



THIS PERILOUS
LIZZIE PATH

A BLACKBURN CHRONICLES
FREE READ

RAQUEL BYRNES

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Raquel Byrnes

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This Perilous Path

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Lizzie cringed as she pulled on the greasy stocking. Filthy with grime and grit, the material resisted her tired hands as she tried to avoid tearing the blisters on her fingers. The rumble of the trains across the street pushed her to hurry, and she tripped over a sleeping girl on the mat by the door. Over a month working at the garment factory, and she still found it so hard to wake in the morning. She checked the bundle of money she had stashed in secret pocket sewn into her work dress and felt immediate relief. Just a bit more. A little while longer until you can go home, she told herself.

“Careful, Lizzie,” Mildred mumbled.

Lizzie could barely make her out on the dark floor. Covered in the soot of the foundry in which she worked, Mildred’s stained skin and clothes blended with the shadows. Lizzie crept into the hallway of the boarding house. The stirring girls rose with winces, moaning over aches and stretching stiff backs. Mrs. Morrogan was very particular about the boarders keeping quiet, a feat in itself considering nearly a dozen of them slept in just two rooms upstairs. Aware of the terrible skin rashes common to the factory and foundry workers, Lizzie knew that in order to have enough time to wash properly, she had to rise before all of them flooded the small water closet. Too exhausted to do anything more than stumble home, eat the meal Morrogan provided, and collapse, most girls

didn't bother with washing much. But the voice in Lizzie's head was her mother's, and no one had been more persistent than Beatrice Francis.

What they see is what they expect, Lizzie. Let them see your best.

"Nearly time for the train!" Lizzie called up from the kitchen. The girls stirred, filling the house with the shuffle of tired feet and grumpy muttering. "Ten minutes!"

She turned back to her breakfast and tried to savor every bite. Her toast and coffee barely took the edge off the constant hunger. A low rumble started, thrumming at the soles of her boots.

The train.

Lizzie grabbed her satchel and ran for the door. She sprinted across the road. The train's approaching column of black smoke rose in fast puffs over the far buildings. Through the station entrance, she joined the throng of workers queued at the platform. A jolt moved underneath her feet, and she stumbled, catching her breath. Like a wave underneath the ground, it was gone in a moment.

What was that?

She glanced around, spotted a few other curious glances, now sure it wasn't imagined. The screech of the train's brakes pierced the tunnel. Hot air billowed over the waiting passengers as the metal behemoth slid to a stop.

Pushing the strange incident from her mind, Lizzie made her way into one of the cars and wound through the wave of people flooding the cramped space. Children, young men, craggy old workers, all forced together, let off the stench of sweat and dirt and grease. The train left the station in a rattle of metal and hiss of

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steam, lurching forward. Closing her eyes, she tried to keep her wits about her, not to feel the air thinning or the space around her getting hot with the bodies crushing against her.

Just hang on, Lizzie, she told herself. *This is not forever. Things will get better.* They must or she could not bear it.

The cacophony of the machinery filled the train car as soon as the doors opened at the Piedmont Station. Built next to the river that powered it, the massive boxy building stood eight stories tall. Wind off the water swirled frigid and wet around her, and she let out sneeze while disembarking with the dozens of other workers.

A figure ahead turned at the sound and then waved. William, her brother, tilted his head and gave her an exasperated look. His dark hair fell into his eyes like a shaggy curtain as he stepped over a crack in the ground. Nearly a foot across, it zigzagged along the river's fence line. A glance behind William showed more fissures snaking down the slope leading away from the water. Lizzie raised a brow, searching the area and wondering how long that had been there.

"Where were you Lizzie? We had more than we hoped." He smiled, his dimples pulling a smile from her as they had in their childhood.

"Sorry Wills," Lizzie muttered. Her gaze snapped to those around them looking for anyone watching. "I don't want to cause any trouble."

"We are trying to prevent *more* trouble." William shook a sheaf of leaflets at her. One whipped away in the wind. Tumbling along the gravel, it fluttered against the foot of a guard. "Things cannot go on as they are—"

"Enough, Wills," Lizzie hissed. A knot pulled at her middle. "Do not include me in your foolhardy endeavor." She nodded to the wad of papers in his hand. "How much of your own pay did you waste getting someone to press those leaflets for you?"

William blinked at her, baffled. "Lizzie..." He lifted her hand between them. The blisters looked angry red even in the early morning gloom. "You are already part of it whether you like it or not."

Heat flushed to her cheeks, and she yanked her hand from her brother.

"I've gotten blisters before, Wills. Service is service. Whether in a nice warm home or in a factory. Since we were twelve, we've been slaving away wherever there's work. Why are you making trouble over it now?"

"Because this is more dangerous than being a nursery maid, sister. People...children are like fodder for these places. You have heard the stories. People dying of fumes or getting mangled up in the works. Some burned in the foundries when simple changes could have prevented—"

"You and your friends are getting a bad name, Will," Lizzie cut across him. "Troublemakers and criminals is what I heard."

He shook his head, lips a thin line. "*They* are the lawbreakers."

"Wills," She leaned in, her voice a whisper, "there's talk about responding."

"Good."

"Not good," Lizzie cast an angry look at her younger sibling. "People get hurt in more ways than accidents. You need to think about what you are doing, Wills!"

"I am thinking of *us!*" William shook his head and stepped back, adjusting his mangy coat. His gaze was intense and bore through her. "Nothing will change on its own. We have to demand it."

Lizzie put up her hands in surrender. Once he set his mind on something she could never alter his course, not even as children. Not even if it cost him.

"I just want you to be careful, Wills."

He shrugged. "Hopkins lets those beggar children gather scraps beneath the twining levers—"

"The children are the only ones who can fit underneath the gear shafts. It is dangerous, but all the garment factories use them. All the floor managers. Who am I to say different?"

"Just because what you think is in the minority, doesn't mean you're wrong," William said and bumped her with his shoulder the way he used to when they shared a secret as children, but his gaze was desperate. "Please come to the next rally."

"I will think about it." Lizzie frowned.

"There are just as many women working in these conditions as children. You have a stronger voice than them. You should use it." He folded a leaflet and slipped it into the pocket of her apron.

"I am just trying to survive, William," Lizzie said quietly.

"You need to do more than that." William rolled the leaflets and shoved them into his coat. He fixed her with that disappointed gaze of his and Lizzie's heart fell. "You were raised to do what's right."

"Enough," her gaze darted around them, worried about someone hearing. The factories had posters up urging others to report 'disruptive' behavior. "There are a hundred girls out there to take my place. We

know it, and they know it.”

“They don’t let us ever forget how replaceable we all are,” William snapped.

“I am not starving again. I can’t go back to being cold and...” she shook her head. Eyes filling, Lizzie’s voice broke. “P-please you are only one person. You can’t take on an entire company.”

“Shh, it is OK.” William’s face softened and tried to smile despite the worry lining his eyes. He hugged her. “I will see you tonight.” He left, disappearing into the milling group crowding the factory entrance.

Overhead, a klaxon sounded. The start of day. Lizzie shuffled forward in the line, her gaze on the looming building ahead.

“You *can* do something, you know,” a voice sounded behind her.

“Pardon?” Lizzie glanced back and met a pair of piercing blue eyes. Fordham Brooks, the floor mechanic held her gaze. Like the blue of sky, she’d thought, when she saw him her first day. Heat rose up her neck.

He leaned down, his voice barely a whisper. “Enough of us ban together, and we can do something.”

A thorn of worry shifted in Lizzie’s chest. Someone had overheard her and her brother. She caught sight of William in the crowd, and her heart ramped up.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” she replied as calmly as she could.

“Your brother is right.” Fordham leaned in, his gaze earnest. “We cannot, as a decent people, see what is wrong and do nothing to stop it.”

“No one can stop it,” Lizzie breathed in

frustration. *Least of all a nursemaid.*

He shook his head slowly, his steady gaze pinning her in place. "Do you know why so few can do what they please to so many of us?"

"No..." her voice caught in her throat.

"Because no one will take that first step out of the shadow of fear and into the daylight of truth."

A guard barked at a group of women in line, yelling for them to hurry.

"Please, Fordam," Lizzie warned. "Be quiet."

"If you fail to speak while you are still able, then you have already lost."

Lizzie opened her mouth to argue, but he was already turning to leave. She watched him weave through the throng and join with William. A whisper of worry moved through her. She felt as if she was losing her brother to the cause. To those who agreed with him. Fought alongside him.

The cluster of buildings along the river swarmed with workers while black smoke blotted the sky overhead. Lizzie entered the Gaspar building taking the stairs to the eighth floor. The garment factory workers, mostly women and girls, queued down the long corridor to get into the sewing room. Her brother and the other men filed into the nearby foundry. She stood silently, listening to the conversations around her. Still, it was a job, something her brother had worked so hard to help her secure.

It had been so difficult after being let go from her former position as a nursery maid. Lizzie remembered desperate hunger and worry. Surely William remembered as well. How then, could he risk getting fired for people he didn't even know? How could he expect her to?

The line moved through the doors and onto the work floor. Lizzie sighed, hugged herself in the sweltering heat. The factory floor chugged alive. The metal behemoths beat and spun and chugged all around her. Raucous clanging and vibrations throbbed through her. The length of a field, the Gaspar textile floor seemed so vast, so powerful. What could so few do against something so big?

A week later, Lizzie sat at her cotton loom machine. Head pounding from the relentless clanging of the churning machines, she took in breath and glanced up at the small windows that let in the dying sun. It happened in the span of a breath, in the time it took Lizzie to look away and mop her brow. The child, one of the workers at the spinning line further down the floor flickered at the corner of her vision. Too close, he was too close. Lizzie turned in time to see the small form dart between the gears and belts of the ring frame spinner next to her.

"Wait," Lizzie reached for him an instant too late. The child, perhaps unaware that he had grown over the past weeks, reached down to piece together a length of thread that had snapped. It was what he was hired for. To splice together ends on the loom. But he was bigger now. Not by much, but enough. When he rose, his shirt sleeve caught, and the metal rollers that powered the threading machine yanked his shirt into its churning maw. He screamed, eyes going wide.

Lizzie lunged for him. Screaming for help, she grabbed at his shirt and yanked. Churning without mercy, gears chewed at his sleeve dragging him closer

to the spinning gears. His hand caught, and he shrieked, sending a wave of cold dread ripping through Lizzie.

“Help me!” Lizzie planted her feet against the machine, wrapping her arms around his small torso. His terrified face turned up to her, and she shook her head. “If you go, I go.” She grunted, straining against the might of the ringer. “I won’t let it get you!”

Her coworkers scrambled around them, the floor manager shouting for the mechanic to stop the machine. All around her, screaming women and churning machinery roared, but Lizzie kept her eyes on the boy, held his gaze as if that connection were the only thing that might save him. And then it all ground to a shrieking halt. The break engaged. The gears snapped still. The boy blinked once, twice, with surprise, and then collapsed in her arms. Warmth pooled around her hands. His small hand ripped and misshapen.

“Get him out,” she shouted. “Hurry, please!”

They carried him out. His tiny form barely moving in their arms. Lizzie stood in the center of the work floor, her bodice and sleeve heavy with crimson. Heaving, she staggered to the trash bin and vomited. Weak and shaking, she slid down the wall to the floor taking in the shaking heads and tears even as the workers turned once again to their tasks. His terrified eyes, the pain filled screams, the helpless agony swirled in her mind as she fought to keep her wits about her. William was right. He tried to get her to help. Maybe if she had acted, had not been too terrified about her own skin, that little boy would not be disfigured for life. Guilt and anger gripped her, and she ground her teeth against the urge to scream.

On the floor, a mechanic poked at the ringer, swearing under his breath while a washwoman mopped the area with filthy water. The gears shifted, launching the machine back to life. The clatter snapped Lizzie back.

"Back on the line," Hopkins shouted. He glanced at Lizzie. "Go get cleaned up."

Lizzie stared at him. Her breath still coming in hitches. "But he..." she pointed at the floor.

"I said go get cleaned up and get back to the line," Hopkins said over the noise. "That or I find someone else."

"Go, go." An older woman appeared at her side, urging her towards the back. Her accent thick as she muttered in Italian under her breath. "Sangue innocente." *Innocent blood.*

Lizzie went with her, numb and with a cold settling in her gut. In the small water closet, she pumped the primer and dipped her hands under the freezing water. It washed pink into the basin. She shook. From the cold. From the memory of the child's pitiful screams. From the icy grip of dread squeezing her heart. The old woman paced outside the doorway as if guarding Lizzie from the urge to run from this place.

Fordham's words echoed in her head.

If you fail to speak while you are still able, then you have already lost.

She adjusted her apron, wondering if she could stomach working with it stained with blood. The leaflet William had shoved in her pocket fell to the floor. Caught against the door jam, his drawing of a raised fist peeked out from the folded paper. With a shaking hand, she picked it up and smoothed out the wrinkles.

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His sharp script leapt off the page: *Defy the tyranny.*

She stared at the crimson on her sleeves, still under her nails, and took in a shaking breath. Using the sharp end of the wrench, she stabbed the leaflet to the wall over the basin and walked out.

The old woman stared over her shoulder, shaking her head. "This path, is a perilous one, young girl."

Snapping the strings of her apron, Lizzie let it fall to the ground. "At least it is one of my own choosing."

Another aftershock rocked the small warehouse, rattling the windows and sending dust raining down on the small crowd. Lizzie clutched the table riding out the tremor, her heart racing. Eyes clenched, she fought to keep her breathing even. William squeezed her hand, his reassuring nod a beacon in a sea of fearful faces. At least thirty of them were gathered this night. There was more every time. William told her there were others. Others left to fend for themselves in the wake of this disaster. Others to join them.

"Nothing has changed," he continued over the murmurs. "The quakes only make our dilemma more immediate."

"The Great Calamity has taken entire cities," Fordham said. He straightened his ragged vest, smoothing his hair back from his eyes. "Whole states and territories are gone. We are not in the same situation."

"We are in a worse one," Lizzie countered. "Before, when people flooded to the cities, they were seeking a better life. Now..." she gestured to the ruined foundry, her glance going to the glowing red of

the fires just outside the window. "Now they are fighting to survive."

"Supplies are being hoarded in the few cities still standing. People are starving if they don't die from the smoke and vapors first," William snapped. "If they valued us so little before, now we are nothing but fodder for the fires. They couldn't care less as our children search between crumbling buildings for scraps to eat."

Julia Ward nodded, her face going red. A fellow garment factory worker, she had approached Lizzie, desperate for a way to fight. "Yes, while theirs are shipped to the havens in the untouched areas. We have to do something!"

"There's talk of closing the cities. Of not letting anyone else find refuge here," another man said, his face was bruised and smeared with soot. He pushed in, shutting the door on the swirling smoke. "Making trouble now is the worst thing we can do."

Assenting murmurs rose, and Lizzie shook her head in frustration.

"There are promises of The Order stepping in," Fordham said. "Perhaps, with their resources—"

"The Order, if it still exists, cannot help us," William argued. "And their loyalty is to the elite of this broken country. I would not be surprised if they simply carted everyone who could pay out to Europe."

"Has anyone heard anything of Ohio?" a young man asked. "Anything at all? My...my family is..." his voice trailed off.

Lizzie took in his red eyes, and her heart broke. "We are hearing that most of Ohio fell to a chasm."

"What are they going to do?" The boy asked. "Who...who is in charge?"

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"No one," William said. "The president is lost, most likely dead—"

"Don't say such a thing," Fordham hissed. "Something will be done. I know it."

"By whom?" Lizzie snapped. Her heart ramped up at the shift in the floor. It was subtle, but there. Forcing herself to remain calm, she caught Fordham's gaze. "Who could possibly discern what is happening much less stop it?"

"Some say it is an act of God," someone whispered.

"Others blame the earth-shifting on the government. Something they have brought on the entirety of North America it seems," Lizzie countered.

"I heard they're gathering scientists," the boy offered. "My father said after the first wave of quakes took out the capital that the government was using our best men to stop this."

The ground rolled, undulating under her feet in a shaking wave. The support beam next to her cracked lengthwise. She yelped, sucking at the wound to her palm. The tremor rose to a cacophony, shattering the windows. Lizzie screamed and dove beneath the table, hands over her ears.

When will it stop? When will our world stop toppling around our ears?

The ground stilled and Lizzie counted her breathes, too scared to move. Slowly the others rose, peeking out from their hiding places. No one ran outside anymore. No one tried to right the overturned furniture or replace broken windows. Their world had been shaking apart for weeks now. A mysterious calamity wrought by God or by men. It did not matter to those cowering in the jagged ruins of what once was.

The country, so nearly destroyed by the States War, would surely fall in the face of this never-ending storm of destruction.

"Whatever the solution to our broken country, you can be sure that we won't be considered in it," Lizzie said quietly. The image of that poor boy in the factory flitted across her mind. Had it been so recent that her heart broke over the loss of only one child? Now there were hundreds more gone. "We have to claim a place for ourselves here. Before we are tossed out."

"What are you talking about," Fordham said. "They can't do that."

His voice trailed off at the sound of horses outside.

"Quick, the lanterns," William snapped. The lights winked out leaving them in complete dark save for the glow of flames through the broken windows. Lizzie felt her brother's hand at her shoulder.

"They found us, go!" He whispered and pushed her towards the rear entrance. "Get as many out as you can."

"But—" the sound of his revolver hammer ratcheting back made her body instantly cold with fear. "Wills, no!"

Before she could move, soldiers burst into the warehouse. They shouted, trained a lamp beam on them, and opened fire. Lizzie screamed, terror freezing her in place as flashes of scrambling bodies and horrorstruck faces lit up with the blasts. Fordham tried to run, but was mowed down in a barrage of rounds. Her brother fired back, his body jerked once to the side and then the dark swallowed him up.

"William!" she flailed for him. "W-where are you?" The flares of bright light blinded her, and the material of his sleeve slipped just past her fingertips.

Someone rammed into her, and she bounced off a length of pipe. Pinpricks flashed behind her eyes, and she felt the warmth of blood at her hairline. All around her, the room flared and roared as the soldiers slaughtered them. She crawled on her hands and knees, sobs ripping from her chest, and wedged herself underneath a bundle of corroded pipes.

The floor tilted. Lizzie didn't know if it was from the dizziness or another quake. A loud buzzing filled her ears, and she felt herself falling. Trying to catch herself, she tried to sit up, banged her head again, and then everything went black.

Shards of sunlight filtered through the smoke and broken windows. Lizzie stirred, wincing at her stiff muscles.

Morning? How long had she been out?

When she moved to rise, pain sliced through her head and sent a wave of nausea roiling through her. Panting back the graying of her vision, Lizzie fought to remain conscious. She crawled from the pipes and looked around. The morning sun, wan and obstructed by smoke, cast the warehouse in a hazy light. Eyes still blurry, Lizzie squinted, trying to see.

"W-William?"

Water dripped off somewhere off the shadows. She stood on shaking legs, using an overturned table for support. A form on the ground near the back of the room caught her eye, and she stumbled forward, stomach knotting.

"Wills?" Her voice broke. Throat aching, Lizzie forced herself to take a step forward, then another. *"Is that y-you?"*

It was the curve of his jaw that pulled the sob from her. The dark hair, so unlike her own ginger locks,

were matted to his cheek. Deep brown eyes, once earnest and true, stared blankly at the ceiling.

“No!” She ran to him, her heart tearing.

“No, no, no,” Lizzie cried. “Don’t leave me here alone, Wills. P-please...I am not strong like you.” She cradled his head in her lap. Fingers knotted in the material of his shirt, the sobs shook her. “I’m not strong.”

The vast crowd around her moved towards the dais as the suited men exited the enclosed carriage and took the stage. All those who possessed gas masks or breathing filters jostled and clumped together along the cracked and steaming streets. Some curious. Some afraid. All with their gazes locked on the newly constructed building behind the stage. A steady thrum rose from its inner workings, and the closer Lizzie came to the strange construction, the more her hair rose. It stood on end, suspended by the crackling energy surrounding the machinery. Sparks flicked from her fingertips to the man in front of her, and he jumped, giving her an annoyed glance. Grateful for the obscurity the mask offered, her gaze slipped to the soldiers peppered throughout the throng looking for any sign of recognition. Lizzie paused at the sight of their rifles. They were strange. Dark metal she had not seen before.

She moved in, getting closer to the front as quickly as she could without pulling their notice.

Gray banners decorated the elevated platform where two men stood in impossibly clean suits despite the smoke and ash blowing across the ground. Lizzie

eyed the governor of the newly formed Vir-Hio City State as he fussed with tube of his gas mask. The pin on his lapel matched the flags behind him; a depiction of a dark bird, rising from below, jagged wings spread. Lizzie shook her head, not understanding. Where was the familiar stars and stripes of her country's flag?

"Excuse me, miss." A photographer gestured for her to move, then hunkered beneath his drape, and held up the powder tray. "Governor Hatfield, Lord Rothfair, over here please." It flashed, bathing the scene in bright light.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the governor said, his muffled voice tinny through the filter. "We are gathered here to inaugurate our new territory. Through the brilliance of engineering, we move forward from this devastation. I give you..." He gestured to the building and then at the device rising from the stage to waist height. "The Tesla Dome!"

"Our great governors have not faltered," Rothfair added. He pulled the sheet from the machine before them with a flourish.

Twisted and bulging, the pipework machine thrummed with power. The crowd stepped back, a collective murmur rose from behind the breathing apparatuses. Wisps of electricity quivered out from the device giving it an eerie glow.

Lizzie smoothed her hair back into the required bun and wiped the sweat of her hands on her skirts. She scanned the edges of the crowd, spotted the others, and nodded. They moved into position, and waited for her signal.

The governor pulled the brass handle on the equipment, and a great roar rose from the building. The churning, thrumming of the steamworks shook the

ground sending billows of smoke into the sky. Pressure built, popping Lizzie's ears and making her teeth grind. A slip of violet light slid along the goggles on the upturned faces of the crowd. Lizzie gasped at an intense flare of energy. Once, twice, three times, like sun was flaring. And then purple lightning sped towards the sky around them forming a vast grid dome that canopied the city; a barrier that lit up the mottled sky. The clouds nearest the dome's apex shredded to vapor from the heat of the protective latticework.

"Behold," the governor shouted over the excited crowd. "We have ignition!"

The purple light pulsed once, twice, and then glowed steady. The wind stopped. The smoke floating across the darkness outside the dome from the ruined parts of the city dissipated on contact. Lizzie blinked behind her goggles. First one man, then another peeled off their mask and took a tentative breath.

"It's working," a woman said through a quivering lip. "It is working."

One of Lizzie's group broke a piece of wood from an abandoned wagon and tossed it at the grid nearest him. It shot back towards him, propelled by the incredible energy, and landed near Lizzie's boot. Charred, it glowed with embers.

"It is," Lizzie said through an ache in her throat. "But at what cost?"

So many had perished during the building of the massive machinery that powered their salvation. So many women and children enslaved to work in the mines to feed the need for constant power for the domes. Unable to fend for themselves out of fear of being tossed into the poisonous wastelands outside the

refinery factories, they endured heinous conditions. More would give their lives if nothing was done.

“Who cares what the cost is?” the woman asked. Her wondrous gaze tilted towards the lighting caging her. “We are safe. At last, we can be safe.” She wandered off, hugging a nearby child. They cried together in relief.

Movement in the corner of her eye made Lizzie turn. A wagon pulled into view from behind a nearby fence. Stolen at the beginning of the festivities, the white sides of the governor’s carriage bore their message in blood-red paint. It had taken weeks to locate paint in the rubble of the state, but as the letters dripped downward in their battle cry Lizzie decided it was worth it. She just hoped the news photographer got a good photo.

The driver lit a torch on fire and leapt down from the seat. He reached for the cloth at his neck, his gaze snapping to her.

Lizzie did the same—pulled the blue material over her mouth and nose like a bandit’s disguise.

“There’s no turning back after this,” he said.

She looked at him. At his wind chapped face and tanned arms from a life at sea before the quake chasms erupted with molten earth and boiled the oceans. She knew him only as Charon. A name he’d given himself since he never knew his real one. She’d escaped the work camp with his help. “Do it.”

He turned and threw the torch into the carriage. In a soft whoosh, the kerosene she’d ordered to be poured onto it struck ablaze. He stood next to her as the flames lit up the rally cry emblazoned in red.

Defiance!

People noticed the blaze. Shouts of alarm sounded

as men scrambled for pails of water at the pump. Lizzie and Charon melted into the fray, the chaos a cover for their real mission. Lizzie pointed to the dais. He nodded, grabbing the governor's satchel and tossing it to her. They walked quickly from the crowd, heading for the alleyway. Out of the corner of her vision, the photographer's powder tray went off, flaring the scene of the flaming carriage in bright light. Lizzie smiled inwardly.

Charon slipped his hand to hers entwining their fingers. "They'll hunt you down."

Lizzie tilted her head back and gazed at the sky beyond the crackling grid above the city. Charon's ship, the *Stygian*, waited just beyond.

"Let them try to catch me."

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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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