

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Kelsey Klosterman

April 7, 2016

Hair and Hide

by

Kelsey Klosterman

Lynna Williams  
Adviser

Creative Writing

Lynna Williams  
Adviser

Jim Grimsley  
Committee Member

Jack Hardy  
Committee Member

2016

Hair and Hide

By

Kelsey Klosterman

Lynna Williams

Adviser

An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2016

## Abstract

### Hair and Hide

By Kelsey Klosterman

Fifteen-year-old Eklah Fareki spends her days working in her village as the daughter of a butcher. To change things up, she colors her hair white with a dye of her own creation. But the neighboring country, Rargon, has instigated a war, and the battles soon make their way to Eklah's village. Her home is ravaged, and she and her best friend Nevi flee east. On the way, they meet other refugees who take them into the eastern country, Vali. They arrive at a military camp, where Eklah encounters a group of religious Valirens who believe that her white hair is a sign that she's been sent from their god to save them. The misunderstanding runs out of control, and Eklah is enrolled into the military camp as a soldier, where the Valirens plan to raise her to the top and have her lead them to victory against Rargon.

Hair and Hide

By

Kelsey Klosterman

Lynna Williams

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2016

## Table of Contents

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Geographical Map | 1 |
| Hair and Hide    | 2 |

Geographical Map



## PART I

The village is loud today. Erdu is teeming with the crackle of wooden wheels against gravel, chickens clucking, parents calling to their children to help them carry materials around. The traders from the fishing village Vieklos are here today, so all our people are running about, gathering our wares to trade: grain for salt, fresh lamb for fish caught near the shore. We're an inland village, so we don't get fish unless we trade for it. It's always been my favorite, but Mama and Papa usually can't afford it.

I sit in my kitchen, resting my cheek on my hand as I stare out the window, watching everyone move about. Papa is out with the livestock, out of sight, and Mama is cleaning some fresh beef. She turns to me, water running over her hands at the little wooden sink.

"Eklah, dear," she says. "You're making me nervous just sitting there watching me. Would you help me carry some of the meat outside?"

I pout, even though I know it won't do anything to change her mind. She scoffs as I stand up. I don't like trading days; they're always busy, always full of people I don't know. I hate being surrounded by strangers.

She fills a couple of wooden boxes with beef and mutton and chicken, wrapping each cut in thin brown paper, and hands me one of the boxes. She balances the other on her hip. She's full-bodied, a trait that she laments was never passed down to me, and the crate nestles perfectly into the crook of her waist. I don't bother trying to press my own burden into my hip; I hold it in front of me, the weight of it pulling at my shaking arms.

I follow her out the door and down the steps into the dirt below. A couple of kids run by, chasing some chickens that must have escaped their coop. The smell of fish is heavy in the air. I never liked the smell, but I like what it means. Maybe I can convince Mama to trade for fish



tonight, though it would mean we'd also have to get some salt. Fish without salt is no good, that's what Papa always says.

We pass through the crowd, dodging moving carts and people and getting the scent of fish and manure stuck in our wild hair. Half of the people I see are people from Vieklos. I keep my eyes down and follow my mother toward our cart. Halfway there, an old man steps into our path. Kovu is probably one of the smallest, oldest people in the village. He nods at us and grins, showing off a couple of missing teeth.

"Morning, Enna," he says to my mother. "All ready for trading day?"

"We're getting there," she answers. "Farro's out with the livestock, so it's just me and Eklah right now. There's a lot of cleaning to be done and beef to be dried."

"Sounds busy," Kovu says before turning to me. "So, Eklah, how are you liking the work so far? Like being a butcher?"

"It's a lot of dead things," I answer. "It's fine."

He waggles his eyebrows at me, big hairy white things that practically drop into his eyes. "That's the making of a good butcher, I tell you, Enna. Not afraid of death."

"I wouldn't exactly say that's a—" Mama says and then stops herself.

I'm almost sure I know what she was going to say. *I wouldn't exactly say that's a good thing, she wants to say. Death is just a step beyond violence, and that's always been a problem with this kid.*

I say nothing, waiting for the two to finish their conversation. Kovu turn to me and slaps his hand onto my shoulder.

"Hey, still got good old Anya?" he asks me, and I nod. The straw doll he made me when I was a kid is sitting on my bed in the kitchen, propped up against a pillow.

“She’s still there,” I tell him, and he bobs his head up and down, over and over.

“Sorry, Kovu, but these are a bit heavy,” Mama says. “Do you mind?”

Kovu grips my shoulder a little bit harder, shaking me. “Oh, sure. Get going, you two. We got a lot of people here today—lots of business to be done!”

My arms are numb by now, still shaking, and the edges of the wood are digging into my fingers. I stagger after my mother and drop the box onto the ground next to our cart, raising dust and making myself cough.

“Eklah, don’t get any dust on the meat,” Mama mutters as she places her own box down gently, like it isn’t half as heavy as her.

I start working automatically, taking the wrapped parcels and laying them out on the cart’s counter, organizing them by animal. Almost immediately, a few men from Vieklos approach and begin speaking with my mother about the different cuts and how fresh they are.

I’m half listening to the conversation when a girl my own age comes up, rests her elbows on the counter, and looks up at me from beneath her short, dark lashes. She’s full-bodied just like my mother, her chest small, her face round and short. She puckers her thick lips at me.

“Hello there, miss, I’ll have eight parcels of your finest meats,” she says.

“Really?” I ask her. “Did you want to pay for all of that?”

Nevi laughs and drops the act, straightening up and moving behind the counter with me.

“You got me,” she says. “I don’t have any money. But Mama says she doesn’t need help today. She’s making Beni learn how to trade and she says I’ll just get in the way.”

“Isn’t Beni a little young to be trading?” I ask. Nevi’s little brother is only six.

Nevi shrugs. “Whatever Mama wants done will be done. Anyway, can I steal you for a while? There’s way too much commotion here. I wanted to go somewhere quiet.”

I turn to my mother and wait for her to finish the transaction with the men from Vieklos, but the men seem to want to talk.

“It’s only a matter of time, you know,” one of them, a mustached man, is saying to my mother. “You know they’re sweeping through the west. They’re on their way here. You must have gotten some refugees like we did, haven’t you?”

“Carr,” the other man mutters. He’s clean-shaved and thicker in his waist. “That’s not polite conversation.”

“It’s relevant,” Carr says with a shrug. “I just want to know what the other villages think of it.”

“I’m not sure it’s worth talking about,” my mother says quietly.

“Why not?” asks the man. “This is Rargon we’re talking about. They’re expanding rapidly, taking people by force. It doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it bothers me,” my mother says, “but I’m not sure what we would be able to do about it. Either stay here or leave everything we know behind and head to the east.”

“We’ve got to fight back, don’t you think?” Carr waves his hands around and clenches them into fists. “It’s only a matter of time before they show up. Shinna’s got to get an army together and stop them from getting any further.”

“Carr, there are children here,” the clean-shaven man whispers, glancing at me and Nevi.

“Yes,” my mother says, “I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention such things around my daughter. Now, did you want to add in the mutton or not?”

“Mama,” I pipe up. “Is it alright if I go to the pond with Nevi for a little while?”

My mother rubs her finger and thumb against her temples and glances at Carr. “Yes, I think that would be best, actually. Stay as long as you want.”

Carr rubs his stubbled chin in thought, nodding to himself. “Only a matter of time.”

Nevi and I share a glance and run off, leaving my mother with the rude man and his flustered companion. We cross through the village, past the well that sits in the center, to the edge where the forest is allowed to grow. We slip through the trees, stepping over vines and raised roots until we’re out of sight from the village but within earshot. Erdu has a freshwater pond nearby, which is where we get our drinking water when the well dries up.

We can still hear some yelling and laughing as we sit by the water’s edge. Nevi takes off her shoes and dips her toes in, even though we’re not supposed to put our feet in there.

“Mama thinks she and Beni are going to sell a lot of grain today,” she says. “But it’ll be mostly bread. She’s sure we’re going to sell out of bread and pastries, and she plans on getting a whole bunch of salt for it.”

“Could you spare a little salt, then?” I ask. “I’m going to try to convince my mama to get some fish today.”

Nevi seems to consider it, rubbing her chin dramatically as she mulls it over. “Maybe if you give us a little fish, we’ll consider it.”

“Deal.”

We giggle, but it fades. Nevi circles her big toe around in the water, making little ripples drift across the pond’s surface. We stare at our reflections in the water.

“I can’t believe he brought that up,” she says, and I suppose we’re getting into it now.

“Mama says it’s really rude to mention it, especially with other villages,” I tell her. “Has yours said the same thing?”

Nevi nods. “I guess it makes everyone upset, which is fair. It’s not polite conversation.”

“Do you really think it’s going to happen soon? I mean, that’s what everyone says, if you listen closely enough. Everyone’s worried.”

“I don’t know,” Nevi whispers. “I’ve heard that in some cases, they go to certain towns peacefully. They don’t hurt anyone if you just surrender.”

“I haven’t heard that,” I answer, and I don’t want to elaborate.

Nevi huffs. “I don’t understand this at all,” she says. “War doesn’t make any sense. What are they even fighting over?”

“Something about territory and minerals, I think. At least, that’s what Papa told me, but he says it’s a lot more complicated than that.”

Nevi dips her fingertips in the water. “Rargon is a terrible country, starting a war over something like that.”

“And now everything’s expensive,” I say. “The villages they massacred—they’ve burned crop and stolen their livestock, and now people don’t have enough to trade and they won’t buy anything.”

“Are you only concerned about trading prices going up?” Nevi asks in disbelief. “Eklah, people are dying. Entire towns, entire villages. Burned crops mean the people can’t eat.”

“And that affects us,” I remind her. “And we’re stuck with the refugees.”

“Only until they continue east toward Vali,” Nevi says.

I pull my knees to my chest and fold my arms around my legs. “They’re in our houses, in our beds, eating our food. It’s not—what’s the word Mama uses? It’s not sustainable. There’s no room for them. We don’t have enough resources for everyone, you know? They just showed up here one day.”

I don't look at Nevi because I know she disapproves. "They're just staying here until they can move on to Vali. They just lost their homes, Eklah. Their families. They need some kindness."

I rest my cheek against my knees. "I don't know if we can afford kindness."

"Eklah."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." We shouldn't have brought it up. Talking about the war isn't going to do us any good. We're only kids, anyway. We can't do anything to help.

We both fall silent for a long time. I watch Nevi on the pond's surface. She's always been so pretty with her full face, her microcurls naturally wound so tight that her hair sticks up into whatever shape she cuts it into. It's been pulled into a little pouf on the top of her head for months now. Mine is much longer, the curls larger, but that's not the biggest difference. I pull at a strand of my own hair. Dark as night, its natural color.

But Nevi's? A beautiful shade of bright white.

I did that to her a few weeks ago, at her request. Since I was fourteen, a little less than a year ago, I figured out that I could strip my hair of all its color and make it pure white by putting a mix into it. All the ingredients could be found right around Erdu—put them together and the result is white hair. I wore it that way for months until Nevi asked for me to make the mix for her.

A day later, we had matching hair. White like the snow I've heard of in the north. We strutted around the village, claiming we were sisters even though everyone knew us and our families and knew we weren't related in the least.

But after a while, I could feel my hair becoming brittle. The dye was unhealthy, and I couldn't keep taking its color away. So I developed a mix to undo the white. And then my hair was back to its natural state, and the two of us looked like opposites again.

“What is it?” she asks, meeting my gaze in the water, a wary hand straying up to her hair. “Is it the roots? Can you see them?” She leans forward and gazes at herself in the water, tilting her head back and forth, trying to see the top of her head.

“You definitely can,” I tell her. I hold two fingers together and indicate their width. “There's about that much there now that's black. It looks kind of odd.”

“Maybe I can make it fashionable,” she says, but she's frowning at herself. “No, that won't work. Can you undo it? Undo the dye?”

“Sure,” I tell her. “It should work for your hair, too.”

“Great! Let's do it now.” She jumps to her feet. “You know what? We should redo yours. I really liked white on you. The contrast—it's really pretty.”

Heat comes to my face, and I'm thankful that I'm one of the darker-skinned people in this village and blushes aren't obvious on me. “You really like it?”

She clasps her hands together in front of her chest. “I love it on you. Will you do it?”

“If you want, sure. Let's do it. We'll switch.”

I get to my feet, and we grin at each other. She runs to one of the trees, kneeling and pushing through some brush.

“You need what, crushed carda petals?” she asks. “And lemon juice? What did you use for the color? Oh, and we'll need to find everything for mine, too.”

“You're really excited,” I murmur as I follow her. “I actually use this, over here.” I lead her to the other side of the pond, where a few pale vreda rocks lay beneath the underbrush. “I

take a few of these and crush them into powder, and then I add that to the mix. The vreda rock is the most important part.”

“Well, let’s take some.” Nevi picks up a few stones. “Here, put them in your bag.”

I do, and when I look up again, she’s grinning at me. “You really like this, don’t you? The hair dye stuff?”

Nevi waggles her eyebrows. “Of course. You look great either way, but I prefer your hair dyed.”

“Oh, stop.” I duck my head, my hands blindly searching for more stones even though I don’t need any more. “I have some carda flowers in my house, but I need a few things for your mix.”

She leans closer to me. We’re both kneeling in the grass, the underbrush thick in front of us. “You don’t mind making a whole new batch for me?”

“If it makes you happy, I’ll do it.”

Nevi side-eyes me and grins again. “So generous,” she says, and she kisses me on the cheek.

She gets to her feet to head home, and my face is burning, because I never expected her to do something like that. When she glances back at me, I’m still on my knees and I’m sure I’m blushing. She notices this time and starts laughing.

“What, can’t handle a little kiss?”

“Not when I’m not expecting it,” I mutter. I have my bag in a death grip.

“Well, what about when you are expecting it?” She saunters back over to me and pulls me to my feet. “I’m going to kiss you now. Are you ready?”



“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say, but she leans forward, and she’s kissing me again, on the lips this time, and it’s longer than before, and it’s deep, and it’s strange because I’ve never kissed anyone before because I’m only fifteen and this is really nice and I feel dizzy but only a little bit.

She’s the one who pulls away. My face is still burning, and I’ve never held my bag so tightly in my life.

“See?” she says. “You can handle it just fine.”

This time when she starts to leave, I follow her. I can’t stop looking at her as she walks. I’ve always thought she was so pretty with her wide hips and belly and her little curls and round cheeks, but now that I think about it, she’s always said the same thing of me, about my smaller frame and looser curls, and my long face and nose. She’s always made me feel better about myself, even though I’ve never really felt bad.

###

We return to my house shrieking in excitement over the new hair we’ll have. Mama is there, washing fish that she’s laying on the counter next to a small bowl of salt. Papa has returned from the livestock pens, and he’s sitting at the kitchen table with Kovu, each with a mug of tea in their weathered hands.

“Evening, Papa,” I say as we set our materials on the table.

My mother turns to me with pursed lips. “Eklah, get that off the table. We have a guest.”

“Kovu doesn’t mind,” I say, and the old man nods.

“Let the girls do what they want,” he says with a hearty laugh.

My mother clicks her tongue and shoots a look at my father. Papa glances at our ingredients and raises a brow. “Come on, kid. Put that stuff on your bed.”

“But we’re going to make it now,” I tell him. “We’re going to redye our hair.”

“Farro,” my mother says, narrowing her eyes at Papa.

“You’re going to have to wait on that,” my father says to me. “There’s work to be done in the pens. We sold out today, and Uya next door says she wants goat for dinner. Go on, now. We’ll trade the goat for some carrots to add to dinner tonight.”

“Now?” I ask. “The sun is nearly down. The day is over. You want me to work?”

“Go on,” my mother says sharply, turning to me with the cutting knife dangling from her fingers. “By the time I clean the fish and cook it, you should be done. Right in time for dinner.”

Nevi raises her hands to her hair. “My roots are terrible,” she mutters. “Eklah said they look bad. Won’t you let us do it now?”

“You look fine,” Mama says. “Sorry, girls, but you’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Now go on, Eklah. Get!”

Nevi’s lip wobbles, and I feel warm in my chest. “Uya should have gotten some goat when everyone was trading,” I hiss. “She’s making me do extra work for nothing. And now we have to wait!”

Mama’s voice is low. “Don’t you raise your voice at me.”

“It’s not my fault,” I mutter. I grab the dye ingredients and throw them onto my bed before storming out the door. I make my way toward the other edge of the village where the livestock pens are all lined up next to each other. I hurdle the fence and scan the area. Twenty-six goats today. I approach a white one with little brown spots smattered around its coat. I hook a rope around its neck and lead it out of the pen. On a panel of wood, I lay the goat down, pinning it against the ground and taking a knife to its throat. The creature wails, struggling against my hold, flailing its hooves around and nearly striking me in the face. Blood wells

against its neck, staining the pale hide, and it screeches. The other livestock lift their ears and turn their heads toward the pained squeals of their fellow. I press the blade further, slitting the animal's throat, and it falls limp against the ground.

When I pull away, there's blood on my hands and a little on my clothes. The goat twitches a bit, and I stare at it for a little while. There's still warmth in my chest and in my stomach, and I feel a bit sick. Nevi looked so surprised and upset that she had to wait. I shouldn't have told her about her grown-out roots. And I know it doesn't matter, and there's really no reason for either of us to be upset because we can just dye our hair tomorrow anyway. But my head is throbbing a little bit and my vision feels skewed.

I reach up and grab a bigger knife that's hanging from the fence. The butcher knife is huge and heavy in my hand, and I hold it there, balanced between my hands, until the goat twitches again, like it's not really dead.

I raise the blade and sling it down on the goat's neck, breaking through the vertebrae there, through the bone and the muscle and the stretching tendons. The fur is matted with blood now, the crimson a stark darkness against the pale white of the goat's hair. Some blood splattered in my direction, and when I look down, there are dark red dots covering my clothes. I forgot to bring out an apron first. It's probably on my face, too. I lick my lips, and the sharp tang of iron is there. I press my lips together and lick the blood away, letting it settle in my mouth against my tongue and teeth.

When I stand up, I tie the goat's legs together at the ankles and sling the body over my shoulder. It's heavy, but I keep the tie in one arm, grabbing a horn with the other hand and carrying the head along.

I make my way slowly back across the village, the carcass a heavy burden on my back. I'm slumped over, weighed down by the animal's body, blood dripping from both ends of the neck. There are still children out kicking their ball in the last light of day, and as I pass, one of them, a younger one, shrieks and runs to his mother. The others stop their game and watch me with wide eyes, as if a butcher's daughter carrying a goat carcass and disembodied head across the town is something strange. Some of the adults glance at me with raised eyebrows and pursed lips. A few whisper once they think I'm out of earshot. I can't hear them, but I know what they're saying: the same thing my mother whispers to my father about. The way I act sometimes—the behavior that comes from the warmth I feel in my chest and stomach. The blurry vision. The look they say I get in my eyes when I get mad. How easily it happens sometimes.

This isn't strange, I tell myself. This is my job. This is fine and normal and there's no reason anyone should look at me this way.

The body is heavy, and I drag it up the steps to my house, leaving a bloody trail in my wake that my mother will probably clean up later. I open the door and swing the body into the room, watching it slide across the wooden floor of the kitchen, right towards my mother's feet. She turns around and nearly screams, throwing her hand against her heart, her eyes wide.

“Goodness, Eklah, why do you have to throw it across the room like that?”

“It needs to be cleaned,” I say before moving past her to the sink, running some water over my hands, and passing Papa and Kovu to go to my bed. It's in the same room as the kitchen, and I take a look at the straw doll on my pillow before moving it aside and crawling into bed, turning my back towards them all.

###

Nevi's curls are sopping wet, soaked with the clear, watery liquid that will return the color to her hair. She's bent over the kitchen table, the clear substance spilling from her head into the bowl I've placed beneath her. Her hair begins to turn black immediately, but it's uneven, her head a mess of black and white splotches.

"You look like a cow," I tell her, and she tilts her head towards me and makes a face.

"Don't be so rude." But she's laughing, trying to get a good look at her hair even though it's too short for her to see it.

My mother sighs from her eternal place at the kitchen counter. The light of afternoon spills in through the window and catches on her dark hair, lighting up the bare skin of her arm. She's chopping vegetables, which was fine when she was cutting up carrots, but now that she's slicing onions the air is sharper and my eyes are watering.

"You girls are stranger than your father's mother," she mutters.

I blink a few times. "Can't you chop those later, Mama? You're making my whole face hurt."

My mother scoffs. "Do you want to eat today or starve?" she asks, more to herself than to me. "I don't see you doing anything useful."

"We are doing something useful," I retort. "We're making ourselves pretty."

"Pretty?" Her chuckle is harsh. "What use is pretty in a place like this? Now, back in the village where I was born, pretty was very important. That's how I ended up here with your catch of a father." She pauses in her cooking and wiggles her large behind.

"Gross," I mutter, turning my attention back to Nevi and pouring another round of the anti-dye over her head. It spills through her curls into the bowl below her. I take a couple handfuls of her hair and squeeze, trying to get the mix thoroughly into her hair.

“Make sure you get it all,” Nevi says. “I don’t want it to be uneven.”

“Relax. When I’m done with you, there won’t be a single white strand left.”

“That would be useful in my old town,” my mother says to herself, patting her graying hair, a wistful look in her eyes.

Nevi smiles at me, showing her little teeth that look like they belong in a baby’s mouth. “We’ll be opposites again.”

“Yup, I’ll have the white this time.” I tilt my own head, feeling the weight shift on top. My curls are piled high on the top of my head, covered in the thick white dye. When I wash it out, it’ll look like Nevi’s did this morning.

“There we go,” I Say, pouring the anti-dye over Nevi one last time. “Nice and black, back to normal. Now let’s get some water through it to wash it out.”

“This sure is a complicated process.”

I pick up a bowl of water and tilt it towards her, letting it pour over her again so she’ll shut her mouth. “Not really. It was basically black again with one rinse of anti-dye. You could tell what color your hair actually was. It was just uneven; there was still enough white in it to look weird.”

I grab a towel and hand it to her. She takes it and wraps it around her hair, patting it down to soak up some of the water. When she lifts her head, some of the water escapes from the towel and drips down her neck.

“What about you, then?” she asks. “How long do you have to keep the dye in?”

“A couple of hours to make it really bright. And since I haven’t done it in a while, I want it to look nice. I can wash it out in a bit.”

My father comes home for lunch before we wash it, and he rolls his eyes at me when he sees what we're up to. We wait half an hour before pouring water through my hair and scrubbing the dye out of it. Nevi watches in awe as the white becomes more and more apparent, and finally, after wrapping it in a towel for a little while to dry, I unwrap it and grab a hairbrush.

"It's beautiful," Nevi whispers as I take the brush to my hair and start working at the damp knots.

"Wait until it's completely dry. That's when it looks really good."

My mother gives an exasperated sigh from the counter. The water in front of her is boiling over the fire, the smell of soup thick in the air, mixed with the leftover flowery scent from the dye.

"When's lunch ready?" I ask. "Can Nevi stay over?"

"Lunch is ready when you start helping," Mama tells me. "Sorry, Nevi, your parents will have to cook for you today. There's not enough in the pot for four."

"That's alright, Enna," Nevi says, hopping up from her seat. "I'll see you tomorrow, Eklah—when your hair is dry."

She smiles at me, but there's something in her eye that I catch as she turns toward the door—something mischievous. I smirk at her, and she winks before she darts out the door.

###

When lunch is in our bellies and Papa has returned to the pens outside, I string up the meat with Mama. It needs to dry, and we hang it over the counter, where we've laid a towel to catch any juice that falls.

Mama is knotting another piece of string when she starts talking.

"Uya told me about yesterday," she says quietly.

“What about yesterday?”

“How you carried the goat across the village, along with the head. Why did you cut the head off?”

“It was still alive,” I mutter, tying a fresh piece of string around the end of a hook.

“So you decapitated it?”

I don’t say anything, trying to fish the thread through the hook’s end.

“You have blood splattered all over your face, you know. You must have hit the goat very hard.”

“It wasn’t dead.”

My mother bites her lip, her hands slowing in their work for a moment.

“And you had that look in your eyes,” she says.

I lower my hands and look up, but not at her. I stare straight ahead of me.

“What do you want me to do, Mama?” I ask. “Haven’t we talked about this before? I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It just happens. I’m trying to keep it under control.”

“Uya says that it’s an anger problem.”

“I think that’d be fairly obvious,” I say, working at the hook again.

“Don’t you want to talk about it? I mean, is it getting worse? How are you doing with the other kids in the village?”

“They don’t like me.” I don’t know why she’s asking, since she knows the answer.

“Well, you keep hitting them.”

“They make me mad!”



My mother doesn't answer, working very slowly. I dig the sharp end of the hook through a piece of meat, forcing it through the meat until it comes out the other side. My mother is watching me out of the corner of her eye.

"I don't know how to stop it," I say. "It's just a part of me. It gets overwhelming and I just—I just act." I scrunch up my face. "And I don't need the approval of the other kids here."

"I'm just worried about you—you know, finding a mate. Someone to carry on our work with."

I say nothing. I haven't told Mama about Nevi, and I don't care to.

"Your temper is going to get the best of you," she goes on. "You need to learn how to hold back some of the things that you say to people."

"I don't say anything rude to people who don't deserve it. Like Nevi."

"Eklah."

I press the hook between my fingers, holding it as tightly as I can, and then I place it back on the counter, as gently as I can. The warmth is back, just in my chest.

"I'm going to get some air. Is that okay?"

My mother looks at me.

"Eklah."

I turn towards the door. "I'll be back to help later. It's fine."

It's late afternoon, and the village is bustling as usual. The little kids are back at it with their ball, and some adults are playing a card game at a table next to the well. Some older kids, teenagers like me, steal the ball from the little kids and start playing their own game, kicking it back and forth, turning it into a match.

I go to the well and sit on its edge, staring at the floor. I wait for the warmth to subside, and as my chest cools, I close my eyes and rest my head in my hands. I take a few breaths, letting the air fill my back and expand it like the growth Uya's wife got right before she died. I let my heart settle, and soon, I start to feel okay. I keep my head down until I hear the kids yell a little bit louder than before.

I raise my head just in time to see the ball take over my field of vision. And then there's an immense amount of pressure on my face, crushing my nose and my cheek and my right eye, and I'm in the air. The ground is hard and rocky against my back and elbows when I land, and when I sit up, my face is throbbing, my arms skinned and red and burning.

My chest is on fire. My stomach, my limbs.

I scream at the kids as they approach. "What is wrong with you?" I shout at them, holding my eye and looking over them all, trying to find out which one looks guilty. "Who kicked that?"

A few steps away, and the others exchange looks, like they're unsure of what to do next. One of the girls turns to a boy with dark, shaggy hair.

"Palo, look what you did!"

"It wasn't me!" he shouts, but I can see it in his face. There's a little bit of fear, a little embarrassment—but there's the hint of a smile on his face. I get to my feet.

"You think this is funny?" I ask him, my lips curling back. "You glad you hit me?"

"I didn't mean to," he says, but then he snickers, and it doesn't matter if he meant to or not.

"Is that so?" My voice is low as I approach.

“Palo, you’re going to die!” one of the girls shrieks, and she sounds more amused than afraid for him.

“You’re going to wish you died,” I snarl at him before I lunge forward.

He doesn’t have enough time to dodge, and my whole body seizes up with the impact when I run into him. We both fall into the dirt, and I wrap my legs around him, pressing my knees against the sides of his ribcage. My fingers curl into a fist, and I throw my hand forward. There’s no way for him to get out of the way, and the punch connects with his cheek. His head whips to the side, his eyes wide open. The second hit is to his neck. The third to his nose. Over and over, I clench my fists and hurl them at him.

“You did it on purpose!” I shout at him. “Didn’t you? You think it’ll impress your friends? You think it’s funny?”

Some of the kids are screaming, but the sounds are muffled, like I’m under the surface of the freshwater pond. I lift my arm to force another hit to his face, and then there’s a hand on my arm. And then another, and a third. I’m forced away from Palo. I whip my head around. The hands belong to some of the other kids, who throw me in the other direction. I stumble back, and my spine falls against the edge of the well. I scream at the impact and land in the dirt.

Dust rises and fills my lungs. I cough it out, vaguely aware of the screaming around me. And then I hear my mother’s voice.

“Eklah!”

My eyes are shut but there are two more pairs of hands on me, pulling me to my feet. My mother has me by one arm, Nevi holding the other. Mama begins to drag me towards our house, and Nevi does her best to push me forward gently, keeping me on my feet.

“I cannot believe you,” my mother is saying as we pass the onlookers. “Utterly disgraceful! What an embarrassment. How dare you?”

“He hit me first,” I mutter, but she’s not listening. She goes on, her shrill voice filling the entire village, berating me the whole way home.

###

Mama and Papa put me to work for two days. Papa took a little time off, since most of the work was going to me. It’s not my fault; I can’t control the warmth, the fire. I burn as I slit the throats of the livestock, as I drain their blood. As I clean up after them. I stay in the slaughtering house nearly the whole time.

Two days come and go, and my punishment is over. It’s been two days since Nevi and I switched hair colors, two days since I beat Palo’s face in, two days since I got a black eye from the ball. My spine still hurts from the well. I return home and the feeling that I need to get out of the village is still crawling beneath my skin.

I need an excuse to leave, and I have one. I learned the last time that I dyed my hair that it only looks natural for about two weeks, and then my hair grows out far enough that you can see the natural roots. My hair still looks just fine, but I need an excuse to get out of here. I grab my bag and turn to my mother.

“I’m going to the pond,” I tell her, since I can find everything I need there.

“You don’t need any more hair dye,” Mama says quietly, standing in front of the pot of water, waiting for it to boil.

“I just want to make sure I have all the materials for the next time,” I mutter. “I’m going.”

“Fetch some water while you’re there, then. The well’s dry. And at least try to stay out of trouble, would you?”

She hands me a goatskin bag, and I take it without a word.

I go to Nevi’s house first, and when I knock, her little brother Beni answers the door. He grins at me, a few of his baby teeth missing.

“Eklah!” he cries, and he wraps his lanky arms around me. He hasn’t yet grown into his limbs.

“Hey, kid,” I say, trying to put some emotion into my voice. “Is your sister here?”

“Sure thing.” Beni lets go and turns to the house. “Nevi!” He holds out the last syllable until he runs out of breath, and then he takes a moment to catch it again. “Eklah is here!”

Nevi appears from around the corner, and I hold up each of my bags.

“I’m going to get water and ingredients for the dye,” I tell her.

“Already?”

I try to smile. “Yup. Want to come along?”

She watches me for a moment, pressing her thick lips together. “Not even a question.”

She slips on her shoes, and we head to the village’s small orchard first. I find a few low-hanging lemons to drop into my bag, and after that, it’s a walk through the woods until we find the pond. There, we find the carda petals and pale vreda rocks and all the little things we need to make the paste. We gather some of the best, enough for many weeks’ worth of dye.

When the work is done, Nevi sits by the pond, takes off her shoes, and dips her feet in as she always does.

“You know we drink that, right?” I ask as I sit beside her. “You know that’s one of the reasons we’re here?” I hold up the empty goatskin bag.

“No one will know.”

“I know. I don’t want to drink your feet water.”

“Well, you should have thought of that before you waited to get some water. Should have done it before I sat down.”

“You’re hopeless.” I lean forward and fill the bag, pulling the strings to seal it up before I set it aside. I lay back in the grass, the thicker blades poking against my back. I keep my leather shoes on; I have no intention of putting my feet into our drinking water. “You know, Vieklos doesn’t even have a good source of water. All they have is sea water, and that’s full of salt.”

“And that’s why we can trade our good water for fish,” Nevi says. “It all works out. They want our stuff, we want theirs. That’s how trading works.”

“My point is, it’s not just our village whose water you’re ruining. You’re sending feet water to everyone in Vieklos.”

“The people in Vieklos don’t have to know.”

I sigh, because there’s no getting through to her. She does what she wants. I sit up and stretch. “We should bring this back. Mama gets impatient when we don’t come back right away.”

“Your mama can wait. We’re busy.”

“Doing what? We’re not doing anything.”

But there’s a glint in her eyes again, something mischievous in her smile, and she plants a kiss on my lips before I even know what she’s doing.

“Hey!” I pull back. “You can’t just sneak up on me like that.”

“What, do I need to ask your permission first?”

“That would be great.”

She mock-pouts. “Fine. Eklah Fareki, do I have your permission to kiss you again?”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Oh, come on! That’s not even fair. You have to give me an answer.”

“What if the answer’s ‘no’?” I wiggle my brows at her, and she sticks out her bottom lip.

“That would just be sad,” she says. “And embarrassing.”

“Well, it’s a good thing the answer’s yes.”

It takes a second, and then she grins, showing me both rows of tiny, crooked teeth.

“That’s a great answer,” she says, and she leans towards me.

This kiss is different from the others because neither of us is surprised and I’m kissing her back this time. It’s long and deep and I feel something in me that’s happy, and excited, and there’s a warmth that’s different from the angry heat. It’s kind and familiar, and the feeling moves around from my heart to my stomach to my arms and my face. I can’t keep track of it, but I know I like this, and I feel like we should have been doing this a long time ago.

She’s the one who pulls back, but it’s only for a second, and we stare at each other and then we start kissing again, and she pushes me back into the grass and neither of us will stop.

We don’t stop for a long time. I’m dizzy when she pulls away again, light-headed, like I’m swimming and maybe drowning in that pond next to us, but in a nice way. I gaze up at her, and she’s smiling, a different sort of smile. It’s lost its mischief, and she just looks content. Her hand is in my hair and I don’t remember when it got there, or how, but I like the feel of it.

She lays her head down on my chest and rests it there, collapsing on the ground next to me. Her hand finds mine, and we lay silent, maybe for hours.

“Don’t tell my mama,” I whisper, and she giggles.

I nearly fall asleep with her there, and I don't know how much time passes before I hear it: yelling in the distance. I open my eyes and look into the treetops in front of me. Nevi raises her head.

At first it's one person, but almost immediately, it's a lot of people. And then the yelling turns into screaming, and when Nevi looks at me her eyes are wide and there is no more content smile on her face.

"It can't be them," I whisper, but her face is pale. We both know the truth. It's time; we've known this was going to happen for months.

*It's only a matter of time.*

In an instant we're both on our feet. Nevi's already running toward the village, and I grab both my bags and sling them over my shoulders as I take off after her.

I already know what's happening before I get there, but it doesn't stop my whole body from turning cold when we reach the village. Nevi and I skid to a stop, and we stare, both of us frozen.

Fire. That's the first thing I see. It's everywhere: surrounding the houses, the fences of the livestock pens. The goats and cows and sheep are bleating until their throats go dry, stampeding in their pens and knocking each other over in a panic.

And then there are the people. My peers, my neighbors, and they are all running, and they are all screaming, and there is so much happening that none of them even see Nevi and I as they sprint past.

And scattered about the village are strangers. Faceless strangers in armor, silver and gleaming orange in the firelight. Their blades and bows and drawn, arrows flying through the air, swords and knives and spears hitting the flesh of my people.



Uya, my mother's friend, is in the distance, her baby daughter in her arms until an arrow flies into her back, lodged beneath her shoulder blade. Uya, whose husband died less than a year ago, falls to the ground, the baby tumbling from her arms, screaming, crying, the blanket unwrapping and leaving the infant naked beneath the flames.

Palo's older sister, a girl I know but not that well, has him by the arm, dragging him behind her. One of his legs appears to be broken. She's shrieking at him to hurry up, and he's screaming in pain. His face is bruised and bloody and I know more of that damage is from me than the soldiers. His shaggy dark hair is stuck to his forehead with blood, and his sister slings her arm beneath his soldiers to help him along until a spear is thrust through her leg. She crumples to the ground, Palo falling with her, and then the spear is in Palo's stomach, pushing past the flesh and muscle into the bone, into his organs, and he's screaming only for a moment and then he stops. His sister is shrieking beside him, calling his name over and over until the spear is in her neck.

I grab Nevi's arm, afraid she will run off, but my hand is shaking against her wrist, and my grip is very loose because suddenly I don't know how to hold onto things.

"My house," Nevi whispers. "Mama. Papa. Beni."

"Nevi," I try to say, but my voice is hoarse. From the smoke or the shock or the constriction in my throat, I don't know. The heat is blaring against my skin. "We have to get out."

"I have to find Beni and my parents," she says. "Eklah, I have to find them. Beni was at home when we left."

"We don't—we don't have time to find your brother." I realize I'm pleading, but I already know what she will do. I know her too well, and she won't listen to me. She tears her

wrist from my hand, and it's not hard because I can't hold her tightly at all, and she takes off, into the smoke, into the fire, into the mass of screaming people and the soldiers and the blades. She yells for her parents, and then her brother, and then she's gone.

I am standing there, frozen, on the edge of the trees and the edge of the village like a coward. I don't know what to do. I should try to find my own mama, or figure out where Papa is because I haven't seen him since this morning, but I'm scared and I can't move. But then I decide.

I have to find my family. At least, I have to make sure Nevi gets out okay. I run toward my flaming house, but I have only taken two steps when I am grabbed. I scream, but when I look up, I find Kovu's dark eyes staring at me.

"Eklah, you've got to get out of here, kid," he says.

"My parents," I whisper, my voice cracking in the smoke.

Kovu's grip on my shoulder loosens a bit. "Kid," he says. "Your father—the livestock pens—he—"

He stops speaking, and then he takes hold of my wrist and starts pulling me away from my house. I start to shout again, because I have to get inside to see if my mama is there or not. That's where I left her. She's counting on me to get water. She's still mad at me for the fight. I look toward my house, and there's someone in the doorway.

Mama.

The little wooden house is trembling, waving in the heat, and it feels like my eyes are playing tricks on me. I pull towards the house, but Kovu's holding tight and I'm too weak to pry my arm away. Mama falls against the doorframe, the image of her hazy, and she looks up. Her eyes find mine, and I scream at her, and the house shakes once more and the roof caves in. She

disappears beneath the rubble and I shriek, I cry out so loud it completely wrecks my throat. There's heat on my skin and in my face and when I look up again I'm on my knees, Kovu's hand still wrapped around my wrist.

Kovu tries to pull me back to my feet, and he puts so much effort into it that he doesn't see the silver soldier approaching us. I can't give a coherent warning before there is an axe in Kovu's arm. He releases me, and he stares at me as his knees give way.

"You have to run," he whispers, and then the axe is in his back and he is face-down in the dirt.

The soldier turns to me, and I spin around and run. But I'm still not leaving the village. Like a fool, I sprint through the madness towards Nevi's house, because I need something when I leave this village. I can't leave this place alone. I can't be alone.

Nevi is kneeling at the blackened ruins of her home, her little brother in her lap. Nevi holds him against her, trembling.

"It's okay," she whispers. "You're going to be alright, hear me? I'm going to make sure."

Beni opens his mouth to speak, but he chokes on the blood and coughs, his little body convulsing. He looks up at her, riddled with wounds, and I watch as his eyes turn to glass, and then he's staring through her.

"Beni," Nevi whispers. "Beni, you can't. You can't do this."

"Nevi," I say, but she doesn't seem to hear me.

"You have too much you have to do," Nevi says. "You can't leave yet."

"Nevi, he's dead." The words come out easily, and only afterward does my throat constrict again.

Nevi's breathing comes fast and shallow, and I grab her arm and pull her up. Beni falls from her lap, his limbs crumpling into a heap that makes me want to vomit.

"Beni!" she shouts, but I pull her from her house, pull her no matter how she struggles against me, crying her brother's name, sobbing.

"Come on!" I stop and face her, taking her shoulders in a death grip, forcing her to look at me. "If you don't start running now, we're both going to be dead. Do you understand?"

Nevi's eyes are wide, the tears refusing to stop. Her mouth parts, and she nods.

We turn and run. We can hear the armored steps behind us, the howls of panicked animals, the cracking of collapsing houses, the bloody thumps of steel and iron against bone. The moaning of the dying, the wailing of the loved ones watching them. I pull Nevi along, and even though the soldiers are fast, we are faster. I run more than I have ever run in my life, and I think of my mama in the doorway, of my papa, of Kovu and Uya and Palo dead on the ground, of Beni's eyes, and another scream tears itself from my core through my throat and into the air, and I don't stop running until I feel like I, too, am dead.

###

I'm tired. I'm so tired, but I swear I can still hear them behind us, the swords, the hatchets, the shrieks and the sounds of blades puncturing muscle and skin. I'm exhausted, but we keep running.

We keep running.

###

The woods thin out. Nevi and I are alone. It's cold here, colder than Erdu, and I don't know where this is. I don't know how long we've been walking. We could only run for so long.

The two of us keep moving forward, one step at a time, dragging our feet along as we go. I still have both my bags slung over my shoulders, one full of useless hair dye ingredients and the other half full of water. We've been drinking from it. We found some apple trees and stole their fruit. I don't know how long it will be until we get somewhere, or where that place will be, and we need to eat.

We find them as night falls. The sun is falling slowly behind us, and I realize we've been heading east. And then I see them: the hazy figures in the distance, orange in the fading light.

We stop. I hold on tight to my bag of ingredients. It has rocks in it, and I'm ready to use it as a weapon. It's the only reason I've been dragging it along.

One of the figures stands. I feel the strap of the bag in my hand, ready to swing it around as the figure approaches.

It's someone old. At least, old to me. They must be the same age as my parents.

"You've been through so much," they say, stopping a few paces away. Neither of us says anything back, and they hold out their hands. "Has Rargon attacked you? Rargon has attacked us all. Are you all alone?"

I don't know what to tell them. We are alone, aside from each other, but I don't want to say it. We should pretend we have friends with us, people who could back us up in a fight.

"It's alright," the person says. "We're in the same place. We're going eastward, to Vali. Do you know where that is?"

"It's the country north and east of ours," Nevi says. "Are you also Shinnan?"

The person nods. "We all come from the same country. Rargon has moved in through the west, and they're moving through both Shinna and Vali. Do you live close by?"

"Not anymore," Nevi whispers.

The other Shinnan exhales and rubs their chin. There's some kind of sorrow in their eyes. "It's dangerous to be here. And it's dangerous to go back. We're happy to take you two with us. We'll bring you somewhere safe."

"Where is safe?" I ask. "Vali? You said they've already been attacked, too."

"Rargon is sweeping eastward through both countries," they say. "But Vali has a military; they'll be able to protect us. They're keeping Rargon's forces back. They can fight back."

"Fight Rargon?" I whisper.

They nod. "It's the safest place you can go now. The west and north are under siege, and to the south is nothing but an ocean. The only way to go is east. Would you like to come with us?"

Nevi and I exchange a look. I stare at the bag in my hand, full of useless things and rocks. We have no idea who these people are, but our only other option is to be alone. Wandering around by myself, with no idea where we are, with no certainty to get food or water or to keep living.

It's not the way I want to go.

"It's fine with me," I say, and Nevi nods.

"We'll go with you."

The Shinnan bobs their chin up and down before looking us over. "You're cold. Let me give you each a coat."

"Oh—that's alright," Nevi begins, but the Shinnan has already approached their companions. Two of the others, an adult woman and a boy who must be about twenty, shed off

their coats and hand them to us. The boy's coat has a hood in it, and I pull it up over my head against the cold.

###

The border between Shinna and Vali is two days away by foot. I wish we had horses to ride, because my feet ache, and even with the jacket, the air is cold. I can't imagine how the two who gave their jackets to us are dealing with the wind's chill. But it isn't long until I find out.

We're a day away from the border, camping out the night, and it's freezing.

"Mam, I'm freezing," a boy whines. It's the one who gave me his coat. "I'm going to die of cold. Why did we give them our jackets?"

"Quiet, Frulan," the woman huddled up beside him hushes him. She's bigger than he is, the one who gave her coat to Nevi.

The wind picks up, and Frulan starts shivering. "I need it back, Mam," he says. His mother tries to quiet him again, but he turns his eyes on me. "What have they done to deserve our jackets? Why do they get shelter from the cold?"

"Be kind," his mother says, but he's on his feet.

"Hey, you," he calls, approaching us. "Hand me my jacket back. Why don't you share?"

"You already decided to share it," I say. "You're the one who gave it away."

"That wasn't my choice."

"Well, it's been made." It's freezing. I am not giving up this jacket.

Frulan stoops down and grabs the collar. "Give it!"

"No way!" I'm pulled to my feet, and when I gain my footing, I try to pull away. But his grip is strong, and he's trying to tear the thing off of me. Even in the cold, I feel the heat blooming in my chest, in my face. "Don't you touch me!"

I throw my hand forward and punch him straight in the nose, knuckles hard and sharp to make it hurt. Frulan stumbles away, his face admitting he wasn't expecting that at all.

“Eklah!” Nevi shouts, on her feet behind me.

“What’s your problem?” he cries.

“What’s yours?” I retort. “You really want this jacket? I’ll fight you for it. Try me!”

Frulan’s mother is by his side now, her hand on his arm to keep him back.

“Don’t you dare,” she hisses at him. He scowls at me, but the tension leaves his body.

“Frigid bitch,” he mutters as he turns away.

###

We walk for one more day. It’s a group of twenty or so, smaller than the population of Erdu, but the number goes up over time as we find more stragglers, more people like Nevi and me, who are alone and scared, or people who don’t know where they’re going. Each time, someone in our group tells them the story: that we’re going east, that we’re seeking protection from Vali’s military, and the people join us. No one we’ve met has said no. It’s as if it’s impossible to reject something that almost sounds like salvation—something that at least sounds better than death.

We pass through villages that have not yet been touched. We ask for small amounts of food and fresh water. The villagers stare at us, and some are very kind but others look shocked. Scared. Some seem angry, and I think that I must have looked that way at the refugees in Erdu. Here we are, using their water, eating their food. They’re small things, but they make the journey easier. We warn the villages of what is to come, but some of them don’t seem concerned, like they don’t think it’ll happen to them. But I know it will. It happened to me.



Eventually, a little beyond the border between Shinna and Vali, we reach a different form of civilization. I'm told it's a military camp that provides temporary housing for refugees before they move further into the country, where it's safer. The camp has high steel walls surrounding it, and the whole thing is much larger than all of Erdu, even including all of the livestock pens and the pond.

As we walk around to the front of the camp, we pass a pond surrounded by shrubbery. Beneath the leaves I see a flash of white peeking out. I realize with a start that they're vreda rocks. I never thought they would be anywhere but home. Whenever we travelled to other villages to trade, I never saw the rocks nearby.

The gates of the camp open for us, and inside, I am amazed at what I see. Tents are erected here, along with some blocky wooden buildings and rows upon rows of buildings that look to be made of steel, just like the camp walls. There is a huge building on the far side, and it by itself is larger than my village. Beige and white flags wave from the wall and on top of every building.

It's loud here. Some of the soldiers peer at us as we pass, but most barely seem to notice that we're there and continue on, pretending to fight each other, yelling at each other, moving in sync in groups. The refugees are ushered to the right side of the camp, near the tents. We're told to use the tents and eat and drink for a few nights before going on our way and making room for the next group that shows up. We're given food and one blanket apiece, but after that, our group settles down, and it's like a cold veil has been draped across this half of the camp, and no one really speaks. I don't want to talk to them, and it seems like they don't really want to talk to each other, either.

I think we all understand. They said before that they've been through the same thing. Some of them know each other, but most of them showed up completely alone. They have also lost their villages. They have lost their people.

They say there are a lot of military camps along the border. They say that they'll protect us while we're here, and once we've moved on, they'll protect us from afar by keeping Rargon out of Valiren territory. They talk, but it's never long before they quiet down.

Nevi tries to smile at them, but I keep my hood up and don't say a word.

###

The next day, even more people arrive. There are so many people here and I didn't even know this many people existed. It's hard for me to imagine so many camps, each filled with soldiers and refugees. And these refugees are just the ones who have already lost their homes, their families, and everything they had before the war started. There are many more who will come, who will be like us. And others will never make it out of their villages. People like my mother and my father. People like Beni and Kovu. People like Uya and Palo and his sister.

Some of them say the war will never stop.

I am not looking at anyone. I have not spoken to anyone but Nevi since I got here. I just followed the others and went where they told me. I've spent most of the past day sitting in one of the tents with Nevi and a few other Shinnans. Nevi has brought me my rations to eat inside the tent. I keep my hood up, hoping no one looks at me. I don't want to be around all of these strangers.

On the morning after our arrival, Nevi turns to me. "You should get out of this tent, you know. Get some air."

"I don't need to."

“I’m not going to keep bringing you your food. Just come outside and sit. It’ll be almost exactly the same as being in here.”

I know she’s right. I exhale and adjust my hood over my head before following her outside. We go to the fire and take some stale bread. I try to chew it into smaller pieces, but it’s hard against my teeth and I worry a little that I might break my teeth instead of the bread.

“You gonna give me that jacket or not?”

I look up from under my hood to find Frulan staring down at me.

“Excuse me?” I say.

“You’ve got a blanket now,” he says. “And a fire. You’re warm enough. That jacket is mine; give it here.”

“It’s mine now,” I tell him. “I’ve grown to like it.” The heat is back. The flames cast warmth against my skin, but there’s a fire in my chest, the natural thing, what I’m used to. I dare him to challenge me.

“You’ve got an attitude problem, you know that?” Frulan grabs my collar again. It seems he hasn’t learned his lesson since the last time he tried this.

I get to my feet and grab the hand that’s around my collar. “You think I have an attitude problem? You might want to check yourself.” I take his wrist between my hands and push them in opposite directions. He cries out, flinging his hand back before I break a bone.

He shakes out his arm and holds his fists in front of his face. I don’t move into any kind of stance; I just leap forward and force all of my weight against him. We tumble into the dust together, and then people are shouting around us. I get a punch to his cheek before he forces me away, turning us over so that he has me pinned. My hood falls back and my pale curls spill free around my shoulders, and I wrench my arm from his grasp, grabbing a fistful of his hair and

yanking it towards me. People are shouting as he falls face-first into the dirt beside me, and I use the opportunity to roll away. I get to my feet and kick dirt into his face. He grabs my ankles and pulls, tripping me up and resulting in me flat on my back.

Fruhan crawls over me, ready to punch, when hands upon hands grab him and pull him away. I sit up and find a man kneeling right there in front of me, his face inches from mine, his eyes wide, his lips parted.

“Vali,” he whispers.

“What?” I scoot away from him and try to get to my feet. I rub at my neck, my knees shaking, but then there’s a hand on my shoulder. A woman is looking at me with her mouth agape. The man has remained on his knees and is now praying. The woman in front of me starts to sob.

A crowd is gathered from the fight, but now almost all of them are staring at me. People are yelling, and then someone else grabs my arm. I jerk away, but someone grabs a fistful of my hair. I yell in protest and swat the hand away, but another has seized me, holding my face too tightly in their hands, turning me towards them. The people shout, crying *Vali* over and over, and others are on their knees praying and some are crying and some are watching me and the rest are grabbing my hands and my face and my hair. I start to shriek and thrash around in their grip, and then there is another great shout, a booming voice that stops all the hands and the prayers, and most of the people turn to the source of the voice.

A huge man is standing there. He, too, is staring at me, and he raises a thick eyebrow before stepping to the side. Behind him is a woman who is maybe twice my age, with some wrinkles and a shaved head. Everyone is looking at her instead of me, and for a moment she meets my eyes and does nothing.

She whispers something to herself, but I can't hear what she says, and she approaches me. When she's a few feet away, she whips her head around to face the others, and she yells at them to get away from me. They do, but another hand reaches out for me, toward my head. The woman swats it away, and the sound echoes through the camp. She narrows her eyes at the person, who slinks back into the crowd, before she turns to me.

"Hello there, my child," she says softly, and the people around us shift. "I'm so sorry you've just gone through all this. Are you alright?"

I don't answer. Within seconds, Nevi is there, standing between me and the woman, hunched forward a bit like she's ready to attack someone.

"What do you want?" she asks, eyeing the woman and the rest of the crowd.

The woman studies us. "You poor things," she says under her breath. "Let's get you away from all of this. Are you two from the same town?"

Nevi doesn't answer. I keep my mouth shut.

"Would you come with me?" the woman asks. "I'd like to explain what's going on. I won't touch you."

The people shift again, and I twitch. I can still feel their hands on me, all over me. My skin is crawling and burning. I want to get away from them. Nevi looks back at me, and I nod.

The woman turns and goes toward the front of the camp, by the gates. The huge man goes after her. Nevi and I follow, and I shrink as I pass through the crowd. I don't want them to touch me again. Nevi takes my hand.

The woman with the shaved head and the huge man stop near the gates and turn to us.

"My name is Yichta," she tells us. "This is my mate, Brack. We are from Vali, as are all of those people over there. What is your name?"

I don't answer, but Nevi does.

"Her name is Eklah. I'm Nevi. We're Shinnan."

"Of course you are. If you were from Vali, you would understand. Allow me to explain. It was very irresponsible of those people, but you should understand. Do you know anything of the Valiren faith?" We shake our heads. "Well, you know what's going on with the war," Yichta says. "These are terrible times—very frightening for all of us. Many people have lost so much. But we Valirens believe that our god, Vali, will never abandon us. We believe that in perilous times such as these, Vali will save us. It is said that Vali will send a savior, you see."

She pauses, apparently waiting for a reaction.

"What's your point?" I ask.

Yichta smiles, apparently pleased to have gotten a response out of me. "If it was just anyone, plenty of people could take advantage of our beliefs and pretend to be the savior. For the special treatment and the fame, you see. Anyone could claim to be the one chosen by Vali. There's something that prevents that, though."

"What is it?" Nevi asks.

"It's the mark of the savior," Brack says. His voice is low and gruff. He's looking at me very peculiarly from beneath his shaggy brows, but he says nothing more.

Yichta goes on. "Our ancient texts state that the savior will be revealed to us by a specific physical characteristic, so that there is no way we can confuse any other person for the one who will bring us to salvation." Yichta pauses, and then she meets my eyes. "The physical mark—it's white hair."

I am not sure how to respond right away. I raise my hand to touch my hair, running a curl between my fingers. My hair is white. I'd almost forgotten that I'd returned to this color after months of keeping it natural.

"You see what is going on, then," Yichta says. "Your hair. There's no mistaking it. You are our savior, Eklah."

"I'm not," I say automatically, and my mind isn't working that well. I can still and feel all of those hands.

"This is a mistake," Nevi says.

"There's no question," Brack tells us.

"What about old people?" I ask. "Their hair almost always gets white and gray. My—my mama was just starting to turn gray."

"Yeah, why don't you have thousands of saviors?" Nevi asks. "That's a silly mark to use."

"We didn't choose the mark," Yichta reminds us. She waves the idea with her hand. She has old hands, almost wrinkled, though she's probably younger than my parents. "It's written in the ancient texts created through Vali's scribes. They say that it will be someone young. Someone old enough to have gone gray wouldn't be suitable to lead us, anyway. We need someone strong—someone young."

Brack chuckles. "And, well, you're a little younger than anyone expected, but..."

"I'm not your savior," I tell her. "I'm not even Valiren."

"You don't have to be," says Yichta. "The texts say nothing about the nationality of the savior. Vali doesn't discriminate; it's part of our teachings. It's part of why we let the refugees from Shinna into Vali."

“But I don’t even believe in it,” I say. “Your savior should believe in the god that sent them.” I know there’s a better reason, but my mind feels numb, and I can’t think of it. I turn to Nevi.

“There’s no reason for the savior to know they are the savior,” Yichta says. “It would not make a difference. It makes for a humble background, something very important for someone meant to lead.”

“Lead?” I can’t lead. I’ve never led anything more than a herd of goats to the slaughtering house. “I can’t do that.”

Brack laughs again and nudges Yichta. “There’s that humble background.”

I shake my head at them and back away. Nevi takes my arm. “I’m sorry,” I say, “but I’m not your savior.”

I turn and start back for the tents, even though I don’t want to return to those people, those hands.

“Please,” Yichta says behind me, all traces of humor gone from her voice. “I know you’ve been through a lot. I’m sure the same thing has happened to you that has happened to Brack and I. You’ve suffered so much loss, haven’t you? But we only want to find something again, and we have. We’ve found you.”

I face her and open my mouth to tell her the truth: that this hair is a fabrication, that it’s nothing for a nation of half-ruined people to place their faith in—but she has tears in her eyes, and I stop short.

“Eklah,” Nevi says warily. “A word?” She takes me aside and glances at Yichta and Brack. “You have to tell them the truth.”

“I’m trying,” I tell her. “Haven’t you noticed?”



“How can they not recognize what’s going on?” Nevi asks. “About your hair?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. They must not know how to do this—how to dye hair.”

Nevi bites her lip and thinks of over. “You’re the only one I know of who’s ever figured out how to change your hair color. I guess I’ve just sort of taken it for granted. No one here has ever seen that happen. They think your hair is natural.” She peers closer. “I still can’t see your roots. It does look natural.”

“Well, I have to tell them it’s not.”

We return to Yichta and Brack, where she’s wiping her eyes. Her dark skin looks like it was tanned further by years in the sun, like it’s made of leather.

“You’re a hope for us, my child,” she says. “A beacon of hope. I know it sounds silly, but in the middle of all this, after everything that’s happened, everything that will keep happening... We need this. I know that it’s you. There’s no mistaking the signs.”

But it is all a mistake.

“I can’t,” I tell her. “Listen, lady.”

Yichta approaches me, her dark eyes soft and shining. “I know you may not believe in this. I know it’s a lot to take in. But the Valirens have suffered the same tragedies as the Shinnans. We need to band together now, trust and support each other.”

I don’t answer.

“I lost my child,” she says. “I’m sorry. When we were attacked, we had no choice but to run. Brack and I couldn’t stay and try to find Illa. We just had to run.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, because I don’t know what to tell her. I don’t know her or the child she left behind. I’m not attached to her. And even if I was, I don’t know what I can say to make her feel better.

But I do think I know how she's feeling. Mama, Papa. Beni. But I saw Mama die— somehow that seems better. Somehow it makes it final. Yichta doesn't know if her child is still in this world or not.

“All I want is a bit of hope,” Yichta says. “It's what we all need. And that's you, Eklah. You can do that for us. And in return, let us help you. You look like you need it.”

A man runs up to us, cutting off whatever reply I had.

“Yichta,” he says. “What has the savior said?”

“She hasn't—”

“I'm not anyone's savior,” I say again.

The man has a long, dark beard, and he stops next to us and turns to Yichta.

“We've all figured out a plan,” he says to her, but a woman approaches us.

“Don't listen to him,” she calls. “He wants to make this about violence!”

And then another comes up to us, and another, and then the entire crowd that we've left has come back, and we're surrounded by the stares and the twitching hands that want so much to touch me and my hair. Nevi has me by the arm, sweeping her gaze along the crowd, daring someone to reach out.

“Listen,” says the woman. “We have to take her to the high chancellor. He'll be able to tell us what to do. She needs spiritual guidance and direct access to the capitol.”

“No!” the bearded man retorts. “Look at where we are: a military camp, right on the border. We need to make her the commander of this camp and have her lead our troops against Rargon's forces! Vali's divine intervention is sure to lead us to victory.”

“She needs to be taken to one of the priests,” another man calls. “Spiritual guidance is right, but the capitol is so far away. Take her to the nearest priest and ask Vali for guidance.”

“But Vali is within her,” someone says. “She shouldn’t need to go to the priests. Vali should be able to speak with her anyway.”

A woman puts her hands on her hips. “You can’t take her to the capitol. It’s far too dangerous to take her across the country.”

“So, what? You want to keep her here?”

“It’s safest here! She can’t leave the camp.”

“And what do we do with her here?”

“Give her leadership,” the first woman calls over the others. “Leadership of the camp! Strike Rargon back before they can do any more damage.”

“That’s absurd,” someone else says.

“Vali will fill her with power!” another cries. “She’ll be naturally gifted with leadership abilities and military prowess.”

The first woman yells over the others, and then the whole group is shouting. I shut my eyes and press my palms against my ears. After a while, it quiets down again, and when I open my eyes, I’m crouching and Nevi is kneeling beside me, keeping me steady.

I look up, where Yichta is speaking with the others.

“Unfortunately, I think you’re right,” she says to the bearded man. “We are right in the camp already, and it’s dangerous to cross the country in these times. Many of the refugees have died shortly after leaving the camp. It’s the most logical course of action.”

“Take her to Faidelk!” someone calls, and Yichta kneels before me so that we’re at eye level.

“How are you holding up?” she asks, and I say nothing. “We have a plan of action, I think. We wanted to speak with the military leader of this camp. Vali must have brought you here for that reason. Would you like to come speak to her with us?”

I look at Nevi.

“Let’s just get you out of here,” she whispers, and I nod. We stand and follow Yichta away from the people once more. She speaks with some of the soldiers, who lead her to one of the steel buildings on the other side of the camp. Inside are several rooms, and in the spacious back room is a huge, flat table with a map spread over its entire surface. I recognize some of the words written there: Vali in the northeast, Shinna nestled beneath it, Rargon covered in arrows that come from the west. Beneath all three countries is the southern ocean, the one where Vieklos gets the fish we trade for. The arrows extend from Rargon into Shinna and part of Vali. I know enough to figure out what they mean.

There’s a presence in the room, and I can only look at the map for so long because the woman is staring at me. She’s tall, and I’ve never seen someone so light-skinned. Her skin is pink and strange and I don’t like it; she’s pale as bone. She has straight black hair that she’s cropped to her neck, and she wears a beige jacket with perfectly angled shoulders, stripes and stars bordering the sleeves and breast.

“Can I help you?” she sneers, looking us over. “We have work to be doing, and I don’t appreciate this interruption from our resident refugees.”

“My apologies, ma’am,” Yichta says, bowing her head. “Are you the leader of this place?”

“Of this camp, yes. Faidelk’s the name. What are you here for?”

And Yichta explains. A few of the Valirens who have piled in behind us pipe in to add some information they think is relevant. Brack doesn't say a word, just stands there next to Yichta as she speaks. I watch the pale woman's face as she listens to our story, as Yichta asks for me to be put at the top of this camp to lead it. I watch the corner of the woman's mouth turn upward and her cheek twitch into her eye, like she's trying not to smile, but there's something bitter about it.

"You're telling me," she says when Yichta is done, "that you want me to step down from my position as commander of this camp—this position that I earned after eight years of hard work and labor in this military, and that I've held for the past four years—to let some random kid from the Shinnan boondocks with no military experience or world knowledge take over?"

Yichta hesitates. The woman is right. I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm still trying to tell these hardheaded people that I'm not who they think I am.

"Yes," Yichta says. "I suppose we are."

Faidelk laughs right in our faces, a grating sound so loud it's like she's a barking dog.

"Well, what a great joke," she mutters to herself, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "I sure needed that. Haven't had a good laugh in years."

"Ma'am," Yichta protests, but Faidelk holds up her hand.

"Don't even start," she says. "This is absurd. That's not going to happen. I don't give a damn what your rinky-dink religion says. You're looking at an atheist, got it? Just because I'm Valiren doesn't mean I'm the same as all of you. Here in my camp, we have this thing called common sense. Have you heard of it?"

Yichta stiffens. "Please don't patronize us."

“Then don’t give me such stupid requests!” Faidelk says. “Look, if the kid really wants my job, she’s got to earn it. Same way I did—years of hard work, gaining military skill and knowledge. Making it to the top is the hardest thing to do around here, and I promise you she doesn’t have what it takes to get here.”

“Years,” one of the Valirens whispers behind us. “Years of work. Of war.”

“That’s way too long,” another pipes up. “This was a bad idea. We only have one savior; we can’t waste all of time here, doing nothing.”

“But it wouldn’t be doing nothing,” Yichta says. “We’d be helping the savior. If we all stay here and help, we could get her there.”

“Listen,” one Valiren whispers to Yichta. “If we all enter this place together, if we all become soldiers, we can probably rig the whole thing. Get her there fast.”

No one else hears; they’re all arguing with each other about their plan of action. But Yichta tilts her head at the thought.

“Please,” Faidelk mutters to herself. “Jan! Get in here. I need a huge cup of tea.”

A boy about our age pokes his head through the door. “Sure thing, Commander. I’ll be right in.”

Nevi takes my hand. “Can I speak with you for a moment?”

I go with her to the corner of the room. Everyone is staring at us, and I try my best to ignore them. Nevi looks at me expectantly.

“What?” I whisper.

“You have to tell them the truth.”

“I’ve been trying.”

Nevi shakes her head. “Try harder. They seem pretty hard-headed, but this is all a misunderstanding. We have to tell them before this gets out of hand. I mean, people are falling to their knees and praying at—at you.”

I glance at the others, who are all watching us, with the exception of Faidelk, who’s staring at the door behind her like all she wants in the whole world is for that boy Jan to come back with her tea.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” I whisper to Nevi.

“Tell them!” she hisses.

“But…” I trail off. “If we tell them, there’s no reason to stay here. I mean, we’ll have to leave and go into Vali, and—well, where are we supposed to go, Nevi?” I take a breath. “I mean, we don’t have a home to go back to anymore. We—we’re refugees. Where do we go?”

“There has to be somewhere in Valiren territory we can go.”

“And what? Will people give us work or food? You’ve seen the number of refugees in this camp alone, and you heard what they said about how many people are actually being—displaced, I think was the word.”

“What’s your point?” Nevi asks.

“I’m not sure there’ll be room for us,” I say. “They said there are more than a million of us. I can’t even figure out how big that is in my head. There’s only so much space. There’s only so much this country can give the refugees.”

“And?”

“And they seem to like me here—they think I’ve been sent here by a god! By *their* god. Nevi, we can survive here. We can make it if we stay. But if we leave, I don’t know what’ll happen.”

She looks at me long and hard. “Eklah.”

“I know,” I whisper, “but what other choice do we have? This can... this can be a home. A place to be safe.”

“A military camp,” she scoffs. “A place to be safe.”

“Nevi,” I say, and she stares out the window for a few moments before sighing.

“Maybe,” she whispers. “Maybe you’re right.”

I pull her close and hug her, even though there are nearly a dozen people in here watching us. “We’ll be okay,” I tell her. “We’ll be safe.”

She nods into my shoulder, and we break apart. As we return to the group, Yichta smiles at Nevi.

“Are you a good friend of Eklah’s?” she asks.

Nevi takes my hand. “I mean, you could say that.”

“She’s a consort,” one of the Valirens cry. “She’s been sent by Vali to keep watch over the savior.”

“That’s not—” I begin, but another person interrupts me.

“You’re completely right,” they say. “We’ll keep the consort in good quarters, too. Only the best for the savior and her companion.”

I glance at Nevi, whose mouth is parted a bit at their deduction.

Jan, the boy who seems to be a servant, comes back in with a plain mug of tea, steam rising from the surface.

“Here you are, ma’am,” Jan says.

Faidelk takes it and doesn’t even look at him. “Thank you, Jan.” She watches the Valirens while they whisper with each other. Jan hesitates.



“Ma’am?” he says quietly. “As long as you’re waiting for them to finish, I wanted to mention that I’d like to talk to you later about becoming an actual soldier—”

“Quiet, boy,” she snaps, and she actually looks at him this time. “You want to make it in this world, you have to learn to be obedient when the situation calls for it. You start at the bottom just like the rest of us, doing other people’s dirty work until you’re able to claw your way up the ranks.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jan says, shrinking away. He glances at all of us, lingering an extra moment on me, or rather on my hair, before he darts back out of the room.

“Anyway,” Faidelk says over the noise, sipping from the mug. “You people are irritating me. Figure out what you want to do and get out of my office.”

“We want to join the military,” Yichta says, and there’s a variety of looks from the other Valirens—eagerness, irritation, disapproval.

“All of us, really?” asks one of the Valirens.

“Yes,” she says. “At least, anyone who wants to stay. We’ll rise with her as we push her to the top. And we can send for one of the nearby priests for guidance. That should satisfy everyone.” She turns to me. “Well, of course, it’s up to you. You’re the one this is about, after all. What would you like to do?”

I open my mouth, and for a moment, I don’t know what to say. I want to tell them this is all a mistake, that I can’t let them believe this lie. But I have nowhere now, and no one but Nevi.

Faidelk watches me and smirks, her thin lips pressing against the rim of the mug, steam rising into her face. “What, got a vendetta against Rargon now, kid? Gonna become the new commander to hit them back where it hurts? Get them back for what they did to you, huh? Is that it?”

I look away from her, finding the map on the table between us. I gaze down at our land, at the borders between the land and sea and each country, at the arrows, thick and black, curling from Rargon's territory into ours. I'm so tired. But my mind slowly begins to work again, and I think of Kovu's words about my father while we both choked on ash. I think about my mama looking at me from the doorway to my house as the roof turned black and collapsed beneath the flames. I think of the spear in Palo's stomach, of his bruised face and his older sister sobbing. Of the axe in Kovu's back that made him release his grip on me. Of Beni's gangly, growing body smeared with blood, of his glassy eyes, of Nevi clinging to him as he went, of his empty stare, of Nevi's shaking shoulders.

The warmth blooms in my chest and surges through my body. It burns in my core and warms my entire body to my fingertips and my toes and heels and the tips of my ears. Everything is hot, and I realize that I am angry. I am angry at Rargon for coming to my village and decimating it and slaughtering my people and taking any survivors as prisoners of war and now I don't know where anyone else is or who has survived, and I don't know if I will ever know where my people are, and I am enraged, I am burning, and I know that if I saw one of those silver soldiers in front of me right now I would kill them.

And I realize that these people, these Valirens, want me to go into the military, and the military's entire job is slaughtering people who are a threat. Rargon is approaching the border. And suddenly I see with so much clarity what I need to do.

"Alright," I say before I think about it anymore. "I'll do it."

Nevi takes my arm and says nothing.

Yichta's eyes get big, and she nearly starts to cry but tries to hide it.

“Well, then,” she chokes out, “that’s the first step, I suppose. This is a great day—this is a historic day.”

“Eklah, what are you doing?” Nevi whispers.

“Oh, please,” Faidelk scoffs. She rests the mug against her palm and smirks at me.

“What guts. You got a long journey ahead of you before you quit. What’s your name, kid?”

She’s smiling so big, and her teeth are perfect except one’s missing on the side, like she got punched there. I think of the bag I have in the tent, full of ingredients, full of vreda rocks—the same rocks I saw outside the camp when we arrived yesterday.

And I smile.

“My name is Eklah Fareki,” I say, “and I’m Vali’s new savior.”

## PART II

The punch connects with the leather mitt on Brack's arm. He grunts, and I hit him again. The blow knocks him back, and I aim a kick at the mitt. My heel strikes off-center, but it hits the target. Brack lowers his arm, and I take the cue. I lower my arms, gulping down air, and wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

"Very good," Brack says, pulling the mitt off his hand. I swear he's bigger than he was the day I met him. Since he, too, joined this military a year ago, he's grown. "You've come a long way, Eklah."

I clasp my hands together and reach my arms high over my head to stretch out my aching shoulders. I'll feel the results of this training session tomorrow morning.

"What, since I reached Keeper rank?" I scoff. "Thanks for the flattery, but I don't think I've gotten any better."

A year of work, a year since I arrived at this camp and became a soldier, and I'm a Keeper. It's just another rank, another notch I have to get past to make it to the top. I've passed all the tests, gone to every mandatory training session, and outside of the military's organized training, Brack has me train further with him, one-on-one. It's exhausting.

"He means since you got here, Eklah." Yichta moves onto the training field from the sidelines, Nevi by her side. "You really have grown a lot."

I roll my eyes. "Don't get sentimental on me."

"I'm not."

I clap my hands together, swinging my body around to loosen it a bit after the workout. "That was a long one. I need some water."

I turn towards the camp's well, but it's like my words are magic. Two young men appear before me, each holding a cup of cool water.

"Miss Eklah," they whisper together, bowing their heads as they extend the cups to me.

"Yeah—thanks." I take one of the cups and chug it down like it's air. My body is starving for water, and I can almost feel it moving through my limbs as I drink.

The treatment is still strange—the way I say I need something and someone is immediately at my side, ready to help, the way I'm given gifts and luxury without asking for anything, the way people still bow their heads when I walk past. Not all of them do, but there are enough. I'm most comfortable with Yichta and Brack, who don't bother with the formalities anymore. They treat me more like I'm a human. The others still look at me with awe in their eyes. It's part of why I spend so much time in my tent.

Maybe by the time I'm the commander of this camp, I'll be used to it.

The two men wait until I take the second cup, and then they slink away, their chins lowered into their chests, not making eye contact with me. I watch them go. There are a few bystanders surrounding the training game, those who like to watch the savior train and become strong. By now, I can almost tune them out and forget they're there. Almost.

"I'm so proud of you, Eklah," Yichta says. "I know I say it a lot, but you really have come so far. You've got those muscles now, and you're one of the fastest people here."

"I was one of the fastest in my village," I say.

"Well, I just mean to say you've come a long way since we found you. I mean, you were quite small back then, and so different."

I turn away and refuse to look at her. She and Brack really like bringing up the past, and I don't like to think about it. So much has happened. I'm a different person now. I have a different home, a different family.

I'm better now. Nostalgia is a dirty liar.

The war is never-ending. Rargon has pushed through most of Shinna, far past my home village and into the villages we passed on our way here to salvation. Every so often a scout comes back with a report on where Rargon is, and every time, they're closer. They've been moving more slowly as they've neared the border to Vali. Shinna was not a military nation; we had no organized army or anything of the sort. Vali, though, is stronger than we were. Vali has soldiers and strategy and leadership. Rargon has moved through the north portion of the country, but here in the south, we haven't yet been hit.

Every so often, Yichta or Brack will bring up the day they found me. They think it will inspire me or motivate me to keep going. They do everything they can to keep me here. After all, they think I've been sent here on behalf of their god. They think I'm real. A year, and they are still being fooled.

I am still angry, but it simmers now. The warmth comes and goes. I have calmly made my way up the ranks, though I can't avoid the fights. The Valirens here who don't believe in me. The ones who are desperate for a quicker deliverance. The ones who know the truth without truly knowing it—who suspect that I am just a liar, that this is all a trick. I never go too long before someone pushes me, and then the fire is there, fueling my body as I hurl myself tooth and nail upon them, until someone pulls us away.

Sometimes people don't pull me away for a long time. Sometimes they just let me burn myself out. They believe, some of them, that whatever urges I have are Vali's will, and that it's not their place to intervene. Those are the worst days—the ones where I have to stop myself.

"I'm going to go rinse off," I say abruptly. I turn for the residential area of the camp, and I've barely taken two steps before the two men have returned to take the empty water cups back. I hand them off and head towards the rows and rows of steel buildings, our little homes. Mine looks just like everyone else's on the outside; the interior is where it differs. I open my door and go inside. I was supposed to have the place to myself, but I wanted Nevi to share the room with me. The Valirens reluctantly agreed, telling me that I should really have my own living quarters, but I persisted.

Nevi, who chose a year ago to remain a civilian instead of becoming a soldier with the rest of us, now sleeps in the second bed in the room. Of course, mine is much more lavish, and even though it's just a cot, it's covered in fluffy blankets and all the extra pillows in the camp. It's extravagant and unnecessary, like most of the things that these people try to give me.

The room also has a bath and a sink with running water, which is my favorite part of the whole thing. They've even gotten some soapy mixture that foams the water.

I unwrap my wrist guards and throw them onto the bed. They bounce a little on the cot, and the door opens. I turn to find Nevi closing the door behind her.

"Hey," she says. "You just left me."

"Yeah, sorry," I mutter. "I'm tired. Just wanted to take a bath."

She comes up to me and takes my hands in hers. "You okay?"

"It's nothing any different than the usual," I say. "I'm fine."

She's frowning at me, but I look down at her and grin, popping my head forward to sneak a kiss on her cheek.

"Hey!" She laughs and takes my face into her hands. "No sneaking up on me."

"Look who's talking."

We close the gap between us and meet in a familiar kiss. This has happened so many times, but I always miss it, and every time has felt as strange and wonderful as the first. Nevi pushes me toward the bed, and I manage to land sitting without opening my eyes. Nevi comes forward.

The door opens, and two women let themselves in. Nevi springs back, her hands rising to her hair, patting it into place. She looks anywhere but at the newcomers.

The handmaids first came with the priest from the north who arrived during my first week here. They each studied at the chapel their entire lives, and the pair was selected to care for the savior during her time at Faidelk's military camp.

The younger one, Lail, is slim, her long dark hair always hanging to her waist in a shimmery sheet. She's one of the palest people here, a bit pink like Faidelk and some of the Valirens from the north. She's told me before that she's twenty-five. The other woman is older, twice Lail's age and twice her weight. Yetu's head is shaved like Yichta's, but she's light-skinned like Lail.

"Are you ready for your bath, Miss Eklah?" Lail asks, her voice soft and demure as always.

I nod.



Yetu comes forward and helps me start to disrobe. “Those workouts make you quite sweaty,” she mutters. “Give me these clothes; I’ll wash them when I leave and have them back to you before morning.”

“Take your time,” I tell her as she pulls my over-shirt away. “They’ve given me a few sets of uniforms, remember. You don’t have to work so hard for me.”

“Pish,” she says. “It’s our job, Miss Eklah. No problem.”

Lail runs the bathwater while Yetu strips me of my tank top, boots, pants, and undergarments. I’m naked by the time the bath is full and hot and full of soap suds. Each woman takes a hand and helps me into the tub, and I settle in, letting the heat burn my toes, my thighs, my stomach and chest and shoulders. I sink so that the suds touch my face.

“Would you like a massage, Miss Eklah?” Lail asks, and I shake my head. They pour some shampoo into their hands and work it into my hair. I close my eyes and let things be done to me. I don’t need to worry about them finding out about my hair. I’ve made sure the shampoo they use doesn’t alter the dye at all, and my roots are just fine. So I let myself relax a little bit and let them touch me, these two women who have bathed and dressed me for a year, who I even trust a little bit.

Nevi sits on the edge of the tub and holds my hand while I sit in the warm water. Her hold is a little tight and uncertain. She’s still not used to this luxury I receive. And to be honest, neither am I. But I have grown to accept it and even welcome it sometimes. Whenever I tried refusing them in the beginning, they wouldn’t take no for an answer. The first time Lail and Yetu had appeared and demanded I strip naked in front of them, it had resulted in Yetu practically throwing me into the bathtub by herself.

“We might as well use it while we have it,” I say, and Nevi looks at me like she’s just realized I’m talking to her. We hold each other’s gaze for a moment before she nods.

“Speaking of weird things, that priest is supposed to show up soon,” Nevi says. “You’re going to have to do another ritual with him.”

“Nothing I haven’t done before,” I mutter, but I sink further into the water. I like the ladies doting on me, but I could do without the religious part of all this. Even though that’s what got me into this whole situation, I guess.

Yetu leans over me. “I know you’re not Valiren, but I hope you’re taking these things seriously,” she says. “These rituals are important.”

“I know, I know.” But I sink away from her hands and submerge myself in the water, staying beneath the surface until I can’t hold my breath any longer.

###

The meeting hall is packed. Rows and rows of soldiers line up by rank. The lower ranks stand in the back, and the top soldiers stand at attention in the front rows. I’m somewhere in the middle now. With every month that has passed, I’ve moved myself further to the front of this room.

Or rather, I have been moved forward.

The Valirens who believe in me, the ones whose idea it was to bring me here and take on this long, arduous journey of pushing me up from the very bottom to the very top of this camp—they’re cheating. I know they are. Some of the ranking tests, the exams that determine whether a soldier is ready to move up to the next rank, are physical. You fight another soldier and compete for the upgrade. Some of those matches I’ve won, fair and completely out of my own merit. But others haven’t been unbiased. There have been plenty of tests where I’ve faced off

against a devout believer, someone who's in on the plan to get me to the top. And those are the people who have thrown their fights with me. They never fill me in on what they're doing, but I know my own strength, and I know that I shouldn't have beaten some of those people.

It's the only reason I've come so dramatically far in such a short time. Faidelk said it took her eight years to climb all the way to the top. I've gotten half that far in one.

Faidelk paces the front of the room, the floor space separating all of us from the raised table of upper officers. Those officers are the ones right beneath Faidelk, the ones who can take her position if she resigns. I have to get to that table before I can reach Faidelk's rank, before I can reach the very top.

The commander stops her pacing and calls everyone to attention. She goes on for a bit, talking military strategies and honor and other things I'm not that interested in. Every so often she turns and sweeps her gaze over the crowd, watching us with narrow eyes that even scare some of the upper soldiers. Her hair is so short, cropped to the nape of her neck like that. Other soldiers have told me her hair used to be much longer. She used to wear it in a braid.

I don't listen until I hear something of interest to me, something that affects me.

"As a result," she's saying, "I am moving the ranking examination forward. It will not take place next month as scheduled. We are moving it up to this week's end."

I allow my shoulders to sag. I have barely been Keeper rank for long at all. I'm not ready to move up to the next rank yet. I'm not ready for the examination. I need more time to train.

The commander turns on the ball of her foot and leans towards one of the soldiers in the front, squinting at him, invading his space. "Tell me what that means, boy. Surely you've been through quite a few if you're standing all the way up here."

The soldier swallows and stammers out an answer. His body is even more rigid than before. “It’s the test soldiers take in order to increase their rank in this camp, Commander Faidelk.” He speaks a little too loudly, trying to project a voice that clearly spends most of its time small, fragile, and quiet. “Soldiers who believe they qualify for the next rank may apply to take the examination.”

“That’s right,” Faidelk says. Her smile makes her lips part and show her missing tooth.

The crowd has shifted; many others feel the way I do. For some ranks, the examinations are mental, and they decide whether you are ready for a leadership position. Right now, I am still just a soldier, nowhere near being an upper officer. My tests have all been physical, and my next one will be, too. But when I get to the mental exams, the Valirens won’t be able to cheat for me anymore. I’ll have to get to the top on my own.

“Listen up.” Faidelk turns her sharp gaze to the organized crowd assembled before her, then to the raised table of upper officers behind her. They watch silently from their perch and bow their heads when the commander glances up at them. “If you have any ambition and a decent sense of purpose, and if you care about the fate of your country,” she says, turning back to us, “you will one day sit at that table. From there, you will help lead this camp, and thus this country, to victory against Rargon.”

I stare up at the table and feel something stir inside of me. That table is the bridge between soldier and commander. To get there, I need to pass every single examination, and after that, I will be standing where Faidelk is standing now. At least, that’s where the Valirens want me to be. I don’t know what their plan is to get Faidelk to retire from her position at the top, but we’re still a long way from that.

Once I'm there, I will have full control of this camp and everything it has—every weapon, every armed soldier ready to help. The Valirens will save what is left of their country. And me? Me and the rest of the Shinnans, we have nothing left. Rargon took everything from us. I feel the fire burning. They won't get away from it. And they won't hurt anymore people.

Faidelk paces back and forth, strutting about and humiliating her soldiers. Yichta has told me that I'll be a much better leader. I've told her plenty of times that I don't think I'm suited for leadership, but she always protests with tales of how Vali knows what They are doing and chose the best person to be the savior. Yichta assures me that I will stand in Faidelk's place and see that power properly.

The commander goes on about her war plans, but I have stopped listening. I can't wait to get my hands on that country, to make them pay for what they've done.

The flame is warm.

###

Slipping on the wrist guards and wrapping their bands around my arms has become a natural instinct. I feel better with them on. They're beige like our uniforms, made with a shock-absorbent material that I'd never heard of until I came to Vali. They match the training outfits that were distributed to us, the ones we're all dressed in now. It's loose material that bunches beneath the knees.

During official training time, we train with soldiers of our own ranking. It means I cannot train with Brack anymore today, and neither can Yichta. The Keepers train in the outdoor courtyard behind the assembly hall. The ground is dusty, since the dirt has all been worn away by feet as soldiers spar with each other.

After adjusting the wrist guards, I face my opponent. Jan is two years older than me, and he's been in the camp for only a year longer than I have. We usually spar against each other, since we've matched each other in rank during most of my year here. Of course, I've been moving up faster due to the Valirens cheating for me, but Jan has moved up quickly on his own merit. He's only been a soldier as long as I have; his first year here, he was stuck attending to Faidelk.

He's Valiren, a skinny, pale boy who grew once he got here, like I did. The physical demands of this camp built us all up. Anyone who wasn't already deathly skinny from starvation lost their fat and replaced it with muscle. That is, people unlike Brack. He says his big build is what gives him his strength, that fat bodies like his are better made for combat and heavy lifting. I wouldn't have believed him if he wasn't one of the strongest people in this camp.

Jan is more my size, and that's why we've been paired together during most of our training sessions. I raise my fists to him.

"I can't believe they're keeping our weapons from us," he says as he raises his own hands, readying himself to spar.

"They say the next test is more about agility," I remind him. "Brack said it was the hardest test he ever passed."

Brack is even higher than me in the ranks. He and Jan have nearly set records in how quickly they progressed. Brack has passed every single test on the first try. But since they've all been physical examinations until now, it doesn't really surprise me. His next tests will be mental, but I have a feeling he'll be just fine regardless.

Jan scoffs. "Well, that makes sense. That guy is huge. I wouldn't put my money on agility being his strong suit."

“He swears none of it is muscle,” I say. “He says the fat makes him strong.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m sticking with the belief that muscle is what really does it.” Jan raises his arms, making sure I see his defined biceps and shoulders. He’s so pale, something I’m still getting used to in some of these people. His arms are completely bare other than the wrist guards; he’s just wearing a beige tank top, like me. He raises a brow and looks me over. “You’ve certainly gotten bigger, too, now that I think about it.”

“I’m aware.”

“I remember when you got here, you were scrawny! You looked just about starved to death. And now look at you. Sixteen, already a Keeper, and you’ve got more muscles than most people I know. Talk about definition.”

I roll my eyes. “You were pretty skinny before you started as an official soldier.”

“Faidelk wouldn’t let me,” Jan protests. “She made me follow her around like a dog, waiting on her. I had to massage her feet once. Do you know how awful that was? She doesn’t cut her toenails. And I only had limited time for training until I got to be an actual soldier.”

“How come you had to work for Faidelk first?” I ask.

Jan shrugs. “It all goes back to my dad. He’s the one who wanted me to be a soldier in the first place—glory for the country and honor for the family, you know, that kind of stuff—and he shipped me off here because he knows Faidelk. But when I arrived, she took one look at me and laughed her face off. Said I was too skinny, that I didn’t have the makings of a soldier. Said I had to prove that I was worth training.”

“You were pretty skinny when we first met.”

“Yeah, but imagine that, even skinnier. Like, I was a stick. Faidelk made me cater to her until I was good enough, which is why I was training on my own in all my free time. And right

around the time you got here, she finally said I could be a soldier. But I think it's because she heard one of the Shinnans who showed up with you is really good at foot massages." He tilts his head to the side, cracking his neck. "Anyway, let's get to it."

He tightens his fists, and I ready myself. Jan lunges forward, shooting his fist towards my face. I duck and throw my arm out, aiming for his side. He steps back and avoids it.

"Going for a face shot in the first move," I mutter, stretching out my fingers before balling them back into fists. "Have you sunken that low?"

"Hey, if it works, it works," he says. I don't mention how it didn't work. "Why's it about agility, anyway? If you can hit the other guy, isn't that enough?"

"You know how they are. Being fast is just as important as being strong. If you're too slow, it doesn't matter how hard you hit." I shift forward, and Jan jumps to his left before he catches the feint. My fist connects with his chest, and I smirk. "And you have to be smart. Point."

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters.

"And by the time you're at the top, you're supposed to be a well-rounded soldier." I lunge forward again. We both shift, circling each other for a moment before his arm shoots out. I knock it away with the back of my forearm and aim a punch at his chest again, but he catches my hand and pulls. I stumble forward, and he catches me.

"Watch yourself, kid." We part, and I press my boots against the dirt, grounding myself again. Jan rolls his neck. "I heard they don't even let us use weapons in this examination. Is that true?"

I nod, reading his movements. I stumble in the next move, and he lands a hit on my shoulder.



“Point,” he says. “So?”

“Brack says that’s how they do this one. That’s the skill they focus on at this level. Otherwise we’d be using blunt knives in training—something, at least.”

“I’d rather use real knives,” Jan whines. I smile, and we lunge at each other again.

I win the first spar with him, but he wins the second. I hope I don’t have to compete against him during the ranking examination. All things being accounted for, he’s a better soldier than me. I think I’m more agile than him, but in every other regard, his skills are greater. He’s stronger, smarter, more knowledgeable about the world and war tactics. He’s made it this far on his own, and he’s done it just as quickly as I have. Sure, we passed each other a few times, but he didn’t have anyone laying down their matches for him.

Plus, Jan isn’t religious. He knows people are cheating for me, but he’s never given me grief for it. He’s made it clear that he’s not going to go easy on me if we ever do face each other, and I’ve told him that I wouldn’t want him to.

And aside from that, I don’t want it to be between the two of us. I’d rather have both of us pass. I like training with Jan. He never mentions the savior thing, because he doesn’t care. It’s refreshing.

Training ends long after the summer sun has set and the heat of the day begins to die down. It’s after many hours of work that I finally loosen the wrist guards and return to my room with a mighty need to bathe.

###

I don’t quite make it back to my room. I’m untying my hair from its ponytail as I cross a wide area of the camp where soldiers hang out during their downtime. A group of Valirens is gathered there, and I’m trying to get the hair tie free from a knot when one starts yelling.

“A year!” she shouts. Her loose curls are black and short, cut even shorter in the back. “An entire year, and where are we? Everything is the same, if not worse. Rargon is moving closer. More people are dead.”

“Be patient,” another person whispers to the woman.

“She’s doing her best,” a man says to the short-haired woman. “Faidelk won’t let her go right to the top. And really, why should she? The savior is learning. She’s just a girl.”

“Death to Faidelk,” the woman mutters, and a few hush her and glance around. Some gazes settle on me. I’ve stopped, and I’m still trying to undo the knot that has my hair tie stuck, but I’m listening.

“Don’t you dare say anything more,” someone whispers.

“Our people are dying in the north,” the woman shouts. “And Rargon is pressing against us here in the south. We have to do something! She’s not doing enough. This isn’t going fast enough.” She turns her angry gaze on me, and even from here I can see that her eyes are red, bloodshot around the edges. Her face colors. “This is your responsibility. Do something!”

I’m at least twenty feet away from the group, but I don’t bother raising my voice. “I don’t know what you expect me to do.”

The woman breaks from the others, barging forward until she’s right in front of me. She a few inches shorter than me.

“You’re the savior,” she hisses at me. “Hasn’t Vali given you any help? Ask Them for help. Tell Them we’re suffering! This is your job.”

“I can’t communicate with Vali.”

“Of course you can!” she shouts. “You were sent here by Vali! You have a connection with Them. Use it! Perform a miracle or—or anything. Help us!”

“Calm down before you embarrass yourself,” I say.

“You’re the embarrassment!” she cries. “You’re the disappointment here. You promised us you would help, and what do you have to show for yourself? A suffering country, a dead family, a burned village, thousands of starving people—”

“Leave my people out of this,” I say, and suddenly my voice is like acid. Heat creeps up. “Vali is supposed to watch over you people, not Shinnans. Don’t you mention my family or my village.”

“They’re just a few of the victims in this mess of a war,” she says, her lip curling back. She extends a finger and jams it into my chest, beneath my collar bone. “And more of that is happening right now, as we speak. People are dying, people are suffering—because you’re not doing anything!”

“I’m doing what I can!” I shout back. I seize her hand and force it away from my chest. But I keep hold of it. “How dare you talk to me this way? Get out of my sight.”

“I won’t stop until you start doing something. Think of all the people who are dead because of you.”

“No one is dead because of me!” I squeeze her hand as hard as I can, and she convulses a little with the pain. I try to crush the bones, though I can’t.

“Let go!” she cries. “Let go, let go!”

But I don’t. I squeeze harder, willing my hand to contract hard enough to break a bone. I want to break something in her.

She’s screaming, and people have gathered around us, but no one is doing anything. They are letting me do what I want. No one will intervene unless a non-religious Valiren shows

up, and even then, most of them don't want to get involved with me. No one is going to stop me but me.

My hand cannot possibly contract any more. I can't squeeze any harder. But I try. And when I can't do anything more to her hand, I take my other palm to her wrist and twist the skin around.

She cries out again, trying to pry my hand away. When it doesn't work, her fist finds my face. That's when people start to yell, when they get angry. But there's no need for them to intervene, because the fire is alive in my limbs and before I know what's going on, I'm on top of her in the dirt, her neck between my hands.

Someone runs forward, but they're pulled back. Someone else announces that it's the will of Vali—that the woman is being punished for her lack of faith. But then another person breaks through the crowd and pulls on my arm. She pulls me away, and I only struggle against her for a moment.

Nevi holds my face roughly in her hands, forcing me to look at her. And I do. Her eyes are hard, her face drawn.

"You can't do this," she whispers. It's so quiet only the two of us can hear her. "I know it's hard. But you can't let that feeling take over. Not when these people are counting on you to lead them. You can't set this kind of example. Do you understand?"

I don't answer, just get to my feet and turn to the crowd.

"You want me to lead?" I shout. "I will, and I promise you all that the second I get the chance, I will lead us into the territory Rargon has stolen and we will take back what is ours. I will burn that country to the ground and kill every last person who made us suffer."

Some cheer, and others begin to pray. Some are silent, like Nevi.

“Faidelk is the only one who’s stopping us,” I say more quietly, and I look down at the woman who’s curled up on her side in the dirt. “You have a bone to pick with anyone, it should be her, not me. This is not my fault.”

I leave without another word, heading to my room. Nevi is by my side in an instant, once we’re inside I drag out the bag hidden beneath my bed. Inside are lemons, dried carda flowers, vreda rocks, and a few other choice ingredients. I take a knife and split the lemons in two, squeezing out the juice into a large bowl.

“You’re making another batch?” Nevi asks quietly.

“It’s time. The roots will show soon.”

Next is the rocks. I knew I could pull this off when I found the vreda rocks by the pond outside the camp. Every ingredient I need, I have found somewhere around this camp. Lemon trees, carda plants—everything.

I take the stones in my hand and place them in a grinding bowl. I strike them a few times until they crack into pieces, and then I begin grinding those into a fine powder. Ten minutes later, everything is prepared, and I have a white liquidy paste in the bowl in front of me. I begin to pile it onto my hair, massaging it in, taking extra care at the roots.

Then I run the bath water and begin to strip. My clothes are covered in dirt, and dust has settled into my skin, in the pores around my nose, and I’m ready to scrub it all away.

“Watch the door,” I mutter as I sink into the water, my goopy hair piled on top of my head. The door doesn’t have any way to lock, something that has always made me paranoid. That’s why Nevi’s been so handy. She’s saved my skin more than one time when someone like Yichta tried to come in without knocking while I was dying my hair.

I let the water soak into my skin, raising the dirt away and dirtying the water. There are no suds, since Yetu keeps the bottle of soap in her room. I sit and breathe for a while, letting the water press against my chest and stomach and make breathing more difficult.

“You can’t keep doing that.”

I open my eyes. Nevi is watching me from the door.

“What, take baths without Yetu and Lail? They won’t know.”

“No. You can’t keep fighting people who make you mad.”

I glance away. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I do.”

“I’m a leader. I have to make sure people remember I’m in charge.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it.” Nevi puts her hands on her hips. “You’re not a leader—not yet, anyway. And you’re not fighting people for a reason. You’re just getting angry.”

I shift in the tub, and the water ripples against my surfaced knees.

“It’s not something I can control.”

“You don’t even try to control it.”

I sit up, splashing water against the edge of the tub. “I can’t control it. You don’t understand what this feeling is. It just takes over.”

Nevi comes to the side of the bath. “I understand plenty. Listen, Eklah, you need to—to talk to someone about this. Talk to me.”

I don’t look at her.

“Eklah.”

I say nothing, and she sits on the edge of the bath, leaning towards me. She takes my chin and lifts it towards me. I keep my eyes down, to the side, away from her.

“Eklah,” she says again, and the door opens.

Nevi is on her feet in an instant, but the door is wide open, and Lail and Yetu are there.

“Miss Eklah, we didn’t realize your workout was over,” Lail says, her breath heavy like she ran here.

“It’s time for your bath,” Yetu adds, but then they both see me in the bath. And the dye is on my head. I sink into the water, up to my nose.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” Nevi says, going forward.

“What is on your head?” Yetu asks. Nevi tries to push them out the door, but Yetu pushes her away and approaches the bath. “What are you doing to your hair? You’ll ruin it if you put strange things in it.”

“It—it’s not strange,” I say. “It’s, um, something of my own invention. A sort of conditioner.” I nearly forgot about the lie I’d come up with a year ago in case this ever happened. I don’t think I really pulled off the execution.

“A conditioner?” Lail echoes from the door. She comes forward, too, and Nevi shuts the door.

“Yeah, it makes my hair soft.”

“Really?” Lail’s eyes light up, and she kneels beside me. “Oh, Miss Eklah. Feel my hair, would you? It’s been so brittle. This southern weather has been so terrible on it. It’s used to the north.”

I keep my hands in the water.

“Don’t make her touch you,” Yetu mutters, and Lail’s white face turns pink.

“I just meant—well, I’ve tried some conditioners developed in the south, but I’ve never found one that works. My hair is so dry and unhappy. What do you put in yours? Can I use it?”

“No,” I say immediately and with enough force to make Yetu raise a brow. “I mean, I only have so much of it.”

“Well, what do you put in it?” Lail asks. “I could make some of my own. Can you find the materials around here?”

“Um. Some lemon juice, and—” I try to think of things that go into conditioners, but I’ve never made one before. I only ever used shampoo in Erdu. Conditioner was too much of a luxury.

“And?”

“Well, it’s not important.”

Lail sticks out her lips in a pout. “You won’t tell me?”

“Leave it, Lail,” Yetu growls. She gets down on her knees next to Lail.

Nevi clasps her hands together. “It’s, um, disrespectful for you too to be in here. Eklah doesn’t want any attendants right now. You should leave.”

“But the conditioner,” Lail whines.

“We always bathe Eklah,” Yetu says. She speaks slowly. “It’s our job. There’s no reason for her to bathe herself, or to use products on herself without our knowledge.”

“I didn’t think it was that big of a deal,” I say, but there’s something in her eyes, something wary.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“What?” My voice is too high.

“You’re hiding something,” Yetu says, turning to me. “Out with it. What’s going on? What is that?”

“The conditioner?”



“If it’s conditioner, why do you have it on your eyebrows, too?”

I don’t answer. Her hand snaps out towards my head, and she wipes a fingerful of dye off my head. She brings it to her nose and sniffs it.

“If this is just what you say, then you won’t mind me trying it out on Lail.”

“Wait,” I say, but she’s already wiping it on, rubbing it into a lock of hair under Lail’s ear.

“Is there a problem?” Yetu asks.

I lock gazes with Nevi. I don’t know what to do. But Nevi’s lips part.

“Don’t you—don’t you have power here?” she whispers.

I stare at her because I don’t understand. I do have power here, but...

My breath slows. I know what she wants me to do. And really, it’s the only option, isn’t it? At least, the only sensible option. That strand of Lail’s hair is going to turn white. She and Yetu are going to know the truth when the dye comes away. So there’s only one choice.

I rise from the bath, warm water dripping from my limbs and spilling down my body. I step over the ledge and drape a robe over my body before I turn to them.

“Yetu,” I say. “Lail. This is highly disrespectful. I am an object of Vali, and you have acted dishonorably. You’re not worthy of your positions here as my handmaids. For your actions, I must respond. This is Vali’s will: you two are to leave this camp and never return. Never speak of this day again, to anyone, as long as you live. Do you understand?”

Lail’s dark eyes are huge, her face whiter than usual, like there’s no more blood there at all, like her heart has stopped. Yetu’s face is set in a deep frown, a suspicious look, but she says nothing. Instead, she stands, and she pulls Lail to her feet. She takes the girl to the door, and there, she turns.

“You’re a liar,” she says. “But I know they won’t believe me. That’s the only reason I will choose to leave instead of exposing you for the traitor you are. You are an insult to Vali.”

I say nothing, just watch as she turns and opens the door. Lail looks like she’s about to cry when she looks back at me, and I almost feel guilty for sending her away when being sent here was the best thing to happen to her. But I don’t, and she turns away, and the door shuts.

###

I’m on my way to train when someone approaches me, a Valiren who can’t be older than fifteen.

“Miss Eklah,” they say, speaking a little too loudly, like they don’t know how to control the volume of their voice.

I stop and face them, adjusting my wrist guards. “Can I help you?”

The kid shuffles forward, eyes on the dirt beneath us. “I was wondering, you know. I serve Commander Faidelk, and I made her some tea today but she got mad, and the tea spilled on me, and—well, it was practically still boiling.” They roll up their sleeve and turn over their arm, revealing a burn mark there, red and angry, a little splotchy on their skin.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. “That looks like it hurts.”

“Miss Eklah, I wanted to ask you to heal it.”

I sigh. This is the not the first time they have asked this of me. Miracles, healing—they never want anything mundane. When I tell them I can’t do it, that I have no magical powers to show them, they never seem to accept it. They always come back. A couple even tried to attack me in hopes that I would defend myself with some kind of magic or divine intervention. I didn’t. All that incident ended in was a couple of black eyes, and I nearly broke my hand doing it.

They tried it again a month later, thinking things would be different. They weren’t.

Even now, the people still come to me every so often and ask for something—for a miracle. Every time, I turn them away.

“I can’t heal your burn,” I tell them. “You should go to the first aid tent.”

“It hurts,” they whisper.

I step forward and nearly extend my arm. My hand twitches, and I resolve myself to go further and raise my hand to their shoulder. I turn them and begin to steer them towards the front of the camp.

“Let me take you,” I say, and the kid falls silent as I lead them to someone who can actually help.

###

My face is painted. Little flecks of gold are dotted in a line beneath my eyes. Dark blue cosmetics have been rubbed into my eyelids, and my eyebrows and lashes have been covered in a gentle white paste. A white line has been drawn down the center of my lips. My robes are heavy, golden and extravagant in their patterns and details. White fur lines the collar and the ends of the sleeves. My hair has been tamed and braided a thousand times around my head.

I kneel at the altar, an engraved staff in my hands. The staff of Vali, the one they brought from the capitol so long ago for the very first ritual. I have the words memorized, and I sing them to myself, chanting praise to Vali, asking for forgiveness for my people and the people of the world, asking for aid and hope in these trying times. Behind me, the priest watches alone, prayer beads in his hands.

I have done this a thousand times.

It’s just another day.

###

I undress in my room, scrub my face of the paint, and leave my hair in its braids. When I take Nevi to the pond that sits near the camp, Jan is sitting on the bank by himself.

“Hey,” I call, and he lifts his head. He raises his hand in hello, but as we approach, he turns his head away. There’s a piece of creased paper and an opened envelope in his hands.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

He glances at us, then twitches the hand holding the papers. His eyes are rimmed in red.

“I got a letter from home today,” he says. “It’s my dad—he fell ill. You know how everyone’s been getting sick lately, the disease that’s swept through from Rargon. Well, he caught it. And—”

He cuts himself off and says nothing more. He stares through the trees for a moment, then drops his gaze to the water.

“Well,” he whispers.

I look at Nevi, whose lips part and quiver.

“I’m sorry.” I don’t know what else to say. I sit by his side and wonder if I should put my arm around him. But I just stare at the grass.

“He’s the one who wanted me to come here,” Jan says. “Dad’s the one who shipped me off to be a soldier. To prove myself to him. To show him I’m worth something. And I made it so far, too. Once I finally got to be a soldier, I did everything I could to climb up those ranks as quickly as I could. So I could make him proud, you know? Show him I wasn’t worth nothing.” He scoffs, smiles to himself. “Guess I wasn’t fast enough.”

“It’ll be okay.” I know it’s a stupid thing to say, but I don’t know what else I can offer. “Vali—Vali needs him. They’ve taken him to a better place, don’t you think?”

Jan’s face is turned away, but I see his cheek contract in a smile.

“You don’t need to pull that with me,” he says. “I never believed a word you said.”

“What?”

But he doesn’t say another word. He just drops his head into his arms and lets the letter fall from his fingertips into the water.

###

My hair is purest white when I fall into line in the meeting hall. Tied up in a knot on the back of my head, it struggles to break free into curls. It takes a lot of work to get it to stay in place like that, but today, I will be fighting to climb to the next rank. I can’t risk my hair swinging around in my face as I move.

I stand among the other Keepers, staring silently ahead. I’ve been training with them every day since Faidelk made her announcement, and in my spare time, Brack has been drilling me on my agility. He’s a tough but kind teacher, also taking his ranking test today. We’ve been separated into rooms by rank, each group being overseen by a different upper officer or Faidelk herself.

The officer conducting our examination today is Herrad, an old man with more muscle than usual for his age. He’s bald around the top of his head, and the rest of his hair is white and wispy, curled around his ears. He first goes into a little speech about the exam, telling us of the glory of being in the Valiren army, reminding us that we will bring peace to all of our countries by taking Rargon down. My fire is burning. Herrad tells us how brave we are for fighting, how those already lost to the war would be so proud of our work. How our fallen families may be watching us right now, honored to see how far we’ve come.

And then it begins. I watch my fellows spar without any weapons, the smaller ones generally more agile and able to get more hits in than the bigger competitors. That, at least,

works in my favor; I've gained a huge amount of muscle since arriving here, but I'm still one of the smaller ones here.

Jan is called up with another boy, and I nod to him as he leaves, relieved that we won't be fighting each other.

"Do well," I say, and he smirks.

"I always do."

But there's the ghost of something in his face as he turns away.

I'm glad we won't be fighting. We can both make it to the next rank if we win, and I do like having someone consistently in my rank who's actually friendly and isn't doing it because of his faith. Lots of people are kind to me—most of them, and they're overly kind—but they're all faithful Valirens, and if they believe I am what I say I am, why would they be cruel or cold to me? For those who have never doubted me, it has always felt like a false kindness, like they don't truly know me. Jan has no such restrictions. He's been kind to me simply because he likes me.

The exam is a race to see who can put two hits on the other's body first. Jan is fighting a boy a little taller and wider than himself, and that's all I need to see to know the outcome. The tall boy doesn't get a single blow on Jan. Two hits, one on the boy's shoulder and the other on his chest, disqualify him and signify Jan as the winner. He's made it easily.

They call another name, and then mine.

"Eklah Fareki."

Immediately my heart is beating, and I feel heat rise to my face, but my complexion is dark enough that the blush doesn't show up. I move forward, passing a few rows of fellows before I reach the sparring area up front. Standing beside me is a boy who's quite fat, and I'm

wary of his size because of what Brack has always said about fat leading to strength. I raise my fists to him, and he smiles and does the same. It's not a cruel smile; it's nice, like he recognizes me as his opponent and he's sorry that both of us cannot continue. I try to return it, but I'm staring at his large fists. As far as I know, he's not going to give up the fight to me.

Herrad gives us the signal to start, and I begin to bob up and down on my feet, very slightly. It's an agility test, so the faster I can move, the better. If Herrad determines that neither of us are fast enough, it doesn't matter who wins; neither of us will pass the test. My opponent also begins to shift on his feet, and he throws the first punch.

I'm moving back and forth so quickly that I dodge it easily, and I take advantage of his outstretched fist to lunge forward and connect my fist with his stomach. It's surprisingly firm, and I decide I absolutely believe Brack about muscles hidden beneath fat.

"Point," Herrad calls, and I move back to my starting position. The boy is smiling less now, and I'm not smiling either. If I win, I am one step closer. It's been a long journey so far, but I will do it. I will reach the top and make Rargon regret they ever decided to set foot in my village.

When we are cued to start, the boy makes the first move again. He's already predictable, and I duck to avoid it, dropping to my hands and knees. My stomach faces the ground, and I swing my legs around in front of me, my ankles colliding with his, and he's been bouncing around so much trying to be agile that he's off-balance. He falls, and the ground vibrates for a moment as his weight hits the ground. I rise to my feet.

"Point," Herrad says once more. "Eklah Fareki."

I look down at the boy and decide to smile once more. He's a great lump on the ground, and I stretch out my hand. His grin returns as he looks up, and he takes my hand. He's heavy, but I have grown so strong here that I can still pull him up.

"Thanks," he says. "You're not so bad."

"I don't like to think I am."

We're ushered back to our places to watch the remainder of the examinations, and I drift into my head as the competition goes on. I am a little bit closer, but I am still only halfway there.

They will congratulate me afterward—Yichta and Brack and all the other Valirens who believe in me. And I will smile and tell them that I am doing my best for them, that I will lead them back to safety and victory and peace. I know that this is a step forward, even if it's a small one.

Still, I can't help it. I do not feel any closer to my goal.

###

The next week, I return from the pond weighted by a sack heavy with vreda rocks. The rocks themselves are very porous and not that heavy, but an entire bag of them is a burden. When I get to my room, Nevi is waiting for me. She watches as I juice the lemons, take out the grinding bowl and grind the rocks into dust, make the paste that I am begin to raise to my head.

It's on my hands, not my head, when the door opens. Nevi is waiting there as a precaution and she begins to force it closed.

"No one is permitted to enter the savior's quarters right now," she says. "She's—she's indecent."

She pushes on the door, but whoever's there forces it open and barges right in anyway.



“What, you mean to tell me that the Great Messiah of Vali can be indecent?” Jan asks, walking past Nevi and coming over to me. “Look, it’s just me. I can come in if I want.”

“No you can’t!” Nevi shouts, shutting the door behind him and hurrying over.

“Yeah, so indecent,” Jan scoffs, giving me a once-over. I’m fully clothed, completely normal looking. The dye is in a bowl in front of me, a scoop of it in each of my hands. He leans over the bowl.

“So, this is what you use to do it, huh? This is the big method? I always thought it was fake hair or something, like you stole it from some white wild animal I’ve never heard of.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, trying to scrape the dye off my palms and back into the bowl.

“Don’t play games with me, Fareki. I’m not one of those religious zealots out there. And I couldn’t give less of a damn about what you’re doing here. I know you’re a fake.”

My mouth opens, but there are no words. What am I supposed to say? He just knows?

“Don’t be so surprised.” He chuckles and cracks a smile. “Why are you doing this, Eklah? What do you think you’re doing here, lying to all these people?”

“I—I need them,” I say. There’s no point in pretending. “I need them to become Commander.”

“For what?” He slumps down on my bed and pats the spot next to him, motioning for me to follow. I don’t. Nevi stands guard at the door, watching us silently. “Are you going to get all this power and mindlessly throw your soldiers at Rargon? Get back at them for your village?”

“I need them to pay,” I whisper.

Jan scoffs. “War is more complicated than that, Eklah. You should know that. Well, maybe you don’t. You’re from a little place in the middle of nowhere. Did they ever teach you about the Valiren civil war that happened about thirty years ago?”

I shake my head. “Why does that matter?”

“Well, one half of Vali wanted one thing, and the other half wanted something else. You know, the usual. And it caused some mild tension between the people, and then some rumors started to spread, and then a couple southern people attacked a kid in the north. After that, the northerners said that all the southerners were cruel, violent people bent on having their way, who killed their children, and then people on each side were saying terrible things about everyone else. It turned into a full-fledged war, and then people were dying all over the place. Lasted three years.”

I find a loose part of my pants and gather the material in my hand, squeezing it between my fingers. Then I realize that there was still some dye on my hands and now it’s all over my pants.

“Why are you telling us this?”

“Because it matters,” Jan answers. “Because that’s how war works. Did you ever stop to think that Rargon is fighting for a reason other than being power-hungry? That maybe their soldiers are just like us? That they have families and they’ve struggled and they’ve lost and they’re no different from the Valirens and the Shinnans? Have you even considered that?”

“They ruined me,” I say. “They killed the people in the village. My mother and father are dead. Nevi’s little brother is dead—we watched him die!”

Jan sighs. “But you have to understand this, Eklah. You can’t just take a sword and go blindly forward, swinging it at every Rargonian you can find. You know that’s not right.”

I don't answer. If I accept anything he says, I have something else to deal with—something I don't want to face.

“This isn't your whole reason for being here, is it?” Jan asks. “Revenge?”

My lips part again, and no sounds come out. I swallow and try again. “No. I mean, that's why I started this whole thing. They came up to me and they threw this at me—I didn't know what to do. I was just a kid, a refugee—I'd just lost my family. But when they told me their plans, I panicked, and it seemed like he best option. I was angry, and I could make Rargon pay for what they did to me and to all of us.”

“Is that all?”

I take a breath and turn to the counter, bracing my hands against its edge.

“I wanted—I wanted a home. I needed support, and these people were all suddenly supporting me, even though they didn't know the truth, and what else could I have done, Jan? I had nothing. I'd lost everything except for Nevi. What was I supposed to do?”

“They would have supported you,” he says. “They understood. We all do. It was a misunderstanding. We've all lost something, Eklah. You're not the only one who's suffering.”

I turn to Nevi, and whatever look is in my eyes spurs her to move away from the door. There's no need to keep guard, anyway; the dye isn't in my hair. She comes to my side and takes my hand.

“What do I do?” I ask no one in particular. “I can't back out of this now. I can't tell them I've been lying to them all this time. I give them hope. I give them faith. If I tell them I'm a fraud, what are they going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Jan says, eyes on the ground before us. “It’s your decision, Eklah. I don’t mean to be harsh, but you got yourself into this. And yeah, you were a kid, and you still are. Maybe they’ll have some sympathy for you if you come clean.”

“But maybe they won’t,” I say. “People are unpredictable in situations like this, aren’t they? One of my neighbors lost her husband to sickness, and she hit someone the next day. Almost killed them. I can’t fight back against that kind of thing.”

“I’m not sure how they’ll react,” Jan says. “But, Eklah, know one thing.” He rises from the bed and comes next to us. “You have my support, whatever you do. I won’t tell your secret. I was never going to.”

I meet his eyes, trying to control my breathing. Suddenly I want to cry.

“Thank you,” I say, my head falling forward. Nevi wraps her arms around me, and Jan slings an arm around us both.

Soon he returns to his own room to sleep, and I dip my hands into the dye. It’s cold against my scalp, and when I look in the mirror, I don’t recognize myself.

### PART III

It feels like so much time has passed. The days began to blend together after a while, every day the same, working my way up to the top, watching people cheat for me, passing my tests, going through the rituals, listening to the whispers of angry Valirens impatient with my progress—and all the while making sure that my roots never, ever showed.

My feet are heavy as I make my way to the meeting hall. My armor changed two months ago: I now wear a higher-ranked insignia on my shoulders. My boots are higher quality, or so they tell me. They're more comfortable; that's all I can say for sure. A lot has changed.

My hair is freshly dyed, but the follicles are unhealthy. It's brittle and dry and dying. For two and a half years, I have been stripping it of its color and health, over and over, every week to keep my identity safe. It has been endless. Sometimes I'm not sure why I'm here.

Rargon's forces have pushed past the upper end of the continent, through northern Vali. Their influence has spread, and they've been creeping closer every month. This all began so long ago, and every so often I'm taken by the disgusting feeling that I've accomplished nothing. Yes, I have made my way up the ranks—fought in every test, studied for every exam, built up my body and learned to hit hard—but it has done no good so far. The war still goes on, the people still suffer. I suppose government affairs move slowly.

I'm an upper officer. I sit at the raised table in the front of the meeting hall, next to Brack and four others. It has taken over two years, and even though I have made it all this way, it feels like I am in the same place I was when I started. Some of the Valirens have whispered of mutiny. Many have given up on me. The most faithful still stand by my side, unyielding. I had never met people with such conviction until I came here. Yichta, Brack, and plenty of others—they still smile at me when I pass, though some of their heart seems to be gone.

I am finally here, one step away from the goal. But I have been at this point for two months, and Commander Faidelk isn't going anywhere.

I stand before the door to the meeting hall. The assembly won't start until I'm there. I'm important now, in the eyes of the entire military. I suppose I was always important to the Valirens. I don't quite feel like any of them are right.

My hands press against the door, and it opens. Heads turn towards me as I go in, my hair a white beacon against the somber shades of the Valirens and the few Shinnans who make up the rest of the ranks. I have it pulled into a ponytail on the back of my head, the curls bounding behind me as I move, tickling my neck.

I take my seat at the table of upper officers, next to Brack. He has made it here of his own merit, though he has no plans to move up anymore. It's my job to take over as Commander, not his. Though he would do it brilliantly. He's shown himself to be a good leader—to me, to the Valirens. His mate certainly thinks so.

I sit wearily at the table and stare down at the lower-ranking soldiers. I dreamed of this a long time ago, but now I'm not sure I deserve to be up here. Much of my progress had to do with the Valirens pulling strings and manipulating things in the background. Towards the end, though, I did face off against a few Valirens who had lost their faith in me. They seemed to be the hardest to beat.

I find Yichta's face in the crowd, and she smiles at me. I try my best to return it, but I'm not sure my face moves that way anymore.

The last of the soldiers file in, and the commander strides across the front of the room, pacing between us and everyone considered less important.

“Glad you’ve all been able to make it,” she says, eyeing a few of the latecomers. Her hands are clasped behind her back, her voice carrying through the hall. “You’re here today only for an update. I want the entire camp to be aware. A few scouts have returned from Rargon’s nearest camp on the other side of the mountains, and it seems that they’re restless. They’re planning on moving east along the southern border—and do you know where that is, soldier?”

She stops in front of a man in the front line, and the soldier stammers out an answer. “That’s where we are, Commander.”

“Precisely,” Faidelk says, continuing on her way. “Now, we’re the biggest camp in this area, and we’re the westernmost camp, as well. Rargon has pushed past our brethren in the north, and we’re the next point of interest. They need to get past us, which means they’re going to put up a hell of a fight.” She stops and turns toward the crowd. “This afternoon, you’ll be reviewing emergency procedures for an attack. I want you to take this seriously; I want these procedures memorized. Your officers will be testing you on this, and failure to know proper proceedings will put your rank on the line. This is real, people. Remember that.”

The meeting concludes quickly, with the bulk of the soldiers retreating immediately to their assigned areas of the camp to go over the emergency procedures. The upper table stays put, and Faidelk turns to us.

“Now, if you would all follow me to our meeting room, we can discuss strategy.”

We rise and follow. I walk in line with Brack. He puts his hand on my shoulder and smiles when I meet his eyes.

“You’re doing alright, kid,” he whispers.

“It’s been two months,” I respond. “I can’t move up anymore. It’s like—everything has come to a standstill.”

Faidelk's private meeting room is much nicer than the majority of the camp. The large table in the center of the room is made up of fine, polished oak, as are the chairs that surround it. We take our seats, and I mush my boots into the carpet beneath us, wishing I could take them off and curl my toes against the rug.

Brack sits across from me, and the other four other officers take their seats. Faidelk has a chair at the head of the table, but she never sits. I'm not sure I've seen her sit down once in the two and a half years I've been here.

She plants her hands atop their back of her empty chair and glances around at us.

"They're going to attack soon," she says. Her voice carries well, even in here, in this small space, when she is not shouting. There is power and unquestioned authority there, like she knows she belongs at the top. She rarely looks at me when she speaks, but when she does, there's a glint in her eyes. She, like the rest of the camp, knows why I am here. She doesn't believe in it, but she knows that her position is where I need to be. She knows I am supposedly a danger to her, but she has no intention of stepping down.

I always wondered what the Valirens planned to do when we got to this point. It never came up. I've asked, but each time was met with silence and a shrug, their eyes cast to the ground. Some of them assured me they had a plan, but I've been an officer for two months and nothing has happened. I asked Brack and Yichta, but they said the others wouldn't tell them what they had planned, either. Rargon continues to move east, slaughtering more and more people, taking prisoners of war, burning crops and villages in their entirety.

Faidelk looks at me now like she knows I'm not a threat to her. How can I take her position when she is there for good?



“We need to be ready for their strike,” she goes on, turning her eyes to each of us in turn. “Make sure each division is properly reviewed on emergency proceedings. Go over every scenario. I’ll have you all oversee the work they’re doing now. It’s possible that Rargon will circle around and attack from the east. They’ll most likely strike at night. I don’t know when it will be, but I’ve already added some extra sentries around the camp’s border. I want us to be prepared for anything. We will not lose this camp.”

It’s standard. She isn’t saying anything new. She goes over some details, and I listen—I do. But I’m not sure what good it will do me. I’m not a leader. I have no right to be in this position. The strategies don’t make sense to me, the little details, the nuances. I was raised in a Shinnan village, a secluded little place next to a small freshwater pond that hid some vreda rocks beneath its surrounding shrubbery. I wasn’t meant for this kind of life. I’m not suited for it. I never have been. The Valirens made a mistake. They never should have believed me. They’re foolish.

When the meeting finishes, I am one of the last to get to my feet. Brack places his hand on my shoulder once more and leads me out of the building. I think Faidelk was staring at me as I left, staring into my back.

“You looked pretty tired in that meeting, kid,” Brack says as the sunlight breaks onto our faces. “I don’t mean any offense, of course. How have you been doing?”

“I *have* been tired,” I say. “It’s been a lot of work.”

“Well, not just anyone can do what you’re doing,” Brack reminds me. “You’re the only one for the job.”

We’re headed towards my room, his hand guiding me there. I’m sure he’s going to tell me to get in the bath and relax for a while. I open the door and let him in before I follow. He

has to duck under the doorframe. Nevi is sitting there on her bed with a book. She's been sitting there waiting every day, every day for years, letting me keep up this façade. I don't know how she does it.

"Sit down," Brack says, going over to the counter and heating a pot of water. "Let me know what's wrong."

Nevi looks up. I slump down on the other bed,

"What if I'm not right for this?" I ask. "What if your books are wrong, and I'm just some kid who—who just happens to look the right way?"

I don't know why I'm asking this. I shouldn't mention it to Brack—I know it's dangerous. But I won't tell him the truth. I can't; I'm too deep into this. It's too late to come clean, many years too late. It was too late the moment I agreed to lead them.

I couldn't take the look on his face if he ever found out the truth.

"Nonsense." Brack laughs, a hearty sound that comes straight from his gut. "Our books don't lie, Eklah. You're the savior."

"You really believe that?" I ask. Nevi raises an eyebrow at me, her eyes cautious, wary.

"I always have," he answers. The water boils, and he mixes some herbs into it and takes it to me. He sits by my side, and the bed shudders and sags beneath his weight. "You're a good kid, Eklah. I know that for a fact. I'm never wrong about a person."

I scoff but try to keep it quiet. I blow on the steaming tea for something to do.

"I don't know what anyone's planning on doing now," I mutter. "There's no way to get to the top. Faidelk is still here, still standing tall and strong and proud, and she's not going to step aside for me."

"We'll find a way," Brack assures me.

“How?” I cry. “When? This was a terrible idea, and—and I knew it from the start. I was just so angry, and there was nowhere else for me to go. And now I’m here at the end and I just—it’s like a wall. It’s like I hit the ceiling, and I can’t go any higher. This was useless. This was stupid. I should have just kept going east. I never should have stayed in this camp.”

“Eklah—” Brack begins, but I’m on my feet, crossing the room, placing the untouched mug of tea on the counter.

“I need some air,” I mutter, and then I’m gone.

I don’t know where I’m going, just that I’m not leaving the camp. I try to go where there are fewer people, because even though they’re used to my presence, some people still stare. I don’t know what it is—the hair, the savior sent from Vali thing, the fact that even though I’m almost eighteen, I’m still one of the youngest people here. But they stare, and I want to get away from it.

I duck behind a building and fall back against the wall, sliding down against it until I’m on the ground. I sit there for a while before I hear the scuffle of boots against dirt, and some whispers.

“The time is getting close,” one voice says. “This is going to be our only opportunity.”

“You’re sure this is the best plan of action?” another asks. “It seems a bit extreme.”

The first voice scoffs. “There’s no other choice. Rargon is sweeping through the country. We need the savior to lead us to salvation, and that’s not going to happen with how things are now.”

“That’s right,” someone else pipes in. “We can’t wait any longer. It’s been years. It’s time to end this damn war.”

“So,” the first voice says, “we need to make sure we’re prepared.”

“Which one of us is leading them in?” someone asks. “You? Alright, and then our group will head out of the camp.”

“Make sure no one sees you,” another says urgently. “It’s imperative that everyone thinks *they* did it—that it was an accident.”

“Yeah, it needs to look like a coincidence. Something unfortunate.”

“Don’t patronize me. I know what I’m doing.”

The group lowers their voices, and I can’t hear anything else. There’s an unfamiliar feeling in my stomach, something unsettled, like I had a lunch I shouldn’t have. Careful not to let my boots scrape against the dirt, I get to my feet and return to my tent.

Brack is still there when I get back, sitting on Nevi’s bed this time, my abandoned mug of tea in his hands, half-empty. Jan is also there, stretched out on my bed like he owns the place.

“Hey, savior,” he calls. “Have a good walk? They say you freaked and ran out a little bit ago.”

“Thanks for telling Jan all of my personal problems,” I mutter, casting an irritated glare at Nevi and Brack, because at least one of them is the culprit here.

Nevi raises her hands in surrender.

“Listen,” I say, crossing my arms. I feel too agitated to sit down, and Jan’s taking up my whole bed, anyway. “I just overheard something. And I’m not entirely sure what it was, but I feel off.”

“What is it?” Nevi asks, and I tell them, trying to repeat it as word-for-word as I can.

Jan bites his lip as he thinks it over. “Wonder what it’s about.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I say. “Me, too. That’s why I’m asking you all.”

Nevi tilts her head. “It sounds like they’re planning on letting someone into the camp.”

“And they’re mad at me,” I add, “because I’m not working fast enough for them. I don’t really blame them.”

“But what are they planning on doing to change things?” Brack asks. “They’re planning something they shouldn’t.”

“You think?” I ask.

But none of us know what it is. I didn’t get enough information. Maybe I shouldn’t have left so soon, but I knew something was wrong. Something *is* wrong.

Jan sits up, suddenly serious. “Eklah,” he whispers, “what are the Valirens willing to do for you?”

I don’t know how to answer.

###

A week passes. The camp has been going over drills and emergency procedures, and I’m almost certain that if anyone gets into this camp, we’ll be able to beat them back within hours. That is, if they can get in at all. We have sentries lined up on the walls, even more so at night. We’re prepared. If anyone challenges us, we will take them.

The group is gathered in my room—the small group of people that I have learned to call my friends. Nevi sits perched on her bed, Jan draped over her, determined to take up as much space as possible. Brack and Yichta sit upon my bed, surrounded by unnecessary pillows. It took a lot of coaxing to get them to sit; there are no chairs in my room and no other place to sit but the beds. I’m sitting on the floor, back against the wall, and Yichta keeps casting worried glances at me, like she thinks I’m not comfortable enough.

Drills are over for today, and we have the rest of the day off. Outside, the sun is sinking towards the horizon. I'm exhausted after running the emergency drills, and I can only imagine how the actual soldiers are doing.

Jan is saying something about making it up the ranks so quickly compared to everyone else, and Brack laughs, reminding him that he's not the only one to rise that fast. It seems even our small talk is related to the camp, to the war. Jan is muttering an irritated response when I hear it.

It's a shout, coming from outside. Just a shout, not a scream, but then there are others shouting, more than one. I glance at the others, and they're already looking at me with big question marks on their faces.

"There's no way," I say, but Brack's on his feet already and so am I. When he opens the door, the bell begins to sound from the corner of the camp.

"They're here," Brack whispers, staring as soldiers sprint back and forth in a frenzy. Their emergency training is being kicked into full gear.

The others are behind us, peering out at the madness that has already formed in the camp.

"That doesn't make sense," Yichta insists. "It's not even dark yet. The sun is still in the sky."

Brack shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. They're here. We need to get into formation."

"I don't think I'm ready for this," I mutter, and then Brack's huge hands are on my shoulders, like they belong there.

"You're fine, Eklah," he assures me. "You've made it so far. The Valirens will protect you, and so will all of us. We'll die for you if we have to."

“You shouldn’t.” I’m shaking my head. They shouldn’t. They shouldn’t.

“Eklah.” Nevi’s hand is on my arm, her voice a whisper.

“Listen, Eklah,” Yichta says. “You’re the most important person in this camp. And you’ve fought hard to get where you are. You deserve to be here, and if anyone is going to survive, it’s you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to fight them again.”

Brack still has me, and his grip is tight. “You’re strong, kid. You’re going to be fine. We’ll keep you safe. Just stick with me, alright?”

I stare at him. “Alright.”

“Good.” He straightens up, lets go of me. “Now, that’s enough talk. We’ve got to get moving, get into form—”

The words are cut off. I wonder if he’s seen Rargonian soldiers, but there are none in the camp yet. Instead, I follow his eyes and spot a group of Valirens running through the front gate, outside the camp boundaries.

“Now, where are they going?” Brack whispers. “No one’s supposed to be going that way, not during an attack.”

And I feel what he feels—what we all feel. There is something wrong. Something very wrong.

“They’re the ones I overheard,” I say. They all nod; they already know. The five of us are in sync somehow.

And that’s how I know what Brack is going to say before he says it.

“Eklah.”

“I know.” I meet his eyes. “I’ll go with you.”

I turn to the others. “Stay here,” I tell them. “That’s an order—I don’t care about the formation.” I look between Jan and Yichta. “You two, you keep her safe. Understand?”

Jan shakes his head. “I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not,” I say, facing the door. “You’re staying right here and making sure Nevi stays unharmed.”

“Eklah—”

I turn back to him with daggers in my eyes. “If you let her get hurt, I will never forgive you. You are going to stay here no matter what. Do you understand?”

He keeps my gaze, his eyes just as sharp, before he nods and concedes.

“Don’t worry about us,” he says.

Brack and I set off, sprinting towards the front gate. My hand moves to the sword at my hip, and I see now why we always carry our weapons with us. It was for this moment, always for this moment. Brack’s axe is strapped to his back, and I stare at it glinting in the sun as I run behind him.

The gates are wide open—exactly how they’re not supposed to be—and we run straight out of the camp, dodging the Rargonian soldiers pouring inside. Brack spots the Valirens ahead of us, and we sprint into the woods.

The forest is dense right around the camp boundary, and the shrubbery slows us down. I’m trying to get over a raised tree root when Brack holds his arm out in front of me.

“What?” I ask, even though I am a trained soldier and I know better than to make a sound in this kind of situation.

Brack is better at this than me, and he says nothing in return, staring straight ahead. He crouches, and I follow suit, shrinking myself into a ball about an eighth the size of Brack.



Ahead of us, the Valirens have stopped. There's a clearing there, where the underbrush is thinner and the trees are farther apart. Six Valirens stand there, facing something, but I can't see what it is behind the trees. But soon, I learn.

It's the commander's voice.

"How dare you?" Faidelk demands. "How dare you drag me out here and threaten me? You are kidnapping. I am your Commanding Officer. Unhand me!"

"I'm sorry, Commander," one of the Valirens, a short woman, says softly. "It's not your fault, truly. But we know you won't step down on your own."

"What reason have I to step down? You two, get your hands off me immediately."

The Valiren woman scoffs. "You're such a proud woman. It was always your worst quality. You are powerful, sure, but you would never give that power up. And we don't have time to wait for you to die."

"Excuse me?" There's a pause, and then the sound of movement, but I can't see the commander or the two holding her. "I know what this is," Faidelk says. "This is about Vali. This is about that kid officer! Of all the senseless—"

"Please, Commander," one of the men says. "Miss Eklah is our savior. She is meant to lead us. We are those who still believe, those who have not lost their faith in these years it has taken to get her to the top."

"She will redeem us," the woman says. "She will save us. Vali has come to us in her, and we are only one step away from her true leadership. All that stands in the way, Commander, is you."

"You wouldn't dare," Faidelk says. "Unhand me. Unhand me now!"

The woman places her hand delicately on the hilt of her sword in its sheath.

“Brack,” I whisper, and that’s all I can do. My whole body is cold, and I don’t know how to move anymore. I’m frozen, and all I can do is whisper his name.

And that’s all it takes. Brack is on his feet in an instant, his axe unsheathed in his hand, tearing through the brush. The Valirens raise their heads to him.

“Stop this instant!” he cries as he bounds towards Faidelk and her captors.

“Brack!” the Valiren woman shouts. “Don’t you dare get in our way.”

He stops, facing Faidelk, axe in hand, but he doesn’t want to fight them, not if he doesn’t have to.

“Now, listen here.” Brack shifts his axe. “What do you all think you’re doing? You aren’t planning on killing the commander, are you?”

The woman sighs. “Step out of the way, Brack. Don’t get caught up in this. Someone needs to make a sacrifice for the cause—to stop this war. You don’t need to have this blood on your hands.”

“I won’t let you kill an innocent woman,” he snarls, turning towards the bigger group. I can see half of his body, the rest hidden behind a tree that sits between us. I can’t see Faidelk or the two holding her.”

“You’re going to stop us?” the woman says. “Brack, we cannot wait anymore. Miss Eklah must assume this position, and Faidelk has no intention of stepping down.”

“That’s no reason. Don’t you have any sense in those heads of yours?”

The Valiren woman smiles. “Of course. We’ve given this much thought. We’ve been waiting for this moment. Eklah’s been an upper officer for months, and that means she’s only one step away from redeeming us and ending this war. We needed Rargon to attack to give us the cover to do this.”

“You wanted Rargon to attack?”

“That’s right.” The woman places her hand on her sword. “Now, Brack, if you don’t mind, we only have so much time. The battle in the camp can only last so long. Step aside.”

He grips the axe more tightly. “I’ll do no such thing.”

“Fine, then.” The woman looks beyond him, at one of Faidelk’s captors behind Brack. She raises her brows.

“Eklah,” a voice whispers, and someone crouches next to me. It’s Yichta, and I jerk my head towards her.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out.

“I couldn’t let you two go alone,” she answers. “Don’t worry, Nevi is still safe with Jan. But where did Brack—?”

Her voice cuts off, and she’s staring straight ahead of her, her mouth falling open just a bit.

“Yichta,” I say, but I then I hear it. The slash of metal against leather, and then against flesh. I turn back towards the clearing, and he’s falling, his eyes open wide. And then there’s the bloody thump of his body hitting the grass. And then he’s still.

“Brack,” Yichta whispers, and then she’s screaming. She tears through the brush, and for a moment the Valirens raise their swords to her, but she collapses over the great lump of his body, and she’s sobbing. I can’t move. Brack.

The Valiren woman sighs and nods again at the two holding Faidelk. I’m still hidden behind the tree and the brush, and I can’t see, but I hear it. Another slash, another thump. And I know she’s on the ground, too, blood spilling out in a puddle around her body, staining the grass.

I'm stuck in place. I have not done anything, and now two people are dead. I couldn't leave this spot. I was too afraid. I have learned nothing in all these years. Dead. They're dead, just like Mama and Papa and Beni.

I get to my feet and immediately think I'm going to fall over again. But now the Valirens notice me, and the woman's face softens.

"Miss Eklah," she says, bowing her head.

I don't move for a moment. I stare at her, and then I move my eyes to Brack. The stain is crimson on his uniform, blooming from his back. I go forward, my legs shaking, all of me shaking.

When I'm in the clearing, I can finally see Faidelk. She's on her stomach, just like Brack, her cheek pressed into the grass, her eyes closed as if she somehow reached peace—this war commander.

Brack's are open. He stares straight ahead, Yichta bent over him, her tall body wracking with sobs. I fall to my knees next to her, and I'm not sure if I did it on purpose or if my legs gave out.

The Valiren woman stands over us. "You were supposed to be her caretakers," she says to Yichta. "You and Brack. Who is supposed to take care of her now, with one a dead traitor and the other a weak woman in mourning?" She sighs. "I suppose one of us will have to do it now. I'll take care of you, child."

She kneels and places her hand on my back, and I recoil, slapping it away with all the strength I still have. "Don't touch me!" I shout, and I fall backwards onto my elbows and I don't get back up. I stare at Brack, and Yichta, at Faidelk. Dead. They're both dead, dead because of me.

“You were impatient,” I whisper. “You didn’t want to wait for Faidelk to resign. So you—so you—”

“Relax, Miss Eklah,” the woman says. “This is for our people, and for yours. Faidelk was standing in the way of all of us.”

“She was a good leader,” I say, and I realize the immense truth of it, and I straighten myself. “Her camp has survived attacks like this before. Faidelk knew what she was doing. She earned her position.”

“So have you,” the woman says.

I shake my head. “No, when I went up against your people, they threw their fights with me. They wanted me to get here faster. I’m not a strategist. I’m not a fighter. I’m just a kid. I shouldn’t be here.”

The woman purses her lips, still crouched next to me. She looks irritated now. “So, what? Are you trying to give up? Now that you’re almost at the top? Are you going to ignore Faidelk’s sacrifice? Was this all in vain?”

I try to look at Faidelk’s body, but I can’t. Dead. She’s dead because of me. There’s no way to stop now. I can’t undo this. I have to keep going.

“Sacrifice?” I whisper. “You dare call this a sacrifice? She didn’t choose this.”

“She chose this by refusing to listen to her soldiers.”

I shake my head. “No, just you. She doesn’t believe in Vali, and that’s not a fault. What reason would she have to step down for the sake of a god she doesn’t believe in?” It doesn’t make any sense. They’re wrong. They’re wrong.

The woman’s voice is soft. “Please, Miss Eklah. Let me take you somewhere farther from the camp, away from this. You should be somewhere safe until the fight is over.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I say. “Just go.”

“Miss Eklah—”

The fire felt like it died a long time ago. I haven’t been angry in so long. And for the first time in months, I feel heat in my chest, and then in my stomach. The flames spread through my shoulders and hips, out through my limbs, and it’s burning, it’s raging, and I’m on my feet, facing her, and then we’re on the ground together, in the dirt, and my fist is on her jaw. I strike her face, over and over, breaking teeth, bruising her cheeks and her neck, and I don’t know how long I’m there until the hands are on me, until I’m forced back, falling into someone’s arms.

The world is red, and I can’t see—I’m blind. But the rage subsides, the fire cools, and my limbs burn out. I’m half-collapsed in Nevi’s lap. Jan stands over the woman, who’s barely more than a broken, bloody mass in the dirt. I’m not sure if she’s dead, but then she stirs, moans, tries to turn over.

“Get out,” I whisper.

The woman groans again, and the Valirens shift around us.

“Eklah.” Nevi’s voice is soft, and I don’t listen.

“Go!” I shout, surging forward, practically baring my teeth. “Get out of here. You don’t know what you’ve done. Leave this camp, and don’t you ever let me see your faces again.”

The woman is sitting up, and she stares at me. My lip curls back.

“In the name of Vali,” I whisper, “I *command* you.”

I turn my gaze to the rest of them to let them know that none of them are welcome, and they exchange glances with each other.

“As you wish, Miss Eklah,” one of the men says gently, and they leave the six of us there in the clearing, me in Nevi’s lap, Jan standing alone, Faidelk bleeding in the grass, Yichta curled over Brack’s body.

I leave Nevi and crawl towards Yichta, nearly falling in the haze that’s clouding my mind.

“Yichta,” I whisper, and the only response I get is a sob.

###

The battle was over within a day. With Faidelk’s faultless strategizing, the Valiren military did just fine in keeping most of its forces alive, and Rargon did not take the camp. It was not a perfect fight—not nearly—and we honored the dead in a Valiren funeral. Thirty-six of our soldiers did not make it to see the dawn of the next day. The thirty-fifth was an upper officer. The last was our commander.

They were the final two honored, and I sat with Yichta in the front row. She held herself together until his name was called, and that’s when she broke down again. I put my arm around her as she cried, and I only stared straight ahead. I wasn’t sure I *could* cry anymore. I didn’t know how. So Yichta cried for the both of us.

###

I stay in my room during the days that follow. The Valirens knock on my door several times a day, seeking my guidance as if I can tell them anything they can’t figure out themselves, but I don’t let them in. I don’t want to see anybody. Nevi and I sit in silence, not even looking at each other. Sometimes Jan comes and sits with us, but he doesn’t speak, either.

In the times when I leave my room, I hear the camp discussing their new leadership. An upper officer will assume the position of our late commander, and it's supposed to be me. I don't want it, but I don't think I can go back anymore.

The vote is held in the meeting hall. The table of upper officers is one person short, Brack's empty chair like a gaping hole in the room. Five of us sit at the table, and Herrad, the oldest of the five, conducts the vote. It's slow, counting each of the hands as they go up, but by the time they get to me, the victor is obvious. Valiren hands go up, even ones belonging to those who claimed to have lost faith in me long ago. Some Shinnans vote in my favor, as well. Yichta and Jan's hands both rise at my name. I try to smile at them, but I can't.

Then, someone stands.

"This is absurd," the man calls. "How can you vote for this child? She has no leadership experience beyond being an upper officer. From a tiny village in the middle of nowhere, and then she gets picked up and you all want her to lead us?"

Valiren heads turn towards him.

"How dare you disrespect Miss Eklah?" one demands.

"She's our savior!" another shouts.

"She was meant to lead us. Vali brought her here."

The man shakes his head. "I hate to tell you this, but we're not all Valiren here. You have Shinnan soldiers."

A woman shouts over the crowd. "He's just saying what we've all been thinking: she doesn't belong at the top. She's just a kid."

There's a murmur going through the room, a tone of agreement from other Shinnans, some Valirens.



“That’s enough.” Herrad gets to his feet at the upper table. “This isn’t a debate.”

“Well, it ought to be!” the Shinnan man points out. “This is our future—this is our leader! Rargon is right upon us; we saw that this week, and look what it did. We only had as few casualties as we did because Commander Faidelk was a good leader, a great leader. How can you replace her with a wordless vote, without discussing it?”

“He’s right!” someone else cries. They’re Valiren; I learned their name when I met them a year ago, and we never spoke again. “This is important. I used to believe, but now? If Eklah was supposed to help us, she would have done it a long time ago. I was never convinced that this is what we’re supposed to be doing. Is military strategy really how we’re meant to save our people from disaster?”

“Nonsense,” another Valiren shouts, a believer. “How dare you question Vali?”

The hall erupts. The soldiers yell at each other, the orderly lines shifting into chaos. Herrad tries to calm the crowd, but at this point it’s useless. He falls back and sighs, turning to the four of us remaining at the table.

“We’ll have to resume later,” he says, and he glances at me. “You should head back to your room for a while. Let them calm down without you around.”

“I’m sorry to cause trouble,” I murmur, and he puts a hand to my face.

“Don’t sweat it, kid. Me, I don’t give two darns about these beliefs, but it’s important to them—and to you, I’m sure. We have to go about this in a respectful manner.” He smiles. “I know you didn’t ask for this.”

I try to smile back at him, but I seem to have lost the ability.

###

The dye is mushier than usual. It clumps in my hair, and I sit on my bed, staring at myself in the mirror across the room as I wait for the color to be stripped away. I may as well get this done while everything is settled. I have the rest of the day to myself, and I'm afraid my roots are beginning to show.

I squint at my reflection, making all sorts of faces, trying to figure out what I look like to all of them. I'm so young compared to the rest—there's not a line of my face, no ridges between my eyebrows like Faidelk or laugh lines like Yichta. That man was right, wasn't he? I'm just a kid. I have no experience. I never should have let it get this far. But now that I'm here, I don't know how to back out. Maybe what's happening is a good thing. Maybe they won't vote for me. It'll all be controversial, so they'll elect Herrad or something else who's actually qualified and capable.

Commander Eklah. It doesn't sound right in my head, so I say it out loud.

"Commander Eklah," I murmur to myself. "Commanding Officer Eklah." The words get twisted around in my mouth. It's not right.

Nevi looks up from her place on the bed, where she's been reading.

"You doing alright?" she asks.

I exhale. "Not sure."

I trace a finger delicately along one of the damp, whitening curls. There's a knock on the door, and I jump.

"Eklah?" It's Yichta's voice. She sounds tired. I scramble for the door, trying to get there and shove my weight against it before she can open it, but the handle turns and the door swings open and there she is. "I don't mean to intrude, but I wanted to talk to someone about—"

Her voice trails off, her eyes going to my hair and the glob of white mass sitting on top of it.

“Um, Yichta,” I say, but my excuse is not coming to my lips.

“What is that?”

“What is what?” I laugh, and it’s the hollownest sound that’s ever come out of my body.

“Oh, this stuff? It’s just this goop that I make for my hair. I invented it, actually. It’s a conditioner.”

She’s staring at me, her dark eyes wide, and I’m aware of Nevi getting to her feet.

“Conditioner?” Yichta echoes.

“It makes my hair healthy. It’s really nice, actually.”

“Oh, is that it?” she mumbles. “I was confused for a moment.”

I clap my hands together; they need to be doing something, moving. “Yeah, that’s all. What did you want to talk about?”

But she’s not looking away. She steps closer, her eyes narrowing at the dye.

“Are you sure that’s conditioner?” she asks. “I’ve seen that type of product before. It’s never that shade. It’s always been some sort of cream color.”

I wave away the concern. “Well, I use my own ingredients. That’s why it’s this shade of white.”

“White,” she echoes. Her gaze is fixed on my head, and I take a step back, going to the sink, pretending to be busy.

“So, what is it you wanted?” I ask again, hoping she’ll take the bait this time.

“What ingredients do you use?” she asks.

I pause. I have to come up with something. “Um, lemon juice, of course, and some herbs you can find in the woods. I put some tea leaves in it, too.” I try to leave it vague. She isn’t answering, and I huff and face her. “So, you’re here for—?”

“No oil?” she asks.

“What?”

“You don’t add oil? It’s a key ingredient in every conditioner I’ve seen in Vali. It’s the most important ingredient; why wouldn’t you mention it at all?”

“I—just didn’t think about it off the top of my head.”

“Eklah.”

“What? What, Yichta?”

“What are you trying to hide?”

I turn back to the sink, ducking my head away. “What are you talking about? Why are you here?”

And then another voice speaks, but it’s not Yichta—it’s Nevi.

“You’d be better off giving up now, Eklah.”

I look up, and she’s coming towards us. There’s some kind of fatigue in her eyes.

“She already knows,” Nevi whispers. “The jig is up. It’s over.”

“Nevi, please,” I say, but now Yichta is looking at me, her creased brow furrowed.

“Yichta is one of the most important people to you in this camp,” Nevi reminds me.

“Stay out of this,” I hiss.

Yichta moves between us, capturing my attention once more. “Tell me what’s happening,” she demands. She’s taller than me, just broad enough to block Nevi from my view.

“There’s nothing wrong,” I murmur.

“Tell me.”

“I just—my hair—I mean, the whole savior thing—”

I don't know how to explain it, and I'm not sure I want to explain it, because she's going to hate me, but Nevi is right. She knows. She knows, and she'll never forgive me, never. And there's no backing away from this anymore.

I see it on her face, the realization. It's slow, terribly slow. Her eyes get wider and her lips part and her jaw slackens, her thick brows losing their worried tension, because there is no worry anymore, just shock. Just a cold realization that I am a fraud, that I am a liar, that I am her biggest mistake.

She doesn't say anything, and I am at a loss for words to fill the silence. She's so quiet, it's like she's become nothing, like she's shrinking out of existence. She staggers back, her eyes wide as they stare at me, through me.

“Yichta.” My voice cracks. She can't hate me. She can't.

Her head sways back and forth, like she's denying it. She doesn't want to believe it, but she has to. And everything that she has done, all the work she's done and the time she and Brack put into me, it was all for nothing, and she knows that now.

She turns away, and she pushes through the door on her way out.

“Yichta,” I call again, but my voice is weak, and she's already gone.

I don't say anything then, my mouth hanging open, my eyes on the door. And then Nevi's closed the door, moved towards me, her hands out.

“Don't touch me,” I say, recoiling.

“She didn't need you to tell her that much,” Nevi says.

“I almost convinced her that it was conditioner.”

“No, you didn’t. Yichta’s smart, Eklah; give her some credit. She already knew the moment she came in here. It was you confirming it that undid her.”

I need to sit down or I’ll collapse. I stumble across the room and fall onto my bed.

“How could this happen?” I whisper to myself. “Yichta knows. And she hates me. She hates me. How can she ever forgive me for something like this? This is her life—she put all her faith in me.”

Nevi sits with me but doesn’t touch me. “Eklah, you knew this was going to happen at some point. Jan found out on his own. Lail and Yetu caught you. Eventually a Valiren with authority or someone who cared was going to find out.”

“She’s going to tell everyone. Isn’t she? They’ll all know. They’ll banish me from this camp. I don’t know where else to go.”

“You don’t know that’ll happen.”

I throw my head into my hands. “I have to prepare for the worst, don’t I? And they wanted to make me their leader. Now it’s all going to fall apart.”

I can feel Nevi looking at me, but I don’t raise my head. “You don’t really want this, though, do you?” she asks. “You know you don’t belong here. Neither of us do.”

“I’ve never belonged here,” I tell her, “but I don’t know how to leave. This is our home now. It has been for years. They’re going to get rid of me. They’ll kill me!”

“Calm down, Eklah,” she says. “You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

I jerk my head up. “I have to tell them before she does.”

“What?”

“I have to tell them. All of them. The Valirens, and my own people. If they find out on accident like that—if Yichta tells them—I don’t know what they’ll do. But they’re going to find out either way. I have to be the one to tell them, right?”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea. Maybe it’s kindest at this point to keep deceiving them.”

I turn to her. “What else can I do, Nevi? Wait for them to find out like Jan and Yichta did? I have to be honest with them. We just lost some of our people. Yichta—she found out at the worst possible moment. She just lost Brack, Nevi. He died for *me*—because of me, at least. She needed hope. And now I’ve taken that away from her, too. I can’t do this to these people anymore. I...I have to tell them.”

“This might be a terrible idea,” Nevi say. But I know that.

“Yichta might tell them,” I remind her. “And if she tells them, it’ll be even worse. I have to do it myself.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “And I don’t deserve to be here, anyway. We’ve both known that for a long time. I shouldn’t be Commander. It was never meant to be.”

“If that’s your decision.” She takes my hand in hers, and I meet her eyes. “I’ll stand by you. You know I will. It might turn out horribly, but you might be right. I think this is the right thing to do.”

I take a breath. “Alright. I know how I’m going to do this. We’re going to make something we haven’t made in years.”

###

The crowd is buzzing. After the commotion last time we tried to take a vote, there's a nervous energy going around. I watch them all as they move, as they shift their weight back and forth, as they whisper to their surrounding soldiers.

We have gathered once more to try to vote for the new commanding officer. I sit at the upper table with Herrad and the others in our rank. I try to remember how I got here. I can't remember. The path is so fuzzy. I don't remember a single moment of my life here. None of it was real, not a second. I was lying long before I set foot in this camp—ever since I gave up on fighting against those hardheaded Valirens.

Herrad stands. "Alright, attention! We'll now begin the vote for the new commanding officer of this camp. And this time, we ask that you keep your opinions to yourselves—vote for who you personally think will be your best leader. That is all."

"Wait." I hold up my hand, and Herrad casts me a curious glance. "Before we vote, I have something to say. Something that I think will affect the results." My voice nearly breaks when I say it, and I clear my throat.

"Well, alright," Herrad says. "If it's important to the vote. Go ahead."

I stand, and suddenly my knees are shaking and I feel like I'm going to fall back into my seat. I place a small container on the table and move out of my seat, in front of the upper table. I am in full view of everyone in the room. I steady my breathing.

"I have something important to say." I make my voice as loud as possible, and it echoes throughout the room, back toward me. "And this is very difficult to admit, so please don't cause a commotion like last time." Even though I know it's impossible. Even though I know they will rise up and yell and shout and maybe kill me in their rage.



“I have not been fully honest with you all,” I tell them, projecting my voice against the far walls. “And I’ve come to realize that I’ve been in the wrong. I first met some of you when I was fifteen. I was even more of a child than I am now, and I had just lost my home and my family. I was scared and mostly alone, and I didn’t know what to do.”

I scan the crowd. I find Jan’s face almost immediately, but I can’t find the ones I’m looking for. Brack no longer stands among us. Yichta isn’t here.

“But then,” I go on, “I found some of you. Or rather, some of you found me. And I am so thankful that we met. And you have been nothing but good to me since the beginning. And maybe you’ve been biased, but you have still been so kind and so giving.” My voice is shaking. I don’t want to tell them. Where is Yichta?

“Your kindness means so much to me. I needed you all then. But I haven’t returned your kindness. You’ve told me your life stories, but I haven’t been honest with you. This has all been a mistake. I—I don’t think I’m who I am. I mean, I don’t think—I’m not—I’m not the savior.”

There’s an energy that moves through the crowd. I watch their faces crumple in confusion. They don’t understand; I can see that.

“Nonsense!” one cries. “You *are* our savior, Miss Eklah. Vali has chosen you.”

“Yes,” calls another one, “it’s Vali’s will.”

“Don’t be afraid of your birthright!”

I take a deep breath. “You don’t understand,” I tell them. “I am so, so sorry. I am sorry to all the Valirens who have ever believed in me. But I’ve been lying to you.”

And more cries come from the crowd, more support. They don’t believe me.

So I have to show them.

I turn back to the table and pick up the container. I remove the lid and gaze at its contents: a clear, flowing liquid, almost like water. And I steady myself once more. Herrad is watching me, as are the other upper officers, and I try to smile at them before I turn to the crowd.

“It’s true,” I tell the room. “I have been lying to you. I was never your savior. It was a lie from the beginning. And if you don’t believe me, I have to show you the truth.”

I raise the container over my head. The eyes of the crowd get bigger as I flip it over and the liquid comes crashing down onto my head.

And then my curls are wet, heavy, sticking to my face. I take a hand to my hair and pull one strand away to look at it. And I see that it’s worked: some of the color has returned. The hair is half black.

There is a moment of stillness. And that moment is the calmest part, the part when suddenly I feel safe, because nothing is happening. But I also know that it is the calm before the storm—and the storm is horrible.

The room erupts. I stand still, rigid, as people shout and scream. Some drop to their knees and murmur prayers, and others simply stare, dumbfounded. The Valirens are the ones reacting; my own people simply look irritated.

One man approaches me, rage sparkling in his eyes, and I know he is going to hit me. I’ve lied, I’ve deceived every one of these people, and maybe I deserve it. But I still throw my arm up when his fist comes towards me. I still deflect it. I still duck and run while Jan holds the man back.

I don’t return to my room. I already have a destination in mind, and I weave my way through the rows of buildings until I find the one I want.

“Yichta,” I say as I open the door, but she’s not there. It’s like the breath has been knocked out of me. Where is she?

Someone approaches from behind. I spin around, ready to defend myself from another attack, but it’s a woman this time, no signs of aggression in her body. Her hands are clasped in front of her. She looks like she’s about to cry.

“Is this a test?” she asks me. Her voice is nothing more than a whisper. “Are you testing our faith? I want to believe.”

“It’s not a test,” I tell her. “I’m sorry. I never should have done this. It all happened so fast, and then this was my life. I didn’t know how to back out of it.”

“You’re not sent by Vali?”

“I’m not. I’m just a girl, some random girl who got mistaken for someone special. But if what you believe is true, then your savior is out there somewhere. And they’re probably working very hard to help your people.”

The woman begins to sob, but she’s nodding her head, over and over and over. “Yes,” she says to herself, “Vali will take care of us. Vali will save us.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I never wanted to hurt your people.”

“Vali will save us,” she says again. “Vali is testing us.”

“I’m sorry.” But I don’t think she can hear me anymore.

###

The dye won’t stop staring back at me. It just won’t stop—existing. I stare back at it, as if we’re having a staring contest, as if I can win. It sits there on the tiny counter, next to the sink. The bowl of crushed carda petals, of lemon juice and vreda rocks. The damn white vreda rocks.

The dye seems like it's glowing, it's so bright, even on the other side of the room. I can't look away.

I lay back on my bed, trying instead to stare at the ceiling. I'm alone in my tent, and it seems deathly quiet outside. I wonder if they're planning on killing me for wasting their time, for my treachery against them. Some kind of ritual, maybe. Or maybe something gruesome. I deserve it. I wasted so many years of their lives. The least they can do is waste mine.

Nevi rests her cheek on my shoulder, her arm draped around me, her hands holding mine. She's given up on speaking to me. Now, we're just waiting. Waiting in silence.

I secluded myself here in my room. They didn't ask me to stay. I wanted to. I wanted them to be the ones to judge me. This is about them. They're the victims, not me. I told them I would wait here and let them decide. Maybe they'll decide somehow that they want me to lead them. I hope they don't. I'm not fit for it—I never was.

Something tells me they wouldn't want that anymore, anyway.

My hair is back to its natural state. Black, all black, the complete opposite of what it's been for years. It shocks me every time I've looked in the mirror, all that black surrounding my face. I haven't seen myself like this since Erdu still stood proud. I look so much older than I used to. It looks wrong. It doesn't look like my face, or maybe the hair is what looks wrong. I don't look real anymore.

Yichta hasn't come by. She always shows up when I'm alone, stops by the tent to say hello. I haven't seen her since she ran out my door. I just want to see her. But I know better than to ask. They wouldn't tell me where she was. And what would I say to her? I don't deserve her forgiveness.

There's a knock on the door. I jerk up.

“Yichta?”

The door opens, and someone comes in. But it’s not Yichta; it’s Jan. The excitement leaves my body, and I slouch forward.

“What is it?” I ask. “Have they decided what to do with me?”

“Yeah, they have.” He comes in further, then stops. “I’m sorry, Eklah. Neither of us wanted this to happen.”

“That’s alright.” A bitter laugh bubbles up in my chest and escapes through my throat. “This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

I look up at him. “I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t know if there’s anything either of you can do. But thank you,” I add. “Thank you for supporting me this far.” I squeeze Nevi’s hand. “Both of you.”

Nevi kisses my cheek, and I manage a weak smile, though I’m sure it must look like death. I get to my feet.

“Let’s go.”

###

A crowd has gathered in front of the meeting hall, outside in the dirt and worn grass. I approach them, a calm settling over me, despite my hammering heart. I already want to cry.

I stop in front of them. Their faces are a mixed bag; some have their gazes on the ground, some are praying, and most look angry, like they’re ready to pounce if I say one wrong word. They’re all Valiren. I don’t see Yichta.

“Eklah.” The one who approaches is a woman.

“Yes.”

“As a community, we’ve come to a decision,” she announces. “You allowed us to decide your fate, which we agree is fair. And we believe we’ve found what is best. For deceiving our people for years, for delaying the rise of the real savior, for using us for your own convenience, for allowing our people to die for you—we banish you from this camp. You are no longer a soldier of the Valiren military. You are no longer one of us. You are nothing more than a refugee from a ruined country with no family or home left to speak of. You are exactly what you were when you decided to deceive us: you are alone.”

I try to swallow so I can speak, but it feels like I’m choking. My face is hot, and I feel tears spill over, tears in front of all these people who hate me, who should hate me.

“Yes,” I whisper again, because it’s all I can muster.

“That’s fine and good, but you’re wrong about one thing.” It’s Nevi beside me. She moves closer and takes my hand. “She’s not alone; she never was. And she won’t be leaving on her own.”

“Nevi,” I whisper.

“Eklah, I’ll always be here with you,” she says.

“Actually, you’re doubly wrong.” It’s Jan this time, stepping forward, taking my other hand. “She’s got two of us.” He looks at me. “I’m going with you, too.”

“Jan,” I stammer, “don’t. You have a life here. You have a home.”

“It’s okay, Eklah,” he says. “I don’t really have anyone here, either. And being a soldier—it was just for my dad.”

“Jan,” I say again.

“And you’ll need someone to protect you, of course,” he adds. “I’m good for that.”

I shake my head. “Don’t do this. Don’t leave this.”

He meets my eyes. “It’s fine. And I don’t want to stay with a bunch of people who would banish a kid for getting caught up in one mistake.”

“One *huge* mistake,” someone hisses. “One that people died for.”

“I know,” I say to the crowd. “I know. I accept your punishment. I’ll leave—I’ll leave today.”

Someone moves forward. “You knew,” he yells, pointing an accusative finger at Jan. “You knew this whole time, and you didn’t tell us. You betrayed your own people.”

“I wasn’t going to give her away,” Jan says between his teeth.

“It’s a good thing you’re leaving with her,” someone says. “You don’t deserve to be here, either. You’re just as much a traitor as she is a liar!”

“You want to banish me?” Jan calls. “Fine. But too bad for you I beat you to the punch. Sorry lot.”

He makes to go with me back to my room to gather my things, but I shake my head.

“I have somewhere to go first,” I tell him. I turn to Nevi. “I’ll meet you in the room soon, alright?” I begin to leave, but I stop and look both of them over. “And, both of you. Thank you.”

They smile at me, but there’s some sadness they’re both trying to hide.

“Of course,” Jan says.

We part, and I make my way through the rows of buildings. Last time I found nothing here, but I have to see her before I leave. What I’ve done to her—what’s happened because of me—I can’t leave it like this.

I knock on the door. “Yichta.”

There's no answer, and for a moment, I am sure she's not there. But I open the door, and there she is, sitting on her perfectly-made cot. The sheets are pristine, flawless. Brack's bed is unmade, untouched since that day.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

She isn't looking at me. She doesn't respond. I move inside and close the door behind me.

"They've banished me," I tell her. "I just wanted to see you before I left."

She says nothing, doesn't even acknowledge me. I try to take a breath, but it's unsteady and wavering like I'm going to cry again, even though I just stopped crying. I move forward and sit with her on the bed. I don't look at her, either. I don't need to.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry," I say. "I really am. I wanted to tell you. I tried to tell you on that first day, when we met, but then you told me I would have all this power, and I could get my revenge, and I got so wrapped up in that, I let myself go along with it. And it seemed harmless at first, it seemed like we were all helping each other, but then it snowballed like this, and now people have wasted years of their lives on me, and now people are dead, and Brack—"

I look at his unmade cot, the pillow teetering on the edge, the thin mattress flattened in the middle where his weight used to be.

"Brack didn't deserve to die. He was one of the kindest people I've ever met, and that's why he tried to save Faidelk. It's my fault. They both died because of me, because the Valirens were trying to get me to the top so I could save them. I let this get out of control, and I never would have done it if I'd known it would lead to this. I would take it all back if I could. I'm so sorry, Yichta. I'm so, so sorry I did this. You don't deserve to suffer like this."

I look at her, but her head is turned away from me.



“This is your life,” I say. “You placed all your faith in me, and I used you. I know that I will never be able to make it up to you. That I took this part of you and wasted it like I did for everyone else. I will always live with the knowledge that I did this.” I take a breath. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m sorry.”

I pause. I wait for her to turn to me, to say something, and finally, she looks at me. Her eyes are red, her cheeks stained with tears. It looks like she’s been scratching at her face to wipe away the tears. But she doesn’t say anything. She’s silent.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I know you can’t forgive me.”

She shakes her head, a slow movement, like time is moving differently for her.

“I can’t,” she says. I think I feel my heart break. I knew she wouldn’t forgive me, but hearing it shatters me.

But then there’s something else—the ghost of a smile. A tenderness in her eyes. And I know that there’s something in her that still loves me.

“I love you, too,” I say, and I get to my feet, go to the door, and leave.

###

Nevi leans close, her hands wrapped around my arm. “Where are you planning on going?”

I hold the map in her lap, staring down at it. It’s an older drawing, one that shows the old country borders, the ones established before Rargon began spreading east. Nestled between Rargon in the west and Vali in the east is a smaller territory: Shinna. But Rargon is past that now. The three are the only countries in this area, on this huge mass of land that juts out from the continent. East of Vali, there’s nothing but a few islands, and then the sea.

“The ocean,” I say.

Jan looks up. “What?”

“There’s nowhere left to go,” I tell them, showing them the map. We can’t go west anymore. Those lands don’t belong to us anymore. If we can’t stay here, then we have to go east.”

“Why can’t we just stay in Vali?” Jan asks. “There’s plenty of it left. Plenty of land that hasn’t been touched by Rargon.”

I glance down. “I won’t be able to stay. “These people hate me. Word will spread throughout the country, just like it did when I first showed up. I won’t be able to find shelter here anymore.”

“So the sea,” Nevi whispers, tracing her finger along the map. “Those islands belong to Vali, but there must be something beyond them, some place to sail to. I’m sure the people on the coast know more about it.”

“They do,” Jan says. “We might be able to secure passage on a ship.”

“And maybe we can get away from here,” I whisper, “from this continent. Find some peace from this war.”

Jan stood up and grabbed his bags. “Then it’s settled.”

We head for the gates. It didn’t take long to pack up my things. I’ve learned to live on little, though until now, the Valirens had always made it easier with their gifts. Now, I won’t have any of those luxuries. I’m not sure what I’ll have. But I do know I’ll have one thing.

I turn towards Nevi and Jan. We stand together under the front gate.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“We’ll go together to the ends of the earth,” Nevi says, squeezing my hand.

Jan grins. "I've been ready." And then he flicks his gaze to my hair. "I like it that color, by the way. Black suits you, sinner."

I take his hand as well and feel my curls brush against my neck.

And we step forward.