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opening extract from

The Forest of Hands and Teeth

written by

Carrie Ryan

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I

My mother used to tell me about the ocean. She said there was a place where there was nothing but water as far as you could see and that it was always moving, rushing toward you and then away. She once showed me a picture that she said was my great-great-great-grandmother standing in the ocean as a child. It has been years since, and the picture was lost to fire long ago, but I remember it, faded and worn. A little girl surrounded by nothingness.

In my mother's stories, passed down from her many-greats-grandmother, the ocean sounded like the wind through the trees and men used to ride the water. Once, when I was older and our village was suffering through a drought, I asked my mother why, if so much water existed, were there years when our own streams ran almost dry? She told me that the ocean was not for drinking—that the water was filled with salt.

That is when I stopped believing her about the ocean.

How could there be so much salt in the universe and how could God allow so much water to become useless?

But there are times when I stand at the edge of the Forest of Hands and Teeth and look out at the wilderness that stretches on forever and wonder what it would be like if it were all water. I close my eyes and listen to the wind in the trees and imagine a world of nothing but water closing over my head.

It would be a world without the Unconsecrated, a world without the Forest of Hands and Teeth.

Often, my mother stands next to me holding her hand up over her eyes to block the sun and looking out past the fences and into the trees and brush, waiting to see if her husband will come home to her.

She is the only one who believes that he has not turned—that he might come home the same man he was when he left. I gave up on my father months ago and buried the pain of losing him as deeply as possible so that I could continue with my daily life. Now I sometimes fear coming to the edge of the Forest and looking past the fence. I am afraid I will see him there with the others: tattered clothes, sagging skin, the horrible pleading moan and the fingers scraped raw from pulling at the metal fences.

That no one has seen him gives my mother hope. At night she prays to God that he has found some sort of enclave similar to our village. That somewhere in the dense Forest he has found safety. But no one else has any hope. The Sisters tell us that ours is the only village left in the world.

My brother Jed has taken to volunteering extra shifts for the Guardian patrols that monitor the fence line. I know that, like me, he thinks our father is lost to the Unconsecrated and

that he hopes to find him during the patrol of the perimeter and kill him before our mother sees what her husband has become.

People in our village have gone mad from seeing their loved ones as Unconsecrated. It was a woman—a mother—horrified at the sight of her son infected during a patrol, who set herself on fire and burned half of our town. That was the fire that destroyed my family's heirlooms when I was a child, that obliterated our only ties to who we were as a people before the Return, though most were so corroded by then that they left only wisps of memories.

Jed and I watch our mother closely now and we never allow her to approach the fence line unaccompanied. At times Jed's wife Beth used to join us on these vigils until she was sent to bed rest with her first child. Now it is just us.

And then one day Beth's brother catches up with me while I am dunking our laundry in the stream that branches off the big river. For as long as I can remember Harold has been a friend of mine, one of the few in the village my age. He trades me a handful of wildflowers for my sopping sheets and we sit and watch the water flow over the rocks as he twists the sheets in complicated patterns to dry them out.

"How is your mother?" he asks me, because he is nothing if not polite.

I duck my head and wash my hands in the water. I know I should be getting back to her, that I have already taken too much time for myself today and that she is probably pacing, waiting for me. Jed is off on a long-term patrol of the perimeter, checking the strength of the fences, and my mother likes to spend her afternoons near the Forest looking for my father. I need to be there to comfort her just in case. To hold her back

from the fences if she finds him. "She's still holding out hope," I say.

Harry clucks his tongue in sympathy. We both know there is little hope.

His hands seek out and cover mine under the water. I have known this was coming for months. I have seen the way he looks at me now, how his eyes have changed. How tension has crept into our friendship. We are no longer children and haven't been for years.

"Mary, I . . ." He pauses for a second. "I was hoping that you would go with me to the Harvest Celebration next weekend."

I look down at our hands in the water. I can feel my fingertips wrinkling in the cold and his skin feels soft and fleshy. I consider his offer. The Harvest Celebration is the time in the fall when those of marrying age declare themselves to one another. It is the beginning of the courtship, the time during the short winter days when the couple determines whether they will make a suitable match. Almost always the courtship will end in spring with Brethlaw—the weeklong celebration of wedding vows and christenings. It's very rare that a courtship fails. Marriage in our village is not about love—it is about commitment.

Every year I wonder at the couples pairing up around me. At how my former childhood friends suddenly find partners, bond, prepare for the next step. Pledge themselves to one another and begin their courtships. I always assumed the same would happen to me when my time approached. That because of the sickness that wiped out so many of my peers when I was a child, it would be even more important that those of us of marrying age find a mate. So important that

there wouldn't be enough girls to spare for a life with the Sisterhood.

I even hoped that perhaps I would be lucky enough to find more than just a mate, to eventually find love like my mother and father.

And yet, even though I have been one of the few eligible during the past two years, I've been left aside.

I have spent the last weeks dealing with my father's absence beyond the fences. Dealing with my mother's despair and desolation. With my own grief and mourning. Until this moment it hasn't occurred to me that I might be the last one asked to the Harvest Celebration. Or that I might be left unclaimed.

A part of me can't help but think of Harry's younger brother Travis. It is his attention I have been trying to catch throughout the summer, his friendship I have wanted to turn into something more. But he has never responded to my subtle and awkward flirtations.

As if he can read my mind Harry says, "Travis is taking Cassandra," and I can't help but feel hollow and petty and angry that my best friend has accomplished what I could not. That she has Travis's attention and I don't.

I don't know what to say. I think of the way the sun shifts over Travis's face when he smiles and I look into Harry's eyes and try to find the same shifts. They are brothers, after all, born barely a year apart. But there is nothing except the feel of his flesh on mine under the water.

Rather than answer I smile a little, relieved that at last someone has spoken for me while a part of me wonders if our lifelong friendship could ever grow to be something more during the dark winter courtship months.

Harry grins and he drops his head toward me and all I can think about is how I had never wanted Harry to be my first kiss, and then before his lips can land on mine we hear it.

The siren. It is so old and so rarely used these days that it starts out with a creak and a wheeze and then it is full-blown.

Harry's eyes meet mine, his face now a breath away.

"Was there supposed to be a drill today?" I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes are as wide as mine must be. His father is the head of the Guardians and he would know of any drills. I stand, ready to start sprinting back toward the village. Every inch of my skin tingles, my heart curling into a painful fist. All I can think is, Mother.

Harry grabs my arm and pulls me back. "We should stay here," he says. "It's safer. What if the fences are breached? We need to find a platform." I can see the terror closing in on the irises of his eyes. His fingers dig into my wrist, almost clawing at me but I keep pulling away, pushing at his hands and body until I am free.

I scrabble up the hill toward the center of our village, ignoring the winding path and choosing instead to grab at branches and vines to help me up the steep slope. As I crest the ridge I look back to see Harry still down by the water's edge, his hands up in front of his face as if he cannot bear to see what is happening above. I see his mouth move, as if he's calling out to me, but all I can hear is the siren—the sound of it burns into my ears and echoes around me.

All my life I have trained by that siren. Before I could walk I knew the siren meant death. It meant somehow the fences had been breached and the Unconsecrated were shuffling among us. It meant grab weapons, move to the platforms and pull up the ladders—even if it necessitated leaving the living behind.

Growing up, my mother used to tell me about how in the beginning, when her own great-great-great-grandmother was a child, that siren would wail almost constantly as the village was bombarded with the Unconsecrated. But then the fences had been fortified, the Guardians had formed and time had passed with the Unconsecrated dwindling to the point that I couldn't remember a time in the past few years when that siren had wailed and it had not been a drill. I know that in my life there have been breaches but I also know that I am very good at blocking out the memories that serve me no purpose. I can fear the Unconsecrated well enough without them.

The closer I get to the edge of the village the more slowly I move. Already I can see that the platforms cradled in the trees are full; some have even pulled their ladders up. All around me is chaos. Mothers dragging children, the implements of everyday life scattered in the dirt and grass.

And then the sirens cut out, there is silence and everyone freezes. A baby resumes its wailing, a cloud passes over the sun. And I see a small group of Guardians dragging someone toward the Cathedral.

"Mother," I whisper, everything inside of me falling at once. Because somehow I just know. I know that I shouldn't have lingered at the stream with Harry, that I shouldn't have let him hold my hand while my mother was waiting for me to accompany her to the fence.

My back is ramrod straight as I walk toward the entrance to the Cathedral, an old stone building built well before the Return. Its thick wooden door is open and my neighbors step aside as they see me draw near but no one will look me in the eyes. At the edge of the crowd I hear someone murmur, "She was too close to the fence, she allowed one to grab her."

Inside it feels as though the stone walls drain the heat of

the day and the hairs on my arms stand on end. The light is dim and I see the Sisters surrounding a woman who is keening and moaning but not Unconsecrated. My mother knew to never get too close to the fences—to the Unconsecrated. Too many in our village have been lost that way. It had to have been my father she saw at the edge of the fence line and I close my eyes as the once-dampened pain of losing him slashes through my body again.

I should have been with her.

I want to curl in on myself, to hide from everything that has happened. But instead I go to my mother and kneel, putting my head in her lap and picking up one of her hands and placing it in my hair.

If I could boil my life down to its essence it would be this: my head in my mother's lap, her hands in my hair as we sit in front of the fire and she tells me stories handed down by the women of our family about life before the Return.

Now my mother's hands are sticky and I know they are covered with her blood. I shut my eyes so that I do not have to see it, so that I don't have to know the extent of the damage.

My mother is calmer, her hands instinctively tugging at my hair, letting it free from its bandana. She is rocking and saying something so low under her breath that I cannot understand her.

The Sisters let us be for now. They huddle in the corner with the most elite of the Guardians—the Guild—and I know they are determining my mother's fate. If she was merely scratched they will monitor her even though she couldn't be infected that way. But if she was bitten and thus infected by an Unconsecrated, there are only two options. Kill her now or imprison her until she turns and then push her through the

fence. In the end, if my mother is still sane, they will pose the question and let her be the judge.

Die a quick death and save her soul or go exist amongst the Unconsecrated.

We learned in our lessons that originally, right after the Return, those attacked were not allowed this choice. They were put to death almost immediately. That was back before the tide turned, back when it looked as if it would be the living who lost the battle.

But then an Infected—a widow—had come to the Sisters and begged to be allowed to join her husband in the Forest. She pleaded for the right to fulfill her marriage vows to the man she had chosen and loved. The living had already established this place—had made us safe and secure as any could be in the world of the Unconsecrated. And the widow made an excellent point: the only true thing that separates the living from the Unconsecrated is choice, free will. She wanted the choice to be with her husband. The Sisters debated against the Guardians but it is the Sisterhood's word that is always final. They decided that one more Unconsecrated would not endanger our community. And so the widow was escorted to the fence where three Guardians held her until she succumbed to the infection, and then pushed her through the gate just before she died and Returned Unconsecrated.

I can't fathom leaving an old woman to face such a fate. But such is the way of choice, I imagine.

II

"You will stay with us now," the Sisters tell me, "until your brother arrives." Jed has still not returned from his rotation on the fence line. The Sisters have sent a messenger to bring him back but we won't begin to expect him for at least a day. Our mother will probably be gone by the time he returns and he won't have the chance to talk her out of her choice.

My mother has chosen to join the Unconsecrated. And I am quite sure that my brother will blame me for her choice. He'll ask me why I allowed her to make this decision for herself, why I did not stand in for her and tell the Guardians to kill her.

I am not sure I will know what to tell him.

It is a complicated process, giving a living human over to the Forest of Hands and Teeth. The Guardians found out years ago that the transfer cannot be done too early because a live human cast into the Forest is nothing but food for the