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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Dead-Tossed Waves

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# THE DEAD-TOSSED WAVES



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# I

The story goes that even after the Return they tried to keep the roller coasters going. They said it reminded them of the before time. When they didn't have to worry about people rising from the dead, when they didn't have to build fences and walls and barriers to protect themselves from the masses of Mudo constantly seeking human flesh. When the living weren't forever hunted.

They said it made them feel normal.

And so even while the Mudo—neighbors and friends who'd been infected, died and Returned—pulled at the fences surrounding the amusement park, they kept the rides moving.

Even after the Forest was shut off, one last gasp at sequestering the infection and containing the Mudo, the carousel kept turning, the coasters kept rumbling, the teacups kept spinning. Though my town of Vista was far away from the core of the Protectorate, they hoped people would come fly along the coasters. Would still want to forget.

But then travel became too difficult. People were concerned with trying to survive and little could make them forget the reality of the world they lived in. The coasters slowly crumbled outside the old city perched at the tip of a long treacherous road along the coast. Everyone simply forgot about them, one other aspect of pre-Return life that gradually dimmed in the memories and stories passed down from year to year.

I never really thought about them until tonight—when my best friend's older brother invites us to sneak past the Barriers and into the ruins of the amusement park with him and his friends.

"Come on, Gabry," Cira whines, dancing around me. I can almost feel the energy and excitement buzzing off her skin. We stand next to the Barrier that separates Vista from the ruins of the old city, the thick wooden wall keeping the dangers of the world out and us safely in. Already a few of the older kids have skimmed over the top, their feet a flash against the night sky. I rub my palms against my legs, my heart a thrum in my chest.

There are a thousand reasons why I don't want to go with them into the ruins, not the least of which is that it's forbidden. But there's one reason I do want to take the risk. I glance past Cira to her brother and his eyes catch mine. I can't stop the seep of heat crawling up my neck as I dart my gaze away, hoping he didn't notice me looking and at the same time desperately wishing he did.

"Gabry?" he asks, his head tilted to the side. From his lips my name curls around my ears. An invitation.

Afraid of the tangle of words twisting around my own tongue, I swallow and place my hand against the thick wood of the Barrier. I've never been past it before. It's against the

rules to leave the town without permission and it's also risky. While most of the ruins are bordered by old fences from after the Return, Mudo can still get through them.

They can still attack us.

"We shouldn't," I say, more to myself than to Cira or Catcher. Cira just rolls her eyes; she's already jumping with desire to join the others. She grabs my arm with a barely repressed squeal.

"This is our chance," she whispers to me. I don't tell her what I've been thinking—that it's our chance to get in trouble at best and I don't want to think about what could happen at worst.

But she knows me well enough to read my thoughts. "No one's been infected in years," she says, trying to convince me. "Catcher and them go out there all the time. It's totally safe."

*Safe*—a relative term. A word my mother always uses with a hard edge to her voice. "I don't know . . . ," I say, twisting my fingers together, wishing I could just say no and be done with it but hating to disappoint my best friend the way I've done too often before.

One day several years ago during the drought, Cira dared me to cross the wide river that separates our town from the Forest. We were gathering water at the spot in the river where there's a break in the fence when the Militiaman on duty suddenly got sick and left us alone. Cira teased me because I wouldn't try it. Because I was too afraid that the Militiaman would come back and see us and I refused to break the rule forbidding us from the Forest.

Finally she went on her own, standing in the middle of the rushing water, her skirt billowing around her knees and her hair blowing into her mouth as she laughed.

I could never explain to her how I felt about the

boundaries of our town. To me they were inviolate. They were what held me together, what kept me safe and protected and whole. To stray outside, even once, was too scary for me.

I couldn't explain how I was afraid of losing myself. I still can't explain it to her now. But somehow she knows.

"Here," she says, reaching to pull something from around her neck. "Take this." It's the necklace she always wears—just a simple black cord looped through the arm of a small plastic figurine of a superhero she once bought from a trader after he told her old stories about men who used to fly and save the world. She drops it over my head.

"He'll keep you safe," she adds as I feel the tiny weight of it settle against my chest under my shirt.

I'm about to protest when Catcher steps close to me and I swallow. Cira grins and fades into the darkness, knowing that her brother is my weakness. "You should come," he says. He places his hand against the Barrier, his fingers almost close enough to brush my own but not quite. He drops his voice just enough to be a rumble in the darkness, more vibration than words. "I want you to come with us."

I'm afraid to say anything, to break this moment. And so I nod. He smiles like a secret between us and I drop my head, embarrassed at every feeling crashing through me.

Cira, of course, has been watching our interaction and lets out a little shout and grabs my shoulders with excitement that I've finally caved in. Catcher's grin spreads a little wider and I wish I had the nerve to meet his eyes but I can't.

The moon's a bright cut in the sky as the rest of the group climbs, pulling themselves easily over the thick wall separating our town from the crumbling ruins of the old city beyond. Even Cira hesitates for a second, throwing a quick

glance back at me before finding crevices in which to slip her thin hands.

And then it's only Catcher and me left facing the towering wall.

I tug on the end of my braid, clenching my palm around the handle of my long-bladed knife strapped to my hip. I know I shouldn't be doing this. It's dangerous and stupid, and already sweat slicks along the sides of my neck. I glance at Catcher and have to tilt my head into the darkness to hide my dizzying smile.

I want to tell him that I've never crossed the Barrier before. I've never wanted to—I still don't. I've only stood at the top of the lighthouse where I live, and even then I feel overwhelmed staring out at the ocean and the Forest and the breadth of the world around us. Like it's too much to take in.

I think about my mother and her stories of growing up in the Forest and finding her way here to the ocean. And I realize in that moment, as I face the edge of everything I've known, that I don't have the same strength as my mother. I can't bring myself to leave Vista, even just for a few hours in the darkness beyond.

I force myself forward and trace my fingers along the Barrier. The wood is warm, still retaining the heat of the summer afternoon.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him, turning away from the wall. "I can't do it." Before this moment I've never realized my own limitations. Before, I thought I'd be able to do anything, be anything.

Catcher slips his hand into mine, holding me in place.

His skin is warmer than the Barrier. "I'll help you," he says, his smile like the lighthouse beam, something to hang on to in

an uncertain night. "Trust me." And he guides my fingers to the gaps in the wall, showing me how to climb.

I hesitate at the top, my legs straddling the thick wooden logs, and Catcher scrambles up to face me, his toes nudging my own. I look everywhere but at him. The night feels heavy, as if it can pin me here.

We've been alone together many times before, but something's shifted tonight. I'm suddenly so much more aware of how broad his shoulders are, how strong his hands. Of the way he looks at me and the sound of his breathing.

And I can't tell if something really is changing between us or if my own hesitation is causing my senses to spin. I dig my nails into the wood, the splinters pricking my skin. But the pain doesn't dull my fear, only scratches at the edges.

I open my mouth to tell him something. Anything. To explain why I can't go farther. To tell him again that I'm sorry. But he speaks first.

"I'm afraid of heights," he says. His confession is so unexpected that I catch a giggle in the back of my throat before I realize that I shouldn't be laughing. I cover my mouth with a hand, trying to smother my smile.

"This isn't that high," I tell him, trying to seem bold but not knowing whether I succeed at making him feel at ease.

He rolls his eyes, the corners of his lips tugged up a little. "I mean real heights," he says.

I notice again the roughness across his chin, the stubble of a beard. He's not the same boy who used to seek me out and chase me in games of tag or even the one with too-thin arms and a sharp Adam's apple.

"I remember one time Cira and I came to visit you at the lighthouse," he says. "Cira was just happy to be away from the

chores at the orphan house, but I wanted to do something with our morning off. I wanted to climb. I wanted to see the view from the top."

He looks past me, his eyes unfocused. "Halfway up, I couldn't go any farther."

I swallow and put my hand back down to steady myself, suddenly too aware of the heat of him, of the wall, of the night consuming me.

"I don't remember," I tell him, because it's true. So much of my childhood is a blur, memories that tangle in my head and twist with stories so that I don't know what is mine and what I've been told is mine.

"You wouldn't," he says. "Nothing really happened. We came to explore the lighthouse and you and Cira played and I spent half the day sitting on the steps trying to convince my hands to let go of the railing and climb higher."

I close my eyes, trying to picture it, but I can't.

"Every now and then you two would run by. Cira would point at me and laugh—she was a brat even then. But you would just stand there and stare. Eventually, Cira got lost in some project and you came and sat next to me for a while."

"And then what?" I ask. I don't remember him ever wanting to see the view from the lighthouse. Ever wanting to climb the stairs to the gallery in all the years I've known him.

"And then nothing. We just sat there. You didn't say anything and neither did I. And then our morning was over and Cira started crying and I took her back for the afternoon chores."

"You never made it any higher?"

"Nope."

"You never tried again?"

He shakes his head.

I sit there, staring at the distance between our hands resting on the thick wall, at the way his fingers flex against the wood. I try to figure out what he's telling me. That it's okay to wallow in my fears? It's okay if we just sit here? And that he'll stay with me, even if I can't go any farther?

Suddenly I wish I were Cira. I wish I knew how to flirt, how to read guys, how to know what they're saying and what they want. I wish I could act with the sort of abandon that seems to infuse every movement she makes. Until this summer I'd never realized that it was a skill to have. That it was anything I'd ever need.

I was happy enough to let her be the one to toss her hair and tilt her head while I skipped rocks over the waves and kept watch on the horizon, making sure nothing interrupted our cocoon of safety.

Before I can stop myself I swing my leg over the Barrier and drop to the other side. A soft thud, and Catcher lands beside me. We're in the shadow of the wall, almost pitch-darkness. I feel his hand reaching for me, feel his fingers as they barely brush my skin.

In that moment I wonder if we can melt into each other in the blackness. There's nothing distinct about our bodies, nothing keeping us apart except the thick heat of summer rising from the ground below.

It feels boundless, the walls keeping my frame in place now gone, my world exploded, leaving me struggling to catch my breath, as if there's not enough air here beyond the town.

Suddenly my head feels too light. The world outside the Barrier too wrong. Too dangerous. My stomach feels hollow,

the fear corroding me from the inside. I'm not supposed to be here, it's not safe. It's not allowed. I start to turn, feeling my body begin to shake apart as I reach for the wall. I have to go back.

And then Catcher's hand grasps mine and he pulls me close, reminding me of where I end and he begins. He pulls the knife from the scabbard on my hip and holds it out for me, the cut of the moon sliding over the sharp metal edge. I take it, my grip tight, hoping it will make me feel stronger.

"There's still the possibility of Mudo out here," he tells me, the word *Mudo* falling so easily from his lips but causing my own to quiver.

"The fences around the park always hold them," he adds. "But just in case . . ."

I try to swallow the fear, its taste hot and metallic like blood. He must feel me pulling away from him, ready to claw back over the Barrier to the safety of the town, because his grip remains firm as he tugs me closer.

"Don't worry," he says. "I've got you." His voice is like the night, deep and dark around me, and I try to relax against him. I try to trust him.

I've never been beyond the protection of the town and as we weave through the crumbled ruins at the edge of the amusement park, every shadow is the dead rising. Every scratch of concrete shifting is the moan of the Mudo craving our flesh. Every turn taking us farther away from our world and into the dead world.

I wonder how he can feel so comfortable out here. He was raised the same way I was, he learned the same lessons in class as I did: That the only safe places are those protected by walls and fences. That the dead will never stop once they scent

human flesh. That an Infected who turns when there aren't Mudo around will become a Breaker.

And yet Catcher strolls through the ruins with confidence and ease. Every part of me envies him for this.

Something flickers past us, a hint of sound and wind. I jump. My heart seizes and I grasp at Catcher's shoulder. "Just a bat," he murmurs, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

*There are rules for a reason,* I want to tell him. *We're not supposed to be here.* But he pulls my arm tight in his and I can't help but fall into the feel of him.