



OF BOOKS ASHTON
AND BLADES

A BLACKBURN CHRONICLES
FREE READ

RAQUEL BYRNES

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Raquel Byrnes

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The shuffle of boots close-by made Ashton sink deeper into his hiding spot in the trash hewn alley. He touched his swollen, bloodied lip and worried more was to come. Exhaust billowed from the pipe works of the factories and iron foundry. It heated the bricks and lingered in the night air. Once the footsteps had passed, he scurried from his hiding place, running through a cloud of steam towards the main street. He tasted oil and chemicals and coughed, cringing at the sound and hoping they did not hear him.

An overturned barrel barred the way to his right, stopping him short and he tripped in his too big shoes. Panic stole his breath. None of this looked familiar. He shivered in the thin material of his shirt and trousers, remembering with longing the fine coat he used to hate wearing. He leaned both hands on his knees, panting for breath and listening.

A horse whinnied. A gas lamp on the street sputtered alight giving him a glimpse of his surroundings.

Movement flickered at the opening of the alley, yanking a gasp from Ashton.

They were right there.

Backing up, he flattened himself against the bricks and blinked tears from his eyes. The boys chasing him were so fast, so big. What if they caught him again? Ashton spotted a fence separating the alleyway from

the side of the foundry and squeezed his slight frame between the broken slats of a gate just as he heard their voices behind him.

"He went that way." Paddy O'Darren's massive shadow wavered in the light of the gas lamp. He edged his way along the cobblestones. "If you find him, bring him to me. He's getting it this time!"

Ashton froze and tried to slow the hammering of his heart. He watched through the space between the boards, hoping the dark of his hair and eyes might hide him. Paddy slowed at the gate, his gaze narrowed and he bent, rummaging through the rubbish in the alley. He kicked over crates and looked under piles of trash, muttering. Big and bruised from years of work in the iron and pipe foundries, Paddy ran the Mill Boys with terror and beatings. Now nearly sixteen, his group of boys worked the chimney and tunnel cleaning trade for a large part of St. Louis. Ashton, new to the streets by just a few months, had stayed out of Paddy's way until two days ago.

"I know yer out here, Wells." Paddy's gravelly voice sounded from the other side of the fence. "Mill Boys do the job they was hired for. No whining about it. No shirking either."

Ashton touched his fingertips to his cheekbone, feeling the growing bruise from Paddy's punch to his face. Earlier, after stealing from a shopkeeper and trying to get away, he had run right into Paddy. Quite literally, his eight-year-old frame had bounced off the teenager's torso like a bug. For the rest of that day and all the next, Ashton was dragged onto rooftops and shoved down chimneys as the Mill Boy's newest sweep. When he complained, said he was scared of the charred walls crushing him, Paddy had answered with

knuckles.

That night, with his elbows and knees scraped and bleeding and the taste of soot still coating the inside of his mouth, Ashton decided he would not go back down another chimney. So he waited, trembling under the threadbare blanket on the cold floor of the abandoned shop where the Mill Boys slept. When he thought they were all asleep, he tiptoed across bodies and out the door. He was almost to freedom when a squeaky floor board gave him away and he had to run for his life.

Ashton wrapped his thin arms around himself and hoped Paddy could not hear the chattering of his teeth. He dared not look, clenching his eyes shut. The movements of the large boy on the other side of the fence grew closer. Then nothing. The stillness and silence were unnerving. Only the sound of the constantly chugging factory machines interrupted the night. Ashton let his breath out, chancing a glance between the slats, but saw no one. He gripped the top of the fence with scraped fingers and stood on his tip toes to peer over. Craning his neck, he looking up and down the alley. It was empty.

A ripple of relief spread through his middle, and Ashton lowered himself with a sigh. He should go find a place to stay, maybe near the steamboats. Lots of folks to beg from down there, he'd heard. Maybe he could even stow away and go someplace cleaner...safer...like home use to be. A well of sorrow and fear threatened to flood over him. Gritting his teeth, he tried not to think of his parents, blocking the images of the house fire from coming back. Crying like a baby did nothing out here but get you made fun of, or worse. Best to not think of those things at all.

Ashton started back down the alley, lost in thought. A hand shot out of the shadows and gripped him by the throat. Ashton tried to cry out, to struggle, but Paddy's iron vice barely let him draw in air. Pin pricks fired at the corners of his vision, and he panicked, thrashing wildly.

"Settle down," Paddy growled. He threw Ashton to the muddy ground and kicked him viciously in the side.

Ashton howled, the pain boring through his whole body. "Stop, stop," he begged.

"I ought ta just kick you 'til you stop moving." Paddy snarled, delivering another kick to Ashton's thigh.

"No," Ashton gasped, his face tight with pain. "No, please."

"I let you run from me and then what do the other boys think, huh?" Paddy leaned down, pressing a knife to Ashton's chin. "Can't let them think I'm weak. I got no use for a headache like yerself."

"I – I will go back," Ashton said, his lip quivering as the point of the blade dug into his skin. "I p-promise not to run."

Paddy leaned back, eyes narrowed. "Where'd you learn to talk like that, huh? Like you know the Queen Herself, er something?"

Ashton blinked, confused. "I was born in England...but my governess was from America. Perhaps—"

"Governess? What, is Ashton Wells a noble?" Paddy guffawed, but then stopped, his gaze intense. "Do you know how to read?"

Ashton nodded. "Yes, I can read."

"Well then," Paddy said. He stood and put away

his knife, and then extended his hand to Ashton. "I might have use for you after all."

For the next few weeks, Paddy used Ashton to break into several shops and homes via the chimney in the dead of night. Although it was still frightening, the fact that Ashton only had to get in and out of the narrow passage and not actually clean and breathe in the sooty grime, did make it bearable. He took only ledgers and schedules, catalogs and the like, never anything else. Not sure why he was doing it, but grateful to not live in constant fear, Ashton spent hours reading to Paddy by candlelight on the roof of the Mill Boy's place after everyone had gone to sleep.

"That, right there. The one you just said." Paddy spoke through a mouthful of bread.

"What, the one about the..." Ashton squinted at the ledger, sounding out the word. "apparatus?"

"Yeah." Paddy stood, stretching his back. He let out a long burp. "Inventors use that word and where there's tinkerers, there's copper. And copper sells good up by the harbor." He tossed Ashton the crusty loaf and motioned with his head. "Let's go."

"What, now?" Ashton took a bite off the hunk of bread, and his stomach rumbled with anticipation. He hadn't eaten since the morning.

"Yeah, show me where this ledger says it delivered all that copper to."

"I think the address of the delivery is in the Warehouse District," Ashton said, flipping the book closed. An embossed symbol marked the cover, and it was smooth against the pads of his fingers. A crossed

blade and parchment done in crimson. "What is a tinkerer?"

Paddy didn't answer. Instead, he climbed down the fire escape with Ashton right behind. They trudged through back alleys and finally wove through the eerily quiet Warehouse District. The building where the ledger said the delivery was dropped came into view and Ashton shook with cold and fear. Factories had guards. Getting caught would mean a boys' home or factory work where he'd heard of many children dying or worse, maimed for life able only to sell matchsticks on the street.

"T-that's the one," Ashton whispered, pointing up ahead.

They stopped short of the building. The two-story rusted structure seemed to peer out at the night through blacked out windows. Paddy eased into the shadows. He gave Ashton a shove forward.

"Go on then," he hissed. "Make it quick. Get in, unlock the door, and I'll come in with this." He held up an empty sack and tossed another one to Ashton. "We'll take as much as we can carry."

"But..." Ashton hesitated, his stomach churning.

"I said go!" Paddy swooped down, picked up a rock, and threw it at Ashton, striking his temple.

Ashton yelped. Hand to his head, he turned and ran to the rear of the warehouse, hot tears stinging his face. There was no chimney. He swallowed hard, casting about for some way, any way to get inside. The thought of what Paddy might do if he failed sent his heart ramming. The wind rattled a low rectangular window near the ground. It squeaked on its hinges. Ashton glanced around and gave it a push. It opened inward. He wedged himself inside, pulling and

clawing his way through. His ribs felt crushed. The metal tore at his skin, but he couldn't fail at this. Almost in. Ashton heard a far off clink from within the warehouse. He froze, hoping a nearby guard did not hear his scuffling. With a final push he toppled inward, landing on the floor with a muffled groan. Writhing, he hissed at the pain for a few moments before catching his breath.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the wan light from the moon, and he looked around the space with amazement. Every manner of twirling gadget, clicking contraption, and whirling motion surrounded him. A soft glow came from some glass vials on the counter, and Ashton wandered over. He reached out, curious at the warmth from them, when light filled the room. Stumbling backwards, he fell over, attempting to shade his eyes from the bright glare.

"What are you doing here, boy?" a gruff voice boomed. The man loomed over him. Shirt sleeves rolled up, grease on his fingers, a monocle at his eye. His wild hair and mustache, both too long, stood on end. Ashton spied strange tools in his hand and wondered if this was a tinkerer. "Are you here to steal? Are you a thief?"

"No-no...sir." Ashton scrambled to his feet, his gaze going to the curious lantern the man held. It seemed to contain a wire glowing brilliantly with light instead of a candle or gas wick. "What is that?"

"None of your concern," the man said, but his gaze softened. "How old are you? Where are your parents?"

"They passed, sir," Ashton said, backing up and glancing around for a way to run. "But I'm not going to a boys' home."

“Well you can’t wander the streets alone.” The man the man grabbed for him. “I...”

But Ashton was already moving, skirting around the work table and darting for the door. He passed a tray with strange metal parts and grabbed one, glanced at it, and threw it at the man’s feet. It hit the ground. A cloud of smoke and sparks flew between them. Propelled by the blast, Ashton flew backwards. He skidded against the far counter, unable to catch his breath, pain throbbing through his head.

Coughing, he tried to rise, but his arms buckled. On the floor, Ashton watched the man’s boots coming nearer until he was staring at the toes. The man bent down, his curious gaze holding Ashton’s bleary one.

“How did you know to throw that?” the man asked.

“*Ignis*,” Ashton wheezed, his vision going grey. “it was etched on the metal. That is Latin. It m-means fire.”

The man rocked back on his heels and scratched at his sideburn.

“Why were you here? You are clearly not a street child. You’re educated, speak well.” The man glanced back at the open window. “Did someone send you here?”

“I was forced,” Ashton said, his tongue going to the cut in his lip. “I had to or he’d beat me. I wouldn’t have broken in otherwise. I know thievery is—”

“Well, obviously the likelihood of this being *your* grand plan is ridiculous,” the man said. “You cannot be more than eight years.”

Something made Ashton angry over that. He was nearly nine. Old enough to fend for himself, obviously. He sat up, blowing the strange powder from the

explosion from the tip of his nose. "Well, I'd rather face Paddy than go—"

"To a home for orphans," The man interrupted. "Yes, I believe you mentioned that." He shook his head, pulled out a handkerchief, and handed it to him. There was a curious look on the man's face that Ashton did not understand. "No, I do not believe you belong in a terrible place like that. In fact, I know exactly where you do belong."

The carriage drew up to an enormous building and Ashton stirred, his neck aching from sleeping sitting up. He stared, opened mouth at the crimson heralds snapping in the dawn light. The tinkerer, who'd barely spoken during the journey, turned to him, and held up his hand.

"Stay here. I am going to speak to the provost."

The vast wooden doors to the abbey opened and a man wrapped in curious robes stepped out, greeting the tinkerer with a nod. Leaning out the door of the carriage, Ashton strained to hear their conversation.

"...orphan," the tinkerer had said. "...will pay the expenses."

Ashton watched the exchange with bated breath. What was this place? It resembled a cathedral like the ones he'd seen while on holiday with his parents, but fortified, like a castle. Boys fought in groups, their swords clanging in the crisp morning air. The grounds held giant flowering trees and other boys in robes talked while seated beneath them. Ashton had not thought such a place still existed outside the grit and metal of the city. He could hardly remember the

gardens at his family's estate. Or what it felt like to be clean. Nor had he ever seen the curious clothing or shaved heads like the boys had here. He wondered where they were.

The tinkerer ended his conversation and returned.

"This house of veneration belongs to The Order of the Sword and Scroll." The tinkerer helped Ashton from the carriage. "You will be a novice here. You're to train to be a Man of Books in the Order."

"I – I am able to stay here?" Ashton blinked, hoping it was not a dream. A whisper of hope rose in his heart. "Like the others?"

"Learn and grow wiser than you have been tonight," the tinkerer whispered as they strode for the steps. "You have a chance to become more than your peers. Do not squander it."

In the two years since arriving, Ashton had learned that not all novices of The Order were equal. In fact, some were considered much lower than others, himself included. Most boys in The Order were celebrated if chosen. Most were from noble and wealthy families. There were few like Ashton who had a benefactor. It was his lack of means and family connections that set him apart. Clear from the first night, when he'd been scrutinized and teased by boys who'd only ever known clean clothes and soft beds, they did not believe Ashton belonged.

Though he'd grown quite a bit since arriving, Ashton was still too small to defend himself from those who truly wanted to pick on him. He rarely saw the tinkerer, or, as Ashton had come to think of him, his

benefactor. Yet, the man's words drove him. Ashton never wanted go back to the streets and the cold and the hunger. Not ever again.

The morning gong sounded and Ashton hurried down the steps of the abbey towards the garden. A boy up ahead, slowed when he saw Ashton, the pale blonde brows quirking as Ashton caught up. Adjusting his novice robe, Ashton ran his hand along the shaved skin of his head and smiled at the boy.

"Do not worry," Ashton said. "Master Galen does not hate you."

"Why are we always late?" Tristan huffed, the husky boy had arrived a week after Ashton, and the two found surviving together was easier than trying it alone. Neither had any family to speak of.

"We will slip in unnoticed," Ashton promised.

The other novices stood at attention as the Master of Science spoke while gesturing with a cane to various plants. Ashton sneaked into his proper place. The boy next to him cleared his throat, annoyed.

"And what do you call this, Tristan," Master Galen asked. "Now that you have deigned to join us."

Tristan's face flushed red, and he sputtered, looking helpless. "It is, uh..."

Several boys snickered. One muttered under his breath about *useless trash*, and the words roiled in Ashton's gut.

"It is foxglove," Ashton called out.

"In Latin," Master Galen snapped, banging his cane on the gravel.

"*Digitalis purpurea*," Ashton said. He locked gazes with the snickering boys. "An excellent choice if you want to poison someone. Nearly undetectable in honeyed tea."

The boys stopped snickering, but the large freckled one scowled, his lip curling. Ashton knew in his gut that teasing Marcus was unwise, but the boy was relentless in his torture of Tristan. Ashton could not let that pass. Not if he was to live with himself.

"Yes, well, thank you, Wells," Master Galen said before turning to point at another plant. "But there will be no assassinations today."

Ashton winked at Marcus, a sly smile pulling at his lip, and noted, with satisfaction the jerk of tension to the boy's jaw. Ashton would have to be careful for the next few days.

Later on in the evening, Ashton hurried down the back hallway of the library, distracted with his pile of books. Marcus emerged from the shadows and stepped into Ashton's path. A sliver of worry slipped through Ashton. They were alone, and the larger boy still looked very, very angry.

"Lost, Marcus?" Ashton said with nonchalance he did not possess. "Looking for the infirmary?" He squinted his eyes, pretending to see something. "Feeling all right?"

"Still the lying street rat," Marcus hissed. "You did not do anything to me. You can't."

Ashton didn't like the weird change in the air. Marcus was up to something. "And why not?"

"Because you are a pathetic charity case who is scared of getting tossed out with the trash like you belong," Marcus sneered at Ashton's involuntary intake of breath.

Though he knew he did not belong, not truly, like the noble and wealthy boys here, their thoughts about him had not been so blatant. Ashton backed up a step, his stomach roiling with a flare of anger. "I am not

afraid of anything," Ashton said through gritted teeth. "Least of all you!"

Without thinking, Ashton swung, hitting Marcus square in the jaw with his fist. The bigger boy stumbled back, but did not go down as Ashton had envisioned. Instead, his face contorted into something like a raging bull. Ashton turned and bolted through rear the doorway. He ran across the grass to the quarters of the other detachment of novices, the ones from which Ashton and his studious peers were kept apart. Those chosen to be Knights of the Order. Large, aggressive boys who learned swordplay and combat populated those ranks. They lived, trained, and worked in separate parts of the abbey grounds. So fascinated by their warrior-like upbringing, Ashton often stole away during meal times to watch them learn with wood practice blades.

He sped towards the first of their buildings, glancing over his shoulder at a quickly gaining Marcus. Slipping through the doorway, Ashton ran down a lit hallway of hewn stone wracking his brain for what to do next. He couldn't really just run forever, and he definitely wasn't going to cower in the shadows like he had with Paddy. Not this time. He slowed, panting as he looked around. This building, older than the others he knew, smelled of metal polish and burning wood. He pushed his way past a large door and into the vast room.

"That was a big mistake, Wells," Marcus's voice warbled through the hallway. He sounded in pain and very, very angry. "You want a fight? Let's fight."

Ashton glanced around looking for some form of protection, but aside from mats on the floor there was not much in the room. Marcus ran through the door

and stopped, panting. A slow, evil smile spread across his face.

“Nowhere to go and no more surprise punches to save your filthy beggar hide,” Marcus yelled. He lunged for Ashton, caught him by the robes, and threw him like a sack of rice to the floor.

Wheezing with pain, Ashton pulled himself to his feet with a wince. “Is that...is that all you have?”

Marcus shoved Ashton viciously back to the floor. His head cracked on the boards. A white hot flare of pain flashed across his vision. Groaning, Ashton got back up, slower this time, but on his feet all the same.

He looked at Marcus with bleary eyes. “Is that why you pick on boys younger and smaller than you?” Ashton winced as he put his shaking fists up. He forced a cocky smile despite his quivering gut. “Because I know a matchstick girl who fights better than you.”

Marcus dove for him, but Ashton was quicker. He stepped aside and extended his leg as he'd seen the knight novices do. Marcus tripped and went skidding on his belly across the polished wood floor.

Scrambling onto his feet, face red, lip bloody, Marcus let out a frustrated growl Ashton had never heard anyone make before. Perhaps the teasing was not a good idea. He backed up a step, wondering how to best avoid a pummeling. Marcus stood a head taller, was at least thirteen, and Ashton had used up all the tricks he had in his head.

Marcus stepped forward, but then stopped, his gaze going to the mat at his feet. “Oh how fortunate,” he said, and reached near the edge of a mat and picked up a wooden practice sword. He lunged, taking a swipe at Ashton. “Just what I need. A switch to throttle

the thief."

Ashton ducked, tripping over his own feet. He nearly went down but, a strong hand gripped his shoulder. The Sword Master stood next to him, a real blade dangling at his hip. Tall and lean with dark hair that fell to his chin, Master Vega fixed Ashton with a strange look.

"He is correct, Marcus," Vega said softly. "Your fight with him is unfair to say the least. We should fix that before you proceed."

"Sir?" Marcus asked, confused.

Vega strolled casually to the far end of the room where he reached into a crate. He strode back and held a wooden practice sword out to Ashton.

"*Now*, it is fair," Vega said and turned, striding for the door. Over his shoulder, he said to Ashton, "He used your time on the streets against you, Wells. I suggest you return the favor. Come and find me tomorrow if you win."

Marcus's gaze snapped back to Ashton who stood with the blade in his hands, his breath coming in heaves. All his loss. His parents. Beatings and hunger. Fear and desperation. It all hardened in his gut at that moment, and Ashton knew that he'd found where he belonged. A place where what he was and where he came from were not shameful, but an advantage.

"What are you looking at?" Marcus said through a shaky voice. "Do you really think you can beat me?"

Ashton gripped the weapon so tight, the leather handle creaked in his hands. He was going to be one of those warrior boys. He was going to be a knight, even if he had to go through Marcus to make that happen. He took a deliberate step towards Marcus. Then another. The bigger boy backed up.

“Raise...your...blade,” Ashton said and attacked.

The ground quaked. Another aftershock crumbled bits of the rock wall and sent a rain of leaves fluttering down. The tool in Ashton’s hand slipped and he banged his knuckles on the chassis of the machine, the pain eliciting a frustrated growl. He blew a lock of long black hair from his brow angrily.

Tristan looked over the top of his book at Ashton and chuckled.

“You know the scientists say that these tremors are actually preventing another Great Calamity,” Tristan said. “You should welcome them. They will taper off.”

A flash of memory seared across Ashton’s mind. Burning lakes of lava spewing from the chasms in the city streets and toppling buildings. The inescapable smell of burning flesh and falling ash. He shook his head, driving the images from his mind.

“Yes, well, they’ve been saying that for years, and they still seem just as strong.” Ashton glanced at the abbey. Metal gleamed in the sunlight, the old plaster walls having been reinforced with bracing after the quakes. The ever-present hum overhead bore into Ashton’s thoughts. “Did you hear anything more? About the disturbance?”

Backlit by the sun, his friend sat on the fence dividing the two grounds of the Order—those of books and those of blades. This time, the after training and meals, was the only time the two friends could meet. Their lives since Ashton’s move no longer intersected regularly.

“I know there’s no need for you to study, old chap,

but some of us do not remember everything we read but once. I don't have time for idle gossip at the moment."

"So...no, then." Ashton said and waited.

Tristan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, I did overhear the Chemistry Master whispering with another teacher about an incendiary going off during a 'peaceful assembly', but then he saw me and stopped talking."

"You really do need to learn to eavesdrop with more...stealth, Tristan."

"Risks are more your department," Tristan said with a smile. He held out the book to Ashton. "You're certain you're done with this?"

"I have learned to study quickly," Ashton answered.

"How do you manage to complete your studies while also training over there?" Tristan leaned against the fence wall. "After all these years they still argue over where you belong. With us or with them." Tristan nodded towards the novices sparring in the field.

"I am them," Ashton said and looked over the fence at the group of boys studying under a large tree. He glanced at his friend. "And also one of you."

"Doesn't that make you neither, then?" Tristan said and smiled, clearly teasing.

"Probably," Ashton said with a frown. He knew his benefactor had wanted Ashton to be a Man of Books, not a warrior. Had objected when told of Ashton's dispensation to be a part of both fraternities. What little Ashton saw of the man had tapered off as the years went by. If he had remained with his nose buried in books, would he have seen more of his benefactor? He wiped his greasy hands with a rag,

eyed the contraption on the ground, and sighed. "I should just give up on this."

"You say that every week at least," Tristan said and shut his book, jumping down to the grass to hand it to Ashton. "I do not think studying more will help at this point." He pulled a deck of cards from his robes. "What say you to a game? I have yet to win back my money from you, Wells."

Ashton smiled down at his longtime friend. Though both were entering their fifteenth year of age, Tristan stood a foot shorter than Ashton, though twice as wide. Years of reading inside dusty rooms had done that. His bald head was reddened by a new shave. Ashton's own overgrown locks and novice knight leather breeches and tunic made him out of place in the classes where everyone looked like Tristan.

"Another time, friend," Ashton answered. "I am due at the sparring gym soon."

A far off gong sounded, and Ashton reached for his sword belt, tying it around his tunic. Tristan shook his head, clearly troubled.

"What?"

"We will get our placement orders soon," Tristan said. "There is talk of me being sent to what is left of the south. Do you think I will see New Louisiana?"

"You should not have learned to speak French so well," Ashton said with a forced smile. "And that territory has been Texiana for two years now. The best of both states survived the disaster, I hear. If you do go, I should think you will be able to satisfy your sweet tooth between the beignets and pie."

"What if you and I are sent to separate parts of the union?" Tristan's earnest face sent a sliver of sorrow through Ashton's chest.

For nearly a decade, Tristan had remained Ashton's steadfast and only true friend. He patted Tristan on the back. "All will be well, friend. You will see."

Ashton strode through the tall grass towards the armory brooding.

Though the landscape had changed, Ashton's dilemma had not. Tristan's comment had hit home. Though Ashton held his own, even bested many of his peers, his position of one foot in each world made him an outcast in both. He had the respect of the other novice knights for his prowess with the blade and in combat, but not their camaraderie despite having lived with them since his tenth year. Ashton had caught the shared looks between them on more than one occasion when he'd offered an answer to a question that was on the more academic side.

And the boys who studied to be Men of Books were no different. Though they knew him as an equal intellectually, they feared him for the soldier he was being molded into.

The clang of blades met Ashton before he entered the sparring room. Novice knights grunted and swung their weapons powerfully at one another, hitting the strapped-on protective gear with muted thwacks. The smell of sweat and blood hit Ashton, and he moved to pull his tunic off to change. Strapping on the forearm guards, he spotted his practice partner and nodded.

The two clashed, blades *tinging* as they tore at each other with vigor. The others saw besting Ashton as a badge of honor, and this partner was no different. Though Ashton had the height advantage, the other boy had the brawn. Every blow of his weapon made Ashton's teeth rattle. A crowd formed, the others

abandoning their matches to watch. They shouted and clapped with every feign and blow the other boy landed. Out of the corner of his eye, Ashton spied Master Vega and another, unfamiliar figure watching.

Distracted, Ashton missed a block, and his partner's blade slashed his neck, drawing blood. The crowd stirred, shouting for a finish. Growing in confidence, his sparring partner broke form, lunging. Ashton parried, leapt backwards, hands out as the boy's blade missed his chest by a hairsbreadth. But Ashton was already countering. Pivoting quickly, he struck blindingly fast, coming in low and hitting his partner with an upward stroke that took the match. A rumble of groans and scattered claps signaled the end of the spectacle. Ashton shook with his partner and peeled off his gear.

"Wells," Vega called and motioned for Ashton to join them. The stranger, a tall man with alert bearing of a knight fixed him with shrewd pale eyes. "This is Vice Provost Hale," Vega said, motioning for the group of them to move further from the others. He turned to Hale. "This is the one I spoke to you about."

"Ah, Mr. Wells, is it?" Hale eyed Ashton before extending his hand. Ashton shook it, confused. "Well done there. The boy never had a chance. It seems Master Vega has not been exaggerating about his young protégé."

Ashton was at a loss. Vega thought that of him? Enough to tell someone outside this abbey? "Protégé, sir?"

"Top of your class in your studies as a novice of The Men of Books and also here, as a novitiate of the knights. Quite what we are looking for."

"Who is 'we'?" Ashton found his voice.

"Mr. Wells, you must understand that the more our world changes, adapts to the aftermath of the devastating quakes, the more the Order must as well. It always has been able to weather major changes in the world. And these strange times are no different."

"You've been chosen, Wells," Vega said. He held Ashton's gaze. "For a most important calling."

"I do not understand." Ashton felt a shift in his gut. As if everything was about to change.

"The Order of the Sword and Scroll has survived all these centuries for one reason only, Mr. Wells," Hale answered. "Information. Knowledge of the secrets and inner workings of kingdoms and governments is power. The Order wields that power like no other, but they have to acquire it to use it. There is an elite squadron of knights. One which few know about and even fewer are chosen for. They are formidable in every sense of the word."

"And you want me?" Ashton stared at Hale with disbelief.

"From what I have seen and heard, yes, Wells. There is a new threat rising. One I fear it may undo all that we have fought to restore in this country. Our strongholds in Europe may be threatened as well." Hale reached into the pocket of his cloak and produced a silver conscription medallion. One Ashton had only seen boys with noble blood receive. "These men, ones like you, with unusual backgrounds and talents, are The Order's most feared weapon."

"Are you saying..." A slow dawning spread through Ashton, and his heart rammed in his chest.

"A spy," Vega said quietly, his gaze going to the other boys and then back. "Ashton, you are going to be a spy for The Order."

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The Tremblers

Charlotte Blackburn—a beautiful, intelligent, and gifted tinkerer—lives in a cloistered world of wealth and privilege beneath the Electric Tesla Dome that shields survivors of The Great Calamity. But when her father is abducted, and a strange sickness starts transforming men into vicious monsters, she discovers that technology is no protection at all.

Ashton Wells has a dire mission: Secure Colonel Blackburn and deliver his research to The Order of the Sword and Scroll. But the plan goes awry, and he is left with nothing but the colonel's daughter who has a target on her back and is willing to stop at nothing to rescue her father—including handing over to the enemy the only means to stop the monstrous plague.

Branded as traitors, Ashton and Charlotte brave the treacherous floating sky ports of Outer City to hunt down the elusive inventor, Nikola Tesla—the only person able to activate the strange device that harbors the secret to their salvation.

With the government closing in, a rebellion brewing in

the streets, and terrifying Tremblers attacking the innocent, the two must work together to stop their fragile world from crumbling once more into destruction.

Wind Reapers

Charlotte Blackburn—hero, hunted, the unwitting symbol of a dark rebellion—she thwarted the deadly intent of the treacherous Order of the Sword and Scroll, but at a shattering cost. Now, she fights to survive among a tribe of fierce Wind Reapers who troll the wasteland aboard massive metal walkers. But a new storm is brewing and Charlotte is once again the linchpin in a deadly plan.

Sebastian Riley has one goal: Help the citizens of his floating Outer City to survive the Ashen Croup, a terrible affliction that drowns victims in their own lungs. But help comes in the form of the infamous Lady Blackburn, a woman wanted for treason who is determined to run headlong into destruction to prevent a coming war—even if it means reaching out to those who want her dead.

Pursued by the shadowy Order and hunted by the furious Reaper clan, Riley and Charlotte brave the monstrous hordes of decaying Tremblers and the terrors of the Wasteland to stop the bloodshed and secure a mysterious calculating engine—a device that can bring about the destruction of an entire nation.

With brutal forces gathering against the unsuspecting

citizens inside the Tesla domes, a vicious scientist intent on capturing Charlotte for his experiments and the whole of the country in deadly peril, one of them must make a sacrifice too terrible to comprehend.

Chasm Walkers

Charlotte Blackburn—Legend, traitor, the Order’s worst nightmare —she escaped the torturous experiments by the villainous Viceroy Arcibo, but is forever changed. Now, she battles to retain her humanity as she fights to survive among the wild sky settlers of Outer City. But an old threat emerges and Charlotte must choose between revenge and redemption.

Ashton Wells has one purpose: Stop Europe’s Coalition forces from slaughtering the citizens of The Peaceful Union to prevent the spread of the Trembling Sickness. But his plan to overthrow The Order from within is thwarted at every turn by his ex-love, Charlotte Blackburn. A woman he betrayed. His treachery resulted in her capture and now she will stop at nothing to destroy the Order – even if it means all-out war with Ashton.

Hunted by the brutal Viceroy and struggling to regain memories of the past two years wiped by The Order, Charlotte must fight to master the devices and startling abilities thrust upon her as a result of her capture. As Charlotte and Ashton endeavor to discover the real reason for what was done to her, they uncover an unfathomable plan against the most innocent of outer City’s citizens.

With ruthless enemies mounting against the struggling citizens of Outer City, Charlotte must brave the terrors of the churning sea and face her darkest truth to retrieve a strange submersible machine—a device that may very well be humanity’s last hope of survival.

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