



THECLA

DARK ROMANCE

BOOK ONE

BY Z. EXIE



CHAPTER 1

I kicked him in the face when I first saw him. Now seeing him perched at the right hand of this man, this dictator they worshipped—Bishop Kato, they called him, all adorned in the finest sheepskin and whatever other animals he was wearing, made me want to kick him right off his man-made pedestal.

“I found her in the upper Wastelands scared, cold, and hungry,” my capturer said.

I cut my eye toward my captor. I wasn't cold, hungry, or scared. I only let him bring me here because I knew he'd take me to HIM. And that he did. I had no idea he had been living in such plush conditions.

I had no idea this much civilization was left. I heard prophecies in church about The Reckoning and even on television, about how nothing but dust and ruins would be left. But that wasn't so. Clearly, there had been destruction, but from what I'd seen thus far, my friend and his people seemed to have done a nice job rebuilding under a new order. There I stood in the hall before Bishop Kato, feeling as if I needed permission to breathe. It made me sick.

What was described as “The Hall” was really an old library. It was dimly lit with what looked like handmade candlesticks. The walls were mounted from floor to ceiling

with shelves of books. Some had been saved from the fires. Others were charred periodicals and other types of publications. The stand-alone bookshelves that used to fill the interior of the library had all been replaced by two rows of empty pews. The first two on the right were reserved for privileged citizens, I imagined, with a one-foot plank built in the upper back that served as some sort of a table for the next row of pews behind it. In the aisle between the two rows of pews was a tattered crimson rug that ran from the entrance to where I now stood.

“Untie her, Quintus,” Bishop Kato ordered.

Quintus immediately complied. I rubbed my wrist.

“I didn’t mean to tie them so tight,” he apologized. I remained silent and looked at Throane, who continued to pretend as if he’d never seen me before. Quintus followed my eyes. His grew dark. He took his position beside me as his prize, as both of us faced Kato, waiting like obedient puppies for him to either pet us or send us on our way.

“Your name, girl,” Kato ordered. I didn’t like his tone. Condescending. He wasn’t the boss of me, but he clearly was the boss of everyone else—including Throane.

“My father asked you a question,” the little bitchy brat sitting beside Kato spat. I stared her down at the floor. Her fair complexion told me she hadn’t seen much sun. Her eyes and nose reflected an exotic unidentifiable heritage. She was very pretty, bitchy, but

pretty. All that beauty was framed in a golden, long, wavy mane. Still, I didn't like the way she spoke or looked at me. Throane remained poised. The little bitch lunged at the edge of her little throne. "Answer him!"

"Amir, until you've inherited this chair, I orchestrate the questioning," Kato bellowed. Amir shrank back into her big girl chair. "Can you speak, girl? Does she speak?" he asked Quintus.

"When I want to. Thecla. That's my name," I replied, not liking how I was being spoken of, as if I weren't there.

"Bishop!" Amir barked. "Address him as Bishop." I looked to Throane to see if she was—they were for real! He tilted his head up to confirm that they were.

"How long have you been out in the Wastelands, girl?" Bishop Kato asked me.

"I've counted at least seven cycles of winter."

"Seven years? How old are you?"

"Nineteen. I believe ..." I looked at Throane. He parted his lips and tilted his head down. Throane's actions told me that this Bishop knew nothing about his visits to me. Kato noticed my attention toward Throane. So did Amir.

“Throane here, is the general of my Fraternity here in Carpathia. He is a fine warrior and next in line to rule with my daughter. Do you...know him?”

An invisible dagger pierced through my heart. Why did I feel this way?

Kato studied my reaction. This Bishop appeared to be quite perceptive. I didn't like that so I had to think quickly while concealing my emotions. The hall seemed loudly silent. I was afraid they all could hear my heartbeat. Throane looked uncomfortable, maybe even fearful.

“He looks like him,” I quickly answered pointing to Quintus.

The Bishop's scrutiny lessened. My lie seemed to have worked. The few hungry spectators sighed with disappointment, not expecting such a reasonable explanation.

“Where are your parents?”

“Dead. Lost in the Reckoning.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Just me.”

Kato leaned forward, studying me. His eyes were bright turquoise blue, light enough so that it seemed he could see right through me, yet deep enough to harbor a vortex of secrets. There was a youthful presence about him, but it was obvious that he was quite older than Throane or Quintus, perhaps old enough to be their father. Not a bad looking guy for his age –wavy silver hair brushed the back off his broad shoulders. His face was framed with a neatly trimmed salt and pepper mustache and beard. A couple of age lines ran across his forehead, which only made him appear more distinguished.

“You mean to tell me you’ve survived the Wastelands all by yourself, since you were nine years old?”

“I’m still kicking, Bishop,” I replied, already bored with the tedious questioning.

The Bishop gave a quick nod to Amir. Amir eagerly jumped up from her chair and descended the staircase toward Quintus and me. She approached us, dressed in a dingy hand sewn white toga, much like the one Throane had given me. But on Amir, it looked like one of those Greek Goddess characters I used to read about before all this happened. Amir glided her way around Quintus and me, eyeing the tattered clothes I’d clearly outgrown. The cloth barely covered what my mother used to call ‘lady bits.’ The entire room, including Quintus, shifted to attention. Really? What type of new order was this?

“She’s dirty. Where did you find her?” she snapped at Quintus.

“At the peak of the easternmost Wasteland,” Quintus answered.

“Isn’t that where you’ve been scouting, Throane?” Amir inquired, casually.

“Yes,” he curtly answered, his jaw twitching. Oh he was uncomfortable. I’ve seen that look before during one of his visits. Yes, those visits...

“What the heck, Thecla!” Throane shrieked, scurrying away from me as I pressed up against the tree trunk, scooping the baby skunk into my arms. It was a cool day, right before the last winter cycle began. I laughed, thinking of what my father would have thought of Throane’s ‘girly’ reaction.

“It’s just a skunk. C’mere.”

“Exactly! And hell no!” he protested, blowing his long black hair away from his boyish face.

“They’re cute.”

“They stink!”

“Only if you’re a threat. Here. Pet him. And relax, they can sense your stress.” I brought Mr. Skunk over to Throane who tried his best to man up. He squeezed his eyes tight and stretched his hand out as if he were trying to touch fire. His jaw was clenched shut and started twitching the moment his hand grazed the fur. Yes. That was the look he had this time, too, like he has seen a skunk.

“Odd that you’ve never seen her,” Amir said to Throane. He didn’t respond. Amir continued her cross-examination.

“How did you get those scars?” She frowned in disgust. Sounds and images invaded my thoughts.

Theclaaa! Nova! Keith! Those cries and screams echoed in the back of my mind for the thousandth time. I quickly dismissed them and fast-forwarded to hunting and bouts with wild boars, foxes, and even a wolf that I escaped within an inch of my life. I had never really given my scars much thought. I saw them as reminders of survival. But this bitch seems to find them offensive.

“Answer me when I ask you a question, girl!”

I snapped back out of my memories and couldn't help but snort out a brief laugh. I've fought creatures more intimidating than this girl. Throane cleared his throat, no doubt muffling his own amusement. He knew.

"I earned them," I said flippantly, becoming even more annoyed by her questioning.

The Bishop smiled at my response. His daughter wasn't so amused.

"Not very comely for a woman," Amir said. "Your hair is different, wooly." She frowned with disapproval and reached for my hair. I instinctively grabbed her wrist. Quintus snatched my free arm and twisted it behind my back. I thrust my head back onto his face, stomped his foot, ducked and twirled out of his grasp, but not before stealing a dagger from his belt. I crouched, waiting for Quintus or that Amir to pounce on me. I was ready. Amir stood there unkempt. Quintus wiped his busted lip. I didn't know if he was impressed or pissed. Either way, I was ready. He grinned. It was unsettling.

"I relish a good fight. Let's go," Quintus hissed.

"Enough!" Bishop shouted from behind me. "Sparring occurs only at my request. Amir..."

One of the Fraternity soldiers took the dagger from me and gave it back to Quintus. The whole episode seemed to have shaken Amir up, but she quickly regained her composure.

“Impressive,” she managed to say. “If you’ve survived out there, perhaps you can be of some use to Carpathia. Maybe we can harvest some skills from you. You might even make a good scout for the expedition. But can she be trusted? Can she be trusted?” she posed to the spectators in the pew. The room filled with murmurs.

“You won’t have any concerns under my supervision,” Throane answered, emphasizing *my*. Quintus and Throane briefly locked eyes, but long enough for Amir and Bishop Kato to notice. Kato’s eyes twinkled as if he had discovered a new toy to tinker with. Amir was going to be trouble, I could tell already. Kato raised his hand and everyone instantly hushed. He leaned back on his throne rubbing his beard once more.

“Quintus,” he finally announced, already having made his decision. A glimpse of disappointment flashed on Throane’s face. “Give her a bed in quarantine until we figure out what to do with her. Feed her. Give her some decent clothes.”

Amir returned back to her chair, lightly brushing my shoulder on the way. I turn toward her, having made it a practice never to have my back against my enemies.

“And clean her up,” Amir added. “She smells.”

Quintus handed his bloody cloth to a Fraternity soldier. He firmly grabbed my arm and led me out of the hall into the bustle of the streets. There were only about fifteen people walking about, but it was more than I'd seen in years. I suddenly realized that everyone was staring at me. One man was so interested in watching me that he ran straight into the wall.

"Why is everyone staring at me?" I asked Quintus.

"They're staring at your scars."

"Why did you make me wear these clothes?" I asked indignantly.

"No one makes you do anything."

"You don't know me."

"I know enough."

I yanked my arm from him, ready to defend myself. Quintus smoothed his thumb over his cut lip, licked it, and gingerly placed his other hand on his dagger. His eyes twinkled with anticipation, but the rest of his face was expressionless. Did he think I was a freaking joke or something? Here I was, ready to fight, and he was watching me like I

was wildlife entertainment. I notice his unusual facial features. He couldn't be but a few years older than I was, but his rugged facial hair contrasted against his sunbathed skin. His almond-shaped hazel eyes blazed through the sternest gaze, something like Bishop Kato's. Kind of impish, Quintus' lips were thin, but the bottom poked out a bit more. Quintus was a beautiful man. Not handsome. Beautiful. There was something about him that made me uneasy. He seemed to be fully aware of his looks and I just didn't trust him. Yet, I had trusted him enough to let him bring me here, to Carpathia. I could have fought him. I could have won and still have been free, but I didn't. Still, I could have.

It had been weeks, maybe even a month since I'd last seen Throane. I didn't realize how dependent I had been on his visits. He was the only friend I had. I was beginning to think I was the only person left until the earthquake four winters ago. I thought maybe this one would take me like it had taken my mom and dad, but this time, it brought me a companion. I hadn't cared to ask where he came from. He just appeared from one of the new crevices, like the ones that swallowed my family. Throane said he'd just climbed it, but I believed that this was the earth's way of giving back what it took from me.

When we were about 9 years old, Throane would bring me old books to read—now I knew where he got them. He brought foods I thought I'd never taste again, along

with newer clothes to wear. Throane had become my provider, my brother, and best friend. He would come to see me at least once a week and tell me stories about his scouting missions to salvage resources. Sometimes, he'd stay for days. When it was time for him to leave, he'd become sad and distant and I never knew why. I always assumed he was just like me, a homeless orphan. I just thought he was going out to gather more resources for us. From what I could see now, that was not the case. Here he was, living like royalty, standing at the right hand of this self-proclaimed bishop and to top it all off, he was engaged! I didn't know what I was feeling. Betrayed? A little? Maybe.

"You just don't know how good you have it," Throane would always tell me. He was always trying to convince me to see the positive side of things, that we were somehow blessed to survive The Reckoning for a reason. He would actually be the one to do all the talking. He'd be so relaxed. So at ease. Nothing like the Throane I saw in Bishop Kato's Hall. I suddenly realized that, that was his way of convincing himself it was O.K. to leave me alone in The Wastelands, cold and hungry, while he remained clothed and fully fed.

Quintus snapped me out of my daydream, lightly shoving me around a couple of corners bringing us through a short alley out the back of The Hall and into an alleyway leading into an outside marketplace. Men, women, and children bustled about purchasing

fruit, vegetables, and even produce at little makeshift stands. The people were dressed in colorful but washed-out and tattered clothing. Men and women wore torn blouses and trousers made of what looked like the parachute material I used to play with in gym class. It took me a minute to realize that I was the one who was oddly dressed in this environment. Everyone was staring at me, but I was equally in awe of them, mainly because I was so amazed that so many people had survived The Reckoning. All this time! Some of these people looked like they jumped right out of the history pages of The Renaissance. These men and women appeared fairer, clothed in dingy white linens, clearly marking the distinction between social classes. The soldiers, Kato's Fraternity, were all dressed in black leather pants with some sort of leather muscle shirt strung together at the sides like a shoestring, exposing their chiseled obliques. Bishop Kato obviously saw to it that his soldiers were in shape, ready to fight. I was in the dark as to who and what that might be and was anxious to learn more. Each of the soldiers had a metal breastplate and belt holstered with daggers and swords. I noticed that Quintus' and Throane's were a bit more decorated in their choice of weaponry.

All the gawking was becoming annoying, so I answered their stares with my own, without blinking, causing them to shrink back. One punk-ass soldier wanted to take the staring contest farther, to the point where I began walking backwards. I didn't want to turn my back on him. Quintus yanked my arm, as if guiding a horse, tripping me up to follow more closely. I looked back again and the soldier beamed a triumphant grin. It was, at that moment that I began to feel more like a prisoner than a visitor. Suddenly, I was longing for the place that I'd come to know as home for the last ten winters. My

private little forest was miles away from Bishop Kato's kingdom, away from all these bizarre people. However, my passing homesickness went away once we came to what seem to be the entrance to a charred and rickety looking stucco hotel that apparently had barely survived The Reckoning. The two soldiers who guarded the double doors immediately stood at attention welcoming Quintus.

"Lieutenant."

"Peace, my brothers," Quintus acknowledged.

The soldiers opened the doors for us. We entered a dimly-lit foyer that was decorated with candles and oil lamps illuminating off a surprisingly clean marble floor. The privileged citizens were scattered about, engulfed in their own private conversations, all stopping as soon as they noticed me. I really expected to see someone being fed grapes, but that didn't happen. The place was well-kept, nothing like the outside. It was far better than my little lean-to by the maple tree. I was still unsure how Throane could see all this as nothing.

"Why don't you just put a leash on me? You can keep a better eye on me," I suggested to Quintus.

Quintus whipped around so quickly that I bumped into his solid chest. I'd need a stick to take him down, but I knew I could take him.

“Is that what you want? To be tied up? Is that what you’d like?” Quintus quizzed, a devilish look in his eyes.

For some reason, I thought he was asking me something else, something I wasn’t comfortable answering. If I ducked and swiped my feet around the back of his legs, he’d fall. Hard. I could take his weapon and pierce it into his side and twist it, then drive the dagger right under his chin, piercing his tongue. He wouldn’t be able to scream for help.

“Are you trying to think of a way to head-butt me again?” he asked.

“I’m actually thinking of a way to take you down without drawing any attention.”

His smile made his eyes twinkle with mischief, inviting me to try to take him down, as if it were all a game. He wanted to play.

“Might be kind of hard to do with an audience,” he warned. “I saved you and this is how you treat me? Come.”

I followed him up five-story stairs. The walls were clean, but cracked. The paint chips had revealed the cold concrete walls. Someone must have cleaned up the chips because there wasn’t a speck of dust in the stairwell.

“Saved me from what?”

He didn’t answer.

“Saved me from what?” I said louder.

“We’re almost there.”

There ended up being yet another door with two soldiers guarding it. They too, welcomed Quintus.

“Lieutenant.”

“Peace, my brothers.”

Oh brother! This time, Quintus opened the door to a surprisingly clean single bedroom with an ornately dressed queen-size bed. It was nothing like the foyer, but it was a bed.

“Here,” Quintus extended his arm to the bathroom. I guess he wanted me to go first. I wasn’t going in there. I still didn’t trust him, especially after I admitted to him that I was thinking of taking him down. He might have kicked me in the back, shut the door, and locked me in there forever. Quintus understood that I wouldn’t cooperate and entered

the dimly lit bathroom to turn on the faucet. Running water! I rushed toward the sink cupping my hands under it and brought it to my mouth, gulping and savoring the cold wet water, splashing it on my face and neck.

“How did you get this?” I asked holding my damp hands out to him. “We have running water now? Why no electric?”

“We don’t have anything. *Carpathia* means to restore the economy and social order by giving its citizens a convenient lifestyle of ease and opportunity. It will serve you well to remember that you are a guest.”

I frowned. Whatever.

“That sounds like something you’ve memorized and rehearsed.”

Quintus’ face hardened. He headed back to the door.

“You’ll stay here until otherwise advised.” He closed the door behind him. I tried to follow, but the two soldiers blocked my path.

“You will be safe here,” one reassured.

I looked around my quarters. What was I complaining about? Despite the cold welcoming, this was way better than sleeping in a carved out trunk and lean-to with one eye open against predators, swatting mosquitoes and other creepy crawlers that I had grown used to. I crept back into the bathroom, feeling as if I were trespassing, and slowly turned on the faucet. The pipes groaned and ached, something I hadn't noticed when Quintus turned them on. I quickly looked at the door, fully prepared to fight the two guards for punishing me for using the water. Nothing happened. I turned it off and tried the faucet in the tub. There was more groaning from the pipes, but there was running water! I twisted the hot water knob and ran my fingers under the spigot. Still cold. Kato's ability to manage running water with all of his power and resources was impressive, but I'd take a hot springs bath in their "Wasteland" any day. I definitely could appreciate the conveniences of what civilization offered, but sometimes there was nothing like what nature could provide.

I plugged the drain with a towel and let the water fill the tub. At last, I got to bathe in clean water without having to watch my back for hungry wolves – at least the ones with four feet. I jumped at a sudden boom of thunder. Rain. Drawn to the huge window protecting me from the downpour of rain, I placed my hand on the glass, almost expecting to feel the water. The sky lit up, giving me a peek at Kato's Carpathia. Holy crap! He had the entire city fortified with walls that were at least thirty feet tall to the far left. The sky lit up again. The wall extended as far as my eye could see.

I wondered how much land Kato had acquired since The Reckoning. I tried to make out the city as much as the lightening allowed. That's when I remembered the bath water! Heaven forbid that I let one drop overflow! I scrambled back to the bathroom and turned off the running water just in time. I suddenly felt that I was not alone so I swiftly turned and prepared to defend myself. Oddly enough, my opponent held the same stance as myself. For seconds, the girl stood there looking at me, each of us waiting for the other to make the first move. Then I realized she would never make the first move because she was I and I was she.

It had been years since I had seen my own reflection. In creeks and ponds, yes, but never so clear. It had been a while since I'd really seen myself. Slowly, I stood straight. So did she. I touched my face. She did, too. I stepped closer to the mirror. I'd changed. Aged. Not much but enough. I looked just like my mother. Gone was the dependent daddy's girl with the one big ponytail ball on top of her head, the girl who had parents to love and everything handed to her, like food, water, shelter, and clothes. All I saw now was a ruff, malnourished, bony teenager, with a dark wild wooly mane, framing my chai-colored light skin that had been stained from the sun. My haunted eyes had seen too much, lost so much, and killed too much in order to survive. Scars riddled my body from fighting off wild boars, hunting, and just being too careless. The girl in the mirror looked ghostly. Cautious. Unhappy. I turned away in disgust. Mirrors, I hadn't missed mirrors. I didn't need mirrors.

I stripped out of my tattered clothes and slowly descended into the tub. I didn't care if the water was cold. I was comfortable. Soaking in a tub with candles burning all around me, protected by four walls, away from the elements could do that. I closed my eyes and exhaled. Even with my guard up, I felt safe.

SAMPLE
ARC

CHAPTER 2

You know that feeling of waking up out of a good sleep but you don't open your eyes? That's when I knew he was standing over me. The sound of the forest blanketed me like a silk sheet – at least what I could imagine a silk sheet felt like. The birds were chirping their mating songs. I even heard the current from the creek three miles away and I felt a presence that was unfamiliar to me, an intruder. Had it been a coyote, he'd be chewing on one of my limbs. A black bear might have sniffed me and let me be, but this presence, it was different and unknown. I felt unsure but I knew that it was big and I had to take it down. In one swift move, I swung my legs in a butterfly-like motion hoping to kick the intruder. As I moved quickly and decisively, I caught a glimpse of it... a boy. Another survivor? Not knowing if he was a friend or foe, I twisted my body to leap up, retrieving my home-made spear and landing a round-off kick right on his left jaw. As I continued to attack, the boy got smart and jumped back, blocking every blow, as I relentlessly continued lashing out at his body.

“Stop!” he pleaded.

I stopped, abruptly, but mostly to catch my breath.

“You sound like a little bitch,” I teased.

His eyes widened. He hadn't expected that type of welcome.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" I asked in a demanding tone.

He raised his hand in surrender, seeing that I hadn't let my guard down.

"You've got a foul mouth," he frowned. "I'm Throane. I came from...down there." He gestured toward the deep crevasse that the recent earthquake created.

For at least 7 winters, I'd been by myself. I hadn't seen anyone since The Reckoning. Yes, The Reckoning...

The earth had split wide open right beneath our feet, releasing a hot white steam that blinded us in our path. I could hardly see in front of me. Mom and Dad each had one of my hands and we were running, my feet barely touching the ground. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back* was all I could think of as we scurried down from the cabin, leaving our vacation home in flames. Dad had been so proud of it, but now a raging fire was consuming it as we ran into the unknown.

“Get the bag, I dropped the bag, GET THE BAG!” Mom called out to Dad. Dad ran back to get his messenger bag.

“Got it!” he said.

Suddenly a geyser erupted in front of us, breaking the earth open and separating me from my parents. The steam scorched my arms and legs. I took a powerful dive away from the geyser and protected my face. My legs felt like they were melting away.

“Arrhh!” I screamed.

“Theclaaa! Noval Keith!” I heard Mom and Dad call out. I saw their silhouettes briefly through the steam. Ignoring the pain in my legs and arms, I sprung up towards them. The earth shook again and began to bleed out hot viscous lava...

“Who are you?” This Throane boy asked, snapping me back into the present. I rubbed the faint scars on my arm. “What’s your name?” he probed. He eyed my out-grown t-shirt and sweat shorts. “How long have you been up here?”

“Since The Reckoning. Thecla. That’s my name.”

Throane's jaw dropped in disbelief.

“How have you survived this long by yourself?”

“Same as you, I guess. Food. Water...” I shrugged.

Throane anxiously combed his hands through his dark shoulder-length hair, shaking it in disbelief.

“No, I mean who's been taking care of you?”

My parents used to take care of me. I thought. A lump formed in my throat.

“No one,” I whispered with a cracked voice.

“Well...I um...I can take care of you,” he suggested. “But you'll have to stay here a little while longer. I have to uhm... I have to make sure you—will be safe.”

The young boy dug into his backpack. It had been a while since I'd seen one of those. He pulled out a ball of cloth and slowly peeled it open, keeping his eyes on me the entire time. Bread! Oh my gosh! I thought I'd never taste that delicacy ever again. Holy hell, was that cheese, too? Forgetting all survival and defense instincts, I lunged into the

palm of Throane's hand, devouring the bread and cheese. The bread was tough to chew and the cheese was warm, pungent and soft. I could barely swallow the food. He gave me the whole thing and I gladly took it, dropping to the ground, crossing my legs, and eating everything. On cue, Throane pulled out a canteen of water and offered it to me. Without hesitation, I chugged it all. Throane watched me in silence.

"I can bring more...and other stuff too, if you like...I can even bring you some clothes to wear."

I nodded vigorously.

"O.K," I agreed, with a mouth full of food.

I finished Young Throane's food without offering him any. He didn't seem to mind. Afterward, we just sat there looking out at the horizon.

"Hey how'd you learn to fight like that?" he asked me.

"Video games."

We both laughed. It had been a long time since I'd heard myself laugh.

“Wake up,” Quintus barked.

I jumped up instinctively grabbing for my spear. Quintus tossed me the dress Throane had given me during one of his visits. Quintus convinced me to wear my own clothes when being presented to Bishop Kato.

“Put this on.”

Once I realized he wasn't going to give me any privacy, I snatched them up, hopped out of the bed and changed in the bathroom.

“Why couldn't I just have worn this in the first place?” I called out through the closed door.

“To keep Throne's ass from being handed to him on a platter. He kept you a secret. The Fraternity doesn't keep secrets from one another.”

“You're keeping one,” I said after I opened the door. “Not telling Kato about me and Throane.”

“I suppose I am,” he answered. “But let's get this straight...” Quintus stepped toward me, invading my personal space. I stood my ground. He brushed the back of his

palm against my scarred arm. I tensed up. He drew closer, pressing his cold breastplate against my chest, arousing a peculiar sensation. "...there is no you and Throane," he whispered in my ear heavily. His words punched me right in the gut, but the way he said it, with his hot breath, made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Something started to twinge below my navel and the only way I could respond to all of these emotions was to give him an uppercut with the palm of my hand. He quickly responded, realizing what kind of girl he was dealing with and defended himself against me. He caught my wrist with one hand and my neck with the other, body slamming me onto the bed.

"You will learn *not* to fuck with me, Thecla" he threatened through clenched teeth.

I spat in his face. He squeezed his grip around my neck.

"You don't have shit I want to *learn* from you," I seethed.

Quintus' face softened. He released his hold on me, giving me a final push onto the bed checking his belt to make sure I hadn't stolen any of his weapons.

"We'll see about that," he smirked.

I learned that dinner with Kato was a big deal. Apparently, one could not sit at Bishop Kato's dinner table without being sterilized. A handful of women had burst in my room like a mob dressed in over washed eastern robes, with their hair pulled back in a tight bun. Each of them was carrying a steaming pot of water, lining up against the walls staring at me. I instantly jumped to my feet, ready to gouge out the eyes of the first bitch who threw a bucket of hot water on me. Two soldiers hauled in a huge tin tub and set it in the middle of the room. These women, who I could only assume were Kato's concubines, emptied each of their steaming buckets into the tub then took her place back on the wall.

"You've got one hour till dinner," one soldier said as both assumed their positions outside the door, closing it behind them. Doing my best to keep my eyes on these women, I slowly crept away from the bed and dipped my fingertips into the water.

"Shit!" I cried. I was pretty sure you could blanch some vegetables in that bitch and it they'd be ready to eat. I sat back on the bed waiting for the water to cool. The concubines exchanged worrisome looks.

"What?" I demanded. The tall girl with the dirty-blonde hair girl stepped forward.

"The Bishop wants you ready in an hour," she said.

"I can be ready in two seconds."

The girl looked to her wallflower friends for guidance. I seemed to intimidate her.
Good.

“We need you in the tub to start the process.”

Process?

“Well you shouldn’t have brought in boiling hot water. How hard can it be to wash your ass anyway?” I asked. “And why can’t I just wash in the bathroom? The redheaded girl muffled a giggle. A short girl with brown hair elbowed her.

“Bishop Kato requires that you be purified of all filth from The Wasteland before eating at his table.” The blonde recited.

My mind raced... You don’t fucking say! I didn’t ask to eat at his table in the first place. This guy thinks he’s a freaking king! I folded my arms in protest.

“Well then, I guess I won’t be eating at his table.”

The women gasped. The blonde left. Seconds later the door opened. Amir entered. Great. The blonde followed in behind her. Amir stood directly over me, eyes blazing with some false sense of authority she felt she had over me. I held her stare,

completely un-intimidated and ready to kick her ass at a moment's notice. A quick punch in the stomach would bend her forward right into a head-butt.

“My father is bored. For some ungodly reason, he insists you accompany us for dinner, solely for entertainment purposes, I presume,” Amir declared. “So you *will* get in that tub.”

It was official. I didn't like her. I didn't like how she looked at me in The Hall and I damned sure didn't like the way she was staring me down now. I remained silent, but I turned the corner of my lip up at her. “I'll do whatever the hell I want, when I want.”

“Very well,” she said. Then she nodded to someone at my peripheral.

A piercing sharp pain penetrated the back of my head. I saw a flash of light then pitch black.

I woke up with a throbbing headache. My body felt like a million needles were puncturing it. It didn't take long for me to realize that I was simmering in the steaming tin tub. I felt dainty hands all over me. Some were picking and scrubbing my toes. Others had my fingernails, ears, and hair. Good grief, they were everywhere! I tried to get up,

but my head felt like an axe was wedged in it. I gently felt my head, only to find a big gash there.

“Easy. I just got it to stop bleeding.” It was the blonde. She gently lowered me back into the scalding water. “I’m sorry I knocked you out. Orders...” She continued to tend to my head. Aside from the hot water, the manicure and pedicure felt pretty good. I gave in and relaxed.

“I’m Marla, the redhead is Sarah, the brunette is Syra. That’s Sarah and picking at your right foot is Neykl.

“Remind me to kick your ass once I heal, Marla,” I said. “What the hell did you hit me with anyway?”

Marla sheepishly picked up a spiked club and showed it to me. My eyes widened. That should’ve killed me. I reached out for it. She pulled it from my reach, flipping it upside down.

“I hit you with this side. Amir’s not pleased about that,” Marla said apologetically, gently placing the club back on the floor. We all remained quiet for a few minutes. Thanks to the headache Marla gave me, I just sat there stewing and let the women do their duty. This seemed to be a routine task for them. Was this their job? This?

“Do you bathe Bishop Kato?” I asked. Once again, the women exchanged knowing looks.

“Sometimes,” Marla answered. “All the Nobles, when they request.”

“Is Throane a...Noble?” I asked. The women giggled. Marla blushed. I was starting not to like these girls either, especially since they seemed to know something about Throane that I didn't.

“Of course he is.” Marla seemed curious with my questions. This girl wasn't stupid. I quickly masked my disappointment or jealousy. Haven't quite figured out which one yet.

“And Quintus?”

The women giggled even more.

“Quintus, Throane, Bishop Kato, Amir...the whole damn Fraternity and their families are Nobles? All Nobles?”

Marla gave a slight nod of affirmation.

“Then what are you? The Royal Servant or something?”

“Prioress. Ambassadors for the Laymen. Not quite noble, not quite Laymen.”

“Laymen?”

“Workers. Those who aren’t part of the Fraternity. If you’re not a soldier, you’re a Laymen worker and Laymens don’t wear the noble linens.”

“What the hell...?” I jumped back at the huge blade Ester brought to my leg.

“Easy. We have to shave you. Orders, Marla said.

Ester lathered my left leg with some fragrant handmade soap. The other women take a limb.

“Hold still...”

The women quickly scraped the soap off without a cut or nick. They’d done this before.

“All done. Please stand.”

I hesitated. The prioresses exchanged more worrisome looks, perhaps fearing another Amir episode. I admit that I wasn't ready for another one so I reluctantly stood.

Syra attempted to apply soap to my lady part. Instincts slapped her hand away. With frustration, she looked to Marla for a solution.

“The removal of bodily hair reflects cleanliness and purity. Hair is like a magnet for germs and disease. That's why Bishop Kato requires all Noble women and Prioresses be purified. It's the law.”

My mouth gaped open with disbelief. Law? What type of *law* dictates whether or not I should shave my body? Fuck that.

“Well you're just going to have to club me again – with the spiked side because no one touches me. Especially there!” I declared.

Marla sighed with defeat.

“Fine. I'm sorry, but I have to do this. Orders...”

I didn't move quickly enough. Ester and Syra quickly bound my feet, and Neykl pinned my hands at the side of the tub. I could not move. These chicks were freakishly

strong. Like a caged animal, all I could do was roar and growl, using my teeth as my only defense, snapping at any piece of flesh I could bite.

“Aaaargh!”

A humming sound buzzed over my head. What the hell? Electricity? What kind of kingdom was Bishop Kato running where there was electricity? I thought that there wasn't any electricity. The buzz from what I later learned was battery-operated clippers vibrated on the top of my head, making close and swift buzzes. A cascade of black wool brushed past my nose tumbling over my breast into the cloudy bathwater.

“Noooo!” I cried.

My head began to throb again. My head began to spin. I just couldn't understand or make sense of any of this.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I whined.

No answer. Just buzz, buzz, buzz. The last time I had heard that sound was when my father used to cut his hair. No guards, just a straight buzz the exact haircut these prioress bitches were giving me. I missed my dad. I missed my mom. I even missed The Wastelands. No matter how anyone felt about it, that was my home. Where was Throane? What type of place was this where people were held against their will, beaten, bathed and

shaved against their will? The pain in my head sharpened. I had to find a way to get out of this place the first chance I got. I didn't even know who Throane was anymore. Images of him obediently sitting beside Bishop Kato's attention in The Hall as if he never knew me was heartbreaking. Tears pooled in my eyes. I didn't know if it was from the pain in my head or from losing the only friend I'd known since The Reckoning. The pain worsened.

"I want to go home," I moaned.

"You are home, dear," Marla consoled. "I had to go through the same thing. It'll be over soon. Just don't go to sleep. You might have a concussion. Plus it's almost time for dinner with Bishop Kato and the others."

"The others" included Throane, Quintus, Bitch-ass Amir, and the self-proclaimed Bishop Kato himself with Nekyl sitting submissively on his right side. Odd. I figured Marla would have had that position.

Kato's eyes widened with delight as Marla, Syra, and Sarah escorted me in the dining room filled with murmuring chatter.

"Ah-ha!" The room hushed.

All eyes turned toward me. I felt like shrinking into a corner. Marla and company had clothed me in fresh noble linen. I quickly learned that in Carpathia, scars on a woman marked her as defiled and impure. So at Kato's orders, the girls had my arms and legs neatly wrapped in the same linen. My legs looked like someone ran out of mummy tape, wrapping my legs just enough to cover my scars, exposing only some unmarked skin. Then they covered it all up with an oversized white linen tunic. The remaining torn linen had been wrapped around my waist, revealing my malnourished body. I couldn't stop shivering. Not from fear, hell no –but from the cool draft on my newly shaven head, even with the matching hooded cloak. Amir didn't try to hide her satisfaction, Quintus looked intrigued, and Throane wouldn't even look at me. I had never felt so ugly. Bishop Kato jumped to his feet, clapping his hands together.

“Our guest has arrived. Please, come. Sit.” Kato gestured to the empty seat.

Marla and company ushered me toward the table. Kato was still standing on one end while Amir sat at the other. Throane sat beside Nekyl, at Amir's right side while Quintus sat on the other side next to an empty seat. I couldn't believe that I almost got a concussion and had my head shaved for this bunch.

The rectangular dining room table sat in the center of credenzas lined against walls of built-in shelves piled with open books and loose pages. An assortment of meats,

vegetables, potatoes, and my favorite bread and cheeses that Throane used to bring me, covered a beautifully decorated table. Too pretty to eat, it seemed.

“I thought kings stood for no one,” I said.

Amir scowled, Quintus smirked, and Throane’s jaw twitched. Bishop Kato simply smiled. Even with his gauntly features, no doubt from surviving and recovering from The Reckoning, Bishop Kato’s intense icy eyes felt as though they’d cut through my very soul, searching, accessing, and demanding something of me.

Marla pulled out a beautifully carved high back chair padded with purple crushed velvet and placed it next to Quintus...and directly across from Throane. Then she disappeared into the adjoining kitchen. I took my seat. Ooh, this felt nice. I could take a bed like this. No doubt, Bishop Kato had one.

“The title ‘king’ is flattering. However, I am just a humble bishop,” Kato responded, sitting down.

“He is very anointed,” Amir piped in.

Anointed? Anointed with what? Some type of ointment? Did he have a rash?
Sounded like ointment was involved.

“He’s been given the vision to fortify, protect, and sustain lost souls who have survived The Reckoning. As guardian of Carpathia, he does it with love, protecting them by any means.” Amir sounded very serious and reverent. “There are dangerous savages who roam about The Wastelands, whose only mission is to destroy. Our Bishop, my father, keeps the savages away by directly communing with our Creator.”

Marla led the other prioresses to a grand display of homemade wines and strong drink. They prepared to refill our empty cups. Kato sipped his clear liquid and quickly scrunched his face with a mixture of mild discomfort and bliss. He nodded at Marla and she continued to serve everyone else at the table.

“We’ve survived and thrived this long because we are a tight-knit community. Shortly after The Reckoning, we took in any survivors we found, but anyone who has tried to infiltrate by way of The Wastelands has proven to be a destructible threat to what we’ve worked so hard to rebuild and maintain.” He paused to take another sip of what seemed to be a distasteful drink. “But you, my dear, have proven to be an anomaly. Your exterior embodies everything I loathe about The Wastelands. You’re scarred, dirty, and the means by which you’ve managed to survive has no doubt been nothing more than savage. And Carpathia has zero tolerance for savagery.”

That backhanded compliment prompted me to almost spit out the awful strong drink Marla had served. Kato chuckled.

Thecla, A Dark Romance by Zorina Exie Frey

“Easy, Thecla. A little goes a long way. That moonshine there is meant to cleanse our palate...and our souls.”

“I thought strong drink like this was considered impure,” I challenged.

Kato smiled.

“Anything produced from Carpathia is a recipe for purging that which is impure and restoring our mind, body, and spirit. Including...strong drink.” He lifted his goblet. Everyone at the table followed suit, including me.

I frowned with distaste. Amir and Quintus snickered.

“I never thought I’d see the day when a product from The Wastelands, so...scathed and bruised might serve as the key to elevating Carpathia to another order of grace,” Bishop Kato continued.

Amir’s snicker ceased instantly as her father continued.

“You do understand why the world has come to these ruins...why practically everything has been burned down?”

I shrugged, taking another sip of my drink. It was disgusting, but I took to the warm feeling it gave me. I had assumed his question was rhetorical anyway.

“Impurity.” he continued on. “It started with the very beginning of creation, women tempting men. For centuries, they’ve abused the power of creating life. Using their sexual parts as bargaining tools to get what they wanted. Breasts made for feeding and nurturing their children, used as a beacon of distraction. The canal meant for planting a seed of life and ushering that new life into creation, have been used as tunnels of temptations and uncleanness. It’s despicable. Having been given the gift to birth life, knowing the difference between right and wrong yet, still allowing all mankind to become tainted, like those Wastelands out there.”

Was he blaming women for everything that has gone wrong with the world?
Unbelievable!

“Nothing good can come of that which is tainted!” Amir piped in, cutting her eyes at me. “Even The Wastelands. You said so yourself, Daddy!” she desperately argued.

Kato gingerly broke off a piece of bread and cheese, pressing them together between his fingers before popping it into his mouth.

“True.” He finally agreed once his mouth was empty. “But just as we were spared from The Reckoning, Thecla here, by nothing short of a miracle, has also been spared. And even though it looks as if she is tainted, she is not.”

Amir angrily pounded her fists on the table, knocking over her drink. Marla quickly rushed to her assistance.

“She is too!” she practically screamed. “Look at her! You even had to cover her arms and legs with the evidence. She-Is-Impure! Do you know what we do with the impure?” she said, turning her full attention to me. “We k – .”

“THAT’S ENOUGH, AMIR!” Kato sternly interrupted her. His entire face darkened with a menacing disapproval that made Amir shrink back in her seat. “You may be my daughter, but you don’t know everything. Not yet.”

Kato looked to me and the menacing frown disappeared into a charming smile that made his eyes twinkle. I relaxed even more because of his look than because of the strong drink I had consumed.

“What my daughter doesn’t realize is that somewhere out of the ruins, out of nothing, a phoenix always rises from the ashes. But there can only be one chosen survivor out of such tragedies. And that survivor endures a time of solitude that can

sometimes get lonely but it is there that the survivor finds strength—a strength no one can take away.”

I slowly nodded in agreement. The entire room hushed. There was not a clink of a goblet or dish. Bishop Kato was clearly speaking of himself—something I had the feeling did not happen often. And by speaking of himself, he somehow was justifying me, making it a brave feat for anyone to speak ill against me. It was a comforting to know that I was somehow being protected. A wave of anguish rushed over me as thoughts of my father came to mind. I missed my family so much.

“It’s not easy to be that lone survivor—that phoenix,” he continued. “You’re forced to make tough decisions and do things you thought you’d never do. Killing our Creator’s creation so that your stomach will cease its hunger pangs or taking him out just for the peace of mind of knowing that there won’t be an ambush when you’re off guard...it’s hard. But when you’re a survivor, it’s either you or them.”

Bishop Kato gestured to one of the servants to bring in the appetizers and he hungrily dug in to the roasted vegetables placed before him. Everyone else followed suit in an awkward silence, no doubt drinking in what he had said.

“It seems,” he continued, sensing our bewilderment, “As though you’ve already endured the purging process.” He dabbed the corners of his mouth. “Without the assistance of Carpathia.”

“How so?” I asked with indignation. His confidence was somewhat annoying, but I couldn’t help but be curious.”

“Like everyone else, you’ve been stripped of everything. Life as you knew it was over. Family, friends, the comforts of home. All gone.”

“Father, I fail to see how her loss is any different from anyone else’s,” Amir intervened.

“I told you to stay quiet!”

“You still have your father,” I managed to slip in.

“And because of that, she’s had someone to watch over her to make sure no harm came to her. You,” he emphasized, “did not have that luxury and yet, underneath all those scars, you embody the purity of a Noble—body, spirit, but not so much the mind. That,” he paused to take a couple more bites of his food, “is not fully...civilized. And rightly so, having had no one to talk to—no companion.”

I cut my eyes over to Throane who shifted uncomfortably in his seat, then to Quintus, who quickly looked away and then to Amir, whose jaw dropped in disbelief at her father’s words.

“By divine intervention, our Creator has managed to keep you from the filth of The Wastelands. It is like being locked in a den of famished mountain lions and coming out without a scratch. A miracle like this cannot be ignored.”

“Excuse me, Bishop. Are you saying Thecla’s a miracle?” Quintus questioned in disbelief. I winced at him in annoyance, at which he shrugged off with wide eyes, challenging my own thoughts. He was right. I could hardly believe what the Kato was saying either.”

“Well, not *her* per se, but the manifestation of her survival certainly is and proves to be guided by the hand of our Creator, and that alone is worth his attention and admiration—not just her but the miracle itself.”

“So you’re saying she is a miracle!” Amir huffed.

“No.” Kato repeated. “Not her, but that which lies within her, the miracle of her purity despite living in a rancid environment.” He held his hands up as if crafting an unseen image. “It’s like a diamond in the rough. Thecla has managed to stay pure and refined while surrounded by dirt and molten rock, the very thing The Wastelands are made of. Amir slammed her hands on the table top as she stood up and stormed out of the dining room.

“Sometimes it takes a little competition to aspire one to move toward perfection.”

He ignored his daughter’s tantrum, taking another sip of his wine and closing his eyes to admire the taste. His eyes popped open as if a new matter had come to mind. “You’ll forgive us for the preliminary ceremony you’ve undergone by our prioress. Indeed, it may have seemed harsh--.”

“It was!”

“But,” in time, you’ll understand the necessity of purity among the citizens of Carpathia. I can assume since you’ve been on your own, you’ve been...untouched?”

What? Did he just ask me if I’ve had sex? And in front of everybody at the table? So inappropriate.

“Correct, Bishop,” Marla answered. Although, I didn’t realize he was addressing her about my personal business. “She is intact. There has been no penetration. ”

Quintus snickered.

“What?” I exclaimed in disbelief.

“Relax, kiddo,” Kato said. “Marla here is not only our head prioress, but our primary mid-wife. She’s highly skilled in gynecological matters. I trust her with my own daughter.”

How could this be? When did anyone have a chance to examine me—a womanly exam for that matter. I wouldn’t allow anyone here to touch me with a ten-foot pole. I looked to Marla for answers. She sheepishly held her head down.

“You were unconscious,” she whispered apologetically. “Those were my orders.”

Kato scolded Marla with a wordy speech about how she should hold her head high when following Noble orders for the progress and sustainment of Carpathia—which was funny because I’d never considered my vagina a catalyst for developing anything, least of all, a nation. Kato definitely had a flair for the dramatic.

“Your purity is good thing,” Kato continued. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from the women in our fold. Lust is the root of all evil. It has broken marriages, caused scandals and was ultimately the downfall of the society we used to know. Now in Carpathia, we’ve been rebuilding as one nation under our Creator Crux, with purity and cleanliness in mind.”

Apparently sexual relations of any kind outside of marriage was a criminal offense in Carpathia. Kato went on to preach that if we kept our bodies pure, free from

sexual thoughts and distractions, then our bodies would make a suitable vessel to commune with Crux.

“Who’s Crux?” I asked.

Everyone but Throane snickered.

“Just how long did you say you were out in The Wastelands, Thecla?” Quintus asked me. “Everyone knows who Crux is.”

Marla poured me a glass of wine. They sure did like their strong drink.

“Not everyone,” I snapped, taking a sip of wine that didn’t really taste like wine at all, but more like overly sweet grape juice. I took another sip, then another, soon I was just drinking like it was grape juice.

“A drunkard,” Amir proclaimed from the doorway. “Can’t say I’m surprised,” she said as she reclaimed her seat.

Embarrassed, I placed my wine glass back on the table and picked up the goblet filled with water.

“Crux is our Creator. He lords over the mantle and has appointed Bishop Kato as ruler of this mantle and The Tombs,” Quintus explained.

What the hell? Mantle? It had been years since I’d seen a movie, but I felt like I might be in one. This was crazy.

“Since when did we get a god who was the center of the earth and what is a mantle?” I asked.

“Crux is who started The Reckoning, to purge and cleanse the mantle of the earth, of all... uncleanliness,” Throane added.

Oh fuck a duck, he speaks! I tried to make sense of this. Kato beamed at Throane, like a proud father. The Prioresses brought out a colorful salad to dish out.

“We’ve been blessed with thousands upon thousands of acres of farmland. We produce a vast array of vegetables, fruit, corn and sugar cane—resourceful fuel. We even have a vineyard,” Kato boasted. “All thanks to the mercy of Crux. That wine you like so much was from my own private stock.”

“I guess I’m supposed to be impressed?” I said disregarding his religious dogma. “I still don’t understand why I am being treated like a prisoner...” The next question I directed toward Throane, “and a stray dog?”

No answer. Just another fucking jaw twitch.

“Dogs have fleas,” Amir murmured.

This bitch...

“We’ve taken great care to retain the purity of Carpathia. Again, my apologies if my Prioresses treated you anyway other than civil,” Kato replied. “It is of the utmost priority that we do not repeat the sins of our forefathers with even a blemish of the past. The Wastelands are a constant reminder of our progress, destruction, and Crux’s mercy.”

“Mercy? Brutally knocking someone out and shaving their head is your idea of mercy?” I challenged. “Of course, they’re only following orders...” I mocked, cutting my eye at Amir.

Everyone, including the Prioresses, instantly froze right in the middle of their serving duties, looking at one another and waiting for the Kato’s response. Both Amir’s and Quintus’ faces froze in horror, awaiting Kato’s reaction. Throane, who appeared to have accepted this whole fiasco as dinner and a show, leaned back into his chair with folded arms, patiently awaiting the next line. Expressionless, Kato wiped his mouth, carefully placed his napkin on his lap, and clasped his hands together, resting his elbows on the table. Those cold steel blue eyes pierced my own. It was obvious no one spoke to

Bishop Kato in that manner. He was feared by all, but not by me...well those eyes were working on it, but I didn't plan to let on. Then the most unexpected thing happened. He smiled. Then everybody in the room exhaled.

"The Prioresses are told to carry out a specific duty and understand that there are consequences for those which are not properly carried out, Amir intervened. And on and on she went, but I stopped paying attention when a Prioress placed a ridiculous amount of juicy meat on my plate. It looked like boar meat and it was wonderfully prepared, better than being overcooked on a spit. Another spoon of roasted red potatoes, another mashed potatoes, baked sweet potatoes, is that au gratin? I anxiously reached for my fork.

"We must give thanks to Crux before we dine," Throane announced, more for my benefit than anyone else's.

"Your Crux sounds like a man-made god to me. He had no mercy on me or my family," I said

"Foolish girl! You've got a lot to learn," Quintus said. "and I'd be glad to teach you."

Throane shot a threatening glare at Quintus. Quintus didn't notice, but I did. So did Amir.

Kato chuckled.

“She will. Give her time. She has to get used to the rebirth of Carpathian civilization.”

Whatever. With or without the company of people, this all sounded like a bunch of bullshit to me.

“Oh really?” I replied. “From what I’ve experienced, “civilized” people seem to be no different from the wild boars in the Wasteland. Bishop Kato, you basically said that survivors kill in order not to be killed. How is that different from the animals in The Wasteland?”

Amir jumped to her feet, slamming her hands on the table, knocking over her beverages. Again. The prioresses quickly attended to spilled cups. She ignored their insignificance.

“My father is Bishop of Carpathia, lead general of the Fraternity, appointed ruler of this mantle and most importantly the overseer of The Tombs!” Amir shouted. “He will-not-be-mocked!”

Her shrieky tantrum made my head ache even worse. I really didn’t feel like tangling with her right then.

“It’s a valid question,” I shrugged. “And what the heck are The Tombs?”

“You’re inquisitive. Curious and bold,” Kato mused. “Good. Refreshing that such a young mind challenges the order of things. It keeps us honest.”

“Daddy, you’ve preached for years that this attitude was the very cause of the downfall of the old world, that submissiveness and obedience to a higher power is our lifeline to long life and good will.” Amir liked to argue. “This is an abomination! People have been exiled for far less!”

“Sweet child, have patience for those who have not been educated in the ways of Carpathia. Thecla is right to ask about the proper order of this new world.”

“She’s not asking, she’s challenging!”

“Our Creator has prophesied that we will inherit a divine wisdom and power once we regain The Tombs, a powerful book that will help us rebuild social order over the mantle. You Thecla, just might be able to assist us. She knows the lay of The Wastelands and survived it. She may serve as a better scout than Throane or Quintus. You yourself even suggested it.” He said to Amir.

“That might not be a bad idea,” Throane quickly intervened. “I can always use an extra set of eyes.”

Kato raised a brow, considering Throane’s proposal.

“Our food is getting cold,” Kato said. “Let us all give thanks.”

A defeated Amir slouched back into her chair. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, scooted to the edge of her seat and stretched her hands out, palms down. Then I realize that everyone was doing the same thing, even the Prioresses, as they remained standing. I looked over to Throane, whose eyes seemed to be pleading for forgiveness. It wasn’t that simple. I still had questions. I could only shake my head in confusion, with the questioning look of ‘why’? Having no immediate answer, Throane briefly nodded to my hands, telling me to follow suit with the others and spread my arms out a long, drawn-out prayer.

“Now we eat!” Quintus announced. He ripped into the roasted boar, and then addressed me with a full mouth of chewed meat.

“Now, how about telling us how you survived out there. Share your skills. Defense system. Hunting. Stuff like that.”

My mouth was full of au gratin potatoes. Oh my goodness, it was sooo cheesy. I had almost forgotten how good melted cheese was.

“Quintus, let the girl eat,” Throane said. “She hasn’t had a decent meal in years.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Quintus teased. “I’m sure she had some help...like a dog or something.”

“Did you have a hound to protect you?” Kato asked me.

“No, just instincts and I’m pretty good with knives and fighting sticks.”

“We’ll have to see a demonstration. Perhaps we can arrange one as entertainment,” Kato said. “Perhaps Marla as your sparring partner?”

“I’m no one’s...amusement. I’d like to leave in the morning, but you won’t allow that, will you, Bishop Kato?”

Once again, all of the oxygen had been sucked out of the banquet room. Kato responded in a calm manner.

“It would not be proper for the future Ruler of the Mantle to exile an innocent soul into The Wastelands.” Kato shoveled another scoop of potatoes into his mouth.

“Especially after rescuing her from it.”

This time I jumped to my feet in anger.

“No one rescued me! I can take care of myself and I’d rather be out there than in here with a bunch of idol worshipping, self-proclaimed wanna-be royals!”

Again, Kato wiped the corners of mouth, but this time, he placed the napkin on the table and slowly rose to his feet and walked around the table toward me. Each step he took was deliberate and each became more threatening as he neared me. I stood my ground, defiant, not flinching at all. I was already calculating a way to take him down. Kato towered directly over me, eyes ablaze. Everyone watched him with great anticipation. He took his forefinger and traced my jaw line with his left hand.

“Not one scar on that pretty little face. We’ll respect that, but we are going to have to do something about that mouth,” he said. Suddenly, he gripped my neck, squeezing, holding me at arm’s length. I swung and kicked in defense, but could not reach him.

“Snap her neck!” Amir squealed with delight. “Please, snap her neck!”

“Bishop! Please, have mercy!” Throane shouted out to him. “I—we need her—for The Wastelands! Bishop, please!”

“Quiet, boy!” Kato shouted. He tightened his grip, lifting me off my feet and choking off my air supply. “You are an official citizen of Carpathia and you *will* learn and respect its ways and give reverence to Crux or you will be subject to a kind of suffering you never knew was possible.”

Hopelessly, dangling at Kato’s hands, I struggled for air, wheezing.

Throane mustered up the courage to run toward us and carefully placed his hand on Kato’s arm, the one my life was helplessly holding on to.

“Bishop, please...have mercy...have mercy,” Throane pleaded.

“I will amputate your pinky fingers and make you master the sword,” Kato threatened Throane, all the while keeping his steel blue eyes on my almost lifeless body. “Each time you fail,” he continued, “I’ll take another finger and then I’ll take one of Amir’s and when you’re all out, I’ll exile you into The Wastelands. And not the part from which this one is from either. That is, if you don’t take your hands off me right now.”

“Dad!” Amir shouted.

“Consequences, people. Consequences,” Kato repeated firmly.

Kato shook Throanes’ grip by cocking his elbow back and landing his closed fist directly on my mouth, releasing his grip from my neck with a powerful shove, sending me air-born onto the cold marble floor, spewing blood.

“Thecla!” Throane cried out. I heard him trying to shuffle past Kato with minimal success.

“Leave her,” Kato said. “You *will* learn.”

Marla and the other Prioresses rushed to my aid.

“I said leave her! Come, let’s eat. And you,” Kato barked at me. “you will dine on your own blood and discover the taste of defying Kato. Stay until you are called for.”

Kato returned to his seat. Throane reluctantly followed. My jaw was numb but the pain in my head was on fire. I crawled against the nearest wall and crouched, nursing my busted lip with the cloth wrapped around my arms, trying to numb my head with the cool of the wall. I closed my eyes, shutting everything out until sleep stole me away.

CHAPTER 3

The next few days were a blur. It turned out that I had a concussion and Kato's uppercut had dislocated my jaw. The blunt force of his fist had given me two black eyes and I ached all over. Marla nursed me back to health, but she was being a major pain in the behind about it.

"Sit up, Thecla. You cannot sleep," she ordered. I could feel the blood pressure sleeve around my arm. It was tight. I wiggled my fingers to make sure I still could.

"You could slip right into a coma."

I felt the blood from my arm flow back into my fingers as the hissing sound of the air seeped from the black plastic bubble in her hands. A light slap on my cheek revived the pain in my jaw reminding me of Kato's gift to me, jolting me out of a light snooze.

"Wake up!"

Blocks of chipped ice, cold water, liquid feedings, and occasional slaps on the face, were all I could remember that week. I just wanted to sleep. Every time I tried to speak, the pain increased. My head ached, my jaw was sore, and my heart ached even more. I literally had lost my best friend, my only friend. I just couldn't understand who

Throane was anymore. I was just so tired of trying to make sense of things. I didn't care if I ever woke up.

When I woke up, it was as if I had the best nap ever. I opened my eyes to the dingy-white ceiling, trying to figure out my whereabouts. The room, I was back in the hotel room. Quintus was there talking to the nurse.

“Keep her down,” I heard him say. “She’s not going to cooperate if she’s conscious. It will only set her recovery back. We need her well. Soon.”

For what? I tried to wiggle my jaw to pose the question. Still sore, I touched my face and felt a cloth tied around my head fashioned to keep my mouth shut. It was then that I discovered that I was attached to an I.V.

“She’s up.” Quintus noticed that I was awake. “Do it.”

I tried to move, but I was too weak. I tried to speak, but could only moan. Quintus rushed over to hold me down. Marla pulled out a syringe and injected its substance into the tube and I drifted off again with only short glimpses of semi consciousness to interrupt my sleep.

I'm awake. It's dark. Someone was sitting on the foot of my bed. I couldn't see, still groggy. Throane? I tried to speak but it was still too painful. I drifted back to sleep...

"Up you go," Marla said. "Dinner time!"

I groaned. I'd rather starve than have to drink another cup of tasteless broth. She forced fed me as I was now bound to what I noticed was an old hospital bed with the rails up. I was still too sore to move my arms or legs. What was really confusing was that I had not gone to the bathroom at all. Why tie me up when they keep sedating me with drugs? I didn't get it.

"Good girl."

Marla fed my I.V. and I was out again.

"You left her out there to eat unclean meats and contaminated water!" Quintus said. His husky whispering woke me up. From his tone, he was clearly in an argument. "I did what any Fraternity soldier is supposed to do," he continued. "Kato would have your balls and your position if he knew you'd been keeping her a secret."

“You didn’t need to bring her in!” Throane argued. “Look at what they’re doing to her! She doesn’t deserve this. She didn’t do anything! She was fine out there.”

“For you to have her all to yourself! That’s not the way of the Fraternity, *brother*. Quintus said placing his hand on Throane’s shoulder. “We share our resources.” Throane knocked it off.

“She’s not a resource. She’s a woman.”

“*Your* woman is heir to Carpathia. Betrothed to you, brother. Amir is yours and yours alone. That’s a fucking resource if there ever was one,” Quintus said. “This,” he said, gesturing to me as I squeezed my eyes shut, “this is a warrior, a survivor of The Wastelands. She’ll serve Carpathia well in tactical and survival skills. And it will give us an advantage in acquiring the rest of the mantle, as foretold by the Bishop. Those are our orders.”

“Scouting The Wastelands is my order!” Throane said, “and I’ve been doing that.”

“While you were supposed to be scouting The Wastelands, you were playing patty-cake with your little wildcat,” Quintus interrupted. “Your reports were spotty and didn’t add up. That’s why I followed you and you led me right to the prize. Now she is our secret weapon against Neith Vesparr and the Jingoist.”

Who the hell is Neith Vesparr and what is a Jingoist? I was trying to make sense of all this.

“She is not a weapon,” Throane said.

“Yes she is, brother. She is,” Quintus contested before storming out of the left the room.

Throane started to follow him out, but stopped, letting the door close in his face. He sighed.

“I know you’re awake,” Throane said, in a softer tone.

I opened my eyes. Still bound, I couldn’t move or talk. Throane came to sit at my bedside, resting his forearms on his knees releasing another huge sigh. He ran his hands back and forth over his bald head and onto his face. Sighing again, he looked at me with those dark eyes. They were so dark, almost black. Only when the sun was shining, could I see a hint of brown. I tried to read them, but I couldn’t see anything. I was lost in his eyes, searching my way around his thoughts, his reasoning for leaving me, for letting me be beaten, shaved, bound, and held prisoner. I was hurt, confused...and pissed. Trying to figure him out, I’d accidentally let him into the windows of my soul, revealing all my feelings, a weakness I was usually good at hiding.

“I told you not to trust anyone,” he said.

My eyes shot him a resentful dart of distain. He could not possibly have been blaming this on me? It was my fault that I was bound to a bed with a busted jaw? I’d have kicked his ass if I’d been loose. But I wasn’t. Feeling helpless, vulnerable, and hurt, I looked away, closing my swollen eyes, attempting to keep the tears from flushing out. One tear got away, spilling down my cheek on to my neck. I felt the touch of Throane’s sandpaper thumb brazing against my cheek, tracing the origin of my fallen tear. I turned my head away from him.

“Don’t touch me,” I managed to murmur in anguish.

“No one will hurt you again,” he vowed, rising from my bed and leaving the room. Moments later, Marla returned to inject more sleepy serum into my I.V.

Throane wasn’t bullshitting. Weeks later, after I healed, I was moved from my hotel room, which I didn’t think was so bad, to an old historical mansion with a room five times the size of my old one. It was royally decorated in the same fashion as Kato’s hall, plush chairs and white linen with sections of the room divided by crushed red and purple velvet drapes. Pillars of candles were generously placed throughout the room. The

furniture was made of a rich oak that looked like it may have been hand-carved, something that I'd seen in those expensive magazines my mother used to look at. I was speechless. This bed was even bigger. It had to have been a king-size. It sat on a one-foot platform and was draped with sheer linens. The entire suite was decorated in the same fashion as the foyer back at the hotel. Seeing the king bed reminded me of my parent's bedroom. I used to sneak in there and jump up and down on their bed as if it were my own trampoline.

All I could do was take it in, circling the room, admiring every detail. This type of living was the kind my mother and I used to dream about. How ironic that the world had to come to so much destruction and my mother had to die in order for me to live the life of material luxury. Right by the doorway stood a beautifully handcrafted mirror that was as tall as the doorway. Once again, I was looking at myself, barely recognizing my own image.

I could see my mother in me. I had her big brown eyes and full lips and there was my father's narrow nose and slender build. My bruises from Kato had healed. My hair was growing back. I touched the back of my head. I could tell there was going to be a scar.

"Sorry about your head," Marla said.

"Wasn't your fault. Orders, right?"

“Sometimes, you do things you’d rather not.”

I looked at Marla to press the subject. Exactly what other things did she do? Had she killed someone? She quickly looked away, apparently regretting that she had said anything at all. I decided to leave it alone. For now. I continued to examine my reflection.

I looked borderline malnourished, but toned. I didn’t know where my muscles could’ve come from, except perhaps from climbing rocks and trees, running from wild animals and chasing food, I suppose. I swam the creeks a lot. Yeah, that could have been it. My arms and legs were decorated with scars, each with its own story of how I got it. Some I’d rather not tell. Others were of victorious battles with coyotes, wild boars, even a raccoon. I was proud of these scars, but it seemed as though they were frowned upon in this little fortress of a city.

I even had electricity, a battery-operated lamp beside my bed that I was advised to use sparingly. Batteries in this place were as good as gold. The view outside my room was spectacular. It faced hills of vineyards with an oasis parting it for about a half a mile. Odd contrast to all the destruction I had endured.

“One more thing,” Marla whispered, holding a woven bag in her hand. “The Bishop had it designed just for you.” She set the bag on the bed and pulled out beautifully woven strips of shiny leather fabric.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Your uniform. Bishop Kato wants you to train us. Anyone in the Fraternity is considered a nobleman, but since you are uhm...different...not from here, Bishop wants to show Carpathia that he is merciful.” Marla handed me the leather material. “You are to wear it anytime you leave your chambers.”

I took the uniform and examined it. It looked like it was made of strips of leather. The seams were artfully hand sewn with smaller strips of leather in a diagonal design. I held it up in front of me. Overall, it looked like a bathing suit with a leather sarong sewn into the hips. This uniform was strapless, tying like a shoestring in the back. It was similar to how the Fraternity’s uniform tied at the sides.

“You call this a uniform?” I snorted.

Marla pulled out a vest with four silver cuffs. The smaller cuffs were made for the upper arms and the longer cuffs for the forearms—all attached together with leather strings having one coiled silver cuff designed for neck protection that was attached to a breastplate with a cross welded on to it.

“Your armor,” she said, handing it to me. I took it, holding the uniform up with one hand and my armor in the other. “Here,” she said taking them from me. “I’ve been instructed to help you suit up. Hold your arms out.”

I did as I was told. Life did seem to be a little better around here when I did that. Marla draped the vest around me, threading my arms into the silver cuffs. Then she unsnapped the coiled cross and clamped it around my neck.

“Here.” Marla handed me a pair of leather gloves that covered my forearms, a tough material that would protect me from blades and other sharp objects. The gloves didn’t cover my fingers but looped on to my middle fingers on each hand. The end of the gloves conveniently connected to my silver cuffs.

“And...your boots. I have never seen a pair like ’em. You’d be the first. Amir doesn’t even have these,” Marla smirked and handed me the tallest pair of boots I’d ever seen in my life. I slid them on. These too, had to be laced up all the way to my knee, but they also served as protection against sharp objects. The soles were nice and thick. I could easily wedge some blades into them. Marla helped me tie the back, and adjusted my leather scaled kilt. “There you are, all suited up.”

I walked over to the mirror and stared at my reflection in awe.

“I look like some type of warrior,” I said.

“You are a survivor,” Marla answered.

A survivor. Sounds so heroic. I never thought of myself as anything but Thecla.

“Oh I almost forgot!” Marla ran back to the bag and pulled out a belt with metal loops, two pockets snapped shut with a silver clasp, and two harnesses to hold knives. She firmly attached it to my waist. “For your weapons.”

Weapons? Now I was getting excited.

“They’re giving me weapons?” I asked in disbelief. Even after Kato’s banquet display, they were giving me a weapon?

Marla smiled. “Because you are a warrior. Look.”

She spun me around to face the giant mirror again. Marla was right. My reflection confirmed that I was. I was a real warrior. Everything about me did look like a warrior, a womanly warrior, with curves and everything! The uniform definitely complimented my body. Looked like I inherited my mother’s body after all. I always thought my mother was the prettiest woman ever. I remember the pretty nightgowns she used to wear when she and Daddy were having their ‘special time’. That’s what she’d call it when she tucked

me in bed, supplying me with a glass of water so there'd be no reason to need her or Daddy for the rest of the night.

“Be a big girl and go to sleep,” she'd say. “Daddy and I are having our special time.”

I remember my mother's special gowns always showed cleavage. My chest was always as flat as a board.

“If you have a bad dream, make sure you knock before you come in –but here's Buster to keep the nightmares away.”

Buster was a stuffed monkey. She'd tuck Buster and me in, kiss me on the forehead, and head out the door to Daddy. Her silky gown flowed behind her like an angel. The light from the hallway revealed her curvy frame. My mother's figure was so like this curvy frame I was seeing in the mirror. I even had a little cleavage of my own. I had never thought of myself as sexy, but I always thought my mother was. Daddy told her that all the time so it must've been true. Yet, here I was, looking just like her and yet I couldn't help but feel somewhat ashamed.

But, now this warrior Marla was talking about was a bit easier to swallow. Even my shaven head made me look more like a badass. As if she heard my thoughts, Marla complimented my new haircut.

“I think you are the only woman in Carpathia who can make a bald head look fierce.

Fierce. I never saw myself as that, either. I’d just gone day to day trying to stay alive, finding something to eat and trying not to be eaten. If that made me a fierce warrior, then so be it.

“I am a survivor,” I declared proudly.

“Yep! And with any luck, I’ll be just like you when I grow up!” She joked. I couldn’t help but chuckle. Marla and I had reached an understanding despite all the things she’d done to me. It was clear that she didn’t want to harm me and that she was as much a prisoner here as I was. “Let’s go, Princess Warrior. It’s time for your orientation.”

Orientation? For *what*? Had I just gotten hired for something? Was I starting school? What now? I just healed! I followed Marla out to the courtyard. *Warrior*? Warriors fight battles and wars and it’s usually for land. There was hardly any land left and I wondered who was left to fight anyway – besides the people within Carpathia? None of this made any sense to me. This new world called Carpathia run by an army of meatheads under the order of a self-proclaimed Bishop seemed unreal. What had happened to the government, the army, and the President of The United States?

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