

## Excerpt from Dust 2: A New World Order

### Prologue

#### *In the Darkness:*

Dust's dark silhouette stood in sharp contrast against the flames of a burning building that was slowly collapsing under the intense heat. His hands were clenched by his sides as he fought for control over the waves of emotion and power sweeping through him. Unable to contain the grief welling up inside him any longer, he tilted his head back and released a savage cry as his body shook.

He was alone—completely and utterly alone with his heartfelt, tortured grief and the ghosts that haunted his soul.

Soon, the eerie quiet of the night was broken only by the sound of the crackling fire and the fading echo of his mournful cry. At one time, the grief-stricken howl might have been mistaken for the cry of a wolf or a coyote. The cadence of the desolate tone drifted on the light breeze with the same long, haunting melody.

His cry emanated from the powerful grief slicing him to the core. It cut more sharply than a surgeon's honed blade. The ground trembled as his agony radiated outward, causing the earth to roll with the intensity.

A supernatural force spread outward from him, the type of power only imagined by authors and artists in the time he called *Before...* but this was *After....* This was a new world where such powers existed in a few of the survivors.

The burning building in front of him trembled and collapsed to the ground. The only thing left standing were parts of the metal skeletal frame. He slowly sank to his knees and bowed his head. Around him the dust from the dirt parking lot danced as if trying to distract him. He couldn't help but think that his name fit what he had become—dust that floated on the wind; changing, shifting, growing, and fading away. It had all led him here, kneeling on the hard-packed dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Dust closed his eyes as another wave of pain struck him and he drew in deep breaths as the waves kept coming.

Finally, he lifted his head and stared at the dying flames of the old warehouse. Smoke swirled upward in tight circles on the breeze and filled the darkening sky, but it wasn't the smoke that made his eyes burn—it was the memory of the sound of a diesel bus driving away that resounded through his head.

The acute feeling of loss filled him as he knelt on the hard-packed dirt road in the middle of nowhere. The feelings overwhelming him were more intense than those he'd felt the day his world had changed—the day fragments of a comet had hit the Earth, the beginning of the *After*. With that single catastrophic event, he had lost everything—and yet, this pain felt so much worse.

Dust shook his head slowly as the taunting voice of the creature he had battled minutes before echoed through his head. He had given a name to the creature. Why, he was not sure. Perhaps it was so he wouldn't lose his own humanity—or to create humanity in her.

Daciana was different from Dust. He didn't know her origins or how she had evolved. She'd been called several names before he'd given her this new one—She-Devil, wolf, Lycan. Now she had more than one form.

His battle with Daciana had caused an unexpected change in himself. One he didn't yet understand, but he knew he was now something more dangerous than he'd been before.

*"The female, she will not accept what you have become,"* Daciana had warned him in a sing-song voice. It had hurt more than the sharp tips of her claws, because she was right.

"What am I? What have I become?" he wondered out loud in a strained voice.

He lifted his hands up and stared at them. Was he destined to become an unnatural creature whose only thought was to destroy what was left of humanity and the Earth? That fear was what had pushed him to send Josie and Sammy away.

Josie—who had also changed into something else—into one of the *Others* after the catastrophic events and those like Sammy—the unchanged human girl who had saved his life and given him hope and purpose.

A sudden rage rushed through him, and he rose to his feet. A look of determination flashed in his eyes. He was not a monster! Lifting his arms, he held his hands out and released the power flowing through him.

“I am not a monster!” he defiantly repeated to the empty yard in a loud, savage voice.

His eyes glowed with a dark, swirling green, fueled by the intense supernatural power inside himself. Dust turned his attention to the destroyed building where Josie had freed Todd, Sammy’s seven-year-old brother, while he and Sammy had distracted Daciana. He poured his feelings of sorrow and loss outward.

Swirling waves of energy soared up and formed a dense cloud. They shifted, changing in composition as the cloud enveloped the building. Instead of slamming into the structure and destroying the remainder of the twisted metal framework, those streams of power combined with the fire and began to glow like a welder’s torch, while additional streams of energy picked up the torn and mangled pieces of paneling. As if by magic, they unbuckled and stiffened back into normal sheets. The pieces were lifted and connected back together as the fiery red whips of molten energy welded the seams.

Sweat beaded on Dust’s brow and ran down his temples as he took a step forward. He concentrated on what the building looked like before his battle with Daciana. He didn’t want to destroy like Daciana had. He wanted to build and heal their ravaged

planet. He wanted to prove that there could be something better out in the world for his kind than death and destruction.

Tears of anguish streamed down his face as he continued to use his power. They were for everything he had lost. The comet had taken everything away from him, and yet in some ways, it had given him more than he could have imagined.

He found a new family made up of young and old, unchanged humans and Others. They were survivors, fighters, friends, and—something more. Together, they were finding their way across a vast and altered landscape into the unknown...they *had been* doing it together.

Dust raised his arm and wiped his damp cheek against the sleeve of his shirt. Now, he was alone again. He swallowed and stared at the newly rebuilt warehouse.

His body trembled—this time with an intense hunger. The craving was different than before. He unconsciously ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt normal. For a moment he wondered if he had imagined that they changed when he was fighting against Daciana.

The brief hope running through him faded when he caught a scent carried on the breeze. Turning, he focused on it, automatically summoning the animal to come to him. His eyes widened when he saw a small coterie of prairie dogs slowly emerge from the darkness. His lips parted in a gasp when he felt his

teeth lengthen again. Fear and revulsion swept through him and he released another guttural cry.

Shaken by the changes coursing through him, he took off running across the uneven ground. When he tripped on a low tussock of wild grass and started to fall, long wings appeared behind him and lifted him into the air. This time, they were not made of sand, but were real wings from his very thoughts.

A desperate need surged through him to put as much space between himself and his new family as he could. He must protect them at all costs. His fear gave him strength, and he swept up into the night sky heading as far away from the old gym and the only family he now had as quickly as he could.

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## Chapter 1

### *The old gym:*

“Perhaps it’s for the best,” Randolph murmured, looking out across the empty landscape before he glanced at Sammy.

She turned on Josie’s brother so quickly that Randolph stumbled backwards several steps, her eyes blazing with fury. She didn’t give a damn what Randolph or any of the others thought. They were talking about Dust. Dust! The guy who had saved all of their lives more than once! The quiet, unassuming teen who had a huge heart and would never, ever have thought of leaving any one of them behind.

“*Perhaps* he should have left your sorry butt for the She-Devil and her pack,” Sammy angrily retorted, prodding Randolph’s chest with the end of her bow.

“Now, Sammy, there’s no need to get angry. Of course we won’t leave Dust behind,” Raymond calmly stated.

“I agree. That boy is a blessing to have on our side. We would have died back in our hometown if it hadn’t been for him,” Martha said with a firm nod.

“I second that,” Denise quietly said, shooting Randolph an accusing look.

Sammy turned when she felt a tug on her arm. Her little brother looked up at her. She instinctively

wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders when tears filled his eyes.

“What if the She-Devil hurt him?” Todd asked with a worried expression.

Josie shook her head and crossed her arms. “I don’t think you need to worry about Dust, Todd. He is freakin’ awesome,” she reassured the young boy with a wink. “The question is: why are we waiting to go after him?”

“We’ll go in the morning. We need light to see him and it will be less dangerous,” Raymond said, looking at Sammy. “We can’t know for sure what happened. We need to do what we can to protect ourselves if we are to help Dust.”

Sammy reluctantly nodded. At the moment, they were in the girl’s locker room with the doors barred as best as they could manage. They would need to refill the old bus with diesel and pack up anything of use before they left. No one knew what lay ahead of them. Even with Randolph and Josie’s powers, their guns, and Sammy’s bow, there was no telling what else was out there waiting.

“First thing in the morning,” she agreed, pulling Todd closer when he yawned.

“I’ll take first watch,” Randolph quietly volunteered.

“Thank you,” Sammy murmured.

She turned and guided Todd over to where she had arranged several exercise mats earlier. The soft sounds of footsteps indicated that she and Todd were

not alone. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Josie's worried gaze on Todd.

Sammy blinked back the tears that were burning her eyes, and gave Josie an exhausted smile, then she returned her focus to her little brother, and she helped him get ready for bed, while Josie brought over pieces of paper and wood, and put them in a metal trash can.

Pulling the blanket over Todd, she nodded her approval when Josie started a small fire in the metal trash can after filling it with pieces of paper and wood that she had collected from somewhere in the gym. Despite being inside, there was a draft of cold air blowing through the room. The concrete floor wasn't helping either, even though they had doubled the mats to help protect themselves from the chill.

"It should warm up a little. I found some old wooden pallets in a storage room. Raymond and Randolph broke them up so I could play with fire," Josie explained.

Todd rolled over and looked at Josie with a tired grin. "I wish you had some marshmallows, Josie. You make the best ones ever."

Sammy smiled when Josie laughed, reached over, and tousled Todd's towheaded strands. "We'll have to find some for you in the next town we go through," Josie replied.

"I hope we find Dust. He likes your marshmallows, too," Todd replied in a voice that faded as he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Sammy brushed her little brother's hair back from his face. Her fingers trembled as she touched him. He was the last of her family, and she had almost lost him tonight. Tears burned her eyes again, and she bowed her head to hide them.

"You know you can cry. I won't tell anyone," Josie quietly said.

Sammy shook her head and looked at Josie. The other girl was sitting with her back against the wall, unconsciously rolling a ball of fire across her palm as if it were a marble. She gave Josie a wan smile and looked down at Todd's peaceful face.

"I'm good," she replied in a tight voice.

Despite their differences, the two girls had grown to like each other. There had been more than a few moments when Sammy wasn't so sure they would be able to overcome their differences—namely the fact that they both liked Dust as more than a friend. Neither one had actually said that, but Sammy knew.

In the end, they had put their differences aside and focused on survival. The fact that Josie's father, Beau, and her brother, Randolph, had located them made a difference. Sammy's heart ached for the other girl. Josie's dad had chained and almost starved Josie to death to keep his daughter from using the powers she received after the comet's destruction.

Beau hadn't known that Randolph had also changed. Randolph's powers were unique. He could sense when someone else had been changed—most of the time. However, he hadn't sensed it in Dust, which

made Sammy worry. They would need Randolph's talents if they were going to find Dust.

It was hard to believe that Beau had died less than forty-eight hours ago. He had saved Josie's life when the She-Devil attacked her. While Sammy had not liked the man for what he did to the survivors under his care, both Changed and Unchanged, she never would have wished the man dead. In the end, she knew the man had realized that if humanity was going to survive, it would need people like Dust, Josie, and Randolph.

Sammy and the others in the group didn't have any powers. She suspected it was because they had all been sealed away from the first strange clouds of dust that had swept over the planet. She and Todd had sought refuge in the tornado shelter behind their house. Their parents had been in town and did not survive the initial wave of destruction. She was pretty sure that Raymond, Martha, and Denise had locked themselves in the vault at the bank where they had worked, and that was what saved them. There had been other survivors in their town, but a swarm of mutated insects had killed them off, one at a time.

Sammy scooted over until she was leaning up against a set of lockers. She was exhausted after the night's events but still too wired to sleep. She looked over at Josie. The other girl was staring blindly at the fire in the trash can. Every once in a while, a flame would rise up and form the faces of different people. Sammy was pretty sure that Josie wasn't even aware

of what she was doing. It was obvious that those people had meant something to Josie.

"Thank you," Sammy quietly murmured.

Josie looked up at her with a wary expression. "For what?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Sammy leaned her head back. "For saving Todd tonight," she replied.

Josie shrugged her slender shoulders and looked at the sleeping boy. Sammy could see the other girl's eyes soften before she hid her emotions. Deep down, she knew that Josie had a soft spot for Todd. Once again, she felt a wave of sympathy wash through her.

"It was teamwork. I had the easy part. You and Dust were the ones facing off against Zombie Dog," Josie quipped.

Sammy softly chuckled. "Zombie Dog," she repeated with a tired sigh. "That's a good description."

"We're going to find him," Josie suddenly said, not looking at her.

Sammy recognized the defiance in Josie's tone. She looked at the other girl who turned and looked back at her with a mutinous expression. A slow, weary smile curved her lips.

"Yes, we will," Sammy quietly replied before she yawned. "We'd better get some rest. I have a feeling the next few days are going to be tiring."

"Yeah, goodnight, Sammy," Josie murmured, closing her fist and extinguishing the flame in her hand.

"Goodnight, Josie," Sammy replied.

Sammy slid down next to her brother and wrapped her arm around him. Leaning forward, she pressed a kiss to the top of his head. She tenderly smiled when he murmured in his sleep and snuggled closer to her. She promised herself that she would never take the simple things in life for granted again.

Closing her eyes, she thought of Dust. His birthday was in a couple of weeks. Her tired mind was already thinking of how they could make it special for him.

*Be safe, Dust. We're going to find you and show you that you have a family—no matter what you turn into,* Sammy vowed as the dark edges of exhaustion pulled her into a deep but restless sleep.

## Chapter 2

### *All alone:*

Under the brilliant night sky, Dust sat upon a rock outcropping. He gently stroked the shivering, furry animal in his hands before he released it. The creature was the last of the small rodents that he had encouraged to approach him earlier.

He had been careful not to kill any of them. At first, he hadn't been sure what to do about the changes inside his body. All he could think about when his teeth lengthened like a vampire's straight out of a movie or a book was that his sudden hunger

for blood meant he must have somehow died during his battle with Daciana and turned into the undead.

There were two inconsistencies with that thought. First, he didn't remember dying. He was pretty sure he would have recalled something as important as that. Second, except for a few minor changes to his body—he still felt alive and pretty much the same as before.

Shaking his head, he laid back on the rock. He shivered and then shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket as he stared up at the stars and wondered what would happen when the sun came up. Would he dissolve into a pile of ash?

"If I do, I'll know that all the writers of vampire stories were right. Dang, but I didn't know vampires could be cold. For once, I wish I had Josie's powers." His quiet, slightly humorous words drifted on the light breeze.

He listened, but except for the wind and a few animals in the distance, there was nothing nearby. A frown creased his brow when he felt something hard and tubular against his fingers. Tracing the shape, he released an exasperated sigh. He pulled his hand out of his jacket's outer pocket and removed the cigarette lighter from the small pocket on the inside. He'd forgotten he picked it up along his journey.

Sitting up, he shook his head. "Well, it isn't as cool as Josie, but it will work," he dryly chuckled before he flicked the wheel.

Twenty minutes later, he had collected a stack of dried wood and a large pile of dead brush. He placed

some of the wood in a ring of rocks near the outcropping of boulders that he was using as a wind break.

It didn't take long for the dried wood to catch fire. He sat down and held his hands out to the warmth. Soon, exhaustion took over and he laid down on his side with his back to the rocks. He knew he probably shouldn't stare into the flames. Such an action ruined his night vision, but there was something mesmerizing about watching the multi-colored flames dance across the wood.

His mind drifted, and once again he thought of his parents. They, along with everyone else in the tiny town he grew up in, had perished. How had he survived? He decided he might never understand. Perhaps it was the way the house had collapsed around him, sheltering him. One thing he was sure of—whatever had been in the strange cloud was what caused him to change.

"Whatever happens, I won't forget who I am," he murmured.

That was the last thing he remembered his dad talking about—never forget who you are. They had been working on his grandfather's old truck, rebuilding the six-cylinder engine the day the comet struck. The 1948 Ford F-series pickup truck was supposed to be finished by his sixteenth birthday which was in a couple of weeks.

Dust's lips curved upward when he thought of that morning nearly two years before. His mom had gone to town to get her hair done while he and his

dad had gotten up early to work on the truck. His grandfather had bought the truck new in 1948 and used it on the small farm where Dust grew up. His dad had told him that Dust's grandfather gave him the truck when he turned sixteen. His father had driven it around the farm for another twenty years. He had parked the truck in the back of the barn and covered it with an old tarp. In time, his dad had forgotten about the truck until Dust discovered it when he was four. The vehicle had been in the barn for nearly thirty years by then, and he had played in it for as long as he could remember.

He had been sitting in it one day three years ago, mad at his dad because his father had refused to let him go hang with some of the boys in town. That day had been a pivotal moment in his life. He hadn't realized it until much later.

\*.\*.\*

*Two years before:*

Dust's dad didn't say anything at first when he opened the passenger door to the truck and slid onto the seat. They had sat there in silence, staring out of the dirty windshield across the barn—an angry boy and a quiet, introspective man.

"You really want to go with those boys?" his dad finally asked, folding his stained, scarred hands in his lap.

He sat in the driver's seat, his fingers wrapped around the narrow, worn steering wheel. The anger

slowly faded as he thought about his dad's quiet question. He shrugged, not wanting to answer. His dad remained silent, waiting for him to say something. Dust knew if he didn't answer that they would sit there waiting all day.

"Not really," he grudgingly replied.

"Why not?" his dad asked.

Dust sat back in the seat and shrugged again. "I don't really like them, I guess," he admitted.

"Why not?" his dad pressed, trying to get him to expand upon his explanation.

Dust shifted in his seat and looked at his father. He thought for a moment before he released a long sigh, his thoughts going to the boy who had invited him.

"I don't know. They act like they are some big deal because they play on the football team," he confessed, looking down at his hands.

"Then why do you want to go hang out with them?" his father gently asked.

He absently rubbed at a dirty smudge between his thumb and index finger. Eric, the boy who had invited him, was the son of the local pharmacist and one of the cool boys at school. Dust was not. He was the son of a farmer. Eric and three of the guys from the football team were going out to the reservoir to meet up with a bunch of other kids from school. He had been shocked when Eric stopped him yesterday as he was walking out of science class and asked him if he wanted to go.

“I guess I thought if I hung out with them that some of the other kids would think I was cool, too,” he murmured.

“If that is what you want, then I won’t tell you no,” his father finally replied.

Dust frowned. “Why? I thought you didn’t want me to go,” he said.

His father scratched the whiskers on his chin. Dust followed the movement with his eyes, and he looked at his dad with a puzzled expression. He suddenly noticed details that he had never really thought about before.

His dad’s hands were stained from years of hard work. It didn’t matter how much his father washed his hands; they remained that way. Scars from accidents while working on the equipment or out in the field marked them like lines on a map.

Dark whiskers were mixed with a healthy dose of gray. His dad’s dark brown hair was streaked with the same gray. The years of being out in the sun had darkened and creased his skin, making him look older than he was.

“You can become anything you want to be, son,” his father began, pausing as he looked down at his hands. “A man is only as good as his word. If those boys are who you want to be like, then you have to make a decision. Whatever you decide, your mom and I will support you the best we can.”

\*.\*.\*

In the end, he decided not to go. That decision turned out to be a good one. He later discovered that the jocks had invited some other less popular boys from school as well, just so that they could razz and bully them in front of the other kids.

It had not boded well for the jocks. The incident had caused a major uproar in the school's administration, and the four boys were kicked off the football team. Three had transferred to another school in a neighboring town so they could continue to play football while the fourth was sent off to boarding school someplace in California.

### **Present day:**

Dust blinked from the burning in his eyes as he remembered his mom's teasing smile, his dad's patience, and how lucky he had been to have them as parents. He morosely contemplated the fact that he hadn't really understood or appreciated how much his folks did for him. He wiped a hand across his face with a sniff.

"I wonder if vampires cry," he murmured, feeling the dampness on his cheeks.

With a tired sigh, he focused and his body faded. This little trick had come as a surprise when he first woke up after the comet's destruction. His ability to control the atoms in his body had saved his life more than once and allowed him to move around

undetected when necessary. At rest, he didn't use much energy. Awake and moving, the ability took a toll on him, and he needed to eat to keep up his strength.

He relaxed back against the ground and waited for morning. He had no intention of hiding— from the possibly ash-inducing sun—not that there currently was any place for him to go. Whatever happened, he would deal with it tomorrow—tonight he was just too exhausted.

He pulled the image of Sammy's smiling face into his mind to help push the suffocating feelings of loneliness away. His melancholy faded as he slowly yielded to his exhaustion. In the chilly darkness, he clung to the memory of the kiss he had shared with the beautiful girl who didn't see him as a monster. He could only hope that he wasn't turning into one.