

BLOOD IN THE WATER



WARP WEAVERS

TASH MCADAM

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Published in the United States by Glass House Press, LLC, 2014. GLASS HOUSE PRESS and colophon are trademarks of Glass House Press, LLC.

ISBN 978-0-9816768-3-8

Library Of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication is on file with the publisher.

Cover by West Coast Design

Book Design by Inkstain Interior Book Designing

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1: ORIGIN](#)

[Chapter 2: EMERGENCY](#)

[Chapter 3: COMMAND](#)

[Chapter 4: PREPARATION](#)

[Chapter 5: SUBMERSION](#)

[Chapter 6: DISASTER](#)

[Chapter 7: SURVIVAL](#)

[About Tash](#)

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CHAPTER 1

ORIGIN

“WHAT WE CALL BREACHES ARE, in reality, tears in the veil between our dimension and those that surround us. These doors are a constant threat. Beasts from other worlds seek them, longing to sneak through and feast on the fat of human complacency. Some want our flesh, as food or entertainment ... some want our minds. There are even species that feed on our dreams!”

The professor gesticulates wildly, caught up in her own grandiosity, her gray hair fluttering as she shouts into the microphone on the wooden desk. She ignores the squeal of electronic feedback from the device, though the students sitting near the speakers flinch and mutter in complaint.

“You, young and idiotic as you are, have been awoken as the next generation of protectors. You have been gifted with special skills and abilities that are *never* to be taken lightly or abused. The price you pay for misuse of power is terrible...”

The lecture room is stuffy and holds a mishmash of sprawling teenagers across a wide age range. Some are actually watching the

elderly woman, who is now gesturing at an unresponsive screen with a smart-board control, not seeming to realize it's turned off.

I am not, however, paying much attention. Lost in my own thoughts—a situation that's fairly standard for me—I pick at the battered corner of my maroon tablet cover, half-slumped over the desk. Short black hair escapes from behind my ear and flops into my large brown eyes. Exasperated, I puff it out the way and scratch my upturned nose, which is peeling from a day-old sunburn.

We've been taking this stupid class for weeks, and it's all very heavy on the doom and gloom, without ever getting down to the nuts and bolts. I have so many questions, but no one will let me ask. The guy in charge of us weavers is nice enough, but he can't focus on the real world for five minutes. I can actually see his eyes glaze over when I start talking. Which, in all fairness, I do a lot of. Still, it's not getting me any answers, and that's ... frustrating.

Suddenly a bird caws loudly outside the window, making me jump, and I huff. I keep trying to ask about bird demons. I bet loads of flying demons come through little breaches that are too high to get to, and just zoom off into the skies. And what about under water? Seventy percent of the earth's surface is water! And it's deep. How could anyone hope to find every rip and get there in time to stop anything coming through, or catch the stuff that does? Are we supposed to scuba dive? I refuse to believe that no one has come up with a better system than 'follow techno-magic to the holes in reality.'

After all, surely the massive computer lab—whose primary purpose is to scan for rifts and let us know when they're happening—can make mistakes. Miss breaches. Which is dangerous. Because a lot of those breaches are filled with monsters that want nothing more than access to the blind-to-magic population on Earth.

The professor hits the desk with the flat of her hand, regaining my attention. "Some of you are now fierce warriors, given fighting

skills beyond your wildest dreams. You are stronger and faster than you ever believed possible. You are superheroes. You could be champions at any sport; you could be famous and rich.

“But you never will be, so put aside your childish dreams of glory. Warriors, you have been chosen for your valorous hearts, and should you abuse the power you’ve been given, your very bones will blacken and crack inside you. The Warp has gifted you, but it will punish you horribly if you prove yourselves unworthy.”

I wonder what it would have been like to be woken as a warrior instead of a weaver. *I guess I don’t have a ‘valorous heart.’* I heard from Donnie, another weaver, that we’re called for our ‘intuition,’ but I’m not sure whether it’s a general thing, or something specific—something that allows us to hone a weaver’s awareness, our foreknowledge of a breach-yet-to-be, allowing warriors and warlocks time to prepare. I wouldn’t have described myself as particularly intuitive, although I’ve always had a knack for talking my way out of trouble. I don’t think that was enough to make them ‘pick’ me.

Supposedly, the Warp magic is inside every single human on the planet. Anyone can be woken at any minute, a ‘holy’ duty thrust upon them with no warning. Without any convenient sign or dramatic music signaling that it’s happened. Just some people who *might* be crazy trying to awkwardly explain that you’re needed to save the world.

The way the professors talk about it, you’d think the Warp was God, or at least a sentient, all-powerful sort of thing. Choosing champions from the populace to protect the walls between realities. But from what I’ve seen, it chooses rather strangely. We certainly don’t look very heroic. Most of us are in our teens, but there are stories about old people and even children being given power for short periods of time, in great emergencies. Those people don’t get to keep their power for long; as soon as the emergency is over, they

forget about it entirely. And even people who are ‘chosen’ usually fade out and lose their gifts by their late twenties. I guess middle-aged people aren’t that handy in the war against chaos. So I’m probably in it for the long haul; I might be *thirty* by the time I stop acting like a magical Geiger counter and magnet. I’ll be stuck with this lot for the next fifteen years. Until then, our job is to prevent the different dimensions from bleeding into one another until everything is dark and destroyed.

No problem.

A student who hums with barely contained energy sighs loudly enough to get my attention, presumably at the professor’s words, and slumps back into her padded seat at the woman’s reminder that she is never going to compete in the Olympics. The lecturer raises a pointed eyebrow and looks sternly over her half-moon glasses for a long moment before continuing.

“Some of you were chosen for your intellect and strength of mind, and have therefore been touched with esoteric magics. You will be trained as warlocks, taught to use spells to help your companions against the encroaching darkness. You will develop your skills until we find the elements in which you excel, and then you will be put to work researching as well as taking the fight to the field itself. Leave the right path—the choice to protect your species—and you will be rewarded by slipping into idiocy, and become gibbering, drooling wrecks. The magics that mark you are unassailable. They give you the ability to change the world, but should you falter, they will strip you of everything that made you special. You will march at your companions’ sides until you are unable to do so. Don’t be so arrogant as to believe that for you, there may be a different route. Your spells and potions are nothing compared to the raw power of the Warp.”

The warlocks in the room, three female and two male, are identifiable by the thick archaic volumes—carried everywhere at

all times—balanced on the corners of the tiny desks they’re squashed behind. They all look exceptionally studious.

Isn’t a warlock a bloke? I guess the Protectorate is pro gender-neutral terms, I observe with an inner snigger. *Like Americans saying ‘server’ instead of ‘waitress’ and ‘waiter,’ now. Funny.*

I perk up as the professor moves on to the last kind of student at the Protectorate. Weavers. Me.

“And finally, the weavers, with the ability to shut the doors between our world and others. Your responsibility is great; without you the veils between dimensions would tear open irreparably, and allow Earth to be overrun. Not even the warriors and warlocks could stand against the hells that would be unleashed, should you fail in your duty. While some dimensions pose no threat to us, others try to open doorways big enough for an invasion. Without you, the demon armies could march, unchecked, across our world. Billions would die screaming, and others would live only as slaves. Our land would be a blackened wreck, empty and void of life.”

Does she have to be this dramatic? I idly rub my thumb across the four black and red tattoos marking the inside of my wrist—one for each dimensional tear to which I’ve been exposed, and subsequently closed. As soon as I’m in range, the tattoos start coalescing—black marks where magic is being pulled through my skin by a rift opening, and then words I can’t read, forming faint on my flesh. Once I’ve closed the breach, I get a red seal around the edges, which means the door is shut, and the stitch is complete. The red outlines the black marks like fineliner around watercolours. When a mark—‘stitch’—is sealed, it means the weaver has a sort of bond with that particular dimension, and can open the doorway again. Intentionally.

That might seem weird, *wanting* to open a dimensional doorway, but sometimes it’s the only way to gain an advantage. If there’s a big pitched battle, for example—some demons trying to get

through a large opening—sending troops around to flank them might be our best chance to push them back. If that happens, it takes a weaver with a full stitch to manipulate the Warp, open a tear, and push the troops through.

All of my stitches are closed now, so I can force rifts to those four dimensions. I check the marks all the time, just in case something has changed. The stitches contain the magic—they're how I channel the energy of the Warp—but the human body isn't made to withstand magic burning through it. Things can go wrong; the power can escape and burn you up. They tell me that unsealed stitches are more likely to burst, letting the magic out, and that's reason enough for me to want every single one closed.

I clench my fist. My first stitch is a little darker than the others, because I've been close to that particular dimension three times now. Every time I'm near a breach on the same frequency, the stitch will blacken further, whether or not it's closed. Older weavers have tattoos so dark they look like pieces of coal framed in blood. The seal—closing the tear, and therefore the stitch—gives you more time before the magic escapes. But if I'm exposed to too many breaches on the same frequency, or all at once, the stitches will burst open, flooding my body with magic. My blood will change to acid, and burn me from the inside out.

I've seen a picture of a weaver fraying. That's what they call it when the tattoos spread out too far. It's as though the marks somehow trap the different frequencies of magic inside you, keeping them organized so you can follow each thread to its home dimension. But if they touch each other, they set off a chain reaction. In the picture, the boy was screaming and his hands were jet black. Not a natural kind of black—a lightless void. It was blossoming up his arms like it was sucking the life out of him.

I shiver. Every time I've been near a breach so far, I've been with a senior weaver—someone who could ensure that I didn't

make a mistake. I'm a little intimidated by the idea of being out on my own, which could happen any day now.

Suddenly the professor moves on to a topic that interests me. "And as for water breaches..." I perk up. *Would demons who came through water breaches be mermaids? I totally want to meet mermaids. But if a breach opens under water, would the water all drain through into a different dimension, like a giant, mystical plughole? Is there a department to make sure that doesn't happen? The Department of Interdimensional Water Levels. Hey, that could explain the rising oceans; maybe the 'global warming is a hoax' people know something we don't and really we're just getting shafted by some poxy dimension dropping all its water onto us!*

I'd be more likely to believe that if science didn't show that the ice caps are actually melting. Something to think about, though. Maybe we could drain some water to help with the inevitable flooding.

Sadly, the mention of water breaches is not accompanied by answers to my questions; it's just a brief reminder that openings can and do happen anywhere. I sigh as the tufty-haired professor starts droning on and on about the dangers of letting even one demon run amok through London's oblivious population.

Jeez, woman. Obviously letting monsters go and kill people is a terrible idea, especially if it's a proper bad guy—a spy for one of the warlike clans or something. Honestly, are the students you get here mostly idiots? My eyes light on a warlock boy in front of me, who is leaning over and diligently writing in his notepad. Are you seriously taking notes? You need to write this down so you don't forget? I bet you have your name sewn into your undies, too.

Bemused, I crinkle my nose and click the power button on my phone to check the time. Forty minutes left. *Ugh.* I roll my eyes and resist the urge to head-butt the desk. Barely. Ever since I arrived at the Protectorate's London campus a month ago, I've felt

strongly that the curriculum needs a revamp. Shouldn't learning about demons and magic and ancient wars be fun? It is absolutely beyond me how anyone could make this stuff boring. Math is more fun than this! *Math*.

When I'd found out I was joining an ancient sect that was sworn to protect humanity against monsters, I thought it would be much more exciting. But it's all transpired to be horribly like regular school: dates and species and facts to remember, mixed with military training, which is like PE, but worse. Angrier instructors. At least shooting guns is kind of satisfying, in a slightly scary way. I get to do that, though I don't have a lot of physical training. The warriors have a much heavier focus on martial arts and weaponry, while the warlocks have even more studying to do, as they memorize reams of spells and ingredients. On top of the classes we all share—history, geography, physics, and math, mostly—I'm required to do focus activities, such as the ever-fascinating 'music note identification class.' Something to do with dimensions having a certain 'sound,' and learning to tell the difference between them quickly. Bo-ring.

I consider for a moment whether I'm likely to get caught if I play a game on my phone, and wonder what the punishment could be, but decide against it on the grounds that the last time I got busted not paying attention, I had to take care of the compost. I smelled like moldy bread and tea leaves for a week.

Instead, I start doodling tiny dinosaurs on the pristine sheet of paper waiting for my notes. An ice skating brontosaurus kills the better part of five minutes.

Then movement to my right catches my attention. Cam, my stocky best friend at the Protectorate, pushes a wisp of long, ashy blonde hair behind her ear and slides a scrap of paper across to my desk in a single movement, almost too fast for the eye to track.

Flipping warriors, always showing off. Just 'cause they're faster and stronger, have better reactions and incredible balance... Though I guess that comes in handy for the 'fighting giant demonic creatures who want to enslave the human race' thing.

The silent grumble is affectionate, and I cover the note with my hand, slipping it onto my lap to avoid being noticed. It's pretty easy to get caught messing around in class, as there are only sixteen people taking this course. Orientation, they call it officially. Newbie Torture, according to everyone else.

I look down to see that Cam has written 'Wanna play hooky?' in large, childish letters. I snort and nod in reply, not as subtly as I should have.

"Something to add, Hallisandra?"

It's Hallie! I cringe at the sound of my full name, and make a face before I reply. "No, Ms. Llewellyn, just agreeing with your point." *Please don't ask what the point was, please don't ask what the point was...*

"And what point was that, precisely?" The professor doesn't sound convinced that I have an answer, and I open my mouth, glancing futilely at the blank board. *If you actually turned the computer on, maybe I'd know!*

Beside me, Cam's huge shoulders are shaking with suppressed laughter, and I glare at her before venturing a response. "About our *responsibility* and what it means to be part of this great organization!" I fill my voice with as much awe and excitement as I can. Responsibility is usually a safe bet in this class.

Llewellyn flattens her wild hair with a palm, staring daggers at me as though waiting for me to fold. I blink, doe-eyed, and finally the woman turns away, returning to the smart board and actually noticing it's blank. Her face pinkens as she clicks the power button and scrolls through some text-heavy slides before pulling an image

onto it—a faded map of London, marked with orange streaks and swirls. It looks like a weather map.

“Human cities are always hot spots for interdimensional flux, and as you can see, there are certain points that draw more breaches than others. Large gatherings—situations where emotions are high. You have to remember that every single human on the planet is imbued with some level of magic. Most of them will never realize it, though a few will be woken and join us here. But when the general population is crowded together, the magic in their blood can call breaches by accident. Some people, especially weavers, have a propensity to act as focal points, which is why it’s imperative that they learn their craft quickly and efficiently.”

Next up is a picture of the city centre, featuring people screaming and running from a four-armed, blue creature I think is called a Fest—one of humanity’s biggest enemies. They consistently try to break through the dimensional walls, but fortunately aren’t very good at accessing the Warp magic. Probably ‘cause they’re evil.

Making a mental note to point out that no human should ever use the word ‘propensity’ in a room full of teenagers, I slump in my chair, keeping half an ear open for anything of interest. The professor has now moved on to signs that could indicate an imminent breach: sudden bouts of sneezing, a high-pitched, inexplicable noise filling your ears, or itching, especially behind the ears and at the wrists. Thrilling stuff. As far as I can tell, the allergies that have plagued me for my whole life are actually magic’s fault.

I spend the rest of the lesson trying to walk a coin over and under my knuckles. I’m not very good at it, and definitely wouldn’t be trying it in class if I didn’t have a secret defense system: Cam snatches the coin out of the air with mystically enhanced reflexes

every time I drop it, and before it clatters to the floor, to make sure I don't get busted.

It pays to have the right friends.

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CHAPTER 2

EMERGENCY

WHEN THE BELL FINALLY RINGS, I slide out of my desk—with a quiet whoop I can't contain—before the professor has finished speaking. Shoving my books into my bag, I make a beeline for the door, not even bothering to wait for Cam, who finds me in the imposing wooden corridor, glugging water out of a handy fountain. I emerge, dripping, and swipe my hand across my freckled face, scattering water droplets and grinning at my muscular friend.

“Gods yes, let's skip Dimensional Physics! They shouldn't schedule anything after Tufts'—” I gesture at my head to indicate the wild hair of the professor. “Class. It's hardly fair. Two hours of her droning on—” Cam's deer-in-the-headlights stare at a point over my shoulder clues me in, and I change my tune without missing a beat. “I mean, enlightening wisdom needs time for digestion. I don't think I could concentrate on anything else with so much new information to consider!”

I don't even look over my shoulder to see if the professor bought it; just head off down the corridor, knowing Cam's burly form will be traipsing after me.

We hide in an unused classroom when the bell rings again, and I spread myself out on a scarred wooden desk, legs dangling, fingers woven behind my head as I stare at the dust motes dancing in the air. Cam heaves herself up and sits cross-legged on another table.

“You are the worst, Hallie. We coulda got busted!” But there’s laughter in her voice as she digs in her jeans pocket.

“Hey, you’re the one who suggested skipping, and you’re technically my senior. In age and time served, if not brains or beauty!” I smirk at her, waggling my eyebrows, and she rolls her hazel eyes, scoffing.

“Well I’m sure you *would* be smarter than me if you paid more than forty seconds of attention to anything, ever. You’re the poster child for the ADD generation. How did you do on your final exams, again?”

I let out a merry snicker and hold my hand out for the gum she’s located. When it’s passed over, I unwrap a stick and shoving it into my mouth, so that my words are muffled. “Point taken, I failed. However, in my defence, exams are stupid and do nothing to prepare you for being a real person, *and* I had just fallen in love for the first time. I was distracted.”

“You’re always distracted, and the way you tell it you dated that girl for about six hours, so I don’t think it counts as love.” I launch a retaliatory gum wrapper at her, but Cam catches it before it gets anywhere near her face. “You’ll have to wake up earlier than that to catch me out. Or ... you know, any warrior ever. You basically move in slow-mo. It’s a good job you talk so fast, or I’d be hard pressed to keep myself from going and making a cuppa between words.”

Challenge accepted. Her voice is teasing, and I squirm around, sliding off the table and crouching, then walking sideways, foot over foot, like I’m going to leap to the attack. Cam sits, unconcerned, as I stalk toward her.

When I growl and pounce, her hands flick up and grab me, holding both of my wrists in one large paw while she uses the other to tickle me. In moments I’m a writhing, teary-eyed, hysterical mess, and she releases me, satisfied grin lighting up her broad face.

“See? Faster than you, every time.”

I collapse, leaning my reddened face on her wide, denim-clad shoulder, and heave huge, sobbing breaths. “I hate you.” *It’s not really fair. Warriors are always going to be faster than me. How am I ever supposed to keep up when we’re out?*

What if I slow everyone down, tripping over my own feet?

Cam puts an arm around me to hold me up while I recover, and tucks my hair behind my ear. Her large hand is warm against my cheek and I look up, our faces inches apart. She’s so close, she can probably see the freckle on

my lower lip, smell the minty freshness of the gum I've been chewing. I swallow it deliberately. Her eyes flick to my throat, then back up, and we move at the same time, closing the gap between us, crushing our lips together with practised ease.

WE SINK AGAINST THE DESK in a flurry of kisses and awkward limb rearrangement and then I pull away, confused. It takes a moment, but suddenly the world comes rushing back and I realize the ringing sound isn't just blood rushing hot in my head, but an actual, ear-piercing noise.

Is that an alarm? I open my mouth to ask, but she beats me to it.

"I'm pretty sure that's the emergency siren." Her voice sounds a little hoarse.

Worried, I move toward the door, pulling it open a crack to look out. The noise is louder in the corridor, and people are legging it in both directions, looking purposeful.

I twist my head, whisper-shouting, "Well everyone is running like it's an emergency. What should we do?"

I ignore the part of me that's suggesting we stay here and make out some more. There's no way this is a fire drill, or anything so mundane, and I bite my lip, suddenly really worried.

If it's big enough, we might have to go and fight.

The thought is cold water down my spine, and I dither in the doorway.

Cam straightens her shirt and drops off the table, feet thudding on the boarded floor as she lumbers over to me. How she managed to get woken as a warrior—gifted with the ability to fight like liquid silk—and yet look this awkward just walking across a room is beyond me.

She grabs the door's edge and stares at me with huge eyes. "Well, I gotta report to my team assembly point, I guess. That's what the orientation booklet said."

I sigh, running my hand through my hair; a few strands are sticking to the back of my neck, which is hot and probably flushed pink. "I don't have a team yet. Also, I didn't read the orientation booklet."

And I am regretting that immensely now.

Cam frowns, squeezing past me and sounding disappointed. "Of course you didn't. Why don't you go and find Professor Xavier—he'll know where

you should be. I'll see you later, okay?"

I follow her into the corridor and nearly collide with a boy who is sprinting by with his head down, pulling on leather arm guards. Seconds before impact he swerves, bouncing up and off the wall in a display of perfect warrior grace, not even missing a stride or reacting to my presence. Poking my tongue out at him, I press myself against the wall, out of the way of any other running human weapons, and call after Cam before she rounds the corner.

"Be careful, okay?"

She looks back and breaks into a grin that closes the distance between us, just for a moment. Then she's gone. Seconds drag out as I watch the place where she disappeared, half hoping she'll come back for me. If I could be on her team, I know we'd both be okay. How am I supposed to do this without her?

With a sigh, I set off for the classroom, trying not to think about it. I'm worried that running will end in an unavoidable collision, so I settle for jogging and getting out of the way every time a sprinting warrior thunders down the corridor. It's the first time I've appreciated the suits of armour that line the halls, as they provide handy places to shelter. Before I thought they were pretentious, but now I can see that they're very practical for hiding behind. I'm heading for Xavier's room, hoping the weaver professor will still be there, but doubting it, when my pocket vibrates.

Oh yeah, I guess I could have called. Feeling like an idiot, I fish my phone out of my tight black jeans—a feat which involves some serious hip-wiggling—and unlock it. A text: 'HALLIE WHERE ARE YOU? REPORT TO VAN 6 ASAP.'

Urgh, why do people type in all caps? It makes it sound like they're yelling.

A beat passes, and I read the message again, then turn on my heel and head for the underground garage as rapidly as I can in my steel-toed boots. He probably *is* yelling. I was definitely supposed to be in class. Oops. I've messed up already. If Xavier's actually looking for me, that means I'm going out. My breath hitches as I wonder what could possibly have happened, where the breach or breaches are, and why the teams ready to go couldn't handle it.

I careen down the corridors of the vast Edwardian house that serves as the main school building for the Protectorate, society for human defence. When I emerge, breathless, in the huge garage, two vans are squealing out the massive open doors and four more are queuing, the last of which has Xavier standing next to it, gesticulating wildly at the driver through the window. I manage another burst of speed to cross the tarmac and skid to a halt, unable to avoid saluting. Damn my lack of impulse control!

“Sorry, boss!” It’s hard to keep the note of excitement out of my voice, and judging by the look on Xavier’s hawkish face, I fail miserably. “Should I get in?” Two warriors poke their heads out of the back of the van and grin at me. One of them beckons urgently.

“We gotta weave! All right, let’s go!”

I’m gonna take that as a yes.

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CHAPTER 3

COMMAND

I PILE INTO THE BACK and Xavier slams one door shut, pointing at me with a bony finger and a stern look. “You. Just ... do *exactly* what Louise says. In fact, do what anyone in here says. They’re all in charge of you. Please, for once in your life, do what you’re told?” He sounds beleaguered and I nod vigorously, squeezing into the corner.

“Honest, I will!”

He squints at me for a moment, rubbing a large hand over his shaven head, and I endeavour to look sombre. I do know how serious this is, after all. I’ve been in two minor skirmishes since I began training at the Protectorate—four breaches, but two were for training, the other two doorways that we actually had to close to keep demons from invading the human world. Never before has the alarm gone off like this, though, and my fingers twitch in anticipation.

This is gonna be a big one.

The other van door shuts, the engine revs, and I’m shoved into the person next to me with the force of acceleration as we peel out of the garage. I look around; a serious-faced young woman with closely shorn reddish hair, who appears to be about twenty, leans forward, meeting my eyes. She’s wearing a fancy-looking bluetooth device and could probably snap me in half with one hand, judging by the thickly corded muscles bulging under her shirt sleeves. Warrior for sure, and she could be in the

regular military with that buzz cut. The girl's deft fingers are assembling a large, confusing-looking gun, but she doesn't even look down. I do.

Ooh, shiny.

"All right, weave, you're new, we're not. Like Zav said, you do *exactly* what I tell you."

Zav? You're best friends, I take it? I shut my mouth firmly. My inner commentary always gets sarcastic when I'm scared, and it can be a problem, especially when I don't manage to keep my thoughts to myself. I'm resolute that that won't happen this time. This is too important.

"Order of command goes me first—Louise, Bravo Sierra command."

Perfect, your call sign is 'BS.' How did no one notice that? I shake the thought off, determined to pay attention. This is serious, now.

"I go down, it's Ruble." She points at a rangy, coffee-skinned boy with wild dreadlocks spraying in every direction and an off-centre lip ring. He lifts his chin in friendly welcome.

"Then Milly,"—a Latina girl with impressive shoulders and a pugnacious expression—"Danika,"—an older-looking white girl, missing a front tooth when she grins—"And Paulie." This one can't be more than fourteen, his confident hands sharpening a huge hunting knife even as the van hurtles around corners at high speed.

I hope he doesn't drop it; knowing my luck, I'd end up in the path of the massive blade.

"Then the warlocks, Barry and Jaz, either or." She points at the two remaining occupants of the van—a prematurely bald guy with Irish colouring and an Asian girl, both reading rapidly, mouthing words under their breath. The guy's hands are glowing a deep, fuzzy violet, indicating that he's currently performing some kind of spell.

Louise doesn't seem fazed by the mystical energy whirling round his fingertips, though, and keeps talking. "Then, if we are *all* dead, you can make your own decisions. But only then. Got it?"

I nod, suddenly nervous, the seriousness of the van getting into my blood. These people, some of them younger than me, have an air of professional competence that's easy to respect. "So ... what's actually happening? I've never seen so many people mobilised."

Especially not me. I'm not even really trained; I've only been out with Donnie before, and he's a weave. He's probably in one of the other vans, so

why aren't I with him? What if I don't know what to do? Oh shit. I'm gonna screw this up.

Danika reaches out and hands me something. It's a small gun, cold and heavy in my sweaty hand, and I almost drop it in shock. Louise doesn't even notice. Just keeps talking.

"Sea Serpents in the Thames. Approximately a hundred breaches. It's a total cluster bomb—that's why you're here. Even if every one of our nineteen London weavers makes it in time, you'll still have to close five or six rifts each. And they're under water, so that adds an extra layer of complication. We have to split up, time is a huge factor here."

My eyes widen as my earlier thoughts from class flood over me again, and I check that the safety of the handgun is on before placing it gingerly on my lap. I have had precisely two lessons actually shooting a firearm. The boy next to me, dreadlocked Ruble, taps me gently on the shoulder, and when I look, is holding up a leather armpit holster. He has a sweet tattoo on the inside of his wrist, I notice. A swallow, right where my stitches are. I reach out and take the holster with my heart pounding in my throat. As the van skids to a halt, engine still running—red light?—I gather my nerve.

"So ... if the breaches are under water, why doesn't the Thames drain out through them?"

The female warlock snorts a laugh and looks up from the book she's been flicking through, a disdainful expression on her heart-shaped face. "'Cause there's water on the other side, hence the Sea Serpents finding their way through. Sea to sea. It's not like they can fly! Breaches can't open unless the environment on the other side is almost identical. Else we'd all get sucked into space or our seas would fill up with acid or something. Not much we could do about that! The world would have ended millennia ago. Did you sleep through the first lesson in Dimensional Physics, or what? How new are you?"

Ah. Maybe I should start paying attention in class. I flash an awkward grin and pick at a frayed spot on my jeans. "I guess I was absent that day. So ... Sea Serpents?"

Louise cocks her head to one side, clearly listening to someone speaking through her bluetooth, and after a few moments looks around at the waiting van. "All right, Bravo Sierra, we've been allocated the two-mile patch with the fewest breaches, in deference to the newbie. The first teams are already

on site, and their warlocks have marked out zones so we don't tread on each other's toes. Spotters reckon there're about forty Serpents; biggest looks like he's around one hundred metres. The area is being cleared for a couple of miles on either side of the river—flood warnings—and the police are already setting up a perimeter to help us out. Bonnie's on site, coordinating the whole operation. Teams are gonna pen the Serpents in further up and downriver; they've got their warlocks building magical barriers to turn 'em around. Our job is to chase 'em back from whence they came, or kill 'em, and, primarily, close the breaches. That means you, small-fry. Pick a guard."

I swallow, aware that all eyes are on me. The dedicated, serious eyes of people who probably never skipped a class or caused a delay getting to a multiple-breach site because they were necking instead of studying. "Uh, a guard?"

Relax, would you? You're just saving the world from being overrun by monsters, it's not bloody military school. Which I was supposed to go to before the Protectorate hauled me out, so I guess I should be grateful. This is obviously much better. Right?

Louise rolls her eyes impatiently and gestures around the van. "We're working in pairs. You need a guard to drive and watch your back while you're doing your thing." She waggles her fingers in the air, obviously imitating magic. "Pick someone."

Drive? Do we get submarines? That would be cool. And safe. Very, very safe.

I chew my lip for a moment, and then glance at Ruble. He smiles, and I shrug. "I'll go with Ruble, then. If that's okay?"

Cuz you're kind of bitchy, and he's kind of cute. And presumably competent, if he's second in line.

Louise nods and looks me over, puffing air out of her nose. "Didn't have time to change, I see? Your pants and boots are okay, but you need a better shirt."

I look down at my fashionably ripped band shirt, which is faded to washed-out grey but has Sid Vicious still clearly visible, giving the finger to anyone paying attention, and grin. "What, you don't like the Pistols?"

Ruble laughs softly and rummages under the bench seat, grabbing a duffle. "Here ya go. Roll the sleeves up."

I grab it and look inside to find a black combat shirt with more pockets than seems necessary for anything short of camping for a week, and a reinforced but sleeveless leather jacket. I grin broadly. *Nice!*

“Aw, hell. If I’d known I’d get a sweet leather jacket, I’d come out Serpent hunting weeks ago.”

I hand my gun to Ruble, stock first, and then haul my tee over my head, making the young kid, Paulie, gasp. Unable to hide my smirk, I yank on the combat shirt, buttoning it at high speed. He’s flushing bright red with his eyes squeezed shut, and I roll mine.

“Imminent death, I didn’t think we had time to find a changing room.”

Louise scowls at me, jaw clenched. “Start taking this serious, newbie, or we’ll leave you in the van. Breaches be damned. You could die out there, and if you mess up, someone else *will* die.”

I get that it’s serious business, but you obviously do not get my sense of humour. That’s cool. Remind me to never invite you to a tea party.

I put on my most reliable face, furrowing my admittedly heavy brows, and thread my holster over my arm, clipping it shut as professionally as I’m able. I only fumble once, and don’t shoot anyone, so decide to count it as a win.

“Sorry. I react to abject terror with inappropriate nudity and jokes. It’s something I’m working on with my therapist.”

Louise doesn’t appear to catch the sarcasm, and nods briefly, but Ruble chuckles under his breath and when I glance at him, he’s got a smile tucked into the corners of his full mouth.

I’ve just finished settling my holster in place over my leather jacket when the van squeals to a halt, making me slam into the male warlock, who steadies me with one hand, not even looking as his mouth continues to move in rhythmic chants. No one else skidded at all.

Stupid low centre of gravity. How come I didn’t get any of the cool powers that stop you making an idiot of yourself?

I keep out of the way as the warriors efficiently gather up their equipment and bundle out of the van, following Ruble, who is hefting a clanking bag. The warlocks seem to be staying behind—for now, at least.

CHAPTER 4

PREPARATION

THE VAN IS PARKED DOWN from Waterloo Bridge, with the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben gleaming in the distance. Louise, Ruble, and the other warriors of Bravo Sierra book it at a speed that would leave Usain Bolt in the dust toward one of the major wharfs, where ferries pull in. I race after them, deciding after one hundred metres that I'm definitely going to start going to the gym every day. *Or at least three times a week. Okay, twice.* I make a mental note to inform Cam of this decision so the big warrior can haul me out of bed.

It's eerily quiet around us, the streets not crowded for once, the usually bustling bank completely devoid of traffic and foot passengers. I shiver, impressed by the power the Protectorate wields, that they're able to clear one of the busiest parts of London in less than forty minutes. When I make it, panting, to the team, they're clipped into impressive combat jackets and even the warlocks have somehow beaten me to the group.

Why don't I get one of those sweet rigs? One look at the multiple carabiners and weird zips allows me to answer my own question: *Because I have no idea what any of that does.*

Below us, the water is frothing and foaming, huge shapes milkily visible beneath unnatural waves. A sinuous flank twists clear of the surface of the river, liquid gushing off it like a waterfall, and I move closer to the team.

The Irish-looking guy, Barry, is gazing out over the water, frowning. “Shit, guaranteed some wannabe journalist has snapped a few pictures. I’m gonna be up all night rejigging memories after we deal with the wrigglers.”

The rest of the team looks organized, standing close behind each other in pairs. Apparently in my absence they’ve gone over some sort of plan. Louise is with the female warlock, Paulie is behind Barry, Milly and Danika make a third team, and Ruble is impatiently gesturing for me to stand behind him.

Oh, they’re all standing on something.

I hurry to my place, inspecting the shiny, oval object under my partner’s feet as I approach. It’s about three feet long, two wide, and maybe a couple of inches thick. Whatever it’s made from is translucent, so that I can see colourful swirls of magic dancing inside the layers of what could be glass. The surface is heavily crosshatched, presumably for our feet to grip.

Oh, brilliant, a tea tray. That looks safe. And we’re going boarding on them? In pairs?

“Grab on.” Ruble’s voice is pumped with adrenaline, and he reaches back, taking my hand and wrapping it round his narrow waist. I cling on, harder than is probably necessary, and move forward until he’s basically sitting on my lap, our feet only inches apart as we stand—surfer style—with our left sides facing the river.

“What’s happ—” A whooshing sound drowns me out, accompanied by a weird pearlescent light shooting from the edges of the tea-tray device. I jump, and almost fall right into it, but Ruble steadies me.

“It’s a skimmer. You’ve never used one before?”

I shake my head mutely, reaching out with my free hand to touch the glowing surface that now surrounds us like an iridescent bubble. Sparks of colour matching the rainbow below our feet glint in the air around us, marking the curved shape of the magic enclosing us. At least six different colours, meaning six warlocks must have teamed up to make this ‘skimmer.’ Every warlock gets their own distinctive shade, so you can usually tell who’s done what, but I don’t recognize any of the colours here. Too old, maybe—before my time.

Ruble drags my attention back to him with an exclamation. “Crikey, how long have you been on campus? Shit. Okay. Well...”

The team next to us glides to the edge of the wharf and drops into the water, the weight of the girls plunging the whole apparatus under. I flinch in shock, and Ruble pats my hand. The gleaming container pops to the surface as I watch, just metres from our feet, and slides off over the water, leaning forward. Like a Segway—a floating, water-riding Segway made of magic.

In it, Louise is wielding the fierce-looking gun she'd been assembling in the van, while her partner crouches in front of her, one hand pressed against the inside of the bubble. A viciously serrated tail punctures the water surface next to them, but they're already spinning out of the way, as if they'd seen it coming. Louise fires, the sound muffled by distance, and gleaming purple blood flowers on the chalky tail, which splashes back into the water, raising a huge wave that almost capsizes the team.

I realize I'm pressed extremely tightly against Ruble's back, and that he's been talking for the past few minutes, and groan under my breath. *Can't you listen to one thing, Hallie, ever?*

"Are you ready?" His voice is thrumming with excitement.

No, no, I didn't hear a word you just said, and I have no idea what you need from me or what I'm doing.

"Yeah, sure. Let's do it." I'm pleased with how cool I sound. Then my phone buzzes in my pocket, making me jump, and I squeeze Ruble's waist even as he somehow starts sliding us forward. We're almost at the drop before I jab him.

"Just a tick," I mumble.

We stop and he twitches impatiently, tapping his fingers against the back of my hand. I fish my phone out and look at the screen. Cam. 'Don't do anything stupid. If you die I'll kick your ass. And I will post all your terrible Buffy fanfiction online for everyone to see. With pictures of that Halloween party!'

I grin—shaky, but feeling more normal. Shoving my phone deep into my pocket, I look out at the turbulent waters. I'm pretty sure I can see Cam's six-foot figure in a bubble zipping along a few hundred metres downstream. Obviously she managed to text and skim at the same time. *Warriors get all the perks.*

I cross my fingers, hoping we'll both get out of this unscathed. "All right. Let's go fishing."

Ruble snorts and we slide again; he's pushing against the front of the bubble with the palm of his left hand, like Louise's partner.

"Remember, this only keeps water out. Not the snakes. And not you in—if your feet leave the board, you'll go through the side, or maybe the top. Squat down a bit and hold on. If you get a shot at one of them, take it! The bullets are spelled to cut through their scales, so they'll feel it for sure!"

He whoops then, and we drop off the pier, leaving my stomach behind with the orange emergency equipment.

Is it too late to ask for a life jacket?

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CHAPTER 5

SUBMERSION

AND JUST LIKE THAT, WE'RE plunging under water, bubbles streaming past and obscuring all vision. I squawk in surprise, digging my fingers into Ruble's muscled stomach. We go down what must be a couple of metres before buoyancy asserts itself and we reverse, popping back to the surface like a cork, the solid board beneath my feet pushing up so fast we end in a squat, my thigh muscles screaming with the effort of balancing. I'm grateful for Ruble's strong grip on my forearm. He feels like iron, firm and in perfect balance even though his butt is pressed against my lap from the rapid ascent. I don't mind; I feel safer just from the contact, the adrenaline starting to bubble through my veins making my heart sing.

Ruble crows again and leans forward, pressing his hand harder against the front of the skimmer, the muscle in his forearm tensing. Suddenly we're zooming off over the water and I join in, yelling with the sheer joy of the movement. It's like a rollercoaster—surfing on a rollercoaster.

See, Dad, I knew skateboarding was gonna be useful for something.

I keep myself in balance, shifting my weight automatically, years of practice coming in handy. Underfoot, through the ethereal layer of magic and technology that's keeping us afloat, I can see Serpents. Two of them—one large, one small—are writhing deep in the water, coming up toward us. I open my mouth to shout a warning, but Ruble is already spinning us away from the approaching sea demons.

Then Paulie's team swoops in, a huge war bow in the boy's small hands, fierce glee painting his face with exultation. He hollers something and launches an arrow, which punches through the side of his bubble with no ill effects. The missile sinks deep into a Serpent's flank in a blossom of cloudy blood, and the monster twists away from me and my companion.

Ruble skids us sideways, London riverbank streaming past. We're going at a decent clip, halfway out over the river, when my hands start to glow.

"Here, Ruble!" I squeak out. The smoky ghost light emanating from my hands is drifting left, left and down, calling me to the breach below. The insubstantial outlines of the new tattoos that will become a permanent part of my body art, whether I like it or not, are tingling as they form on my wrists. It looks as though someone has drawn on me in watercolour; they're faint now, but will soon be dark and immutable.

The key to this watery dimension, written on flesh. My future holds many more, and they'll march up my arms in an increasing procession as I close breach after breach.

Yet another reason why I will never get a job in a bank. I shake the thought away, as distractions now could get me killed, and squeeze Ruble's waist.

"Left! Left and below us. Close." The light is flowing now, stronger, showing me the way. Ruble looks over his shoulder as he turns the vessel, his dark eyes alight with excitement, and we skim to a halt, floating calmly for a moment. He grins at me, and then quickly scans the water.

"Ready to go under?"

Do we get scuba gear?

I twist my glowing fist into his combat jacket and shut my eyes. "Sure thing. Just ... one question. How do I close the breach under water?"

He crows laughter, eyes crinkling as he makes a downward motion on the bubble in front of him. Looking closer, I can see that his hand is over a circular area that appears thicker, about twice the size of his palm. It spreads out into the skimmer wall, like the heavy end of a glass fishing float.

"You really never listen to anything, do ya? Works the same, just wetter."

I furrow my eyebrows at him, and then sigh, letting it go. I'd probably argue that point if we weren't about to get eaten.

Suddenly the water laps up around the base of our bubble, moving up the sides, pressing against it. I feel like I'm in a translucent plastic submarine, but before I can protest we sink, the Thames closing over our heads, sending a shiver down my spine. It's a good job I'm not particularly scared of water. My white-knuckled grip on Ruble's clothes can't be comfortable, but he doesn't make any effort to loosen it.

Under the surface, it's dark almost immediately, the sky seeming far away and glassy above us. We're moving quickly, and a rush of water spins us a little, but Ruble fights to keep us on course, dragging his hand left, right, up, and down in patterns so fast I can barely follow them. I feel his muscles clench as he forces the board to obey his feet. He's alternating between looking down, following the mist emanating from my hand at his waistband, and scanning our surroundings. The Warplight illuminates the water around us, like a searchlight, the calling of the breach marking our path to the rip in reality.

I can just make out the huge forms of Sea Serpents undulating in the murky distance. They don't seem to have noticed us yet but my hands are streaming Warplight, guiding us to the rift that has allowed these beasts entry from their home world, and I don't know how long we'll be able to keep our presence a secret. I want to speak, to fill the oppressive silence the weight of the water has caused, but my mouth is dry and sticky with fear. A condom is drifting next to us, resembling a translucent jellyfish. Gross.

Well, this is certainly an adventure. Join the Protectorate, they said. See the world, they said. Drown at the bottom of the disgusting Thames, they didn't say. At least needles don't float. I wonder if mystical healing works on hepatitis.

"There!" Ruble hisses, his dreadlocks brushing my cheek as he turns, spinning the board around with his feet. It spirals so rapidly I lose my balance, just a bit. My right elbow hits the bubble and ... passes straight through, resistance no more than the surface of the water itself. It feels like I've submerged it into a cold bath.

Gasping, I jerk back. My wet elbow drips water onto my feet, the liquid pooling on the solid board below and sloshing around my boots. It doesn't run over the sides, though; the barrier seems to stop water in both directions, but let it in if it's attached to me? *Magic.*

I take a huge breath, suddenly nauseous, and tilt my head back in the hopes it will stop the heaving of my guts. Maybe six feet above us, the surface is an extremely faint source of illumination. Terror presses in on me, and I wrap my other arm round Ruble's waist, hiding my face in his leather-clad back. He smells like cinnamon and fresh sweat. I inhale deeply.

"Just gimme a second." My voice is muffled against his jacket, hands knotted together in the fabric of his shirt. My right hand presses against the warm skin of his belly, and it's this that settles me. So human, yet so strong.

Anywhere but here, hey? Why the hell did I sign up for this? Oh right, I didn't. Military school isn't sounding so bad right now.

I manage to lift my face out of his spine, but it's extremely difficult.

Then we're gliding toward the breach that lit my hands. The glowing is turned up as high as it goes, now, whitish blue misting out from my wrists, writhing over my palms, and trailing from my fingertips. It seems as though it should be filling the bubble, like dry ice, but it's pulled outward instead. Ahead of us, the rift pulses, hanging dead in the water, the other side looking almost identical to this, the mundane water of the Thames.

But monsters are coming through this doorway, and it's my job to close it. Like, now. I sniff, glaring at it. Its black rim sucks the light in, devouring the illumination. The double layer of magic—white inside, around the other dimension, and black framing it—gives me the usual heebie jeebies. There's something wrong with the way it looks, like always. Unnatural. I think it's to do with the slight movement of everything surrounding and inside it—the water in this case—compared to the absolute stillness of the opening itself.

This rift isn't too big, thankfully, and it's not currently disgorging anything gross or violent, which is a total plus in my book. I shudder and loosen my grip, allowing myself a quick pat of Ruble's impressive six-pack for the road before I mostly let go of him.

You gotta take your perks when saving the world.

He shuffles around so he's braced behind me and yanks out a gun, checking it at high speed. I'm grateful for his strong arm when he hooks it around my waist, squatting back a little to give me space. He could lift me up with one hand; they all could, even little Paulie.

And all I get are the magic glowy hands. What a scam.

His grip is tight, but not painful, and I take the deepest breath I can, then reach out, my hands, then wrists and forearms sinking into the water. It's cold, and I can't help the shudder that runs through me, at least partially for the prospect of having my arms bitten off. They're certainly sending up a beacon, the mystic light straining to meet the floating rip in reality. I reach further, and—just as I've done four times before, just as I've been taught in Warp classes—pull the edges of the void together so they seal, leaving nothing to show for it.

Door shut. Magic hands. The light sputters out, leaving us in almost pitch blackness.

Ruble pats my hip and then our vessel starts sliding upward, back to the surface, back to reality. It's a total anti-climax. No snake even came near us. The only negative is that I'm soaked to the elbows in the notoriously dirty water of the London river.

We emerge into the daylight, into the noise and shouting and madness of the fight that has been going on all the time we were under. How long were we down? It felt like years. There are three Serpent bodies floating on the surface, belly up, their milky pastel scales glinting in the watery sunlight. One of them is huge, with dozens of vicious wounds marring its flanks. It bobs against the ships pressed along the bank, easily the length of four barges. Ruble grins at me, dark eyes flashing with glee, and I suddenly realize that by choosing him as my guard, I've kept him out of the fight. As my chauffeur, he hopefully won't get too much action. He still seems to be having a good time, though; warriors live for adrenaline rushes, as a rule. And he's handsome now, with the fight rousing his blood. He's made for war. I grin back, catching some of his excitement and sliding my hand back onto his stomach.

“Ready?”

I nod, leaning into him a little as we set off again. A grid pattern search, I realize belatedly. I bet he told me that while I was busy not paying attention. We head back and forth across the river three times before my hands flare up, alerting us to the presence of another breach.

This one is a little hairier; there's nothing in sight and I'm feeling pretty good about it until a Serpent surprises us from *behind* the rift. Since there's no way to see through to the other side of our own dimension, it's a pretty good hiding spot, but I don't think the Serpent planned it. It unfurls and

noses toward us, huge fangs somehow sparkling even in the lacklustre illumination. Diamond teeth, as though they're creating their own light. I'm about to yell out a warning when Ruble lifts his gun and unloads two bullets into its jaw.

I feel a little sorry for it as it groans loudly enough to rattle my eardrums and spins away.

Do they even eat people? Do we have to kill them, or can we just send them home? I'm sorry, Falcor!

It doesn't return, thank goodness, and I manage to seal the breach without further incident, although I insist we look on both sides of it before I close it, just in case.

My third breach of the day is deeper. Much deeper. As we descend, my breathing starts coming harshly, and Ruble's muscles are jumping; obviously he's also less-than partial to the claustrophobic sensation of thousands of gallons of water pressing down on our heads.

And this one feels worse from the very beginning. I'm almost not surprised when the monster strikes.

CHAPTER 6

DISASTER

I'M HALFWAY THROUGH CLOSING THE breach, and soaked to the biceps, when a flash of movement catches my attention a breath before the violent impact throws me headfirst into the freezing water. I tumble sideways, flung off the board so I'm drenched to the waist, and the board spins up and away from my feet. I lose all sense of direction in a split second.

I'm about to die, I realize suddenly.

The only information that could help orient me is the glow of my hands, and there's no way to follow that anywhere but to the breach. I choke on a mouthful of water that tastes like rust and sewage, panicked thoughts flooding my mind. Then a strong hand fists the collar of my jacket and hauls me back into the haven of the skimmer.

I'm gasping and kneeling, with Ruble crouched over me, steadying our rocking vessel with his feet, when the Serpent returns.

It's huge. We don't stand a chance, and the breach still isn't closed, so if we run we'll have to come back. Its mouth gapes, rings of muscle contracting as I look right down its throat, fangs as long as my forearm glistening with the iridescent colours of gasoline. The beast screams as it rushes toward us, water frothing in its wake, and I'm crushed down onto the ephemeral base of our bubble, curled in a ball.

Ruble straddles my shoulder, clenching firm thigh muscles around my chest, pinning me in place while he equalizes the board. He's amazing, taking aim at the monster with breathtaking calm, and managing to squeeze off four rapid shots before pressing his hand to the control patch and forcing us upward. My eyes are glued to the trajectory of the bullets as they spiral through the murky liquid, smashing into the Serpent's throat lining and bursting into bright purple blood splatters. I even see one collide dramatically with a tooth, which splinters into fragments.

It feels like it's happening in slow motion. Bullet time. The Serpent bucks and flails, spinning downward in a mass of blood and bubbles.

Punctured lung? Do Serpents breathe air?

Then the world speeds up again and we're moving toward the surface, flying through the water. I've just begun to believe that we've escaped when I see disaster approaching. The body of the snake has passed under us, but the tail thrusts through the water, smashing into our bubble at shoulder height. It passes over my head, so that I actually feel the air move, and slams into Ruble's torso with such intense speed that even he can't react in time. He's dashed out of the bubble, out of the pocket of air before I even realize, let alone react.

The last thing I see is his abjectly shocked face, mouth wide, silver air streaming over his thick lips and catching in his tangled hair before he disappears into the murk. I scream, and the Serpent plunges into the darkness after him, leaving me huddled against the thin salvation offered by the board, wondering what will happen. *Will someone come? They'll come, right? But how would they know?* Shakily, I take stock of the immediate vicinity. Nothing in any direction—only the misty light of my weaver hands. If I close the breach below me, even that will go out.

I can't do it. I want to—to do my duty as a weaver—but I can't bear to leave myself in darkness. Gravity glues my feet to the board and I get out my gun, holding it in one hand while I shuffle forward carefully, to press my other hand to the marked area on my lonely bubble.

It takes four spins—four bile-inducing, terror-causing spins that almost spew me out into the water—before I get the feel of it, and manage to slowly guide the craft upward. When I surface, the sunlight a benediction for my fear-chilled skin, I realize I've drifted heavily downriver. I squint across the glinting water, trying to get my bearings.

To my left, the stomach-twistingly familiar figure of Cam is hacking with a great sword as tall as she is, her skimmer zooming in for the huge weapon to send up a spout of blood, then zipping away. I watch, wondering what to do. Bubbles are skittering all over the surface of the water, but I can't see anyone swimming. Or floating. Anyone that could be Ruble.

Swiping the water off my face, and determinedly hooking my soaked, ratty hair behind my ears, I turn the bubble, scanning the surface. No luck. Swapping my gun for my phone, I fumble with the buttons and fire off a quick text requesting back up. Then I force my vessel to head, in fits and starts, toward where Ruble disappeared, trying to peer through the dark water.

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CHAPTER 7

SURVIVAL

I'VE ALMOST MADE IT TO the other side when a yell I recognize pierces my ears. A yell that stabs right through my sternum and into my guts, filling them with ice. I've turned the board and headed toward the sound before my conscious brain has caught up.

Cam is floundering on the surface of the water—not a good swimmer, but able to keep afloat thanks to her preternatural speed. There is no sign of her board or teammate, but there is a Serpent. It doesn't look so big—about six metres in length, and only as thick around as a solidly built man. But it's heading straight for Cam, just under the surface of the water, an ominous V-shaped wake marking its passage.

I almost punch my hand right through the control panel in my fear. My bubble leans forward dramatically, my feet slipping before finding purchase. The Serpent rears up, flaring a dangerous-looking red collar out around its gaping jaws, and strikes down with its blunt nose, the green-gray water splashing up as it collides with Cam's struggling form and plunges them both under. I reach the disturbance only seconds later, the waves lapping up the sides of my bubble and rocking the fragile board.

Nononononononononononononono!

I can barely think past the roaring in my ears, the redness washing over my vision. Sick with fury, I drive the skimmer under, hands working

confidently on the control panel, because to fail is to let my friend die. The water welcomes me, moves for me, and I plough through it, following the frothy, bubbling trail. I pull my gun out with a steady hand and aim down, ahead of me into the darkness.

The Serpent seems to coalesce, rather than simply becoming visible. It's in front of me, worrying at Cam's ragdoll form. Red blood—human blood—is discolouring the water in ugly florets. Screaming my rage, I shoot haphazardly, squatting down and sending my bubble hurtling toward my friend. The Serpent recoils, the bullets shocking it, the water flattening the projectiles into mushroom-headed pieces of metal that rip and tear into its scaled side.

Somehow feeling perfectly in control of my vehicle, I bend my knees and angle my approach so that Cam's drifting form flies through the front of my bubble and under my steering arm, slamming into me with the speed of my travel. The impact almost knocks me clear off the board, but I manage to hold my footing through a sliding, pants-wetting moment. I grab her collar, leaving her limp legs trailing outside the safe zone, and don't look down at the blood sloshing over my feet, or at the insistent glow of my hands. I don't look at anything except the six-inch patch of magic that controls our movement, sending us back upward.

We pop out only fifteen metres from the bank, and I basically crash us right into the edge, having lost all sense of direction and movement now that we're above water. My neck tingles with fear, my mind convinced the Serpent will come for us, chase us up to dry land, until welcome hands are finally hauling us off the water and over the barrier, onto the blessedly solid concrete.

I sit in a heap and shiver, choking on the snot caught in my throat as people fuss over Cam. *At least I got her body out of the water. She doesn't have to stay under there forever. She's not lost. That wouldn't be okay, being dead down there, lost and alone.*

Someone shoves a hot cup of tea at me, slopping the liquid onto my hands in a burning puddle. Tentatively, I lift it to my trembling lips and take a sip. It's sweet and milky and helps me to stop shaking. It does nothing for the block of ice that's replaced my inner organs, though.

Ruble, and Cam. Cam's partner? How many more?

My fixed stare finally manages to provide some confusing information. They're bandaging Cam's body. White, white bandages taking on muddy rings of water from her sopping clothes and dripping hair. Why are they bandaging her when she's dead?

Because she's alive. She must be alive!

I stumble to my numb feet and manage to stagger over to the flurry of activity. I'm shunted out of the way, but persistently worm into a small space near Cam's unbandaged hand. Reaching out slowly, I slide our fingers together, and soon both of my hands are wrapping around her larger one, a hand-sandwich.

Open your eyes, Cam. Open them. C'mon. Be okay, you can't be beaten by an itty-bitty snakeling. Think what people will say! It wasn't even a big one.

I can't relax, can't stop the tension quivering at the base of my spine. There's bile burning my throat, and I'm worried I'm going to vomit all over the people trying to help my friend.

Cam doesn't open her eyes, but she does finally open her mouth. I squeak, squeezing her hand tightly and bending down to hear her, careful not to let my gross hair fall onto her cheek.

"Hallie?" It's barely a whisper. But it's there.

She's not dead. Thank you. Thank you. Tears sting the corners of my eyes, but I hold onto her with both hands, refusing to let go for even a second.

"I'm here, I'm here. Oh God, I thought you were dead. You scared the shit out of me. Holy guacamole..."

She groans, flinching as an enthusiastic paramedic pushes another stitch through the bloody meat of her thigh. "You shot me, you jerk."

Warriors. As long as they aren't dead, they're fine.

I laugh and laugh, and lean down to kiss my best friend's grimy forehead. I stay standing by the stretcher, even as I see a limp body being pulled from the water, the distinctive shock of hair dripping pink onto the gray concrete. They lay him down with careful movements, and cover his form with a black cloth.

I should go over, I know. But I don't move. The paramedics eventually insist that I get out of the way, and load Cam into an ambulance. Another team comes in, one girl half carrying a boy, who collapses as the medics run

toward him. In the water a Serpent dies, twisting and screaming in the river. Nobody asks me to go back in, and I sit with a thick knot tangled in my guts.

How many breaches are left? Are they still coming? I should be doing my duty.

But I stay, sitting silently on the hard ground with my hands locked in front of my bent knees. Louise trudges over and slides into a heap next to me, thankfully *not* wrapping an arm around my shoulders, or even touching me. Not asking me to get back on a board and return to the water. There's blood streaking her arms.

My boots squelch as I shift slightly, and a cold breeze cuts through my wet clothes. We don't move. We sit together, not looking at each other, not saying a word, until the rest of the wan-faced team comes to get her. Then the seven of them walk back to the van in a group.

I feel totally alone. They'd all known Ruble for years, maybe. I don't even know how long he'd been at the Protectorate. I knew him for perhaps an hour. All I do know is that he was brave, and strong, and that he saved me from an unpleasant death. He had a six-pack to die for, and a tattoo of a swallow on the inside of his forearm. He had a lip ring, and questionable hair-fashion choices. I don't know anything real about him, and now I never will. But Cam is alive. And if I'd had the choice I'd have traded Ruble for Cam in a second. That thought makes me sick to my stomach.

Thank you, universe, for not taking Cam.

I try not to think of Ruble's surprised face as he was swept out into the water, but as I move forward, it is that very picture that drags me from my warm bed in the morning in time for every single class, and keeps me leaning over books when my eyes are gritty with exhaustion. It was not my fault, I know. But next time ... I'll be ready.

Next time, *everyone* will come home.

ABOUT TASH



Tash McAdam's first writing experience (a collaborative effort) came at the age of eight, and included passing floppy discs back and forth with a best friend at swimming lessons. Since then, Tash has spent time falling in streams, out of trees, learning to juggle, dreaming about zombies, dancing, painting, learning Karate, becoming a punk rock pianist, and of course, writing.

Tash is a teacher in real life, but dreams of being a full-time writer, and living a life of never-ending travel. Though born in the hilly sheepland of Wales, Tash has lived in South Korea and Chile but now calls Vancouver, Canada home.

Visit the website or facebook for news, gossip, and random tidbits about Tash's adventures.

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