

The Towers of Hell

Twin Blood

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An extract pp 158-170

Original title De Helletorens: Tweelingbloed
Publisher Lannoo, 2025

Translation Dutch into English
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Part II, chapter 6

With a steady hand, Salma leads me back to the unit, pointing out things in the vast hall along the way that I've never seen before, as if she's showing me around a dream world.

But my head is too full to take it all in. I feel like I'm going to burst. It's impossible to process what Salma has told me. What if everything she said is really true? She must be lying, there is no other explanation, her story makes no sense. At the same time, I can't help but wonder why she would make all that up. What is she trying to achieve?

On top of that, I still can't believe I slept for two days. What happened in those two days? Did Father deteriorate that quickly? And is Mico still alive in the horrors of Tier 9?

Mico.

Inside the large unit, about ten people are waiting for us. They stand with their backs against the wall and their eyes to the floor. They're different from the people who cleared the table earlier, but their behavior is just as strange and submissive.

The table where I ate at has been removed. In its place are two Hellkeepers holding a boy by his forearms in such a way that it looks as if he's hovering above the ground.

It takes me a moment to recognize him, the boy who sat crying at the other stone table in the White Zone, the boy from Tier 5 who, like me, chose Tier 1 at the Hour of Decision.

His face is so badly beaten that he's almost unrecognizable. His left eye is red and puffy; the other eye is swollen shut. Blood is clinging to his eyebrows and dripping from his lower lip onto his sweater.

I stand there, frozen. I look tensely from the boy to the Hellkeepers to Salma and back again. Is this a test? He's a boy from my own tier. Are they waiting to see if I'll help him, or would that put my own life in danger?

"He has confessed," says one of the Hellkeepers.

"It's about time," Salma nods.

The boy has barely moved so far, but as soon as the Hellkeepers mention a confession, a shock seems to ripple through his body; he starts whimpering loudly and violently shaking his head.

"Take a good look, Lexa," Salma says. "This is the face of your enemy."

Before I can react, one of the Hellkeepers grabs the boy's hair and jerks his head up so that we're looking each other straight in the eye.

"This enemy has been following you since Tier 5."

Salma utters the words with such gravity that it sends shivers down my spine, and I shake my head frantically. The boy's eyes are filled with terror.

"He was second in line," I stammer. "He made his choice before me, he couldn't have known that I would choose Tier 1... Besides... why should I have enemies?"

"You have far more enemies than you think, Lexa. I want you to study him closely and see how innocent they can look. I want you to be on your guard, to be wary of them, to feel the threat of danger."

Salma speaks with such conviction that it's almost comical, but no one in the room flinches, no one laughs.

"I don't have any enemies," I try desperately, but Salma is not listening.

"Watch closely," she says with a brief nod to the Hellkeepers.

The largest Keeper lunges forward so swiftly and unexpectedly that I gasp for breath, then stagger backward and fall to the ground.

Without hesitation, the other Keeper starts beating the boy with his bare fists. I let out a scream and clumsily scramble to my feet. I try to run toward the three of them, but I'm restrained by a mass of hands, by the people who've been so obediently waiting on the sidelines. They've gathered around me like a pack of wolves, and there's nowhere I can go.

My screams fade; I can't get a sound out of my throat. Shocked, I turn my head so I don't have to see the horrifying scene unfolding before my eyes. I feel desperate, devastated, afraid.

"Hold her head," Salma orders, whereupon someone clamps my head between his hands, pulls my eyelids up and forces me to look straight at the boy.

Kicking and flailing, I try to wriggle free from their hands, but there are too many of them.

"Stop!" I yell, but my voice is drowned out by the screams of the boy, who seems to have found his voice again. He begs the Hellkeepers to stop between each blow.

Finally, Salma snaps her fingers, and the Hellkeepers stop torturing the boy. Before my eyes, he collapses to the ground and lies there, still as death.

At that moment, all the hands let go of me, causing me to fall forward. Gasping for breath, I drag myself towards the boy.

No one stops me now.

The room falls dead silent as I place my hand on the boy's chest to see if he's still alive. I feel nothing, panic sets in, but then I see him trying to open his right eye.

"You're alive," I whisper. "You're alive. Everything's going to be okay."

Everything's going to be okay. The words sound hollow and meaningless, but I keep repeating them even though I have no idea what's going to happen next or if help is on the way. All I know is that that's what I would want to hear if I were lying on the ground beaten to a pulp. Everything's going to be okay.

The boy's lips are moving, but I can't make out what he's trying to say, so I move my ear closer to his mouth. Immediately, someone jerks me away.

I whip around, shout at them to let me go, but I can't escape their grip. Struggling, I hang there in their arms, watching helplessly as the Hellkeepers lift the boy off the ground. With one eye open, he tries to catch my gaze, and I'm overcome by a strange feeling. Recognition? Compatriotism? In that brief moment, it occurs to me that all I did was scream, I didn't fight hard enough to help him. He needed me, and I didn't stand up for him. I am a coward.

The realization hits me like a punch in the gut.

"What's your name?" I ask softly.

My question sounds like an idiotic jumble of three worthless words, but I want to give the boy back some dignity, I want to give him the chance to say his name, like Mico did with Tarik, the boy

who was suddenly sent to Tier 9 at the Hour of Decision. I want to know the boy's name. I don't want to forget him, I can't. He feels like my only link to Tier 5. To home.

The boy breathes heavily. His lips quiver, but again I can't make out what he's saying.

Around me, the hands seem to be loosening their grip, as if everyone assumes, like me, that the boy is close to death. I seize the moment to break free and run to the boy.

There's shouting, and I hear Salma screaming behind me, but I throw my arms around the boy and hold him close in a last-ditch effort to offer him warmth and safety, for whatever it's worth. I have no idea if I'm hurting him with my embrace, but I want him to know that I'm here, whatever the cost, that I will resist the people who have put him in this situation.

The Hellkeepers, who are still nearby, react much more slowly than expected. I feel a giant hand squeeze my arm, but then I hear Salma shout that under no circumstances was I to be injured. I press my ear as close as possible to the boy's mouth.

"Alvar", he whispers. "My name is Alvar."

He speaks so softly that I have to strain my ears as hard as I can to make out his words in all the noise around us.

"Don't trust them, Lexa," he says.

My heart skips a beat. Then one of the Hellkeepers pulls me away from the boy.

"Take him away!" Salma roars. "Red Zone. Now!"

I stand in the middle of the unit, panting. My blood is boiling. I look at Salma, ready to spew fire at any moment, that's how much I hate everything and everyone in the room. But Salma goes back to portraying an icy sense of calm.

"Calm down, Lexa. I will explain in a moment."

She shows the other people to the door, and they meekly exit the room, as if Salma is their all-powerful ruler. Is this the same woman who had just told me her life's story with tears in her eyes, like a sad, vulnerable creature? This woman who had ordered them to hold my head so I'd be forced to witness the horror in front of me?

The hatred I feel for her is overwhelming. She can't be family.

She had a boy beaten to death, and she alone is responsible for that.

I feel my heart break.

Alvar.

The name hits me like a brick. Cecil, my friend in Warehouse 2, used to talk about her younger brother, Alvar. She had been relieved that her brother was among those captured with Mico, that they would be able to support each other. I'd never heard the name spoken before in Tier 5. It couldn't be a coincidence. Cecil's brother was tortured before my very eyes, and there was nothing I could do to stop it, I just stood there and watched. I'll carry the guilt for the rest of my life.

Be careful, Lexa.

Damn it, I don't need Mico's voice in my head right now. Go away.

As I sink to the ground, totally distraught, I promise myself that I will do everything in my power to rescue Alvar from the Red Zone and return him to Cecil. I have no idea how I'll do it, but a vow is the first step. And once I've saved Alvar, I have to get us out of here. Out of this nightmare. Don't trust them...Were those the words the boy had whispered in my ear? Or was that Mico's voice?

"Right," says Salma, as she sits down on the ground next to me.

I immediately crawl away from her.

"I hate you," I hiss. "You are not family. You will never be family."

If my eyes could spew fire, I would have burned her to death on the spot, but to my dismay, a smile appears across her face.

"You don't understand, Lexa."

"I understand perfectly well," I snarl. "You just tortured an innocent boy."

Tears well up in my eyes. I clench my hands into fists, cutting my palms open with my fingernails.

"You don't know what you're saying," Salma says firmly. "You need to give me time to explain everything."

She's no longer smiling. She looks at me so sternly that, despite my resistance, I still flinch.

"You have enemies everywhere, Lexa. Everywhere."

I want to interrupt her immediately, but she slams her hand on the floor so hard that I freeze, petrified.

"I understand your rebellion, but this scene was necessary to make you understand the gravity of the situation. They're looking for you, Lexa, from all tiers. They know who you are. They know who your mother was, so they know what you are capable of."

"What I am capable of?"

"Your blood has the same healing power as your mother's and mine," Salma replies agonizingly slow.

I laugh defiantly, but I feel the tension in my body rising.

"That's impossible," I sneer. "I'm not a twin."

Salma falls silent again. Then she slowly nods, as if she's answering a question I never asked. But perhaps I did ask it unconsciously, somewhere in the deafening silence between us.

I break out in a sweat.

"When your mother gave birth, she knew she was having twins. She had felt you both moving in her belly. Naturally, she panicked. She knew what could happen with twins. She didn't know for sure whether her children's blood would have the same healing effect as ours, but she knew there was a chance."

My throat tightens.

"The fear your mother felt during her pregnancy must have been tremendous," she says. "Fear and stress are not good for an unborn child..."

Salma pauses for a moment, letting the words sink in.

"There were two of us?" I whisper.

It's a plot twist I didn't see coming. She has my full attention now.

"You weren't born alone, Lexa. You must have had a sister. You're a twin. The other child died during childbirth..."

I continue to shake my head until the image before my eyes is a blur.

"I don't believe you," I stammer.

Me, a twin... Impossible. Why hadn't Father ever told me that? Why wouldn't he have confided in me? Does Salma really expect me to believe that my father kept this information from me all this time? Mother, her and his heritage, their love, the extended family, the fact that I have a twin sister, how could you keep all that from your own flesh and blood?

"Of course, it's perfectly understandable if you don't believe me right away," Salma says in a long, drawn-out drawl. "It's too much to take in at once. Give it time, Lexa. Eventually, you'll have to believe it. You're valuable here in Tier 1. And in the higher tiers, you're a target."

"A target? What..."

It is too much. I stare at my hands folded in my lap. With Alvar's blood still glistening on my right hand, I suddenly realize what Salma is trying to tell me. If I really am a twin, if my blood does indeed contain the same substance as my mother's, if Salma is not lying, then my blood is a precious commodity.

"What are you planning to do with me?" I ask, as the fear tightens its grip on my throat. "Why am I here?"

"Calm down, Lexa. We're not planning to do anything with you. The blood only works if both twins are present. And your twin is dead. Here in Tier 1, we only want to protect you from the other tiers—those people want nothing more than to find out what powers your blood still might have. And if they don't succeed, if they can't get you into their own tier, they'd rather have you dead than here with us, alive and protected.

Salma puts her hand on my knee. I'm too defeated to shake her off.

"They will send people to kill you, Lexa. Your enemies will look as innocent as that boy did just now. The other tiers don't want you to stay with us. They think we will become more powerful than they are. But we don't care about that. We want to protect you, I want to protect you, you're family. Here you will be able to live in peace and safety. Here in Tier 1, we just want you to discover what you're capable of, even without your twin."

"What am I capable of then?" I whisper fearfully, not quite sure if I want to know the answer.

"Your blood heals wounds, dear Lexa," Salma says with a warm smile. "For the Disease to be cured, we need both twins, and that's no longer possible. But on your own, you can use your blood to heal wounds and help the injured."

"What..." I stammer. "I can't possibly..."

"Of course, we need to find out how your blood has evolved," Salma continues quickly as she gently taps her fingers on the floor between us.

"Together with you, of course, not under duress as the other tiers would do it. Not like Tier 0 treated me and your mother. You'll have a say in everything, it's your body, your blood. But I think you'll gradually come to see that you want to know too, you'll grow curious. Maybe your blood is much stronger than your mother's and mine, maybe the blood becomes more powerful with each generation, we won't know until we can experiment with it. We will explore everything with respect, warmth and love. That's why everyone is watching you around here, Lexa. You are inconceivably valuable."

A strange glow has fallen over Salma's face; she sounds excited now, as if she isn't speaking to me but rather to herself, as if I'm no longer present in the room.

It all starts to dawn on me. Of course I'm valuable. I'm a walking blood bank.

I need air. I need to breathe. Now. I crawl to my feet and move towards the door.

"Let me out," I declare as calmly as possible, but my entire body is trembling.

For a moment, Salma doesn't move. Then she then raises her head and gazes at me for a long time. Finally, in an overly casual tone, she says, "Fine!"

With a tap on the floor, she springs to her feet, walks towards me and bends down at the door. I duck out of the way, though she's only reaching for the handle behind me to slide open the door. The smile plastered on her face the entire time gives me chills.

Hesitant, I stand in the doorway. Is she just going to let me go?

"You are free to come and go as you please," Salma says, reading my mind. "Your hand works on all the handles in Tier 1. That way you will know that we trust you, that you are free, that we have your best interests at heart. And eventually you will come to trust us as well. Tier 1 is your new home, Lexa. We are not the enemy. The others are. Here you have only friends."

She gestures invitingly to the hallway, pointing to the boy who is waiting for me.

"Dago will show you around," she says.

She must sense my distrust, how could she not, but she continues to smile as if she's fully convinced that I will ultimately bow to her wishes.

"We have time," she says. "All the time in the world. Once you have accepted who you are and what you can do for others, come find me. Then I will show you what you can do."