



SEBASTIAN RILEY

RILEY'S RISE

A BLACKBURN CHRONICLES
FREE READ

RAQUEL BYRNES

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Raquel Byrnes

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Riley's Rise

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Cover Art by *Pelican Ventures, LLC*

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Publishing History

First Watershed Edition, 2018

Electronic ISBN 978-1-5223-0115-8

Published in the United States of America

Red River, Louisiana - April 1864

The sound of cannon blasts roared across the river and sent the plank walls of the coding shack shaking like leaves in a storm. Sebastian Riley winced, blinking at the dirt that flew out of cracks and crevices at his bare feet. He fought with the unwieldy broom. It towered over his eight-year-old frame as he swept the planks just outside and listened to the furiously fast bleeps of the telegraph operator inside. They seemed closer, the Union, and his gut burned. He'd lost his Pa to them, their home to them, and there they were just over the hill fighting to take more. Another volley of blasts rolled over the water. They were nearly to the river. He wiped the sweat from his palms on his threadbare breeches. Licking his lips, his gaze darted to the road. His Ma was ill, unable to leave the bed. How would they run if the Union made it across Red River? Did they kill children...he heard they didn't care who they shot or slashed? Letters from his father before he died told of vicious treatment of plain folk by both sides. War did not breed mercy. Not much did, as far as he could tell.

"Bastian," the telegraph operator, Archer, shouted from inside the shack. "Do you see him yet, boy?"

"No, sir." Sebastian squinted at the smoke from the cannons. It rose in bluish gray clouds, the smell of gunpowder heavy on the late afternoon wind. Sebastian wrinkled his nose, putting his hand to shield

his eyes, he searched the sky. "Nothing."

"Well, keep a sharp eye," Archer admonished. He poked his head out, spotted Sebastian and rolled his eyes. "Boy, why are you bothering to sweep?"

"It's what you pay me for," Sebastian said and flinched as a blast from across the water shook more leaves onto the small roof and plank floor. He blinked the dirt from his eyes, coughing.

"The world is falling around your ears and you're worried about that?" Archer looked at him with disbelief. "What are you still doing here, anyhow? You should be at home, clearing out." He nodded out to the river. "Those waters will run red soon. Best be gone by then."

"We need..." Sebastian fought against the panic in his chest. It squeezed so hard he could barely speak. "M-my Ma, Archer. Doc says to move her I gotta get something for her pain—" his voice broke and he turned, heat rising up his neck.

Stop being such a weakling, Sebastian chided himself. What would his pa think?

Archer nodded solemnly, his gaze going past Sebastian to the road to town. He sighed and then reached into his own pocket, pulling out a few coins. He shook his hand at Sebastian, urging him to take them.

"I can watch for the balloon man myself. You go on, now."

Licking his lips, Sebastian took the money, his hands shaking. "I will pay you back, Archer. I promise."

Explosions sounded across the river. Low rumbles grew with every second. The noise pulled both of their gazes to the opposite bank. Dust and smoke cleared on

the breeze revealing a wall of men, tangled in knots. They fought and fell at the water's edge. The sand stained with crimson. Bodies rolled down the bank and splashed in the current. Gray and blue uniforms tumbled together and floated down the river. Death did not seem to care on whose side they fought. A stray bullet slammed into the wall next to Sebastian, and he raised a hand to his head to the streak of white-hot pain that seared across his forehead. His fingers came back bloody. He stared at Archer, unable to move.

"Go, Bastian!" Archer shoved him away and dove back into the shack. "They're almost here!"

Sebastian turned on his heels, dropped the broom, and ran. The sharp crack of rifles to his left spurred him faster. Eyes burning with tears, his breath coming in ragged pulls, he tore through the brush ignoring the cuts to his feet as he barreled towards town. The streets were nearly empty. Women, with torn dresses and dirty faces stacked belongings into wagons and gathered their children. Men and boys hitched spooked horses, shouting back and forth at one another with fearful voices. Sebastian ignored them all. They wouldn't help. They never did.

He passed empty shop fronts and busted windows, but he didn't stop. Not until he got to the chemist's. Hardley's stood at the end of the row of stores on the main road. Sebastian slammed into the door, expecting it to open. Dazed, he stepped back, trying the handle again with a desperate cry.

"No," he pressed his face to the glass, his heart ramming. "You said you would wait!"

He scurried to the large picture window, his breath fogging the glass as he peered inside. On the

shelf, near the shiny register were bottles of medicine. He knew right from wrong, and yet all those lessons at his father's knee about honor did nothing to help his mother right now. The glass rattled, vibrating from a distant blast. It was all he needed. Searching the ground, Sebastian spied an old chair resting against the wall. He ran over, raised it over his head, and hurled it at the window. He leapt over the broken glass on the floor, scaled the counter, and grabbed what he needed. Tossing the money on the counter, he spied a pair of boots on the floor behind the register. They were big. Likely Hardley's. But his bloody footprints across the store made him act despite his guilt. Patting his pockets, he took out the one thing he had left. The medal that came home instead of his father. He held it for a moment, swallowing against the ache in his throat, then placed it next to the coins. Sebastian shoved his feet into the boots and raced off, never looking back.

Faster now without the pain of rocks slicing his skin, he spied the roof of his house through the trees. Almost there.

"Ma," Sebastian shouted as he burst through the front door. "Ma, we have to go!"

"Bastian," his mother's weak voice sounded from the back room and he went to her, his gaze back out the door at the rise of smoke over the trees. "What's the matter, son?" Her cough sent shivers up his back as did the scarlet at her lips afterwards. Her long hair, auburn like his own, hung limp and dirty at her shoulders. Her green eyes swam with pain.

"The Blues are almost to the river." He hurried to her bedside and fought to uncork the bottle. Handing it to her, he threw some things into a satchel, but he

didn't really know what they needed. Tears threatened again. He should know this. He should know what to do. "Please, Ma."

"Where would we go, Bastian?" Mary Riley struggled to sit up, suffering through a bout of coughing for her trouble. "N-no way to get there..."

"What do you mean?" Sebastian stopped packing, his gaze landing on his mother's fallen countenance. Her eyes flitted to the door. "What happened?"

"They took them." His mother moved to hide the red mark on her forearm with her sleeve, but Sebastian saw it and his blood boiled.

He dropped the satchel and ran outside, clumping with the big boots to the barn. The horses were gone. The wagon missing. He broke down then. Sinking to the dirt, he hugged his knees, desperate cries tearing from his small chest. Trembling, he stared at the smoke as it moved on the breeze.

"I'm sorry, Pa," Sebastian's voice cracked. "I – I can't...I don't know what to..."

The sound of hooves startled him, and he jumped to his feet. They were coming and the thought of what the Union soldiers might do to him, to his mother, sent his whole body to shaking. His gaze snapped to the house. Anger and desperation and helplessness burned in his belly, and he ran for the desk in the front room. His father's pistol rested in the top drawer, secretly loaded by his own hands a few days before when the first of the cannon blasts woke him before dawn's light. His Pa had showed him how to shoot before he left. He swallowed hard, taking in a shaky breath.

"Bastian, what are you doing?" His mother moved within the room. Her dressing gown fluttering just at the corner of his vision as she struggled to stand.

He tried to cinch the holster's belt at his waist, but it slipped past his too small hips to the floor with a jangle of leather and buckles. Staring down at his feet, his knees shook, but he ignored that. Picking up the pistol with both hands he kicked the belt aside.

"Just stay inside, Ma," Sebastian said with more confidence than he felt. He squared his shoulders, cocked the hammer back like he'd been taught, and forced himself to move forward. The thud of his boots gave him comfort. He sounded big. He sounded tough.

The approaching hoof sounds stopped in a cloud of dirt and whinnying horses just inside the edge of the woods. Unable to see clearly, he thought a single figure climbed to the rear of the wagon. He was struggling with something.

Sebastian spied across the barrel of his pistol, fighting to keep it from shaking. "W-who goes there?" He tried in his deepest voice.

The figure froze, just as the view cleared. A man clad in strange clothing caught sight of Sebastian and adjusted his spectacles.

"You there," the man shouted. "Can you assist me, please? It is a bit of an urgent matter."

Sebastian blinked, unsure of what to do. He approached slowly, gun still raised. The man was not a soldier. He wore no blues. Instead, the brown clothing did not look like anything he'd ever seen. Thick with pockets and odd metal fasteners, it looked too thick to move in properly.

"Friend or Foe?" Sebastian shouted, sure he'd heard that somewhere.

The man stopped fussing with the canvas cover and stared down at Sebastian with his hands on his hips. Scrawny mustache downturned, he squinted

through spectacles.

"How old are you, son?"

"Old enough to hit you dead in the heart," Sebastian said evenly and raised the gun a fraction for emphasis. "And I've got plenty of practice shootin vermin faster than you so bear that in mind, mister."

"Whoa," the man said as he raised his hands in surrender. He nodded back over to the house. "I don't mean you or your mother any harm. I just got a bit turned around back there."

Sebastian chanced a glance back at the house. His mother stood at the threshold, her hands over her mouth as she stared with wide-eyed fear back at him. She swayed on her feet, weak. He snapped his attention back to the stranger, careful to keep him in his sites.

"Go back inside, Ma," he yelled over his shoulder, unwilling to look away again. He hoped she listened, but didn't know for sure. Sebastian eyed the man's wagon. He could get his ma safe on that thing. "What do you want?"

"I am looking for the dam."

"You talking about that one they made to stop the ironclads from coming up from Shreveport?"

"Yes!" The man said excitedly. "Bailey's Bridge or something like that."

"That's on the other side." Sebastian remembered climbing a tree to watch the construction.

"Of what?"

"Of the bayou," Sebastian said. He pointed back behind the stranger's wagon with his pistol's barrel. "The river, as you Northers call it. Its across the water where they're fighting."

"Oh, no..." The man's hands flew to his cheeks. "I

am supposed to be over there. They need me to go up over there.”

Sebastian studied the man. He didn't move like a soldier. He reminded him of his school teacher. Right down to the round glasses on the end of his nose. Letting his guard down a bit, Sebastian walked towards the wagon, rounding on it. The stranger bent down, pulled on the covering while muttering. Then Sebastian saw it. The crisscross ropes of a balloon. His breath caught and he raised his weapon, leveling it.

“You *are* a soldier. You're one of those balloon riders.” Sebastian's arms shook with the rush of anger and adrenaline. “I should shoot holes in that contraption and you right now!”

“What?” the man tumbled backwards onto the cover. Spectacles askew, he stammered. “What did I do? What did I do?”

Tears streaked down his face, but Sebastian didn't care. He could barely breathe. He could barely see straight.

“My Pa wrote home about the likes of you. H-he said you spied down on the fighting and you told Union soldiers where to go. You helped them kill my Pa!” His finger twitched. He could take the wagon. He could save his Ma.

The ground shook. Rifle fire cracking much closer than Sebastian had realized. The man jerked up suddenly, tackling him and yanking the gun from his hands with a triumphant shout.

“How dare you—” the gun tumbled from the man's hands, and he scrambled for it. Sebastian stared at him with disbelief. The weapon in hand again, the man stood and adjusted his spectacles with a push of his finger. “Well then.” The man cleared his throat.

"What is this all about, child? You should not be here. I was told this town was emptied of its residents."

"Who told you that, huh?" Sebastian said, and spit dirt from his mouth. Embarrassment and anger emboldening him. "Go on, then. Shoot me."

The man blinked, as if startled.

"I wouldn't shoot a child!" he dropped the gun to the wagon cover. "Of all the nonsense." He looked around as if noticing where he was for the first time. "I need to get to an open area. Is there a field of some sort around here?"

"Not telling you anything." Sebastian glared at the man, unsure of what to do. He seemed stranger by the minute. A glance at his door told him his mother was safe at least for the time being.

The stranger turned, tilted his head as he looked at Sebastian. A tiny crack marred the corner of one of the man's lenses.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot, young man," the stranger said as he suddenly smiled. "I am Professor Kane, of the Atlanta Kanes?"

Sebastian raised one brow. As if who this man's kin was made any difference out here with the bullets flying and the houses burning. A thunderous blast tore across the sky and they both dove for the floor of the wagon. Dirt and debris rained down stinging Sebastian's eyes. His heart rammed in his chest. They were getting closer.

"Please, boy. We're running out of time." Clearing his throat, Professor Kane continued, "While it is true that I am an aeronaut for the Union, I mean you no harm, son. I am merely—"

"Don't call me son," Sebastian interrupted, standing on shaky legs and dusting the dirt from his

shirt. He flinched at a volley of rifle blasts, his breath catching. "I got a Pa."

"Y-yes, of course," Professor Kane said and frowned. "And now your Ma is sick as well?" Sebastian blinked, unsure if it was a guess on Kane's part or if it was that clear his mother was deathly ill. The professor straightened up, glancing around the land, his gaze lingering on the smoke hovering over the trees.

"So, what if she is?"

When he turned back, Kane's expression was different. Harder, somehow. "It's time to make a choice, then. Right now." He held Sebastian's gaze, pulling back the cover of the wagon to reveal the balloon material. "What are you willing to do to save her?"

"What?" Sebastian glared at the hated balloon, his stomach churning. "What're you sayin'?"

"You help me," Kane nodded towards the river, to the soldier's bodies bobbing in the ripples, and then back at Sebastian's home. "I help you."

Sebastian blinked, his mind working. "But..."

"I guess you have to decide where your heart truly lies, son." Kane hopped to the ground and pulled on the balloon material, yanking it out of the wagon. "Your family or your fellow man?"

Sebastian's gaze went to the wall of blue smoke floating across the river. Explosions flared within, lighting up against the dying sunlight. He could smell the blood in the air, taste the gunpowder on his lips. And then he flashed on a similar moment a year ago.

It was his first hunt without this father. Something was killing his mother's chickens. He'd found blood and feathers in the pen for the third day in row. With

his father at war and his mother sick, those hens were the only thing keeping them from starving. So, he set out at dawn to find it, convinced it was gator pushed up from the river by the ironclads delivering supplies from Shreveport. It was a cold morning. Barely light, his breath coming in pale puffs against a still dark sky. Tired from waiting for the predator from his perch in a tree at the edge of the property for the better part of the night, Sebastian had wanted to turn back, when he heard shuffling in the tall grass. His rifle came up in one smooth motion like his father had shown him. He followed the sound, tracking across his barrel, when a form came into view. Squat and lumbering, Sebastian gasped, surprised at the sight of a dog. A mongrel belonging to his neighbor up the way, an old alligator hunter by the name of Owens. The dog's name was Stubby, on account of the one chewed off ear. Sebastian had played fetch with Stubby, walked alongside it on hunts with his Pa and Owens. Sebastian watched it stalk the coop. Going down on its belly, nose sniffing the air, a low growl vibrating from its throat, Stubby made his way to the side of the house. Poor dog was bone skinny, covered in sores, and shook from snout to tail on weak legs. The dog was all the old man had left in the world. Hesitating, Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut. He pushed down the ache in his throat, the sick of his stomach, and shot Stubby. Later, he buried the dog. Standing over the fresh mound of dirt under a shade tree, he stared, considering what he'd done. Sweaty, dirty, and exhausted, Sebastian decided it didn't feel like what he did was absolutely right, but right enough. He did what he'd had to. He'd protected his own.

Kane called his name, snapping Sebastian from the

memory. The crisscross net of the balloon peeked up at him from the wagon. When you stripped it all away, all the talk of sides, of rights, and loyalty...what had his father truly told him to do?

Keep her safe, son.

"Well, boy?" Kane adjusted the strange metal clasps on his uniform.

"I know a clearing. You'll be safe while you get this...contraption ready. But first, we get my Ma safe." Sebastian grabbed the gun from atop the canvas and shoved it into the waistband of his pants. "Then we do what needs doing."

1874

In the western forests of Africa, Sebastian crouched with his fellow soldiers in the ragged tent huddled at the very edge of an ongoing war between Europe and native Ashanti Kingdom. Over gold, no less, Sebastian grumbled to himself as he breathed softly into a harmonica. The sound could scarcely be heard, but it gave him comfort. It reminded him of home. He heard the unsteady footfalls of Captain Collins just outside and nudged the fellow next to him in warning. The card game disappeared a moment before their superior pulled open the flaps of the tent.

"Riley!" Collins bellowed as he stuck his head in, brow sweaty and covered in soot. "You ready?"

"Always," Sebastian answered with a crack in his voice. Although the youngest by at least a few years, his tall wiry frame and stubble belied his age. Sent as part of a secret envoy to get a handle on the rising tension between the British and the gold coast tribe, he

had been surprised to find himself in rough forest terrain and not the sands he'd always associated with Africa. Sebastian shoved the harmonica in his pocket, grabbed the spy scope, and hooked his arm through a bundle of looped rope. "Is it up?"

When he stood, the man next to him, another private, did too. Kiril was bald, hard-eyed, and moved with the attention of a man who'd discovered more than one nasty surprise down dark roads. A Yankee boy with countless scars on his hands and arms who chose being a soldier over factory work. Sebastian did not blame him in the least.

"You're sure about this?" Kiril intoned, pushing a field knife into the holster at his hip. "You done this before?"

"Easier than riding on the back of a gator," Sebastian said with his easy drawl, and crawled out of the tent. The heat hit him then, from the raging fire blazing out of a dug-out hole in the ground. A few men struggled with the inflating material of a large balloon as a third attempted to steady the shifting basket that hovered a few feet above the ground. "Only crashed a few times."

"I have half a mind to stop this foolery all together. If the good Lord had wanted us up in the sky he would have given us all wings," Collins grumbled.

"He gave us brains to come up with this..." Kiril muttered, glanced at the guy next to the basket and sighed. "Well he gave them to *some* of us. Not sure if it's a good thing or not, though."

Collins crossed his arms, staring askance at the air balloon. "You get up, you get what you need, and you get down before they spot you."

"Like I told the old men back home," Sebastian

said as he climbed gingerly into the unsteady basket. "We can see the whole chess board from up there."

"Not really proper, Riley," Kiril muttered. "Calling the generals old guys."

A legacy soldier, Kiril loved the military. Of all the shenanigans Sebastian got caught up in, and there had been plenty, Kiril only ever objected to not respecting the proper order of the hierarchy. Sebastian told himself he shouldn't tease him. But still...

"Well you tell me," Riley tossed the coil of rope and a sketchpad in the basket. "Are they young?"

Kiril opened his mouth to answer. "Riley—"

"No, but, those geezers believed in you enough to send all us fools with you out here," Collins said as he walked up. He tossed the last of what Sebastian suspected was mostly bourbon in his canteen back in one long swallow. He hitched his pants up, nodding at the camp. "So, a little respect, huh, private?"

Sebastian smiled easily. "'Course, captain. Anything for you."

Collins rolled his eyes, motioning to the soldiers flanking the basket to start the ascent. Sebastian reached for the guide rope but one of the soldiers, Sergeant Elby, held it out of his grasp. Narrowing his gaze, Sebastian's other hand slipped to the sheath at his hip as he took measure of the man. They'd been traveling to get out here for a few weeks and it was clear he was not taken with Sebastian at all. Elby was doughy and ill-suited to infantry. Sebastian suspected he did particularly well in environments that contained china cups and doilies, but Elby was his superior, technically. Best to let him speak. He had something on his mind he clearly needed to share. Sebastian put his hands out, shrugging. "We have a problem, Elby?"

"*Sergeant*, to you, private." Elby pulled the rope, tilting the basket and throwing Sebastian off balance. He glanced at Collins over by the tents before he spoke. "The Union teach you all of this hogwash? Heard you turned-coat and worked with that crazy scientist for a while."

"He was a kid, stupid," Kiril said from the corner.

"You watch your mouth," Elby snapped. "This whole thing—"

Collins burped loudly from the edge of the clearing. He was leaning on a tree as if it might fall without him. Kiril shifted on his feet.

"It's alright, Kiril. Old wounds heal slowly, don't they, *Sergeant*?" Sebastian said not taking his eyes off Elby. "No one walked away from that war without shedding a little blood. I was lucky, my mother still breathes that sweet Louisiana air. Not many were as fortunate." Sebastian knew about Elby's brothers. The youngest of four boys, he was the only one who hadn't died in a uniform. At least not yet. Elby searched Sebastian's face, then grunted, backing off.

"Go on, then," Elby said and let go. "Try not to fall out of the sky again."

Sebastian saw Kiril relax out of the corner of his eye and he smiled as he ascended. Elby was not wrong, he thought as he rose out of the heated, foul air and tilted his head back. The cool of the night washed over him and he sucked it in loving the sharp sting of it in his nose. The treetops brushed the bottom of his basket, then fell away as he climbed. Black balloon, black basket, black rope. Nearly invisible, he hovered against the dark sky like a specter. Below him they put out the fire and the cloak of night enveloped him. Adjusting his controls, regulating the heat, he closed

the metal grate. Leaning on his palms at the edge of the basket, he surveyed the landscape. Sebastian thought about how he'd come to this place in life. Thanks to his father's boating and Kane's floating, he could pilot anything they threw at him, just not always on the first try. Or the fourth. But he could do it when others couldn't or chose not to.

Kiril's words from the other day struck him. Sebastian had been bragging about as much. How he was some sort of visionary. He'd said it as a joke, but his friend had looked at him with a gaze so full of sorrow that it made Sebastian pause.

They never have long or easy lives. Nor do those close to them.

Pennsylvania, 1875

Sebastian strode down the boardwalk planks and peered through the shop windows as he passed them. He spotted another shop with mechanica and devices he'd never seen before. They were popping up everywhere he'd gone since he got back.

The smell of warm taffy and popcorn made his mouth water and he adjusted the sack on his back. He wasn't sure he should be here. Not after how he left. Sebastian cleared his throat, adjusting the brim of his hat down shadowing his eyes. He glanced around, blinking the sting away. His thumb bothered the end of the letter sticking out of his coat and he pulled it from the pocket of the long dark duster he wore. Big when he won it in a card game a six months ago in Africa, it was starting to fit just fine lately. It was the first good coat he'd ever given himself. Well, taken for

himself, but still. His mother's tinkling laugh floated from somewhere over by the other shops and Sebastian froze. He scanned the people walking, the ones talking in the doorways, looking for her auburn hair. Blood pulsed in his ears and his mouth went dry. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe he stopped looking too soon...

"She wouldn't be here and not tell me, son," the professor's voice snapped him back. "She's not out there. I've looked. I look everywhere I go."

Sebastian turned, faced him, his breath not coming.

Professor Kane stood in the doorway of an office front shop. The sign overhead read *Kane Aeronautics*. He was a little older, but the spectacles at the end of his nose were the same. As was the mustache. A little grayer, but there the still.

"Kane," Sebastian walked over, hand extended. "I-I got your letter."

Professor Kane clicked his tongue in annoyance, grabbed Sebastian, and pulled him into a hearty hug. He held Sebastian at arm's length and nodded. "You've grown. Quite a bit. I'm looking up at you now, actually." His eyes crinkled at the corners and the knot in Sebastian's chest loosened just a tad.

"I was hoping you would find your way to me," Kane said and motioned for Sebastian to follow.

The ground vibrated, softly at first, barely perceptible, but it grew. They always did. Sebastian grabbed onto the railing of the boardwalk just as the tremor hit. Shop windows shook, some cracking at the corners. Door bells jangled in a disjointed ode to the quake. A murmur, just below panic, spread through the folks trying to brace themselves.

"Just hang on," Kane said, steadying himself in the

doorway of the shop. "I-It won't get too bad."

"Yeah, s-sure." Sebastian supposed Kane's reassuring glance was supposed to make him feel better, but delivered through askew spectacles and rattling teeth, it really did not help at all. Gritting his teeth, Sebastian rode it out and hoped his heart didn't just clatter right out of his chest, it was racing so fast. His hat fell to the planks and he stepped on the brim with his boot to keep it from sliding away. The trembling died away, the ground once again settling to stillness.

"See, that wasn't so bad."

"Not yet." Sebastian bent, scooped up his hat and shoved it back on. The shop signs swung on their hinges in squeaky protest and he reached up and stopped Kane's.

The inside looked like a replica of what Sebastian remembered from Kane's office from when he was a kid. Same desk. Same smell of ink and dust. His gaze stopped on the professor's desk. A pink cameo dangled on a small stand under a glass dome. The wood of one of side of the base was darker in one place. As if someone touched it absently, but regularly. The familiar locket gave the room gravity, made his throat tight, but Sebastian didn't say anything.

Piles of sketches and rolled up design prints littered a nearby table. On the wall, a couple of frames displayed newspaper pages. Articles about Kane's balloon rides with drawings depicting aero craft hovering safely over parks while ladies in flower hats waved down at their friends. He'd talked about a new kind of entertainment for common folk. A novelty they might pay for. It had been his dream to find a good use for his balloons. One that did not breed loss. Sebastian

took his hat off, touching the brim to the last framed article. "Looks like you did it."

"Funny you might say that," Kane said and looked at Sebastian over the rim of his spectacles curiously. "Do you truly think that?"

"Well, you do seem to be doing well here."

"No, not that." Kane waved a hand at the framed articles dismissively. "The part where you thought the quakes weren't bad...yet."

The sudden shadow that passed behind the professor's eyes made Sebastian uneasy.

"I suppose. The papers *do* say they are dying down. At least the papers still being made. They say these smaller quakes are just sort of a way to stop bigger ones but..." Sebastian shrugged. "They don't feel that way though."

"They aren't." Kane pulled a coat from a rack behind his desk. "Come with me."

Sebastian rode next to the professor on the seat of the wagon on their way to what Kane would only say was, 'a project' he'd been working on. They'd settled into silence after the first hour which suited Sebastian. Every so often the professor would click his tongue at the horses. Sebastian watched him, his thoughts tangled from fatigue. Relieved as he was, he didn't quite understand Kane's welcome. And not knowing where he stood or why made him nervous.

"Why did you write, Kane?" Sebastian asked finally. "I got your letter before I left Africa so it was not because you had heard about my...about Terrebonne. Quakes hadn't sunk it yet, so why write? I hadn't heard from anyone in over a year. Then a cryptic letter asking me to get home as quick as I could."

"And what took you so long?" Kane said, a flash in his gaze the only anger he'd shown so far.

Riley sat back, crossing his arms. "You know that would have been deserting, right? Going AWOL?"

"No, I did not know that." Kane snapped the reins a little. "I thought you could visit. I-I didn't know you were so far."

"No one did." Sebastian had watched the road away from town go from the occasional side street with a few homes to almost nothing for miles. Now as they headed into what appeared to be the edge of a forest, he rubbed the cold from his arms and pulled his coat tighter. The constant sway of the wagon was making him sleepy after all that travel. "Where are we going?"

"I have a place out by the river."

"You never answered me. Why write? After everything."

Kane blew out a breath and the cold air caught it and turned it to vapor that flew past them. "I got a letter in the mail from the patent office. Apparently, I filed a number of new patents while in Africa?"

Sebastian's face burned hot. "I didn't know they did that." Kane didn't look at Sebastian and for that he was grateful.

"The modifications were yours. The coloring, the specialized ballast, we'd talked about them. You didn't need to put my name on them."

"They're still your ideas," Sebastian murmured. "Just cause I used them to runaway to the Army doesn't mean I forgot that." An aero pilot pitching surveillance and the technical know-how to help design a means to do it was an easy sell, despite his age at the time. He looked older than he was, and no one

looked at his paperwork too closely. Not with what he was able to do. That he never mentioned who taught him worked to his advantage. No one wanted to remember the war, much less those involved in it. Sebastian swallowed against a lump in his throat. "I should never have left."

"You were angry." Kane led them down a side path cut deep into the woods.

"I was selfish." Sebastian's voice broke. He wiped angrily at the corner of his eye with his coat sleeve.

His mother had loved Kane, but to a boy who'd lost a father he saw as a hero, who saw Kane as a reason for his own betrayal of all that his father died for, that was unacceptable. He didn't see that Kane made her well. Made her smile. He only felt anger and guilt and so Sebastian and his mother had fought constantly. And finally, he'd fled to another continent. That had been the breaking point for her. She wrote that she wanted him back. That he was too young to have left home. She would be waiting, she had written, even though he'd never written back. He was stubborn and hurt. He thought he'd had time.

When the waves took most of Louisiana, his mother had been in the house he grew up in instead of the city with Kane. He'd come home after the first ones hit following the quakes and wandered for weeks looking for anything that used to be where it was. Rot and ruin. That is all that was left.

The dappled sunlight faded as the sun lowered in the sky.

"I should keep looking," Sebastian said after a while. "Lots of people still showing up out in Texas."

Kane did not answer. Instead, he nodded silently, not arguing. He never did. He let you realize he was

right all on your own. Even if it took years. Through the trees, in the pale of the waning light, a metal building came into view in the distance. Surrounded by dark shapes, Sebastian recognized the shape of aero ships of various designs hovering a few feet from the ground. The tethers creaked in the slight breeze as the bulbous crafts drifted first one way and then another, but it was the muffled banging that peaked his interest. He knew the noise a build made. Tools, voices, clattering and cursing.

“What is this?” Sebastian asked as they stopped, and he jumped from the wagon while Kane tied off the horses.

“This may very well be the only means we have left to survive.” Kane motioned for him to follow and led him into the wide mouth of the warehouse. Inside, gas lamps lit up a crew working on what Sebastian thought wildly, was a lighthouse. Or the beginnings of one. At least thirty workers crawled on the sweeping tower. The sounds of their labor deafening in the metal confines. Sparks lit up a dark corner of the warehouse and Sebastian let his gaze travel the curved edge of a giant propeller blade.

“Professor,” Sebastian breathed, his drawl thicker with stress. This felt important. It felt frantic. “I think you best tell me what’s what.”

Kane wrung his hands. “I’ve done well with the balloons. But after I came back up here. I needed to find some direction. I was lost, truly.”

“I know that,” Sebastian intoned. “I know that it was my fault.”

“This is about more than you and...*Mary*,” Kane said her name in a whisper. “What you said about things getting worse, Bastian. That is what I am

preparing for."

"You think the quakes will continue?"

"There are consortiums of scientists and others. We confer and share findings since the first of the tremors began. We are all in agreement despite what is coming from the government's 'experts'. So, we came up with an idea."

Kane led him into a side office where a table contained a miniature model of a small town only it was flanked on four sides by lighthouse structures. They had large rotors on top instead of a lamp. Sebastian flicked it with his finger and sent it spinning. The model of the town was arranged in a square with an empty space in the center. Key buildings connected to the towers by cables. Sebastian tried to envision what this would look like to scale.

"You think they're wrong," Sebastian said while standing halfway in the doorway, his head craning back to watch a few men scale the rim of the tower. It touched the ceiling of the warehouse and looked only about halfway built. "The government."

"It is not just men like me, those considered on the fringes of science. It is great minds. Recognized men in their field who are starting to at least listen to the data."

"Which is sayin'?"

"The devastation is everywhere. Thousands are dead already in the center territories. With thousands more missing...as you know," he said, his face going red. "We all agree, the quakes are going to get worse, but more importantly, they are going to spread."

Sebastian's stomach flopped. "You're sure?"

"Like a crack in a mirror," Kane said forming a circle with his thumbs and fingers and pulling them

apart. "Or a spider web. Multiple fractures in many different directions radiating out from the epicenter. Until, we believe, a massive quake or series of quakes ripple outward to the edges of the boarders."

"Of the Dakota territories?" Kane felt a spark from the workers landed a bit too close to his face and he put his hat back on, lowering the brim to shield his eyes.

"No," Kane rounded the desk pointing to a pile of graphs. "No, Bastian, you are not understanding. The quakes will spread throughout *all* of the United States. Ocean to ocean. We are breaking apart and there's only one place we can go."

"You want to go up?" Sebastian shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around what Kane was saying. "For how long?"

"Permanently." Kane held his gaze. "Thousands are dead, with more to come and already there are too many to bury. The fires are going around the clock out in—"

"Stop," Sebastian said and rubbed his eyes with heels of his hands. "Why do you want me here? Your letter said you had a favor to ask of me. Something too important to ask other than face to face. Well, I'm here. What is all of this about?"

"Bastian, the ground is crumbling around our ankles with who knows what is happening to the oceans. There is no other option."

"But we can't possibly do right by thousands. Not at this pace."

"This is only one of a dozen warehouses," Kane said and showed him a ledger. Dates and amounts written in neat columns. "I am not sure how much time we have, but we are working at a breakneck space."

And it is not just me. There are others who are putting their money and their trust in this idea. There are botanists and engineers all preparing for the inevitable."

"Scientists. Experts. I don't understand, Kane. What do you want from me?" Sebastian put his hands out to his sides. "You want me to grab a hammer, I will."

"That is not what you're meant to do here."

"Then please, enlighten me. Because all of this is..." Sebastian looked around. "It's making me real uneasy, Kane."

"This city, out of the reach of quakes and waves will hopefully be a haven," Kane began.

"It won't be." Sebastian's hand went subconsciously to his revolver at his hip. His father's belt. His father's gun. "Not with what I know about people. Especially desperate ones. This town will be out of the reach of the government on the ground. Out of reach for any help, most likely as well. It'll be worse than mining territories. Like the outer cities of the dark continent. Under the rule of the strongest, those that can survive out there."

"That is why I hoped you would come." Kane twisted the end of his mustache. He paced, gazing out the door small window of the office out onto the warehouse floor. "It is, I believe, what you were made for, Bastian."

"This floating town?" Sebastian took another step into the office. He shook his head, unsure of his own thoughts. "You want to send me up there? To do what? Fly it?"

"It doesn't need flying per se. It is designed to float in place." Kane put his hand up to stop Sebastian's

protest. "But, it will be a wild place. A place of despairing people. Frightened people."

"Sounds better than what you're predicting will happen down here."

"There is no predicting anything. Not anymore. Only an attempt to survive it."

"There's no end to what broken people will do to each other." Sebastian leaned against the wall, hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked up at Kane from under his hat. "I learned that a long time ago."

"Or what a leader can do to unite them," Kane said evenly. He walked to his desk and pulled out the top drawer. He reached in and took something out. Holding his hand open to Sebastian, a polished piece of metal sat in his palm. "This is rightly yours."

Sebastian couldn't breathe. He just stared at the gleaming star in the professor's hand. "That's my father's. I thought...I thought I lost that."

He'd left it all those years ago at Hardley's.

"I think its time you wore it, Sebastian," Kane said. "This Outer City, as you called it, is going to need a leader."

Sebastian blinked, sure Kane was teasing, but it became clear he was serious.

"Professor, maybe in a few years, but now?" Sebastian backed away, his gaze on his father's badge. They sent it back with his things after he died. He remembered it taking the whole of his palm.

"We don't have a few years. There needs to be an authority in place before everything is panic." Kane took Sebastian's hand and placed the metal star there carefully. "You know the sky. You understand how to be up there. But more importantly, you understand how things work. That often what other's think is right

isn't always what needs to be done."

"And you're betting all that you own, everything you have, that you're right?"

"I am betting my life that we are right. We all are."

Sebastian closed his fingers around the star. He met Kane's gaze with his own hard one. He could not kid himself anymore. What he'd feared was coming true. They might lose everything and there seemed to be no way to stop all that loss. All that sorrow. If he could do something about it, then he would. He shoved the metal in his duster pocket and walked out to the warehouse floor. Kane came up next to him and they stared silently at the tower for a few moments, the heaviness of what they knew settling over them. Finally, Sebastian turned to Kane and nodded.

"So, we rise."

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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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