

Black the Tides

By K.A. Wiggins

Advanced Reader Copy - Not for Sale

Preview Edition Only

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A Snowmelt & Stumps book

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Chapter 1: Lily



I'M STUCK IN A LOOP, trying not to look at the ghost of a girl with golden curls and hazel eyes.

I've been here before. I know what's coming next.

Shadows skitter across her face, darken and split the skin. Her childish features contort in a scream. Darkness wells in the corners of her milky eyes and spills down her cheeks in a continuous inky stream.

She smiles, slow and empty.

"We're coming."

Then the nightmare repeats.



I'VE SPENT MOST OF my life (at least the parts of it I remember) believing I was haunted.

It turns out I was—by my past self. Cadence is the remnant of everything I once was, before the loss of our parents and reprogramming by the not-so-benevolent Towers of Refuge stripped me of knowledge, identity, and purpose.

But as far as disembodied spirits go, she's pretty tame. At least her pestering ways never gave me screaming nightmares.

"Again, Cole?" Ange stands beside my cot, knuckling sleep out of her eyes. I'm still not used to seeing her face so bare—down here, there's no need for extravagant makeup nor the shielding illusion of protection provided by masks.

Her long-lost twin peeks around her shoulder, terrified the dream-eating Mara are going to descend at any moment. Amy still hasn't got-

ten used to the idea they can't venture this far below the surface. The depths belong to other monsters. And good old-fashion nightmares, apparently.

I summon up my best "protector-of-the-people" smile. She doesn't look reassured.

My hair is matted with sweat. Sheets tangle around my legs. Blood darkens the bandages where I've reopened at least one of the many gashes. They're not healing well. Wading through viscera after being torn by jagged bone and crumbled tile turns out to be less than ideal, but no one said I had to *look* heroic.

Ange sighs and heads for her supply shelf, Amy scurrying in her wake. Apparently, they were separated for like a decade. I'm sure there's a story there, but Ash and Cadence have been so busy catching up it's hard for anyone else to get a word in edgewise.

Speaking of which—"Did you see it that time?"

"Nope," Cadence says. "Yet again, nightmareless. What a shame. Feeling so left out. Boo."

Pest. "Shouldn't you have?"

"Dunno. Probably. Ask Ash when he wakes up."

I consider reaching over to the next cot to thump him with a pillow. He'd be fine with it—to him, I'm an old childhood friend—and Cadence would just laugh. But I just can't let myself give in and fall into their pace.

Besides, he needs his sleep. He seems to be healing surprisingly fast, but then, he was pretty beat up to begin with. Getting tortured by a monster will do that. The sooner he recovers, the sooner we can make sure nothing like that ever happens again, to anyone.

Ash, Cadence, and I are all that stands between humanity and the bottomless hunger of the Mara. There are thousands of people living in Refuge, and Ange says there are hundreds more hidden in the tunnels down here, too—not to mention, the outcasts who somehow cling

to survival outside, despite flooding, toxic fog, Refuge raids, and, of course, the dream eating Mara.

Ash groans and rolls over. He blinks. A slow smile takes over his face.

I hate it. He's always so happy to see me.

Except when he looks at me, he sees her. Cadence. *His Cady*.

They were kids together. He came to save her. Instead, he found me.

Whatever. It's fine. He and Cadence can chat in the dreamscape all they want. The important thing is we all get back in fighting shape and save the city before it's too late.

The memory of the nightmare's whispered warning—*We're coming*—sends a chill up my spine.

Ash shifts to get a clearer look. "What's wrong?"

"She had another nightmare," Cadence says. "She wants to know if you saw it, too. I didn't. I had a lovely dream about marshmallows. When was the last time you roasted marshmallows?"

"Man, it's been ages! First thing when we get back, we'll have to get everyone together for a roast. Rei started this challenge where we see how many we can stack in one bite, not that he needs the sugar, and then Hatif—"

And they're off. Again. I roll my eyes and swing my legs out over the cold concrete floor. They keep darting off on tangents about things I don't understand and people I don't remember.

To be fair, Cadence did try to share the memories once they started coming back to her. They just didn't take, I guess. They're like stories someone has told me, faint shadows in comparison to the vividness and depth of real things. Or, at least real-to-me things, I guess.

Like that nightmare . . .

Anyway, I'm more interested in the here and now. I've got better things to do than reminisce. There's another whole layer of civilization down here in Under, building and creating and, well, perhaps not thriv-

ing, but doing so much more than just clinging to life in these dark tunnels.

Ange brings in her artisans to show us their creations. They craft wonders from repurposed materials scavenged from the ruins above ground and destined for Refuge's upper echelon of Superiors or the pleasure of Freedom's hedonistic denizens.

Engineers bring hand sized models of machines they claim to have built to harness the waves and create light and warmth, not only for the comfort of those living down in these tunnels, but to fuel subterranean growing rooms and produce the odd, colourless food they seem to prefer to nutrient fluid. Considering Refuge has been drugging their own people's food supply, I can't fault them for avoiding anything that even bears a passing resemblance to Noosh.

At first, I watch this parade of odd performances without comment, not sure what to do with all the information these strangers offer up so eagerly. Is this Under's version of Refuge's training floor? Do they expect me to pick a new job or something?

Not much use for a surveillance technician down here, sure, but now that I can fight the Mara, shouldn't protecting them keep me busy enough for the foreseeable future? Just how much does Ange expect of me?

While I stew in resentful silence, Ash comes up with endless thoughtful questions and insightful observations. Apparently, Nine Peaks—where he and Cadence are from—is a hotbed of agricultural, craftsman, and engineering innovation, based on Ange's people's reactions. Though he keeps them talking longer than I'd like, I find much of it interesting despite myself. So many things I'd never considered or imagined.

When I can manage to sit up without my head spinning, Ange even has some of her people help take me on tours of the workshops and growing rooms and dwellings tucked into small offshoots of the main

tunnels. But it takes Cadence's "they're trying to impress you, stupid," to figure out why she's going to the trouble of educating me.

She's putting me on display, and at the earliest opportunity, sending me out on parade.

Everywhere I go Ange's people drop what they're doing to follow and stare openly. But it's a good kind of staring, even if it is uncomfortable. They're warm, friendly, interested and interesting. And they believe I'm going to usher in a new era, destroying their enemies and lifting these people out of hiding to rejoin a transformed, united Refuge.

They're absolutely right. I've got to get back to fighting form. I finally know what I'm meant to do and who I'm meant to be—there's no time for hanging around feeling sorry for myself.

I wallow my way off the bed and ignore the sharp protests of too many cuts and bruises. I manage a couple of staggering steps before the room goes wavy. I snatch at the curtain dividing the cots from Ange's workspace, tipping dangerously before I snag enough fabric to keep me upright.

"I don't think so." Ange snakes an arm around my waist. She hauls me back to bed and plants her forearm across my torso to pin me down when I protest. "Did I say you could get up?"

"You're not the boss of me, lady. C'mon, say it." Cadence laughs.

Ash just looks worried. He's up on one elbow as if to come after me, but his skin has gone pasty under its silvery covering and his lips are set against the pain. The light of his magic gutters in his eyes, a bare flicker of what it should be.

I consider apologizing—to him, to Ange, to all the people waiting for me to get back on my feet and save them. I settle for staring at my toes while Ange roughly changes the dressings I've gone and made a mess of.

"There's someone here to meet you. Behave yourself." She gives the bandages a thwack to signal she's finished. Or maybe as a punishment—I never really know with her.

She has good reason to be angry, even to hate me. It's basically my fault her partner, Cass, got killed. And, it turns out it was also my fault her sister was nearly tortured like Ash. I first encountered Amy as Morristu in Refuge, when I hid like a coward and let her take the fall for me.

It seemed like the only thing to do at the time, but I can pretty much say that about everything that's happened over the last few months. Doesn't make any of it right. So whatever Ange wants from me, whatever she needs me to do here, it's hers to ask.

Amy sidles around the edge of the curtain that cordons off the makeshift infirmary.

"We've met," Cadence says drily.

Ash nods. Ange glances at him, caught off guard. She can't hear Cadence. Neither can Amy, who seems to take Ash's gesture as encouragement. She beckons to someone on the far side of the curtain.

A small girl darts into the room and lunges at Ash. I cry out at the sight of my nightmare come to life, attacking him. He catches the child, groaning a little at the pain.

"You're hurt," she says in a piping, unfamiliar voice.

Her curls are wilder and many shades darker than the girl in my nightmares, her irises the same hazel, but set in a delicate face with light brown skin. Her eyes are almost the same shape as Ange's—or rather, Amy's, who has rushed forward.

The strange girl twitches free of Amy's pawing and nuzzles Ash before peering over his shoulder at me.

"Auntie Ange said you saved my Ash and I should say thank you but I won't—it was your fault he came here in the first place—so instead I'll say 'nice to meet you' because daddy says you should greet people like that for the first time, and I've never met you before and it all cancels out so I won't say thank you." She pauses for a dramatically ragged gasp before continuing, "So, nice to meet you, Cady."

"Daddy?" Amy says.

"Lily!" Ange says.

“Um,” I say.

Cadence just laughs.

“Oh, right. I’m Lily,” the girl says, reaching over Ash to extend her tiny hand in my direction. “Ash’s partner.”

“Lily, get down!” Ange clamps a hand around the child’s neck and tugs.

Lily fastens herself tighter to Ash. He looks decidedly gray under the onslaught of careless knees and elbows.

“Just shake the kid’s hand already!” Cadence sputters.

I grab Lily’s outstretched hand and yank her off Ash slumps back onto the pillows, his mouth twisted in a grimace of pain, or maybe suppressed laughter; it’s hard to tell. I focus on the child instead.

“Call me Cole. And maybe go easy on Ash, he’s still recovering.”

Lily shakes my hand with great concentration. Then she grins. “He’ll be fine. He’s magic! He said you’re magic, too. Real strong magic.”

“I like her,” Cadence says. “Reminds me of me.”

I glance at Ash over Lily’s head. Tears roll down his cheeks; his shoulders shake, lips pinched to hold back the laughter. Ange has one hand over her eyes. Amy stares longingly at the child, oblivious to all else.

“So, can you save daddy now, too?” Lily asks.

The room goes silent.

I slide out of bed, still holding Lily’s hand and ignoring Ange’s sound of protest. “That’s what I’m here for.”



Chapter 2: Powerless



I'D FORGOTTEN HOW LONELY Freedom could be in the daytime.

Shattered tiles and fallen-in ceilings clutter barren, shadowy halls. Ange says it still comes alive at night, the club-goers' desperation to escape the grinding dullness of their lives for a few hours enough to bring them creeping back to risk a very final escape at the hands of the Mara.

If they were here now, this place would be lit up with spinning lights and shaking with throbbing beats, the air alive with the threads of the dancers' every dream and desire, their desperate longings beacon and bait to the ravenous nightmares.

But soon, the Mara won't be the only hunters stalking these halls. I'll be waiting for them—maybe even as early as tonight.

I hope.

"I won't tell, if that's what you're worried about," Cadence says. She's just as eager as I am to get back to the fight. Eager enough to sneak out at the earliest opportunity.

We left Ash sleeping, trying to speed his body's recovery from its injuries, with Lily curled up beside him and Amy nodding off in a nearby chair. Ange was out for the day, busy running Under, the hidden collective and silent resistance that occupies a portion of the tunnels miraculously spared from the floods.

Ange thinks I need more time to heal, but it's not like I fight with my feet. My hands are working just fine. I should be able to seize the threads of dreams and weave the Mara's prey to safety without any trouble.

Ash wants me to wait until he's back in fighting form, but it wasn't him that beat back the Mara in the first place. I can do this with or without him—and it's past time I stop waiting for other people to do the hard stuff.

I can make my own decisions now, and choose a path for myself. Though, to be honest, I could use more practice at it. One of the worst things Refuge did to me—and it messed with me plenty over the years—was insisting on unquestioning obedience. Turns out, shutting off your brain and learning to suppress everything you need or want is only good for the people who want to control you.

I'm done being controlled.

"Took you long enough," Cadence says, without a hint of irony.

She didn't use to be able to listen in on every thought. Or, at least she never let on she could. Lately, she's been busy enough chattering away with Ash to leave me in peace. But out here, there's no one to entertain her but me.

Lucky me.

"You don't have to be rude about it. Besides, it's not like I want to be stuck with you, either."

I trace patterns in the dirt to avoid dwelling on our warped reality. It was a shock to discover we're the same person. Except, we're obviously not. We don't think, or act, or talk alike at all—

"And thank goodness for that," Cadence says. "You're so boring, even when you're not."

—So we basically went back to normal. I pretend she's a ghost and she pretends not to be mad I exist—

"I'm not mad. I just think I'd have done a better job if I were the one walking around."

"You'd have got us killed in the first week."

"Like you did so much better. 'Ooh, I'm so obsessed with corpses, look at me all angsty and conflicted.'"

"It was a confusing time! And you weren't exactly helping."

“I helped plenty. Without me, you’d never have held on to your sanity. You’d either be a mindless drone, or Mara-chow.”

“I almost was because of you!”

“Whatever.”

I pick up my pace as if I can outrun her. It’s chilly and damp down here without a roomful of sweating bodies warming the place up. The air smells sour. I’m worried Ange will smell Freedom on my clothes, until I remember there’ll be no hiding it from her anyway. Not when I show up with Lily’s dad in tow.

“You’re gonna be in trouble,” Cadence singsongs.

My feet hurt. I shouldn’t stomp, but rage helps keep me warm and moving. All those lives lost to the Mara, both in these halls and in all the floors layered above them . . .

The girl in my nightmares—Suzannah Bell—wasn’t the first Mara-taken I’d ever seen, but she was the first I’d encountered in the dream-*scape*. I met her there after she’d died, which shouldn’t have been possible. Maybe that’s why I keep reliving her final moments. Or maybe it’s that she was so young—at least, the dream-version of her was.

Just the thought of kids getting hurt makes me choke up like nothing else. I had to fight not to cry in front of Lily when she asked me to save her dad. Which I will do—

“We’ll do,” Cadence says.

—Just as soon as *we* can. And then, after we save him, we’ll save everyone else.

Despite the dank atmosphere, it feels so good having a plan. Tonight, after a quick-and-easy rescue mission to retrieve Lily’s dad, will be step one: chase the Mara from Freedom once and for all. Step two: clear them out of Refuge. Step three: save the rest of the city.

“You know they won’t just wait nicely for you to come end them, right? They can go through walls.”

“We have to start somewhere.” Plus, apparently there are other monsters outside. Turns out, the Mara aren’t the only thing that haunts this city.

“Just saying, your strategy sucks.”

“You want to go back, have a little planning session with Ash and Ange?” I can practically hear Cadence pouting. “Didn’t think so. So maybe keep that snark to yourself.”



GETTING TO THE EXITS isn’t the hard part. I used to be a surveillance technician. I’ve seen the maps.

But I’ve never actually gone outside, not unless you count when I climbed up to Refuge’s roof. Or the times the dreamscape let me experience the desperate streets and miserable lives of those clinging to life outside through their own eyes. I’m more than a little curious to see what it feels like to experience the rest of the city in my own skin, especially now that I know how to protect myself.

However, despite all the dreary hours I spent as a drone in Refuge staring at floor plans on a screen, I get turned around more than once. Turns out, when you’re just one of the little dots running around a maze, it’s harder to keep the shape of the whole thing fixed in your mind. And easier to forget that all those tiny signals represent real people. In this case, Refuge Force, patrolling the exits.

The tromp of their boots emerges so gradually from the distant murmur of sound—wind swirling through fog, surf lapping at the shoreless rubble, even more distant cries of circling seabirds—I nearly stumble out of a side corridor into the enforcers’ path. As it is, I backpedal so clumsily one of the two uniformed agents of Refuge falters, his blank goggle-and-mask-covered face swivelling in my direction.

My breath catches. I glue myself to the wall, pulse roaring, and try to disappear into the shadows. I don't have a way to fight against humans.

The second enforcer continues on for several paces, passing out of my range of vision. I hear him grumble, his voice indistinct behind the filter of his mask. The first raises a hand, still peering in my direction, and waves the other on. When he turns to catch up to his partner, the light catches the ID printed on his back: 09-Hayne-05.

Haynfyv. I'm shocked he's back on duty so soon after I nearly sacrificed him in my quest to take out Serovate. He must not have seen me hiding. There's no way one of the mayor's special commissioned enforcers would just let me go, even if we didn't have a history. Which reminds me—I never did figure out what Maryam Ajera wanted with me. Assuming her "summons" wasn't just another one of Serovate's schemes all along.

"Does it matter?" Cadence says. "Hurry up—before they come back!"

Wary, I creep to the rusty double doors as fast and as quietly as my burning feet can carry me and spare no more than one heart-pounding-dry-mouthed-wide-eyed breath before pushing through to the open street for the first time.

Cadence snorts at my awe and laughs all the harder when I immediately choke on the dense, toxic fog that eddies in the wake of the just-closed door.

The light that had so astonished me from the rooftop of Refuge barely filters down to this level. I stumble up a damp heap of rubble that might once have been steps and into a shifting, muddy yellowish landscape.

I can't see more than a dozen steps ahead, not for any length of time, though the swirling fog offers fleeting glimpses of dark water and looming walls. I set off in as straight a line as I can manage, suddenly

aware that I've stepped beyond the edges of my maps without any idea how to return.

"Dramatic much? No worries—I'll get you home safe," Cadence says, with more condescension than reassurance.

It's too late to turn back, anyway. I keep walking, ankles rolling on slimy bits of crumbling concrete and rusted steel, trying not to make more noise than necessary. My clothes grow damp, then drenched, chafing over suddenly sensitive skin. My eyes water. My nose and throat burn.

How does anyone survive out here? And, more to the point: how long can I?

"Such a whiner," Cadence sighs. "Don't worry princess. I got you. We'll be in and out in no time—or, more like 'out and in.'"

I shake my head and blink my streaming eyes clear. Maybe I should've put a little more thought into this plan.

Lily had made it sound so simple. But to save her dad, first I'll have to find him. Her directions—head straight until you run out of street, then climb—seem less helpful with every step. Especially as those steps stop clinking and crunching and start squelching and splashing.

"You do remember the part about the city being flooded, right?" Cadence says. "Relax. I know where we're going. Tide's just a little high is all."

Reassuring—if something hadn't just broken the surface of the water in front of me.



Chapter 3: Stabbity



“STAB IT! STAB! STAB!” Cadence shrieks.

“With what?” I scramble backwards without taking my eyes off of the thing rising from the waves.

“Anything! Whatever you’ve got!”

I claw at my sides as if a blade will magically appear. “Um.”

Cadence groans. “Seriously? You just thought we could go monster fighting unarmed?”

The monster is a smoky darkness amidst the roiling sick fog, smooth headed, long-necked, and sharp fanged. Unless that wasn’t all neck . . .

I trip, bloody my knee, and dig in to brace myself instead of pushing back up. I need my hands free.

“Yeah, no, put your hands down. This is the part where you run,” Cadence says.

“But what about—”

“Does that look like Mara? Do you see threads, Weaver? Are you armed? Ready for combat? No? So run.”

I shake my outstretched fingers as if magic will spontaneously crackle to life between them. Nothing happens. Nothing but a hair-raising, ear-bleeding shriek from the creature rearing in front of me.

I run, clattering over loose debris and splashing through puddles and bouncing off crumbling walls, until my chest burns and I’m hopelessly lost.

“We’re not lost,” Cadence says. “And you’re fine. Out of shape, sure, but fine.”

“What was that?” I gasp, dragging myself higher on a pile of rubble, flinching at every splash. “Why couldn’t I fight it?”

Cadence does one of her insubstantial shrugs. “Some kind of water monster. You’re not up on your lore enough for naming it to make any difference. Not the kind of thing you fight with threads, not unless you know what you’re doing. Which you don’t. You’d have been better off grabbing one of Ash’s blades before you snuck out. But this is good, actually. We’re almost there. Just keep climbing.”

She could’ve told me I needed a weapon. Not that I knew how to handle one. I’d just assumed my thread weaving worked against everything out here, too. How many kinds of monsters were there, anyway?

“Not the time,” Cadence says, rudely. “Climb.”

The particular pile of rubble I’ve hauled myself up continues up into a seemingly endless slope. The fog starts to thin, and I realize I’ve crawled into the mouth of an enormous structure. The surface beneath me evens out into soggy, decayed carpet and pitted concrete. I skirt gaping holes, shuddering at the thought of falling into the inky, brine-reeking blackness below. I catch glimpses of a distant, serrated ceiling and shards of glass bite into the space between slim, weathered columns.

I test each footstep; terrified the floor will give way at any moment. But the fog has thinned to a bare throat-scratching mist and the space ahead is increasingly bright and well kept. Light shines through grimy but now largely intact windows. The heavy decay of the city gives way to fresh salt and . . . smoke?

“Nearly there,” says Cadence. “You should probably let him approach first.”

“Lily!”

The shout is mingled terror and fury and relief so vast it catches at something high in my chest. A figure darts out around a low structure further down the massive corridor and stumbles to a halt, realizing his mistake.

He's dark, no taller than I am, and not much broader. His shoulders hunch, arms raised in a defensive posture. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

I throw up my hands, palm outward, and back up quickly. "Lily sent me."

It's not a lie. Not the whole truth, either, but it stops his threatening advance.

"Lily? Where is she? What've you done to her?"



IT'S EASY TO FORGET about monsters when everything's going your way.

Sam—Lily's dad—becomes my new best friend the moment I introduce myself. Turns out Ash had been staying with them while searching for me.

Sam's thrilled to hear both Ash and Lily are safe. And the look on his face when I mentioned Lily's mom is with them—I wander to the surprisingly good view out the windows to give him a moment, focusing on sparkling sea and distant mountains only barely clouded by fog here at the edge of the barrier, instead of the almost-stranger's sudden upwelling of emotion.

There has to be a story there. I'm not about to ask, even if Cadence spends most of the walk home speculating.

Between Cadence's startling navigational abilities and Sam's familiarity with the city, we make good time, arriving not long after dark. Nothing bars our way. Not Mara, unidentified water monster, nor Refuge Force. We slip back into the labyrinth below Refuge without a ripple.

I practically skip through the corridors, eager to make my triumphant return. Several twists and turns in, Sam tugs my sleeve and points. We're skirting the edge of Freedom, and the club is in full swing, bass shaking the floor.

I shrug and change course. He'll probably get a kick out of seeing it—and I'm keen to scope out the battleground. The next time I face the Mara will not be like the last. Now that I know how to take the nightmares down, their reign of terror is so very nearly at an end it makes my fingers itch.

But the first glimpse of Freedom since my momentous battle with the Mara is a little disappointing if I'm honest. The lights seem erratic, the crowd sluggish, the music fuzzy. The shine has worn off—of newness, or maybe of intoxication. The stunned awe on Sam's face nudges something inside me, though, with a flicker of that first overwhelming astonishment I felt when I first saw it, and I can't resist pulling him through to the next hall, and the next, laughing at his wonder and, more to the point, glowing at the subtle attention of the crowd.

It's different than before. Then, I was little more than another ornament to accent Ravel's extravagance. Now, their eyes flicker to me and away, startled, grateful, unsure. They know me not as an extension of their leader but as defeater of the Mara, rescuer and hero.

I don't fully realize what I'm seeing at first, but after the first few halls, the trend is clear: the styles of Freedom have shifted. The dancers' styles are mimicking things I wore—the costumes, yes, the gold and white, the feathers and chains, lace and delicate trceries Ravel put me in—but it's more than that. Their outfits are artfully torn, their feet bare. They toy with colourful cords and delicate chains that hang loose from cuffs and bracelets to trail over their hands—held up more than once in salute. There are mimicries and interpretations of the cloak Ange had given me, too, the one I cast off to fight and beat back the Mara.

So I keep walking, pretending to show off each new aspect of the club to the gawking tourist while basking in well-earned glory. All this, after one successful battle. Imagine how they'll look at me when I free them for good.

And then we turn that last corner and he's waiting for me.

Ravel, wounds painted over, back taut with pain, eyes dark and hollow and burning.

“Flame,” he rasps, that liquid voice raw.

I turn away, tugging Sam along with me. This wasn’t a good idea. I didn’t think, didn’t meant to run into him, didn’t want—

And, between one struggling gasp and the next, they’re here.



Chapter 4: Ruin



CADENCE YELLS MY NAME, shocking me out of stasis. I reach for the threads of dreams and get ready to slice me some Mara.

But my hands flail through empty air without snagging on anything. Strange, in this crowd, but it's fine—I can use my own.

The hand I swipe across my chest comes up empty. I try again, scrabbling at the front of my shirt for the moonlight glow of my own threads.

Nothing but ordinary, useless cloth. I stare at my empty hands and then up at the shadowy forms of the Mara circling.

“Oh, crap,” says Cadence. “I have no idea—”

I shoulder in front of Sam as the circle tightens.

If it were just me, maybe I could run. Maybe. But with Sam here, there's no choice.

My first swing seems to blow right through the murky fog of the Mara. They flee from my fist—A cheer snags in my throat.

The shreds of fog swirl and coalesce, forming sneering mouths. The amorphous mass of the Mara darts in, luring me to strike, then pulls back, leaving me teetering off balance, committed to a blow that has no hope of landing.

A cry rings out behind me. I spin in time to see Sam's knees crunch into the floor. Three long tears down his back well with blood. A ribbon of pain lashes across my side as I reach for him. The Mara lick my blood off one dagger-sharp claw and roll far too many eyes with taunting pleasure.

“Watch out—” Cadence cries.

There's a blur of motion in my peripheral vision. I know even as I turn I'm too late, too slow, too weak—why am I so weak?—but I strike out at it anyway.

Better to go down fighting.

This time, the monsters form claws, catching my fists. Their grip tightens, slowly, to give me time to realize just how much more force they have at their disposal

The small bones in my hands grind together. The monsters' claws dig in—first pinpricks, then burning spikes drilling through my flesh. Something snaps.

The pain is blinding, paralyzing. There is screaming, not all of it my own, as strange faces, wracked with anguish, flicker behind my eyes. Tormented voices fill the space inside my head, battering at its edges.

I don't know what will kill me first—the monsters' powerful, if ephemeral claws, taking my body apart by inches, or the unseen onslaught.

And then the voices go silent, the faces fade, and the crushing grip slackens. I stagger in its absence. I can barely see, barely focus through the residual pain as the diseased fog of the Mara disintegrates, swept into nothingness by silver light.

Ash seems to fall out of thin air. He collapses beside me, rolls over onto his back, panting. "Don't do that. Ever. Again."

"Yeah, way to go, Cole," Cadence says unfairly. "You just about got us killed."

"You just . . ." I slide to the floor. Ash's shoulder is warm against my knee. Too warm. Feverish. "Where did you come from? What happened?"

His lashes flutter struggling to stay conscious. He loses the battle. I nudge him, panic rising at touch of his unresponsive weight.

"Ange is on her way," Cadence says, seemingly unconcerned. Which makes no sense, so I assume it's an act. Or a distraction technique. "You better come up with a good explanation for this before she gets here."

“What happened to ‘we’?”

“Wasn’t *my* powers that failed to show up for the fight.”

My head spins. I think I’m going to be sick.

The floor beside Ash looks cool and inviting. I don’t know what just happened, and I’m not sure I want to know. Except I do. The old me would have given up and waited for someone else to solve her problems. The new me is here to fight and win. I can’t let a little near-death trauma stop me now.

“Look, just tell me what happened. Why didn’t it work?” I sweep my hands through the air to illustrate its emptiness. “No threads. I can’t see theirs, or mine. What changed? Cadence? Hey!”

“I don’t know, okay? It’s not my fault.”

“Well, it’s not like I did anything differently.”

She doesn’t answer.

Sam crawls over, his face tight with pain. I’d forgotten about him. He shakes Ash’s shoulder, then looks at me accusingly. “You said it was safe here.”

I look past him at Ravel, standing on the edge of the crowd. Why are they all still here? They should have run when it became clear I was losing.

“Go away.” My voice is stronger than I expected. Yay me.

Ravel’s lips part, his face ashen and haggard under layers of streaked paint. He spreads his hands in helpless appeal, nails chipped and ragged.

I close my eyes and wait for him to leave. When I open them, he has.

Good. At least one of us is learning.

I stare numbly out across the crowd. I’m still sitting, so the view is mostly ripped stockings and short skirts and navel piercings. Some of the dancers are doing what they do best: ignoring the rest of the world and focusing on themselves. But more than a few pause at the spectacle we present. I avoid lifting my gaze. I don’t need to know what their

faces look like, rigid with shock, horror, or numb disbelief under their bright masks. Which is why my first sight of her is a pair of sturdy boots heading purposefully in our direction.

“I can’t carry both of you, you know,” Ange yells over the music, hands on her hips. “I can’t even carry one of you. What were you thinking? And what did you do to your *hands*?”

Ravel stands beside her, shifting his weight and avoiding my glare. I close my eyes. Open them. Think about closing them again.

“Did you at least win?” Ange demands.

Ravel winces.

Cadence snorts. “One of us did. I mean, do you see any bodies?”

I jut my chin at Ash’s prone form.

“He’ll be fine,” Cadence says, still trying for matter-of-fact. But a softer note creeps in.

I shake my head. We did not win.

“Great,” Ange huffs. “Well, come on, get up. You’ll have to help me haul him. Again.”

She has to pull me to my feet, grasping my forearm when she sees what’s become of my hands. Sam scrambles up to join us.

Ange eyes him suspiciously. “Who’s this?”

I look at him. Open my mouth. Think better of it. Shrug, and then wince as my latest set of wounds shriek a brighter chorus to the lingering aches of the last crop. At least I actually won that battle. “He’s coming with us.”

Ange’s lips thin.

“I’m Sam.” He peers at her. “You—you’re not Amy’s sister?”

Ange gives me one piercing look before turning her back on the both of us. She pries Ash up off the floor, batting away Sam and my efforts to help, but lets Ravel direct two strangers to her side to help with the burden.

By the time we’re near the end of his territory and what I’ve come to think of as the beginning of Ange’s, Ash can more or less keep him-

self upright with just Ange's help. The strangers from Freedom peel off at a nod from Ravel. He seems to think he can follow us all the way back to Ange's headquarters. That is, until she turns the full force of her formidable glare on him.

"Ange," he whines. Then he turns to me, foolishly hopeful. "Flame . . ."

But I slump against the wall, hang my head, and ignore him until she sends him away.

Ange steers all of us back to her infirmary and our beds, grumbling all the way. She makes Amy take Lily out of the room first, so they don't have to watch my sorry self limp back to my sickbed.

I won't get to see their grand reunion with Sam. Kind of unfair, since I'm the reason he's here—but since I nearly got him killed, it's not like I'm in any position to complain.

This is not how I saw tonight ending.

The last thing I do before I pass out is promise myself I'll do whatever it takes to get my magic back.

Thanks for checking out this preview edition. **BLACK THE TIDES** hits stores September 30, 2020.

In the meantime, why not check out the author newsletter at kawiggins.com for biweekly updates and exclusive content like prequel novella **UNDER?**