

Chapter 1: Renegade

The rain was harsh and cold; could he not have picked another night? It hardly mattered when his feet hit the alleyway's concrete paving, to which he caught the beat in his step again and kept running. The sirens were still blaring in his head when he dashed around corner after corner, just barely clinging to the bricks when he almost slipped and fell. The scathed and torn flesh on his hands barely caught his attention, when he heard it again; the light tapping of his pursuer.

Scoffing, Nick sped into a tunnel, one he had used before. It would stretch towards the other end of the block, where he could hitch a ride, or so he thought. A headache tore through his mind when he remembered where he had left his car: Too far away. He cursed under his breath as he jumped into the tunnel, closing the hatch behind himself and engaging the arbitrary lock.

Nick: "Damn it! Fuck, fuck, fuck-"

He fumbled with the phone he quickly pulled from his pocket, still jogging as he dialed his brother.

Nick: "Heyyyy, Al, would you mind?"

Alex: "Where are you? Dinner was an hour ago."

Nick: "Yeah, sorry I couldn't make it, I texted Thom-"

Alex: "Did you?"

Nick: "I didn't? Look, Al, I could really use a ride right now, quickly."

Alex: "Who are you running from?"

Nick: "You'll see when you get here."

Alex sounded a tired sigh, before audibly shrugging and loudly closing a cupboard.

Alex: "Address?"

Nick: "Raze Street- You know the spot."

Alex: "Figures. Sit tight."

Nick whispered a thank-you-made-apology, before turning his phone off, hoping that the call was not intercepted. Before long, he would make his way to the other side of the tunnel, where he turned around to face his flank- Empty. Good. His head on a swivel, he glanced over his shoulder as he backed up towards the exit. To his surprise, an electronic lock blocked the way.

"Fuck!" He hissed with fleeting breath, as he tried to make out who had placed it there; to which he frustratingly recognised the logo of ForeverTech, the largest engineering corp in town. "That is karma for you," he whispered to himself, a chuckle following when he felt the tumbling flash drive in his coat. These locks were notorious for their anti-tampering mechanisms, which had caught many an unsuspecting burglar, but Nick was not unsuspecting. *Guess I'm stuck here until Al arrives*, he thought to himself as he put his ear to the metal plating.

After only a few minutes, Nick could hear the revving of an engine he recognised. A smirk slipped onto his face as he reached into his pocket, where he found a lighter. He took a deep breath, before pulling his coat's hood over his head again

and triggering the lighter, before holding the yellow flame underneath the lock. After a few moments, the lock disengaged and triggered a fire alarm. The sound made Nick's ears ring as every sprinkler in the building activated as well. A grunt tumbled off Nick's lips as he climbed out through the newly opened escape hatch, which would lead him back onto the streets.

He was relieved to find his brother's motorcycle there, where Alex held out a helmet for Nick to put on. Nick wasted no time and took the headgear, before slipping it over his face and lowering the visor. Maybe he had hoped that they would have a little more time, until the siren sounded again. It was a deafening, alien noise that escaped from the vents of the peacekeeper's ribbed armour. There was no call to halt, no warning of arrest; Nick knew that if they lingered just a moment longer, they would be torn to shreds by a rifle. "Kick it!" He shouted, to which Alex wasted not another moment.

Alex hit the gas for all it had, sending the machine into a screeching gallop. Alex bobbed and weaved through the late night traffic, until they were far enough out of sight to catch their breath.

Nick: "Alex, I-"

Alex: "Check the damn bike for trackers."

Alex' commanding tone always could tear through any fabric, and Nick knew better than to fight him then, so he reared his head and started carefully checking the cycle's frame for tracking devices as they drove down the freeway.

Nick: "None on the back, but Alex-"

Alex: "I don't want to hear it. Not here. Now keep your head down, for Nòll's sake."

Nick did as he was asked and kept his gaze on his brother's back, as they drove all the way to the other side of town. Alex would not slow down one bit, until they left the freeway and pulled into the suburbs on the outskirts of Coredam. It would take no more than another minute or two for them to turn into the driveway of their childhood home, where the garage door responded to their arrival and opened up on its own. Alex carefully brought the bike to a halt and waited for Nick to get off, before doing the same. Nick removed his helmet and placed it on a workbench that stood by the wall. Alex was soon to follow, his deep blue eyes piercing the night as he sought eye contact with his brother, which Nick stubbornly denied.

Still, he said nothing as he nudged Nick out of the garage and had the door close behind them, before opening the home's front door and heading inside. Nick was the one to close the door this time, hesitant to hang up his coat in case he was still being kicked out. Alex had already left the hall and headed into the dining room, but Nick lingered for a moment, thinking of anything and everything he could say. After a few moments, he fixed his blond hair as much as he could and decided to hang up his coat anyway. After that, he headed after his brother, into the dining room where Alex was taking the dishes into the kitchen.

Alex stacked four dirty plates onto a clean one, before picking them up and leaving an empty table behind. Nick briefly checked the living room, yet could not see Thomas, the youngest, anywhere. He figured that Thom had simply gone to bed. Nick hesitated once more, before carefully following

Alex into the kitchen, where the water was running. Alex was scrubbing the plates he had brought in just a few moments ago, glancing over his shoulder only briefly when Nick walked in.

Alex: "You're a mess."

Nick: "You love me when I'm a mess."

Alex scoffed, shaking his head as he stacked the now clean plates. He was nothing if not efficient.

Nick: "You still love me, right?"

Alex: "You stole from a corp. Again."

Nick: "You know as well as I do that-"

Alex: "I know what's at stake, which is exactly why I can't have you keep doing this, not when you live under this roof!"

That last part was what hurt Nick. He would have left, if he could.

Nick: "That's not fair and you know it."

Alex: "What's not fair is that you keep putting Thomas in danger. We had a deal."

Nick: "I haven't forgotten."

Alex: "Then act like it!"

The silence was deafening.

Alex: "Who is it for this time?"

Nick: "The Collective."

Alex: "You are running for those rats again?"

Nick: "They are not rats."

Alex: "They will just sell the damn thing to the Militia!"

Nick: "I would bloody hope so!"

Alex: "I can't believe that you're okay with that."

Nick: "Dad would have supported me."

Alex: "Yeah, well, if you keep this up you can ask him what he thinks of it."

Nick: "I'm going to bed."

Just as Nick started to turn around and leave, Alex grasped his arm tightly and yanked him back into the kitchen.

Alex: "There's nothing you can do. Let it go."

Nick: "Oh, that's right, you would know all about letting go, wouldn't you?"

Alex only responded with a frown, to which his grip weakened. Nick slipped out of his grasp and retreated into the darkness of the hallway, before heading down the stairs and into the basement.

Alex backed up to stand against the counter, where he rested his hands in his lap as he leaned back a bit. He looked out through the kitchen window to see the burning tower in the distance, knowing what there was still to come; knowing that Nick hardly knew at all.