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Opening Extract from...

Deadlands

Written by Lily Herne

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Part One

This story begins with a funeral. I know it's a bit of a downer to start it here, but it just feels right. I could begin ten years ago when the War ended, or even start when I discovered my 'special skill', but if you don't like it, as my friend Ginger would say, 'Not my problemo, mate.'

Oh, and I should probably warn you that it ends with a funeral as well.

But I'm not going to tell you whose.

You can find that out for yourself.

1

My name is Lele de la Fontein. I'm seventeen and a bit, and the first funeral I was telling you about was my grandmother's. I don't remember exactly on which day it took place (who cares about those kind of details, right?), but I do remember the weather. Winter was in full swing; the sky pregnant with the rain that was to turn the streets into muddy rivers for days afterwards; the wind pulsing and howling around us.

Not that the biting South-Easterly seemed to bother the Resurrectionists. They were standing in a circle around Gran's shrouded body, holding hands and swaying from side to side as if they were playing the world's sickest game of ring-a-ring o' roses. Most of them were Dad's age or older, and around their necks they all wore those horrible amulets carved to look like human vertebrae. Their leader, a man with a scraggly grey beard

and rickety legs, abruptly stopped swaying and thrust his arms into the air. 'Soon we shall send this woman, our dearly beloved sister, out into the world,' he said in a ridiculous booming voice. 'Yes! Out into the world beyond! For her divine resurrection in the next life.'

His followers all smiled and nodded, but I couldn't stand it any longer. 'This is crap!' I said, making sure my voice carried over the wind. 'They shouldn't be here.'

'Leletia!' the Mantis snapped. 'Keep your voice down.'

'Gran didn't believe in all this kak!'

The Mantis glared at me, and I did my best to stare her down, but it wasn't a battle I was going to win anytime soon. For the thousandth time I tried to figure out what it was Dad saw in her. It couldn't be her looks. Thanks to her bulbous eyes, spindly limbs and general twitchiness, she always looked as if she was on the verge of pouncing on something. I tried to catch Dad's eye, but, as usual, he was lost in his own world. He stared straight ahead, the empty left arm of his jacket taped to his side so that it wouldn't flap around in the wind. He didn't look even slightly sad, but that wasn't surprising. Gran wasn't *his* mother, and after Mom died he hadn't had much to do with her. Or with me and Jobe, while we're on the subject.

The wind dropped, and the moans of the Rotters floated towards us. They sounded closer to the fence than usual, as if they could sense what was about to happen.

I think it was then that Gran's death really hit me. I tried repeating the same mantra to myself over and over again – *I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry* – but my tear ducts weren't listening. I wasn't just crying because Gran was gone. I mean, don't get me wrong, I was going to miss her so much my stomach hurt, but there was also a selfish part of me that hated her for leaving us. Because without her, Jobe and I would be

forced to stay in the stinking city enclave; we'd be stuck with Dad and the Mantis for good.

Jobe snuggled closer to me, sing-songing to himself as he often did, oblivious to the fact that our lives had taken a massive turn for the worse. He didn't seem to be feeling the chill, although his bare brown feet were turning slightly blue. The Mantis had made him leave Chinwag – his kitten and constant companion – behind, but even this didn't seem to bother him.

The Mantis pulled her fine woollen wrap tighter around her bony body and sighed, 'And *try* to get your brother to behave, Leletia.'

I ignored her. Jobe did what he wanted. Not even I had any control over him, and she knew that. I scrubbed my face with my palms, smearing away the worst of the tears, and tried not to look at Gran's body, its shape seemingly so much smaller than when she'd been alive.

We all jumped as the enclave gate clanked open behind us.

Rickety Legs gasped and clapped his hands together. 'They're coming!' he said, his followers clustering around him like a bunch of excited kids. My stomach flipped, and even the Mantis's grim expression tightened.

It was time.

I held my breath as the Guardians' wagon came over the rise towards us. The huge black horse pulling it was prancing in terror; the harness strapped too tightly across its body, foam frothing around the bit in its mouth. The wind whipped its mane around its neck, and behind the blinkers on its bridle I caught a glimpse of the whites of its eyes.

The cart shook and bumped over the patchy track, eventually coming to a stop a few metres from us. The Resurrectionists all fell to their knees, muttering prayers and clutching at their vertebrae amulets. The Mantis and Dad bowed their heads, but

I refused to look away. It was the first time I'd been so close to a Guardian and for a second I almost forgot about my grief. There were two of them – one driving the cart, hands hidden under the sleeves of its robe, and another sitting rigidly next to it. The driver turned its head towards us, and I couldn't resist peering into the dark shadow that lay under its hood. But the rough brown fabric fell too far over its head; the blank darkness where its face should be somehow creepier than anything my imagination could conjure up.

Of course, at that stage not even the bigwig embassy officials knew what the Guardians looked like under their robes. There were rumours of course – that they were highly evolved Rotters who covered up so that they wouldn't freak everyone out with their maggoty, decaying flesh; that they looked so terrifying that just one peek at their true form would send a person insane. (Of course, now that I *do* know what they look like under their robes, I'm not surprised they covered up.)

The Guardians climbed down and headed towards us, ignoring the prostrate Resurrectionists as if they also thought the cult was a pointless load of crap. The driver lifted Gran's body and flung it onto the back of the wagon as if it was nothing more than a bag of potatoes; as if she hadn't once been a living, breathing person at all. Then, job done, they climbed back on to the wagon and started heading back towards the gate.

'Let's go,' the Mantis said. 'It's freezing.'

Dad put his good arm around her shoulders and they turned away. Rickety Legs nodded at the Mantis, shook her hand, and then he and his crew started ambling away, chatting amongst themselves. 'Leletia, bring your brother,' Dad mumbled.

Jobe was crouched on the ground, fingers fanned out in the mud, and when the wind died I could hear he was speaking to himself in the strange quiet voice he sometimes used: 'Gogo,'

he murmured. 'Gogo.'

I guess all the anger, grief and distress I was feeling reached a head. Or maybe Jobe's rare words finally cemented the fact that I would never see Gran again. This was it. I was really, truly on my own.

'No!' I screamed, and started racing towards the spiked metal gate. One of the Guardians was busy hefting it open, and I thudded down towards the wagon, my legs gathering momentum, unable to stop as the sloping ground fell away sharply in front of me. I skidded and fell to my knees, inches away from the wheels. The horse reared up in alarm, but neither Guardian reacted. The driver just flicked the reins again, and the horse moved on, snorting and shaking its head.

I scrambled to my feet. The gate was fully open now and I could see right through to the outside – right into the Deadlands. I'd become used to seeing the top of Table Mountain, the shells of the few remaining high-rises and the burned-out skeletons of the cylindrical buildings everyone used to call the Tampon Towers peeking over the fence, but I'd never seen into the Deadlands before. Jobe and I had been ferried to the city enclave in the middle of the night, but we hadn't even caught a glimpse of the faceless Guardian who drove our wagon. Now I could make out the rusted carcass of an overturned taxi, grass growing in and around its broken windows. And as I stared at it, something scrabbled around its side, something with raggedy grey limbs and a skull that seemed to be made up of nothing but yellow teeth and dark eyeholes.

The thing moved in rapid, jerky gestures. It was heading straight for the opening, crawling on all fours, jaw gaping impossibly wide, a ghoulish moan coming from its throat.

I knew that if I didn't move fast it would be on me in seconds, but my limbs had turned to jelly. The Rotter skittered forward,

metres away from the gate, as I watched, paralysed with horror. Then, as if it was a trainer instructing a dog to sit, one of the Guardians languidly lifted its arm and the creature slunk back to its hideout in the junked vehicle. Seconds later the gate closed behind the wagon with a metallic clash.

I felt my arm being yanked roughly as someone hauled me to my feet. 'Lele!' Dad yelled at me, trying to catch his breath. 'What the hell were you thinking?'

I shrugged my shoulder out of his grasp and started walking back towards where the Mantis and Jobe were waiting. The rain was starting to fall steadily, drops the size of two cent pieces splashing down around us.

'How could you?' the Mantis hissed.

I was so overwhelmed by a spike of hatred that I actually started shaking. I know the Mantis was supposed to be a great war hero and everything, but right then, as far as I was concerned, she was an A-grade bitch. Somehow, I promised myself, I'd make a plan to get away from the city enclave. Away from Dad. Away from the Resurrectionists. And *especially* away from the Mantis.

And I'd do whatever it took.

The light was fading fast. Taking Jobe's hand, I turned back towards the fence one last time.

'Bye, Gran,' I whispered into the wind.

I was trying not to think that somewhere, out in the Deadlands, Gran was getting up.

2

I spent the next day hiding out in my room, doing my best to ignore Dad and the Mantis, whiling away the time sketching. I hated that room; I just couldn't get used to being so confined. Gran's cottage in the Agriculturals may have been little more than a glorified shack, but there were acres of farmland and veld around our fenced settlements and livestock pens – the area so vast that we could barely hear the moans of the Rotters who roamed in the faraway Deadlands. Not so in the city, where it was an almost constant background noise, ebbing and flowing at the whim of the wind.

Thanks to the Mantis's high-powered job at the embassy, she and Dad owned a squat brick-and-mortar box squeezed in between its neighbours. It was supposed to be privileged housing, but you could have fooled me. The place stank of the paraffin that fuelled the lamps at night and the windows were

tiny and hardly let in any light, even on the sunniest of days.

Around dinner time, Jobe appeared at the door, Chinwag clutched in his arms. He toddled over to me and placed a cool hand on my forehead. 'Eina,' he said.

'Yeah, Jobe,' I said. 'You've got that right.'

He climbed onto the bed and curled up next to me, Chinwag squirming out of his grasp and snuggling herself into the crook of my legs.

There was a knock on the door and the Mantis entered. She was carrying a long-sleeved woollen tunic over her arm and I could tell by the look in her eye that she was about to give me one of her 'important talks'. She stalked over to the wooden chair in the corner of the room and sat down, primly crossing her ankles. 'So, Leletia,' she said, all fake cheeriness, as if we hadn't all been at a funeral the day before. 'First day at your new school tomorrow. You must be so excited.'

I wasn't in the slightest bit excited. If it hadn't been for the sorrow that was eating out my insides, I'd have been feeling a low, throbbing dread.

She held out the grey tunic. 'Isn't it gorgeous?'

'I'm not wearing that,' I said.

Her eyes flickered with irritation. 'You *will* wear it, Leletia.'

'My name's *Lele*.'

She sighed and pinched her nose with her thumb and forefinger as if I was literally giving her a headache. 'We've all got to adjust,' she said. 'I know how hard it is for you to deal with your grandmother's passing over …'

'You don't know anything about me.'

She carried on as if I hadn't spoken. 'We all lost people during the War and we all have to learn to move on and try to make a better life for ourselves. That is why your father and I decided it was best for you to go to school tomorrow. There's no

point wallowing in grief.'

'I don't want to go to your stupid Rotter-lover school!' I didn't like how my voice sounded – whingeing and weak – but I couldn't help it.

The Mantis looked me straight in the eye, but she didn't raise her voice when she spoke. 'You listen to me very carefully, Leletia. That kind of talk could land all of us into very serious trouble – you especially.'

I glared at her. 'Okay, Cleo. I don't want to go to your stupid *zombie*-lover school. Better?'

'I know you think you're being very clever, Leletia. But ignorance is no excuse –'

'Who's being ignorant? I'm not the one who treats the Guardians like they're gods!'

'The Resurrectionists are making a better life for all of us, Leletia,' the Mantis said with that same irritating calmness. 'If it wasn't for them, we'd still all be living in tents like refugees.'

'It's sick, though, making deals with them. You're sick!'

She gave me a small, icy smile and toyed with the amulet around her neck. 'You're extremely lucky to be going to school at all. Not everyone gets the chance. You know that.'

'So you've said, like, a hundred times.'

'Do you know how lucky you are? A chance at a career?'

'Whatever.'

'Not *whatever*, Leletia. You've come of age. You know the alternative.'

I hated to admit it, but she was right. And the alternative wasn't pretty. Marriage. Breeding. Two of the girls at my old school had left to get married when they were fifteen; even in the Agriculturals there were loads of young mothers and fathers, many of them not much older than me, carrying babies and pulling toddlers around by the hand.

The Mantis was really getting into her stride now. 'Besides, it's the best school in the enclave. Have you any idea how many favours I had to call in to get you in there?'

But I had one card up my sleeve. 'What about the Lottery?' I said.

She jerked back slightly. 'What do you mean?'

'What if I win the Lottery? Then it's all a waste of time, isn't it?'

'Now you're just being obtuse! You know you're not eligible. Not after … your brother …' Her eyes strayed to where Jobe was snuggled up close to me and I felt a small thrill of triumph. I'd suspected that mentioning the Lottery would rattle her. I'd heard that even hard-core Resurrectionists didn't like talking about it. But her discomfort didn't last long. 'You're going tomorrow, Leletia, whether you like it or not.'

I thought about telling her to stick it. But what was my alternative? Running away? Even if I did somehow make it through the Deadlands and back to the Agriculturals unscathed, I didn't want to imagine what would happen to Jobe if I wasn't around. I'd heard rumours that kids like him weren't tolerated in some parts of the city enclave.

Taking my silence as agreement, the Mantis got to her feet, pausing only to pick up Mom's old army boots from where I'd dropped them at the base of the bed. They were at least a size too big, but I'd padded them out with old socks, and they were comfortable enough. 'You can borrow a pair of my shoes tomorrow,' she said. 'We'll get you some more at the leather market at the weekend.'

'No thanks. I'm wearing those.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You'll be the laughing stock. It's bad enough that your hair … well, at least that will grow. It's about time you learned that we do things differently in the city.'

‘You mean so that I don’t embarrass you?’ I sat up, and Chinwag zooted to the end of the bed where she began licking a paw.

The Mantis didn’t answer.

‘I’ll go to your stupid school,’ I said, reaching over and grabbing the boots out of her grasp. ‘But on my terms.’

She opened her mouth to fire back at me, but then Jobe tapped her knee and murmured, ‘Shhhhh.’

So you see, right then I wasn’t the happiest person in the world. I don’t want you to think I’m some kind of self-pitying freak, but let’s face it – things were bad. What I didn’t know, and couldn’t have guessed, was that they were about to get a whole lot worse.

3

It's weird, but I hardly remember anything about life before the War, even when I really try. I mean, I was only seven when it all kicked off, but I should still remember stuff, shouldn't I? I have only a vague recollection of the flat we lived in before the Rotters came; it was small and smelled of Mom's cigarettes, and we had to climb up several flights of steps to reach the front door. In fact, my only clear memories are of the years Jobe and I lived with Gran in the Agriculturals. We were happy there. She loved us.

But that was then. Ancient history. And, like the Mantis said, I didn't have a choice.

So that morning I put on the scratchy grey tunic and pulled the thick woollen stockings over my legs. The unfamiliar clothes were at least a size too big. I'm always getting teased about how skinny I am, but it's not my fault. I eat as much as anyone; it

just doesn't stick to my ribs.

As if he'd picked up on my mood, Jobe clung to my legs as I grabbed Gran's ancient Billabong rucksack – the one she'd kept safe through the years after the War. I gently pried him loose and knelt down to face him. 'Listen, Jobe. You have to stay here. You have to behave for Dad. 'Kay?'

I gave him a hug that was really more for my benefit than his, but as I pulled away I was almost sure that I saw a flicker of understanding in his eyes. Sometimes this happened, and it made all the other times, the times he stared off into space, sing-songing to himself, bearable.

The Mantis was already ensconced in the rickshaw by the time I made my way outside. 'Leletia,' she snapped. 'Hurry up.'

I hated going by rickshaw. The men and women who pulled them along the streets all ran barefoot and that day our driver was a hefty woman with long blonde hair and ginormous shoulders. I smiled at her apologetically as I heaved myself in next to the Mantis, but she barely acknowledged me.

The Mantis's bulbous eyes skated over my body and she nodded in approval at the leather sandals I was wearing. I smiled to myself. There was no way I was going to let on that I'd hidden my boots in the bottom of the backpack.

The rickshaw driver started pulling us away from the house, hucking and jumping to get the momentum going. It was still early, but already the streets were crammed with bodies scurrying to and fro. The rain fell in steady sheets, pitter-pattering on the rickshaw's tarpaulin roof, but the wet weather didn't stop the hawkers trying to tempt us with pancakes of boiled spinach, or the sheep's heads and pigs' trotters that bubbled and frothed in drums at every corner. The smoke melded with the stench of molten tar as workers slaved away to pave the muddy roadways. I hated it. The endless greyness and people-made fakeness of it

made my eyes hurt. Everywhere you looked there was concrete or mud, not a sign of a tree or even a blade of grass.

'You look really pretty in your uniform,' the Mantis said in her 'look, I'm your friend' voice. A total lie of course. I looked like a freak, and I longed for my hoody and jeans. Pretending not to hear her, I stared out at the passing rickshaws and the half-completed buildings that lined the street.

'Look, Leletia,' the Mantis said, after a lengthy silence. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

I honestly couldn't see what the hell she was talking about. As far as I was concerned not only was the city enclave as ugly as sin, but it also stank. The Mantis and Dad were always going on about the fancy-smancy sewerage system the Resurrectionists were constructing, but now we were edging into the centre of the sector and the place reeked of open drains and other foul stuff I didn't want to think about.

The rain was falling more heavily now, and the rickshaw driver paused to wipe the rivulets out of her eyes before flexing the muscles in her shoulders and moving onwards again.

We topped a rise and I got another tantalising glimpse of Table Mountain in between the spilling clouds.

The rickshaw driver slid to an abrupt stop.

'What now!' the Mantis said, looking at me in irritation as if it was my fault.

'Resurrectionist parade, ma'am,' the rickshaw driver said, pointing towards the road ahead where a solid wall of bodies was marching in formation, droning some tuneless phrase over and over again. I couldn't make out the words, but it had to be the same kind of crap the Resurrectionists at Gran's funeral had spouted.

'Guardians!' I said, unthinkingly grabbing the Mantis's arm.

'They're not Guardians, Leletia,' she said. 'They wear the

robes as a tribute.' And looking closer I could see she was right. Two robed figures were cutting their way through the crowd, thrusting pamphlets into the hands of passers-by, and as I watched one of them pushed back his hood to scratch his thatch of brown hair.

A woman with wide staring eyes and a lumpy rash across one cheek ran up to the side of the rickshaw and shoved a piece of paper into my hand. 'Take this, sisi!' she said, and before I could react, she melted back into the throng of bodies.

The Mantis sighed. 'Why on earth do they have to do this at this time of the day?'

I looked at her in surprise. 'Huh? But you … you're a believer.'

The Mantis shot me a shrewd look. 'Take the market road,' she snapped to the rickshaw driver, who nodded, jumped up on the balls of her feet and pulled us through a series of darkened alleyways, strung with sodden washing and full of the reek of unwashed bodies.

While the Mantis carried on barking instructions to the driver, I opened up the pamphlet. The ink was smeared where stray droplets of rain had dampened it, but it was still readable. Beneath a crap ink drawing of a large-headed child gazing up at an oval sun were the words:

> *Do you remember the terrible days of hijackings? Murder? Domestic violence? Robbery? Et cetera? Yes? Then join us in celebrating our Saviours Who Have Set Us Free. Become ReBorn with a view to a Glorious ReAnimation. New Greenmarket Square, Saturday, 12 July, Year 10.*

I scrunched it up and shoved it into the bottom of my backpack. Then, all too soon, we turned a corner and I caught a glimpse of

my new school for the first time.

My first thought was: *Oh crap*. It looked like the photos I'd seen of the prisons they'd had before the War. It was ringed by a low spiked fence, and the bland brick buildings behind it couldn't have been more different from my old school, which was basically just a rondavel with a cosy thatched roof. Even from outside the gate I could smell the telltale reek of newly laid concrete. The sign on the gate read *Malema High: 'A breath of fresh air'*.

'Here we are,' the Mantis said. 'Remember, try to fit in, Leletia.'

But, as I was about to find out, that was *way* easier said than done.

4

'What did you say your name was?' The woman in the reception office looked me up and down disapprovingly, taking in my shorn hair and of course the boots, which I'd quickly put on when the Mantis was out of sight.

'Lele … Leletia,' I said again.

It was gloomy inside the brick office, the windows too small to let in adequate light. She flicked irritably through the papers on her desk. 'And you're really Cleo Mbane's stepdaughter?'

'I told you that already.'

I could tell by the way her nose wrinkled up slightly, as if she'd smelled something putrid, that she was finding it hard to believe me. I'd taken an instant dislike to her – when she'd bent down to collect a form from behind the desk, I'd caught sight of a large bony Resurrectionist amulet under her blouse – and it was obviously more than mutual. She was all angles and hard

edges, as if she'd been welded together, and she reeked of the grease she'd used to slick back her hair.

'I'm Comrade Pelosi. If you have any problems, you can come and see me.'

Not bloody likely.

'Let's get you to class,' she said. 'You'll be just in time for morning thanks.'

'For morning what?'

She pretended not to hear me and led me outside.

'You must feel very privileged coming to a school such as this after your time in the Agriculturals,' she said in her superior tone. 'We're very proud of our beautiful school.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I can see why.'

She glanced at me suspiciously, as if she'd detected the sarcastic undertone in my voice, but I smiled innocently back at her.

Comrade Pelosi led me past a bare area dominated by a rusty sculpture of a sun with dull metal rays poking out of its centre and towards a squat barn-like structure with a domed roof. It instantly reminded me of the shed where we used to keep the sheep in the winter.

'All your classes will be in here.'

My stomach flip-flopped, and taking a deep, calming breath, I followed her inside.

The room was as gloomy as the reception area – the only lighting coming from oil lamps that were placed on each desk – and although there had to be thirty or so students in the room, it was almost eerily silent. Everyone had their heads bent, their hands clasped on the desks in front of them.

A freakishly tall man stood at the front of the classroom, his eyes closed and his arms raised above his head. He was almost as skinny as the Mantis, and his long hair was scraped back so

tightly his brow looked as if it took up two thirds of his face. He immediately made me think of the huge rain spiders we'd sometimes find on the walls of Gran's cottage.

His eyes snapped open. 'So we give thanks to the Guardians for the air that we breathe, the food that we eat and the safe environment in which we flourish,' he said.

A low murmuring started to hum in the background. Comrade Pelosi, or Acid Face as I had decided to dub her, cleared her throat.

'Comrade,' she said. 'Sawubona. New pupil for you.' Then she stalked out, leaving me stranded at the side of the classroom.

'Please come to the front,' the teacher said.

Squirming with self-consciousness, I walked stiffly towards him. My boots clunked over the concrete floor, and a couple of girls in the front row sniggered. The words *Give thanks for each new day* were written on the blackboard, but the rest of the dusty brick walls were bare. There were no windows, and despite the size of the room I began to feel claustrophobic.

'Welcome,' the teacher said, his flat black eyes boring into my skull. 'I am Comrade Xhati. Please, tell us a bit about yourself.'

Crap. I really *really* didn't want to stand in front of all these strangers and talk about myself. I turned to face the class, heart hammering in my chest, everyone's eyes focused on me. The girl directly opposite me smothered a yawn and flicked her hair over her shoulder. It was intricately plaited and fell almost to her waist. The Mantis was right. I was one of the only students with cropped hair. My first day, and already I stood out like a sore thumb.

'My name's Lele …' My voice cracked, and I had to clear my throat and start again. Someone giggled. 'My name's Lele. I live with my dad and stepmother and …' What else was there to say?

'Thank you, Lele. And why are you joining us halfway through the year?'

'Um … I've just moved here. My grandmother …' I could feel tears starting to build up, and I swallowed. 'She died recently – we lived with her out in the Agriculturals – and so my brother and I were sent here to stay with my dad.'

The door at the back of the room opened, and a tall guy with a hectic mass of dreadlocks entered, letting the door slam behind him with a crash.

Comrade Xhati sighed and narrowed his eyes. 'I hope you have a good excuse, Thabo.'

The latecomer held up a piece of paper. It was impossible to tell for sure from where I was standing, but it looked like one of the pamphlets the Resurrectionists in the parade had been handing out. 'Sorry, Comrade Xhati,' he said. 'Got caught up. The cause, you know.'

Comrade Xhati nodded, but he didn't look entirely convinced. 'I see. Well, take your seat.'

The girl with the plaits whispered something to her neighbour and squirmed around in her seat to stare at the late arrival. She gave him a small flirty wave, but I couldn't see if he responded or not.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' Comrade Xhati said, reaching over and touching my hand lightly. His fingers were icy. 'But you must think of your grandmother as being in a better place.' He paused as if waiting for me to agree with him. I didn't. 'Do you have an exercise book? Something with which to write?'

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak again.

'Good,' he said. 'You'll find a seat near the back.'

The desks all looked fully occupied, but then I spied a space at the rear of the classroom that was hidden in its own pool of darkness, its lamp unlit.

I dropped my head and retraced my steps, a flurry of whispers tracking me as I walked to the back of the room:

'Are those army boots she's wearing?'

'What a freak.'

'Check out her hair!'

Careful not to catch anyone's eye, I slunk into my chair.

Comrade Xhati asked a question about the life cycle of an aphid, and the students all started writing industriously. Bending down to my bag, I pulled out my sketchbook. On the first page my best friend Thandwisa had written: *Don't let them grind you down. We love you and will miss you stacks, so don't forget us. XXXX*. Thanks to the tears welling in my eyes, the writing was blurry, but I knew the message off by heart.

Now all I had to do was to figure out how to light the lamp. I tried to attract the attention of the guy next to me, a gangly kid with taped-together glasses and furious acne, as he scrawled something on a sheet of rough paper, but he appeared to be ignoring me deliberately.

Now the tears were really building up.

'Is there a problem, Lele?' Comrade Xhati called from the front of the class.

'I'm fine,' I said as a tear escaped and crept down my cheek. I wiped it off with the back of my hand, but I could feel others waiting to take its place. I wished I could tell everyone that I wasn't crying because of them, but instead I looked down at my desk and watched as a second tear plopped down onto its varnished surfaced. I smudged it away with my finger. Another one fell onto Thand's message, but I didn't try and brush that away. Instead I watched as the R and I in 'grind' swelled and bled on the page.

I almost jumped out of my skin when I felt a tap on the back of my shoulder. It was Dreadlock Guy – Thabo, the teacher had

called him. 'Here,' he whispered, handing me a box of matches. I smiled gratefully and took them out of his hand. 'First days suck,' he said.

'You got that right,' I replied, hastily wiping my wet cheeks, and hoping he wouldn't think I was lame for crying.

The first match died, but the second caught and the lamp in front of me flickered and glowed. Someone had etched *Everything's better with zombies – NOT* into the wood of my desk, and this made me smile.

I passed the matches back to Thabo. 'Thanks.'

'No worries,' he said, smiling lopsidedly at me and winking. He was cute. Very cute. High cheekbones, dark eyes, awesome hair. He was wearing an old army greatcoat over a washed-out T-shirt, but he somehow made the outfit look cool. I could feel blood rushing into my cheeks.

He leaned back in his chair, and I turned to face the front. Somehow the fact that the lamp was lit on my desk made me feel better – more connected to everyone – and the tears finally dried up.

While the other students scratched away with their pencils, I glanced around me. With the exception of Zit Face next to me, none of them wore the regulation uniform. Most appeared to be wearing denim or canvas jackets that could only have come from before the War. A couple of the girls had brightly coloured plastic beads around their necks, and some even had sparkly clips and slides stuck into their hair. I'd never seen anything like it. And there I was in my itchy grey tunic, with my agricultural enclave anti-lice haircut and my mother's boots. I couldn't have stood out more if I'd tried.

Not knowing what else to do, I flipped to one of the few free pages in my battered sketchbook and started drawing. Sometimes I do this without actually knowing what the sketch

will eventually be, and this time, as I shaded and cross-hatched lines over the page, a face began to emerge. It looked just like the Rotter I'd spied outside the gate: large, fathomless eye sockets, a dark space where the nose should be and the curve of a skinless jaw. Looking up I saw Zit Face watching me, an expression of disgust on his face.

'We'll continue after break,' Comrade Xhati said. There was the clatter of chairs being pushed back, and everyone started streaming out of the door. Zit Face pushed past me, knocking his bag against my chair. He didn't apologise.

I hung back before following them out into the rain, down a narrow corridor and into a wide concreted rec area covered with a stretched tarpaulin and dotted with wooden tables and benches. Cliques of students of all ages were already gathered around the tables in the centre. I looked around for Thabo – the only person so far who'd seemed human – but couldn't see him anywhere.

I hesitated, not sure which table to head for. A couple of girls were pointedly staring at my boots, so I made an issue of glaring at them and headed for an empty bench in a corner, away from the main throng of students. The rain was beating a tattoo on the canvas above me, and a fine mist blew through the edge of the covering, but I didn't care about getting damp. I was just grateful not to be the centre of attention. Sitting down, I pulled out the roti Dad had made for me that morning. I wasn't in the slightest bit hungry, but I picked at it for something to do while I checked out the kids around me.

For Rotter-lovers, they really knew how to dress, and now that I could see them in the daylight it was clear that everyone was wearing at least something – even if it was just an accessory – from before the War. My eye kept being drawn to one guy in particular. He wore bright blue jeans that weren't even slightly

faded and he'd pinned guineafowl feathers to the lapel of his denim jacket. His straightened black hair was tied into three bunches at the back of his head, and he was surrounded by a group of girls. Every time one of them spoke, they glanced at him as if seeking approval.

I had no idea how I was going to get through the day. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, and they all wore those vile Resurrectionist amulets. The cult hadn't really caught on in the Agriculturals, and I tried to imagine what Thands or my other friends would say if they could have seen me surrounded by a group of Rotter-lovers.

'Hey,' a voice said.

I looked up. Two girls stood in front of me. I recognised one of them – the girl with the plaits. Now that I was close to her I could see that her hair wasn't actually real; the plaits looked plasticky and synthetic. The other girl was about my height, short and stocky, her mouth full of large square teeth. 'I'm Summer,' Plastic Hair said. 'And this is Nyameka.'

'Hi,' I said, barely able to drag my eyes away from their clothes. Summer's jacket was a soft, pale pink satin, the stitching intricate and neat. Nyameka was wearing gorgeous, rubbery, slipper-like shoes. 'I'm Lele.'

'So, like, you just moved here, right?' Summer said.

'Looks that way,' I replied, trying to smile.

'And, is it better than your old school?'

'No.'

The two of them giggled. 'Seriously? But aren't you from the Agriculturals?'

'Yeah.'

'What's it like out there? Do you really all live in huts and stuff?'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. 'No!'

'But you don't have, like, running water and toilets, right?'

'Of course there's running water! It's not that different from here.'

They seemed to find this hilarious.

Finally Summer managed to control herself and sat down next to me on the bench. Too close if you ask me; she reeked of garlic. 'Now, Lebo –'

'Lele.'

'Right.' (Giggle.) 'Sorry.' (Giggle.) 'You know the Lottery Ball's, like, at the end of term?'

I almost dropped my roti on the floor. I couldn't believe Summer had just mentioned the Lottery so casually. Fortunately she didn't pick up on my shock.

'And I'd really *really* appreciate it if you'd vote for me to be Queen,' she continued, handing me a pamphlet. There was a crap sketch of a sun scrawled on it, and at the bottom the words *Vote Summer for Queen!*

'Great slogan,' I said.

'What?'

'Never mind.' Detecting sarcasm clearly wasn't one of her strong points.

'All you have to do is sign your name at the bottom and post it in the ballot box in Comrade Pelosi's office.'

'So what do you win if you're Queen?'

They giggled again, which was really starting to annoy me. 'You don't actually *win* anything,' Summer said. 'It's, like, a total honour to be named Queen.'

'Why?'

'Because everyone says that then you have a better chance of getting picked.'

'You're not serious,' I said.

'What do you mean?'

She looked genuinely confused. I couldn't get my head around it. When we'd first got wind of the Lottery several years earlier, no one in the Agriculturals had taken it seriously. Most of us had assumed that it was just a crazy rumour. But what I really couldn't understand was why Summer would want to win what for all she knew was basically a death sentence (or worse). I mean, at that stage no one knew for sure what happened to those who 'won' the Lottery. Just that, for some reason, the Guardians prized teenage bodies so highly that they were willing to trade water, paper, food, building materials and even electricity for their yearly supply. I remember thinking: Was she seriously that brainwashed?

I decided it was probably best to keep my opinions to myself. I was already enough of an outsider as it was. And this was, after all, a radical Resurrectionist school. 'Where did you get your clothes?' I asked instead.

'You like?' Summer said with a flick of her hair.

'Yeah. They're cool. Is your jacket from before the War?'

Summer and Nyameka shared a look. 'Well, *ja*. Obviously.'

'So is there a shop or somewhere where they sell this stuff?'

'You really don't know?'

'I wouldn't ask if I did.'

'Well, see, if you want something you have to order it from Thabo.'

'The guy with the dreads?'

'Ja.'

They giggled again.

'So where does he get the stuff from?'

'It's a secret. He's totally connected, though.'

'Totally connected to who?'

'I don't know, but, like, if you want stuff from him it costs the *earth*.'

Nyameka stared at my hair and curled her lip, obviously thinking this would be out of my reach.

'So?' Summer said, leaning into me and totally invading my personal space. 'What do you say? Will you vote for me?'

'I'll consider it,' I said.

'Cool! What are you wearing to the Ball, by the way?'

'I'm not sure I'm going.'

They both looked appalled. ''Scuse me?' Nyameka spoke for the first time. 'Everyone at the school has to go. It's compulsory.'

'Yeah. But I'm not eligible for the Lottery.'

'Huh?'

It wasn't as if I could keep it a secret forever. 'My brother was taken.'

Nyameka looked confused. 'Taken? What do you mean?'

'He was taken by the Guardians.'

Their faces lit up. '*Seriaas*?' Nyameka asked. 'Wow! When?'

'At the beginning of the War.'

'No ways!' Summer said. 'Tell us all.' She edged even closer.

'Nothing to tell.'

'Is he like one of those kids they brought back all, you know …'

'All what?'

'I mean, isn't he, like, retarded or freaky or something? No offence.'

'I'm really not comfortable talking about this,' I said, handing the flier back to Summer. 'Give this to someone else.'

'Chill out,' Nyameka said. 'Just because you can't win, doesn't mean that you can't vote.'

I shrugged.

Summer stood up and the two of them drifted away, heading towards the guy with the feathers. They whispered something to him, and he looked over at me, a sneer on his face. For a

second our eyes met, then he turned back to the other two and said something that made Summer collapse with mirth.

I dumped the remains of the roti in the bin, appetite now completely squashed, and pulled out my sketchbook. I spent the rest of break and the whole of the afternoon adding Summer and Nyameka to the drawing of the Rotter. Not very nice of me, I know.