



CHASM WALKERS

SOME HOPES ARE BORN
FROM DESTRUCTION

BLACKBURN CHRONICLES, BOOK 3

RAQUEL BYRNES

Chasm Walkers

Blackburn Chronicles #3

Raquel Byrnes

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Chasm Walkers

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The Tremblers

Wind Reapers

What People are Saying

'The Tremblers,' by Raquel Byrnes is the perfect read for Young Adult booklovers. Byrnes nails the universe of Victorian steampunk, weaving pages and setting that will seamlessly enthrall fans of steampunk, suspense or sweet romance.

In 'The Tremblers' is an intricate storyline, and Ashton and Charlotte are characters with depth and breadth of spirit, and a world that instantly surrounds you. I was captivated from page one.

In this much anticipated YA, Steampunk release—the first in the Blackburn Chronicle's has left me breathless for the second.

~Ashley Ludwig, Romantic Suspense Author

Quid Me Destruit, Liberat ~ What Destroys Me, Frees Me.

Prologue

Plaza Exilio, Spain – December, 1889

Dirigibles and air ships circled the port's landing base, falling lower and lower as the weight of the refugees aboard burned through the vessels' fuel. Snow flurried on a bitterly cold wind chapping the faces of the countless people on the ground as they crowded along the ten-foot-high barricade that corralled the passengers disembarking from both air and sea ships.

Riley pushed through the crowd, his eye on the guards in thick black coats who stood peering over the top of the barrier preventing the mass of people from entering the receiving camp. Filter masks over their mouth and noses, they kept their rifles aimed at the surging mob and shouted orders in Spanish, demanding registration of names and presentation before the line of doctors. The port teemed with refugees shoving and shouting their way to the vast metal doors that guarded the entrance to Spain's last remaining receiving base.

Riley's mech-hand shuddered and whirred, the uncharacteristic cold slowing the mechanica, and he clenched his fingers working the gears. Europe suffered disrupted weather patterns as a result of North America's Great Calamity, and in the decade since, the strange storms that froze the coast or charred

the mountains with lightning had not dissipated. Today was no different, as the wan noonday sun did little to stave off the winter chill. Snow packed from thousands of footsteps crunched under his boots as he walked along the line of jostling bodies, which stretched for nearly a mile down the port.

The receiving camp would close for good today at sundown on orders from the European Coalition formed to deal with the Peaceful Union's massive disaster.

His hand went to the green band of material sewn onto the sleeve of his leather duster—a symbol of his status as a refugee with a clean bill of health. The red wax stamped with the coalition's symbol of an olive branch was already beginning to crumble from the frigid wind.

Through the crowd, a familiar face came into view. Cephas waved his arms over his head, catching Riley's attention. His dark skin was dusty with dirt, and his rumpled clothes bore the grime of living in the filthy holding camp. The cracked lens of his spectacles held the red grime of ash. Still, he smiled warmly as he wove through the milling bodies and took up step next to Riley as they made their way to the entrance.

"Cephas," Riley said, nodding. "How is Reena and the child?"

"Safely hidden," he said and let a half smile escape. "Sheriff, there is news from Outer City—"

"Not here." Riley glanced at the row of armed men lining the fence.

"Yes, of course."

They walked together, Riley silent as he took in the chaos around him

"Coalition of Khent," Cephas said, motioning to

the guards. "The European committee meets this week, I heard. They talk of a full blockade against the Union territories."

"Won't do any good," Riley said, adjusting his large brimmed hat on top of his head. "Once people make it across the noxious Atlantic, there's no way they're going back to the city-states. Better to risk dying of exposure out here than to try to survive the Trembling Sickness and wasteland poison back home."

"But a blockade would stop trade with Europe. Medicine, food, steel, and textiles. We need those shipments to survive." Cephas shook his head. "Would they cut us off completely? Thousands would starve to death."

"The sickness is spreading and so is their panic. They saw what happened to the city-states left unprotected by the Tesla domes." Riley slowed, a deep growl sounding over the noise of the crowd, making him miss a step. He paused, his heart ramping up as his gaze skipped from person to person looking for telltale signs of the affliction.

"Two years and we're still fleeing for our lives," Cephas continued. He wiped melted snow from his brow with the sleeve of his Reaper tunic. "And now this final port is closing. What will all these people do?"

The refugees piled against the high fence, banging their hands or trying to climb over one another to scale it. Children cried, their tiny faces marred with confusion and fear. Mothers shouted for their loved ones, separated from them in the melee, and desperately clung to the ones still in their arms.

Riley and Cephas skirted the intake line and made their way to the barred gate.

Soldiers stood eight deep at the doors checking for armbands and waving people through.

Riley kept his gaze on the crowd, his throat aching at the desperate faces. It was as bad now as it was two years ago when the first wave of people escaped the shores of the Peaceful Union and braved the lethal Atlantic to seek refuge in Spain and Portugal. Rumor was that some even made it across the ice shelf to Canada. Riley had heard news of death by trampling and uncontrollable riots in other coastal countries hit with the fleeing citizens of North America.

"We'll figure something out," Riley said absently. Another growl pulled his attention, and he stopped in his tracks at the sight before him. "What have they done?"

Cephas followed his gaze, the color draining from the man's face. "Oh, no."

A man infected with the sickness, a Trembler, writhed in a large cage near the gate. He gnashed his teeth and flailed his blue-skinned arms through the bars at the terrified passersby. Black eyes roving, a shudder wracked his body breaking bone. Keening with pain, he fell to his knees, still clad in the trousers and fine shirt he'd been wearing when the strange affliction overtook him. At least a dozen more cages lined the fence leading to the entrance.

A soldier wrestled with a screaming woman as he tried to shove her into an empty cage. She shook in his arms, her low moan a dead giveaway of her condition.

"They check for signs of the Trembling Sickness in the camps now too. All of us daily, even if we are already cleared," Cephas muttered next to Riley. "They dragged a poor woman out yesterday because she was shivering from the cold. We haven't seen her since."

"It will get worse." Riley turned at the grating sound of an iron-clad ship pulling into port. A stream of Peaceful Union citizens poured out of its hold. More refugees from the failing nation come to seek aid and shelter in Europe after the massive Reaper attack crippled half of the city-states of their country. "Won't be long until it is not just Spain and Portugal, but all of Europe that starts to turn entire ships away on the rumor of sickness."

"That is my fear," Cephias muttered. "Or worse. Why waste time going through each camp person by person? How long until they slaughter all of us just to be sure?"

Fear eroded the fabric of decency. How long until it ripped apart humanity entirely? The line moved up, and Riley turned to show the guard his armband.

"Face." The guard demanded, stepping forward and shoving Riley in the chest with his rifle. "Show me your temples."

"What?" Cephias asked, startled.

Before Riley could remove his hat, the guard knocked it off. "Your temples and your fingers. Now."

Riley stepped forward, nearly nose to nose with the guard, and held up his hands.

"No blue, see?" He stared him down, his anger barely contained. "I've been cleared."

"You present every time you enter, or leave the camp," the guard snarled. "Or you get shot. You choose."

"We do not have a problem here." Cephias picked up Riley's hat, handed it to him, and then held his hands up as well. "I am not sick. He is not sick."

The guard glanced at Cephias and then back at Riley. He turned, muttered something in Spanish to his

man at the gate, and then motioned for them to enter.

Riley stepped past him, his gaze locking with the man as he went. Out of habit, Riley's hand went to his hip, where his weapon would normally rest in its holster.

Cephas's mouth twitched nervously as they side stepped the row of guards into the camp.

Walking through the gates, Riley paused, taken aback by how much had changed in the two months since he'd been here. Hundreds of new tents filled the area, makeshift shelters made out of sails and sheets and whatever else the refugees could find. Thousands more people had arrived. How would he locate one man in this sea of people? More importantly...how would he do it in time? He blew out a breath of frustration.

"You know for sure your contact is here?"

"Well, yes, I believe so, but that is what I wanted to speak with you about..." Cephas pulled a roll of crumpled aethergraph paper from his pants.

"Is he here or not?" Riley eyed the missive, waiting. "What are you not saying, Cephas?"

"Yes, he is here or he was a few days ago. I believe he is in the northern quadrant but there is something you must read first."

Riley shook his head. "No time."

"You will want to know this, Sheriff. Please, it is news from back home."

"I just left Outer City a week ago. What could have gone wrong in the time it took the dirigible to fly here? Besides, Deputy Kiril is capable of handling whatever it is."

He tried to continue, but Cephas stepped in his way.

"But it is why you are here. The reason you came all this way, Sheriff." Cephas shoved the paper in Riley's hand. "It is Dr. Bartlet. She sent this aether missive a few days after you left Outer City to come here. It is coded, but I deciphered it. Sheriff, it says they found Charlotte Blackburn."

Riley's world stopped. His pulse rammed in his ears, and all sound fell away. He took the message from Cephas with shaking hands. Gaze traveling the etching left by the electric rods of the machine, he traced the words on the paper with his fingers. Not believing, he read it again, making sure he understood every word.

You were right, Riley. She was exactly where you thought. We found her. We have her.

"They..." Riley tried to form words but his mouth was dry, his breath coming in hitches. He staggered, gripping the paper, unable to think. "She's safe?"

"Go," Cephas said, patting Riley on the shoulder. "Hurry back to Outer City. She is waiting for you."

A deep ache in his throat made it impossible to answer. He nodded mutely, blinking rapidly as he tilted his face to the sky. Fine flecks of snow fluttered onto his skin, melting in the heat of his exhaled breaths. Two years in the grip of a madman and she had survived. His mind churned with anguish at the terrors she must have endured, but right now all that mattered was one thing.

Charlotte was alive.

1

Outer City, Port Hayden

I let go of what I am to become what I might be...

The electric current ripped into me. My body quivered with the energy as I whipped helplessly in the throes of agony. Rippling, blue light flashed, distorted, in the liquid of my holding tank. My screams escaped in silent bubbles to the surface of the watery prison. The wall-mounted power machine pulsed and whirred, and its brass knobs gleamed in the laboratory lights. A spark crawled along the leads snaking into the devices on my body. Heart racing, I inhaled from the tube shoved into my nose, desperate for air.

And then I saw his face. Viceroy of the Order of the Sword and Scroll.

Pale, tight skin stretched around his piercing eyes as he watched me with intensity. Hand on the dial, his breaths came in huffs, excited.

All my fear. All my rage, narrowed to a pinpoint focus. Arcibo.

Broken, my heart cried out...*Make it stop...make it end...take me from this.*

I twitched as the charge threaded through my limbs. And then, my father's voice echoed in my memory. His face desperate as he read from the leather-bound book in his hand over my old bed as I burned with fever as a child. Hand on my forehead, he'd whispered with a quaking voice.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

"Fight, Charlie," he pled. "With all that you have, love."

Hands clenched, I yanked on the restraints at my wrists. A wave of power vaulted out of my chest. When the current hit me again, I arched. My back bowing, I contained it, every muscle gripped with frigid pain. The liquid around me crackled. Fractals raced across the rapidly freezing fluid. Jolts of power slid through my muscles, sizzled along my spine, and flew from my lips in a haze of icy shards. A muffled clang pulled my gaze. The leather restraint wrapped around my wrist floated free of its mooring.

"That's right..." Hand to the glass of my tank, Arecebo's ecstatic face came into focus through the liquid. His soulless gaze held my own. "That's my girl." His hand slipped back to the control dial, and he twisted it to its full.

Bubbles erupted from my mouth as my head flew back in a spasm of pain...

I woke with a jagged cry, my hands flailing in defense. The sound of my own un-muffled voice startled me fully awake. Gasping, gulping the room's air greedily, I stifled my whimpers with the sheet and forced my breaths to deepen, my heart to slow.

Slowly, my body adjusted to what I knew with my mind. I was not imprisoned. I was not in fear for my life. I did not have to fight.

I blinked in the darkened room and fought the nausea roiling through me. Linen curtains wafted softly at the paned window. Afternoon sun shafted

through a slit between the material. A candle on the far wall cast a glow on the desk next to me. Dr. Lilah Bartlet's stethoscope, her cup of tea from last night, a vase of faded flowers...all of it normal. Safe.

I stood on unsteady legs, curled my toes against the rough of the wood floor, and shuffled along the planks to the window. Pulling back the curtain with shaking hands, I peered out at the vast sky settlement of Outer City. Made up of dozens of sky harbors and trading towns, the transient nature of the citizens made for a constantly changing vista.

The doctor's office drifted, tethered, alongside shacks and stalls that made up the town here at Port Hayden. The rise and fall of the building as it drifted on the wind currents buffeting the lighter-than-air ballast beneath it soothed my nerves, and I took in a calming breath and let the grip of my nightmare untangle from the edges of my mind.

Outer City's constant list and sway was disorienting, but a sign of its inherent safety as the entire settlement was mobile. Parts of it broke apart when needed, individual crafts unclashed to restock on the ground. Entire ports often moved inland to avoid storms or further out to sea to evade the Security Force patrols. Miles above the surface of the ground, it was the last frontier of a broken land fractured by devastating earthquakes and massive crevasses which billowed noxious vapor. This port and all of the other sky harbor communities were the only places left in North America in which one did not need a gas mask to breathe or the protection of the Tesla dome's electric grid to keep the poisons at bay. A settlement filled with air ships and makeshift balloon vessels was a bastion of trade and commerce. A boom town in the clouds.

And for now, the only safe haven I knew.

"They will fade," Dr. Lilah Bartlet's cultured voice drifted from the door. "The nightmares." Catching my look of disbelief, she nodded. "I promise, Charlotte."

"I believe you." Turning, I hugged myself. "I slept, at least."

The familiar sight of electric-etched print caught my eye. I noticed the corner of an aether bulletin from the News Bureau sitting on her desk, and I moved the papers covering it, frowning at my likeness on the sepia page. The Peaceful Union had not used a recent depiction of me. The print of the photo did not show the mechanica now fused to my temples and hands. Instead it was the one they had used back when they first called me Lady Blackburn. My own government had believed the lies perpetuated by Defiance and branded me a traitor and rebel leader. I looked angry, murderous even—long, black locks flaring out as I swung beneath a crashing dirigible, tracer gun in hand. Pale blue and piercing, my gaze bored from the page. I was depicted mid-shout as I fired on some unsuspecting victim somewhere off the page.

Charlotte Blackburn; enemy of the Peaceful Union. Armed and dangerous. Report at Once.

I traced my fingers beneath those words. Strange how much like that girl in the picture I had become. The rage, the dark intent. It had not fit me then, back when I was a naïve debutante desperate to save her father. It did now. I gathered the missive in my hand, crumpling it.

"Come rest, Charlotte. Let me take another look at those devices." Lilah motioned from the center of the room, breaking through my thoughts. She held up a few tinkering tools. "I have an idea." Patting the chair

next to a small table, she smiled, waiting. Pale skinned with long, auburn locks, Lilah Bartlet was not only brilliant, she was beautiful. The simple shift dress she wore did nothing to lessen her lithe beauty.

Her young son sat quietly near her feet playing. It was the first time I had seen him since arriving. The last time I had seen Lilah, she'd been with child. Of all the things that drove home to me how much time I'd lost in captivity, the fact that Lilah's unborn child was now two years old was what hit me hardest. The Order and Arcibo had tortured and experimented on me, but the loss of living my life for that long was the deepest injury.

"You must be Jack," I whispered, walking over.

He looked up, fixing me with stark black irises, unblinking. The gaze of a Trembler.

"He is..." Lilah's voice broke. "Jack cannot hear."

I glanced down at him noticing that his small arms twitched with minute tremors as he maneuvered the wood blocks with his tiny hands.

Lilah had been terrified, her husband having been infected with the Trembling Sickness not long before she discovered her pregnancy. As a doctor, she knew she was possibly carrying a very sick child.

"Nice to meet you," I whispered to him anyway. Reaching out, I touched the pads of my fingers to his cool, pale forehead.

Closing his eyes, he put his chubby fingers over mine squeezing gently before letting go and returning to his toy.

Taking a seat opposite Lilah, I extended my arm across the work surface.

She stared at me, a strange look on her face.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, instantly

uncomfortable.

"Nothing," she said, clearing her throat. "He just...responds to you." Her voice trailed off, and I knew she was thinking that I *heard* the victims of the monstrous infirmity. Could feel their need. My connection to them and to her son meant a lot more than what she was saying.

"People turn in days, Lilah," I offered. "Jack is two years old."

She looked at me for a moment, blinking back tears. "I am afraid that..." Her voice quavered and she leaned in, whispering. "He was not exposed after birth, Charlotte. He did not breathe in the sickness as others do. The affliction is knitted within his being."

"So are you, Lilah." I placed my hand over her frantically fidgeting fingers, willing my own demons to fade as I assured her. "You and your husband and all the hope you had for Jack to live. That is what he is. Answered prayer."

A shaking sigh escaped her lips, and she held my gaze with her own, her expression desperately hopeful.

I nodded resolutely.

She did the same. Taking in a calming breath, she picked up her tools again. "Let...let us see what we can do about these," she said finally and busied herself with the magnifying lens. Adjusting the stand, she squinted at the metal and glass disc embedded in the back of my hand. The illuminating flame flickered behind the lens with her exhaled breath.

"Any news?"

She had been checking and rechecking the aether's coded oscillation; an emergency channel Outer City used to relay information on a repetitive loop. No word on his arrival.

"Not yet, but Riley's ship did leave from Europe the moment he received word of your discovery."

"That was not necessary." A deep whir sounded from the device at my hand. "I am fine, as you can see."

"I do not think a hurricane would keep him from returning," Lilah said softly. "Every day you were missing was torture to Sebastian...I mean, Sheriff Riley. He searched everywhere. Followed every whisper of a lead. He was relentless."

I let my head fall against the back of the chair and closed my eyes as she adjusted my arm gently.

"I know that he was," I said to the ceiling, not wanting to see the hurt or worry in her eyes again. I knew what Riley, what Lilah and Mara, had risked to rescue me. I knew they had lost friends.

"Did not matter to him if the city-state was overrun with Reaper hordes or taken over by gangs and criminals. He went anyway. Riley searched every abandoned building. Every hovel. And then the *one* time he is called away, you are found."

"I owe all of you my life."

A sharp current sizzled up my arm from the device embedded in the back of my hand, and I hissed with the pain.

"Sorry...I am sorry," she murmured.

"It will not come off, Lilah." I let my head loll to the side and took in the intensity of her gaze. "I tried with a knife on the way back, if you recall. I only managed to bleed all over the floor and paralyze my arm for a couple of days."

"I fear the bone has grafted with the metal and wires. The devices must have been placed nearly as soon as you were taken." Her delicate hands worked

the specialized tinkering tools she'd procured from Mara for the purpose. "I see evidence of at least a year's worth of healing around this...mechanica." A spark flashed, nearly singeing her eyebrows, and she yelped and leaned backward. Her gaze snapped to mine, mortified. "Did that hurt?"

"I am fine." I tried to smile, feeling as if the muscles to do so were atrophied. "Let it be, Lilah. They are as permanent now as my own skin."

"But I am sure that—"

"Ma'am," a voice at the door called out. Kiril, Riley's second in command, poked his head in her doorway. "You said to give word." Stepping further into the room, he removed his hat, fiddled with the wide brim, and cast an uneasy glance at Jack who did not seem to take note of Kiril's presence at all.

"He is here?" Lilah asked, standing too quickly and adjusted her skirts absently. "Now?"

"His ship sent word. They are nearly to port." Kiril's gaze ran over my exposed arm, pausing for a moment on the devices at my elbow and hand, but he said nothing. Looking back at Lilah, he continued. "He said he will come straight away."

"Thank you, Kiril," Lilah answered, her voice laced with excitement.

Kiril nodded and left.

"All right." Lilah smoothed the elegant chignon twisting her red tresses atop her head and rested her fingers at her pinkish cheek. Hurrying over to the desk, she straightened the papers and picked up her dirty tea cup. She walked aimlessly about the room as if looking for something. "We will be ready."

Slow dawning came over me as I watched her flutter about. She was behaving like a woman