

The Forest of Hands and Teeth - Julia's story

by Karissa Huston

My name is Julia. I am eighteen, with curly blonde hair and blue eyes, and I am one of the few survivors from the Breach many years ago.

The Breach was not like any other breach where we could have gone to the platforms in the trees, the Breach was when the Fast One wiped out almost all of the village. We were growing at the time, recovering from sickness, and we had lots of people.

Now I am one of less than a dozen.

I am the youngest as well, with the next oldest being two years older than me and the third youngest being seven years older than him. Among our little group we have one Sister, two Guardians, and the others are just villagers who managed to escape the massacre. Our group used to be bigger, but then the bites from the Unconsecrated from the Breach set in, and we have lost a few others to illness, age, and the Unconsecrated over the years. The Sister is in charge, even though she is nearing her sixties.

I remember the Breach, a long time ago. I was five years old, and yet the realistic nightmares that plague me every night have the most vivid detail that can only be obtained through remembering that horrific event.

When the siren rang out, signalling that there was a breach, my parents grabbed both me and my older brother, Jacob, and ran to the platforms for safety. We lived farther away from the platforms than most of the other villagers, and we had a longer path to run. My brother was six, only a year older than me. My older brother was my best friend, the person closest to me, my entire world. I looked up to him, one could go as far to say I idolized him. When the siren started shrieking that horrific night, my parents grabbed us and ran as fast as they could to get to the platform. The fog was thick and panic threatened to make us stop in our tracks and just let the Unconsecrated descend upon us. We ran as fast as we could, but the Fast One was much faster than we could possibly hope to be, and descended upon our parents faster than they could scream. The Fast One, with her bright red vest, stared at us with clear eyes as my parent's blood dripped from her mouth and stained her teeth and chin. She stared at us, and for a moment, seemed human. She looked human, and in that instant I could have tricked myself into believing that she was, that was just another daughter like I was, just another girl who had a family

and brothers and sisters and friends. She stared at us with those human eyes, clearly showing that she was a newly turned Unconsecrated. That's the worst part about the newly turned Unconsecrated. When they're degrading and falling apart and rotting with dull eyes, you can treat them like they're a whole different race, like they weren't once brothers or sisters or mothers or fathers. The Fast One stared at me and Jacob, the red dripping from her mouth and the red spilling on the ground from our parent's necks looking dull in comparison to the red vest she wore.

Then Jacob grabbed my hand and we ran.

We ran for our lives, not looking back to see if the Fast One was behind us or if any of the other Unconsecrated were following us. We just ran, the adrenaline pumping through our blood drowning out the painful shriek of the siren as we tried to reach one of the platforms before the Fast One decided to change her mind and come after us. Because of the dense fog and the darkness, Jacob tripped and skimmed his knee. I ran for a few paces before realizing his hand was no longer grabbing mine and I turned around to see my older brother on the ground and holding his bloody knees with his small hands. The smell of blood must have drawn the Unconsecrated, because the next thing I knew I saw a large group of Unconsecrated stumbling towards us, towards my brother. I looked to him and then to the pack, and he seemed to hear my silent warning, because he looked behind him as well. I had frozen from fear, my five year old self paralyzed as I watched the Unconsecrated move to devour my six year old brother. I snapped to my senses and tried tugging him with me, but he was far too heavy for me to drag anyplace. Jacob pushes me away from him, urging me to run to the platforms. I should have done something. I shouldn't have listened to him. I should have done something more to save him. Instead I turned and ran.

I left him for dead.

My only family left, and I signed his death sentence by leaving him.

I ran to the platforms like I was told to, and one of the adults roughly grabbed me by the arm and hauled me up to the platforms in the trees while pulling up the ladder. I looked over the edge to see people frantically running around, but the fog was too dense to make anyone out. I could only assume the worst and that Jacob was now one of the Unconsecrated, one of the ones who will eternally hunger for flesh until he is killed for a second time.

I don't really remember much after that, but I do know that I passed out because of shock. The next thing I knew, Jacob's best friend, David, was shaking me awake. David is one of the few who also escaped the Breach and managed to survive. I awoke many hours after the Breach. The sun was setting, and the few people left on the platforms were running out of arrows. Thanks to most of the Guardians in the platforms risking their lives, we were able to cut a path through the Unconsecrated and into the Cathedral. David had to pull me along by the hand because I was crying so hard about Jacob and my parents. He half-understood me through my sobs and began to cry as well, mourning his best friend. Still he pulled me along with the rest of the group, his small seven year old hand closed over mine and dragging the bawling me along.

We made it into the Cathedral and escaped through a secret tunnel into a fenced-in clearing in the middle of the Forest of Hands and Teeth. All of the villagers and remaining Guardians were astonished and angry when they found out about the tunnel, because the Sisterhood had kept such a large secret from us. Unfortunately, we had no time to be outraged at the implications of such a revealing find, as we had to escape the horde of the Unconsecrated and the Fast One.

Ever since then we have been barely clinging to life, slowly traveling down the pathways that led from the clearing. There's an older couple, and they're pregnant, but I don't think we'll be able to keep the baby. We can barely feed ourselves as it is, and we definitely wouldn't be able to provide for it like it needs to. Plus, what kind of life would it have? Slowly moving away from our ancestor's homes, in fear of what lies ahead and that we'll be stuck here, trapped by the flimsy chain link fences? Getting used to the feeling of dehydration and starvation because there isn't enough of anything to go around? Seeing the Forest of Hands and Teeth stretching on forever? Freezing at night, especially in the winter, because we have very few blankets and we give them to the older members of the group? That's no way to live. It certainly is too miserable of an existence for a child.

Some days I wonder what it would be like to succumb to the Unconsecrated, and just live out my life as a starving, shambling corpse. It wouldn't be much different from how we are now, except that I wouldn't have to deal with this overwhelming guilt hanging over me every second of my life. I would be numb. I wouldn't feel the cold, the starvation, or the pangs of depression when I allow my thoughts to wander. I'm sure David knows I think these thoughts, more so than the others. He catches me staring

off into the Forest, silently calculating whether or not I should shove my arm through the fence and allow myself to be bitten. Maybe he knows because he thinks them too, I'm not sure. Many times he just watches me, probably waiting to know if he will have to kill me to save the others. I can always feel his once bright green eyes on me, silently pressuring me to stay alive and to push through this miserable ordeal and keep going. Each day it gets harder and harder. I made a promise to the memory of my brother though, and it was that I would stay alive because he is gone. I will stay alive because it is my fault that Jacob is gone. David always assures me that it isn't true, but I know that he secretly blames me for the murder of his closest friend and forcing him to watch over me like a babysitter.

Sometimes, when I'm almost asleep, I remember this girl in our village. Her name was Mary and she was much older than me, of marrying age when the Breach happened. She would always visit me and Jacob, and always tell us about some of the stories her mother told her. Of the ocean, and how it was bluer than the sky and completely free of the Unconsecrated. My parents always shooed her away whenever they heard her telling us the stories, because they didn't want us to grow up believing in an impossible fantasy. It has to be a fantasy, I mean, the Forest of Hands and Teeth never ends. We have been traveling for thirteen long years, and there is no end in sight. There can't be a place untouched by the Unconsecrated, right?

I don't know anymore. I don't know anything anymore. I just shuffle along with the others, and pray that the end will come soon. The end to the Unconsecrated, the end to the hopelessness, the end to the Forest, the end to something.

Just today I talked to David about this. At first he got really worried, afraid that I was planning on killing myself or something, but understood once I explained myself. He wants an end too, especially since it seems like these paths lead to no place.

I know that David is giving away most of his food to the older people in the group. I can tell because his bones are growing more prominent than they should be, and his green eyes and light brown hair is growing duller with each passing day. He denies it, but I also notice that he's eating less and less at mealtimes. At first I thought he got bitten but it's been a week now. Excepting the smallest of bites, he would have become an Unconsecrated. I'm worried about him. He's also become quieter, spending his time watching me or the others silently, and mostly responding in grunts or moving his head or shoulders. He'll talk to me, but I'm the only person he'll actually utter words to. I don't know if everything is just

becoming too much for him or if it's just showing all of a sudden, but I know that he's falling into despair. I don't know how to help him. The Sister says that I should pray for him, but I gave up on God when I saw the Fast One kill my parents.

When I tried to ask him what's wrong he shrugged me off, saying that it was nothing. I don't know if he's trying to protect me or if he just thinks I'm stupid, but I know that it's not nothing. Something's wrong with David, and he won't tell me. I'm scared for him.

~*~*~*~*~

I went to talk to David again, to see if he would tell me anything this time. I found him sitting in the middle of the path, a little ways from the others, staring out into the Forest like I do. I sat next to him quietly, just waiting for him to notice my presence. He did so after a few moments, and turned his head towards me. I can see how gaunt his face is, and I know it's not just lack of food. Something is weighing on his soul. I know because I used to have the same face of hopelessness until I learned to hide it, for David's sake.

He turned towards me and just stared at my face, searching with his eyes for something. I stared back at him, wishing I could give him whatever it was he was looking for. Apparently he did not find it, for he turned away with a heavy sigh and looked at the dusty ground in front of him.

"David?" I asked him. He nodded slightly, acknowledging my question and giving me permission to ask him something. "What's wrong? You can tell me anything. We've been friends for years, right? I promise I won't tell anyone."

Instead of answering me, he kept looking at the ground for a few seconds before responding with a question of his own. "What is the point of all of this, Julia? I mean, why are we still trying to keep going? What hope is there for us ahead?" His voice was raspy from being in misuse, and I admit that I was shocked for a moment because he asked me one of the very questions that I constantly ask him. It never occurred to me that my questions would have an impact on him. If I had known that my questions would cause him to question himself, I would have kept silent.

"Well, it's like you always tell me. We're trying to find a way out. We may not find in this lifetime, or the next, but we will find a way out and we will finally be free of the fences and the Unconsecrated." He didn't say a word and decided to play with the edge of his shirt. "David?" I moved closer to him and turned so I was facing him directly. He moved his head so that I would not see his

face, so I grabbed his chin to make him look at me. “David, listen. We have to keep going-” I stopped mid-sentence when I saw the unshed tears in his eyes. I haven’t seen him cry since the Breach. I never really thought about it. I mean, he’s older than me, and has always seemed so strong in my eyes. It makes sense now that I think about it, but it never would have occurred to me if I hadn’t seen him in that fragile, desperate state.

He turned away from me and my hand sharply, so I could no longer stare at him in shock. He stood in an attempt to walk back to the others to hide, but I quickly scrambled to my feet and grabbed his wrist to prevent him from leaving. With that simple gesture, he broke down entirely, his body wracking with silent sobs. I could do nothing for him but embrace him, and he returned it with his bony arms. He held me tightly, crying into my hair, and I could feel how sharply his ribcage was protruding from his body when I was pressed up against him.

He didn’t cry for very long, only a minute or so, and then he released me. He wiped his eyes while trying to control his hiccuping breath, and avoided looking at me.

“I’m sorry Julia, I just-” He cut himself off, instead turning towards the Forest and staring into it. I took a step towards him and he held a hand out for me to stop. I did so, and when I did, I heard his mumbled apology. “I’m so sorry.” He turned and walked back to the others. I have tried to talk to him since then, but he has ignored me and tried to avoid me. I don’t know what caused that breakdown, but I have a feeling it is what is causing him to become so diminished and hollow looking.

I am worried that he will either do something drastic or dangerous, especially with the way he said sorry. It wasn’t as if he was ashamed of crying, but more of that he was ashamed of what he did or what he will do. It was a sorry to say goodbye, of that I am sure. I don’t know what I would do if David ever disappeared. He’s been the only constant in my life ever since I condemned my brother to die. He’s the one who made sure I didn’t immediately give myself to the Unconsecrated, and tried to tell me that it wasn’t my fault Jacob is now an Unconsecrated. I wonder if he is going to kill himself. That is the only option I can think of to explain his sudden change in behaviour and his avoiding of me.

~*~*~*~*~

I couldn’t find David today. He must be hiding from me somewhere, avoiding me because I know he is going to do something that will take him away from me forever.

I know I'm being selfish in wanting to force David to stay with us, with me. I know it's horrible to ask someone to continue this wretched existence when all they want to do is to finally have peace, but I can't let him go. I would most likely be insane by now if David was not at my side at every turn, and I know that he probably feels the same.

I went to go look for him at the path again, and I found him. He was facing down the path, back the way we came, and I quietly walked up behind him so he would not leave. I tapped him on his shoulder and he whirled around, tense, until he noticed it was me. When he did his shoulders sagged, and a tired smile worked its way onto his face. I noticed that his face was even more hollow than yesterday, and an eerie shudder crept its way down my spine as the image of him as one of the Unconsecrated flashed through my mind. I quickly put that thought far from my mind, instead giving him a small smile in return.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” We stalled for a few moments, neither of us knowing what to say to each other. I know he cares for me, I've seen it in the way he's changed over the years in the way he talks to me and how he looks at me when he thinks I'm not looking. I admit that I feel the same towards him, but we have both silently agreed to not do anything about it because it would be disastrous to either have the tension of a breakup or having to care for a child. It's only natural that we would develop feelings towards each other. I mean, we're the only ones that are almost the same age, and we have been close ever since we were children.

“David, listen.” He turned his head towards me, indicating he was listening. “I don't know what's going on, but you can tell me. I won't judge you or hate you for it. Please, just tell me what's wrong.” My voice turned towards pleading the closer I got to the end, but I couldn't stand not knowing. He scowled at the ground, his gaze leaving my face, and crossed his arms.

“Julia, like I said before, nothing-”

“Don't tell me nothing's wrong!” His head snapped up at my outburst, shock written across his features. I've always been a quiet, mild mannered child, so the yelling was quite uncharacteristic for me. Tears were streaming down my face as I yelled at him. “I know something's wrong, you can't just pretend that nothing's happening to you! I can see it right now! You're getting thinner, you're eating

less, you look almost like an Unconsecrated, for God's sake! We've been friends for years! You're all I have left, and I will not accept you keeping something important from me! We have been through thirteen years of hell together, starting with the Breach! You can't tell me nothing is wrong when there is obviously something very, very wrong! Tell me what's going on!"

He watched me stand there, tears pouring from my eyes. "Julia, I-

"No! I want to know what's going on! No more excuses!" He stared at the ground, playing with the dust with the tip of his shoe. He started out quietly, so I took a step closer to hear him.

"I didn't want you to know..."

"Know what, David!?" He slowly moved his right hand to the bottom of his left sleeve and rolled it up a little bit. Underneath was a small scrape, probably from a bush or something. The paths are overrun with brambles and dead branches.

"I didn't want you to know. I didn't want anyone to know. I just wanted a few more days with you, is that too much to ask?" He turned his head up towards me, tears freely streaming down his face. "It was one stupid mistake! One stupid, stupid mistake, and now I'm stuck like this!" With every word that fell tumbling out of his mouth, the blood in my veins grew colder and colder until it felt like my insides were ice. The back of my mind had known all along, but I didn't want to admit it. I couldn't admit that I had lost the two people I cared about most to it.

He continued on, the words growing more feverish and his voice growing louder. "I didn't think, and then it happened! I didn't know what to do, I couldn't tell anyone or they'd kill me on the spot! I thought it was him, I thought it was Jacob, but it was too late when I realized! It wasn't him, and then it was too late! I can feel it poisoning me from the inside! I thought I could fight it off, I mean, it's such a small mark, but it just kept getting worse and worse. Half the time I thought about just ending it sooner so I didn't have to deal with it, but I couldn't figure out how to say goodbye to you. I wasn't ready to leave you, not yet. I wanted to have just one more happy memory, one more day filled with your sunshine, before I left. You know me too well, though. You knew something was up, and I realized I was putting you in danger and had to distance myself from you. The only problem was, I couldn't do it. I couldn't stay away from you, Julia. It's all my fault, and I wanted to be selfish and be with you for as long as I could before it happened. Is that too much to ask, Julia? Do you hate me because I was selfish? Or are you afraid of me now? Are you going to go and run to the others and tell them what

happened? I'm sure the older ones have figured it out by now. They're probably already making plans to make sure I don't kill off the others." The tears were still pouring down his face when his rant ended, and he balled his hands into fists and his the fence lining the path, making it rattle and drawing the attention of the nearby Unconsecrated.

"I-I had no idea...."

He shook his head, his dark hair falling limply into his face. "I didn't want you to. I didn't want you to know that I was going to turn into one of them. I didn't want to see that fear in your eyes, or the disgust when you found I'm bitten and I'm going to be one of the Unconsecrated."

He went to turn and head down the path, away from the others, but I grabbed him from behind and hugged him. He just stood there, the tears still freely streaming from his eyes, and his body shook with the effort of trying not to start sobbing again.

I still don't know what I could've said to him. All I knew what to do was to hold him as tight as I could, and just hope that the thoughts I couldn't put into words were conveyed through me hugging tightly. I hope he knows how much he means to me, and how much I truly do love him, and how I could never hate him or be afraid of him or be disgusted by him. He was just hoping. He had hoped the little Unconsecrated boy was Jacob, so that we could finally have the peace of knowing that my brother was Unconsecrated or if he somehow managed to defy the odds and escape like we did. All I know is that I gave him one final, desperate, hopeful, squeeze before letting him go to grab my notebook. I have written down what has happened here, to us, to the village, so that no one else has to endure what we did and so we can live on through our story. I can't help but to think back to Mary, the girl who was always obsessed with stories. I guess she must've rubbed off on me after all.

We are all required to carry a weapon with us so we can defend ourselves if we come across an Unconsecrated. Today, both me and David are going to be selfish. We're going to be selfish, not like any of the others will care. They must've known before now that I have long since given up God, and that all of my hope died with my brother. If my brother did somehow survive, and is reading this, I am so sorry that I left you to die all those years ago. I have carried that guilt with me every day since then, and I hope you forgive me for my completely selfish act.

“Don’t worry, Julia, David. I’ll never forget about you or your story.”