took our backpacks and disappeared down a corridor deeper into the mountain.

Tears blurred my vision. "Anywhere that brings me closer to Colleen." I removed my thermal suit, a unique design Rundle created using an aluminum polymer mesh. It acted like an infrared mirror while siphoning body heat through the boots, most of the time.

"We don't know where they took her." Rundle placed her rifle in a cabinet and locked it. "You're not considering that agent's offer, are you?"

"I have to find Colleen and stop the Federation from bothering us. I can't let them destroy your home."

"Our home is your shelter."

"I already owe you so much," I said, a debt Marginals tried to steer clear of.

"Nonsense. We help our own."

I lowered my voice. "Before I go, I want to give you something. But if the Federation finds out, they'll hunt you like they hunt me."

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STORIES by Lance Erlick

XENOGENEIC: FIRST CONTACT

Aerospace engineer Elena Pyetrov lost her father in space 18 years ago. She finally gets her chance to continue his research and her ship crashes. Alien pilgrims lost their civil war and seek to colonize Earth. Within caves on alien world, the Knoonk execute their plan to genetically adapt to Earth and displace humans. Kidnapped to the closed cave system, Elena finds other humans subjected to Knoonk experiments. With time running out, she must dig deep to uncover the alien plan and stop them before humans face extinction.

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REGINA SHEN: RESILIENCE (Regina Shen book 1)

Outcast Regina Shen is forced by the World Federation to live on the seaward side of barrier walls built to hold back rising seas due to abrupt climate change. A hurricane threatens to destroy what's left of her world, tearing Regina from her family.

Global fertility has collapsed. Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco of the notorious Department of Antiquities believes Regina holds the key to avoid extinction. Regina fights to stay alive and avoid capture while hunting for her family. Does she have the resilience to survive?

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REGINA SHEN: VIGILANCE (Regina Shen book 2)

Regina Shen is pursued by the notorious Department of Antiquities for her unique DNA. She jumps the Barrier Wall into the Federation to find her kidnapped sister. Stuck on a heavily guarded closed university campus in the mountains, she must use her wits to escape and rescue her sister without letting either of two rival Antiquities inspectors capture her.

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REGINA SHEN: DEFIANCE (Regina Shen book 3)

Outcast Regina Shen has DNA the Federation believes can reverse a global fertility collapse. Rival Federation agents fight over capturing Regina to gain power amidst turmoil over who will become the new World Premier. Regina has to flee from Virginia through desert and wilderness to Alaska to hunt a treasure big enough to barter for her freedom and that of her sister.

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THE REBEL WITHIN (Rebel Series book 1)

Annabelle Scott lives under the iron rule of a female-dominated régime that forces males to fight to the death to train the military elite. When pressed into service as a mechanized warrior to capture escaped boys, Annabelle stays true to herself by helping some escape. Her defiance endangers everyone she loves and thrusts her to a place of impossible life and death decisions.

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THE REBEL TRAP (Rebel Series book 2)

Despite being a military recruit, Annabelle Scott rebels against her female-dominated régime by refusing to kill a handsome boy she fancies and helping him escape. Auditory implants and cameras allow her commander to watch her 24-7. Can she help the boy free his brother from a heavily guarded geek institute without destroying her family or getting killed?

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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ULTIMATE HACK (novelette)

Hercules considered himself an ordinary anonymous geek with a special reason to remain in his mom's basement. Ignoring warnings from his best friend and his girlfriend, he pursues the hack of a lifetime into a top secret security system. What could possibly go wrong when he meets his match?

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SHE-DEVIL ROCKS (novelette)

Inspired by *Lord of the Flies*.

Bullied as the smallest of thirteen boys in his class, Bradley is on a plane that crashes on a remote island with a bully who is out of control. Bradley meets a mysterious tomboy who shouldn't be there. He has to learn to survive on the hostile island, deal with the tomboy, and come to terms with the bully.

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REGINA SHEN: SALVAGE (novelette)

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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MAIDEN VOYAGE (short story)

Security Chief Nina Rekovic keeps the peace on the all-female Maiden's Ark that left Earth five years before. Distress signals say Earth is lost, stranding lunar colonists. While balancing Returners she sympathizes with, a dictatorial captain, and an estranged lover who betrays her, can Rekovic solve the conspiracy before she's imprisoned or killed?

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WATCHING YOU (short story)

At the intersection of pervasive networks and the Patriot Act, we have the ability and some say the obligation to know everything about everyone. Can privacy survive? Can the individual endure?

Harold is a second-class citizen and a low-level worker in a government surveillance system charged with reviewing "criminal activity." He has private thoughts about a woman he's forbidden from approaching. He will not be deterred.

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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.