

BURN THE WATER

A NOVEL

BY BILLY RAY

This is an uncorrected proof and should be used for promotional purposes only. It is not for resale. For marketing and publicity enquiries please email publicity@scholastic.co.uk

9780702344862 | £8.99 | Paperback | March 2026

 SCHOLASTIC

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2026
Scholastic, Bosworth Avenue, Warwick, CV34 6UQ
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or
registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

First published in the US by Scholastic Inc., 2026

Text © Billy Ray, 2026
Cover art © David Gardias, 2026
Book design by Maeve Norton

The moral rights of the author have been asserted by them.

ISBN 978 0702 34486 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), or used to train any artificial intelligence technologies without prior written permission of Scholastic Limited. Subject to EU law, Scholastic Limited expressly reserves this work from the text and data-mining exception.

Printed in the UK

Paper made from wood grown in sustainable forests and other controlled sources.



10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Scholastic does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for any third-party websites or other platforms, or their content.

www.scholastic.co.uk

For safety or quality concerns:
UK: www.scholastic.co.uk/productinformation
EU: www.scholastic.ie/productinformation



THE HIGHLANDS

PATERNOSTER SQUARE

ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC

TUBE

BUCKINGHAM PALACE

THE HUMPH

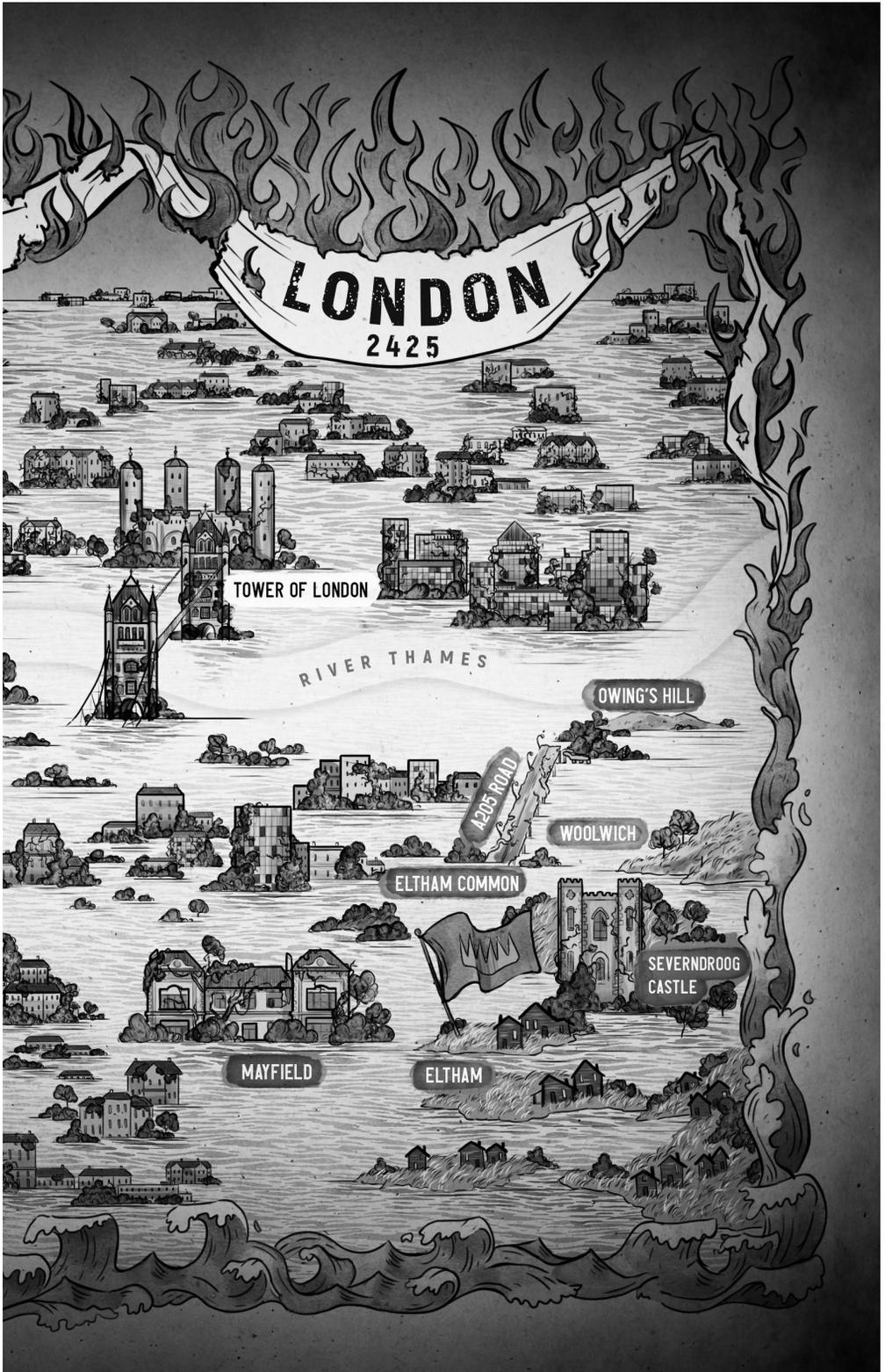
RIVER THAMES

TRUCELANDS

ROGUES

CROWNS

BLOOD PARK



ONE

The young woman sighed.

London had drowned, peril had won, and there was so much she didn't yet know.

She didn't know if she'd survive this day, or the next one. Didn't know that a pax—peace—was possible. Didn't know that one day Love and Water would finally clash, and that one of those two giants would win. Uncertainty was her lot.

But she had courage, and courage matters. It wins wars and builds nations and inspires the doubtful and crosses rivers. And she had so *many* rivers to cross.

So she continued. Bravely.

Autumn had come and the air was cold and insects flitted above Shooter's Hill, darting and humming and feeding and flying. Their sounds were rebirth; the river couldn't touch them. Shooter's Hill was elevated, rising above the swollen Thames, part of London's "Dry Ten," the 10 percent of the city that *wasn't* underwater, off the A205 road. Once—when pavement had meant promise and progress, and vehicles were a necessity—this hill had been a charming suburb. Little shops, humble homes, a quiet park.

Now, in the twenty-fifth year of the twenty-fifth century, it was

lush jungle, trees and grasses wildly overgrowing, smothering what had formerly been black asphalt with verdant green, oxygenating the air for all those winged miracles fluttering above—while on land, dreams continued to drown.

Rain had fallen that morning, and all that foliage—along with a thin layer of mud—felt slick underfoot. She hobbled over it, grimacing in pain, an empty sack slung over her shoulder.

Jule. Her ankle was broken, but her hands were strong and her face was kind, unmarked save for a single small but permanent scar on her chin, its origin known only to her.

Like everyone else in England, she wore clothing that had survived centuries of weather, abandonment, theft, and reuse: a leather jacket, denim jeans patched over dozens of times with needle and thread. Her shirt was made from a version of cotton grown in greenhouses. Her sweater was woolen. Her boots were old and reshod.

It was hard for her to walk down this village road without imagining what it had once been, before the Great Soak and that sadly historic British day in the 2100s when the Thames first climbed over its banks and stubbornly refused to retreat. Jule now passed what were once shops and small eateries, long since gutted, mere shells suffocated by the swarming embrace of branches and leaves. Each business had been someone's livelihood and someone else's refuge. People had congregated on this very lane to make commerce and to talk about the news or a football match or the tabloids or a relative's wedding.

Jule envied them all, nostalgic for a time she'd never actually lived.

She felt it every time the sky went pink, or trees whispered, or grass glistened, or a parent held a child, or the world felt clean. But she kept her longing buried inside like a hidden wound and hobbled on, each step labored. There were no vehicles here. *Anything* made of metal had been seized long ago to be repurposed into slugers, mini-balls for guns, by two rival armies, the Rogues and the Crowns, in their centuries-long war. Every mailbox from every building, every door handle and lock, they'd all been forged, Crowns and Rogues surrendering individual privacy in order to make it easier to kill one another. Both Houses had rules forbidding *any* personal use of metals. The only jewelry one saw was made of twine. Jule didn't wear any.

With that slick grass underfoot, she hobbled toward a street corner where two male soldiers stood at ease, lazily guarding a beech tree.

Beech trees mattered in London. People killed for them.

The two soldiers wore armbands, black ones, which told the world, *Here stands a soldier of the Rogue Army.*

When they saw Jule approaching—slowly—the two men broke into drunken grins. She was injured, helpless. Not even a crutch to protect her. And she wore no armband—black *or* gold—which meant she was a *Hab*, and therefore belonged to neither of the two warring Houses. That made her unsponsored, unimportant.

The taller of the two Rogues called out to Jule, his tongue a bit thick. "What's your business?"

Yes, drunk.

Jule, still twenty feet away, answered: "Just a Hab. May I pass?"

The tall soldier smiled at his mate, then: “Well, that depends. This is a toll road.”

Jule sighed. “A toll road.”

“Yup. And a girl like you might have to pay *twice*.” He laughed. So did his fellow soldier. Jule knew what was coming. It had happened before. She approached slowly. “Sirs, may I pass?”

“That hobble of yours looks pretty bad, missy. Maybe you should just lie down for a bit.”

She was close enough to speak quietly now, almost an exhale. “Must it always come to this?”

The tall one nodded. “Yes. It must.” He felt a stir in his groin and he obeyed it, grabbing her.

That fast, Jule produced a dagger from the back of her belt and slashed his throat with it—one short, sharp thrust. Before the other could react, Jule gutted him. Their bodies fell.

Just eighteen, Jule cleaned her blade on their clothes, then used it to saw some bark off the beech tree, gathering it in the sack, which had been her aim all along.

Two dead Rogues. Two fewer enemies to kill in battle, two fewer threats to the army she’d spent her life serving.

She marched down the A205 road, her ankle healthy and well.

And while it didn’t help them much, those two sloppy soldiers would enter the afterlife knowing that they had been dispatched by the fiercest and most famous soldier the Crown Army ever produced.

Also the loneliest.

The Thames was Central London's highway, weaving through the city like greedy arteries. He rowed atop it in a wooden pirogue, six feet above what had once been Bricker Lane, in a light drizzle.

Rafe. The name still echoes.

He was, at that moment, the Rogue Army's most venerated captain. Broken inside—they all knew that—there was a coldness to him; in battle and out, his face was a stone. But he was a soldier's soldier, and had been for six years. Also a gifted strategist, his mind never still, his oars always seeming to move faster than everyone else's. Especially this morning. Word had come that one of his soldiers, a headstrong boy named Alger, was in danger behind Crown lines. And Rafe was rushing to rescue him.

London was the only home Rafe had ever known, the only place he'd ever *seen*—a wet and bloody chaos, much of it under six feet of polar water. Great buildings, once lions of commerce, soared into the sky above him. But their ground floors had no ground anymore. Eels swam through what had once been lobbies. And foliage wrapped around all those columns of glass and steel, entombing them in an embrace of vines and leaves and branches, so thick that no sunlight reflected off the windows anymore. The phantom towers were green and soft and tall. Happy birds nested in them, filling the rainy skies above with song. It was the year 2425; nothing was dry but the whistling of a chilly wind.

The West End was gone; Piccadilly was gone. The floor of

Parliament was a pool. So was everything else that wasn't hilly. Fins now sliced the water beneath what had once been traffic lights. The buildings were caverns, the light bulbs glassy ghosts. And battle was Rafe's daily bread.

Rafe hated the water and had all his life. He knew—in this, his eighteenth year alive—that it would kill him someday. Swallow him. But the river was London's only thoroughfare, so he muscled through it, his oars slapping the foliage that floated here—flowers, kelp, mosses—and the thin slick of oily film that clung doggedly to the surface. The smell on the water was fishy, fetid, unclean. He turned it all into froth with each new stroke.

On both sides of Bricker Lane were tall wooden poles, once the bearers of electricity and communication, each now marked with black strips of cloth. *Rogue territory*. To Rafe's right and left, handfuls of Rogue citizens sat on the rooftops of shops, casting fishing lines into the swollen river, which crested just below their dangling feet.

They recognized Rafe. One day, everyone knew, he would lead the whole Rogue Army; General Shapcott had been grooming him for years. A few of the roof-toppers saluted Rafe proudly.

Rafe had no time to salute back. A soldier was in danger.

Life was tribal violence: the spear, the knife, the mace, the bow and arrow, or precious sluggers fired from guns that had survived for centuries. Like everyone else on this benighted rock, Rafe awakened every morning trapped in a universe of battle, with no idea if wars like this one—or even life itself—existed beyond these shores anymore.

BURN THE WATER

Death was fact. Truce was weakness. Peace was a fairy tale. And the entire city remained in the cross fire. His sworn enemy, the Crown Army, was tireless, its soldiers well-trained and fierce.

Their finest, Rafe knew, was named Jule.

He'd seen her in battle once, gutting a close friend of his, her face half-masked in blood. She was famously relentless. And Rogue soldiers told stories about her, lionizing her.

Mostly, they *feared* her.

Rafe couldn't stand that. He hoped to encounter her again someday, just to show his colleagues that she was mortal.

The rain fell harder. He ducked his head as he sped beneath signage protruding from what had once been a seafood restaurant, a red-and-blue neon caricature of a happy flounder, so close to the surface it could nearly swim. Then Rafe reached his destination: the banks of Crown territory.

His fear stayed behind on the water.