

## *before*

THE CRACKLE AND hiss of the flames devouring our house couldn't block out the screaming and wailing of those who were still alive. My friends, the children, and babies. Orphans. Most of the men were dead. For how few of us there were, scattered around what used to be our village, the noise was almost deafening. I stood in the damp mud in front of our home, pressing my hands to my ears, trying to shut out the sounds. My jaw was clenched, but I couldn't stop the tears from welling up and slipping down my cheeks.

"Alexa, hurry!" Marcel grabbed my arm, trying to pull me away. But I yanked out of his grip.

"I can't leave them," I said, still staring at what remained of my mother and father. I did not look at my brother. Nor at the flames engulfing our home. Nor at the backs of the retreating enemy. Not even at the king's army, which had become visible on the horizon. It had materialized too late from the depths of the jungle that wrapped around our village, finally scaring off the Blevonese soldiers, but not before their sorcerer had done *this*.

"Alexa." Marcel's voice was more urgent as he reached up and turned my face to his, forcing my eyes away from the two bodies. But I couldn't see him, not really. The image of my parents lying

broken, charred on the ground in front of us, was burned onto my retinas. Onto my memory. The sorcerer had been no match for Papa's fighting skills — but no one was a match for the unholy fire the sorcerer had used against him and Mama.

I shuddered as I remembered the feel of magic in the air when the sorcerer killed them both, a stream of fire bursting from his hands.

The smell of burned flesh and the sight of them lying there were too much. I dropped to my knees and vomited into the thick undergrowth that never stopped trying to reclaim the ground we'd built our home on.

Papa made us promise to hide when we saw the soldiers from Blevon heading for our village. But then he and Mama were slain — and I had done nothing to stop it.

“The army's coming, Alexa. We have to do it now.” Marcel knelt down and held my hair back for me as I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, my stomach still heaving. “If they see me cutting your hair, they'll take you . . . they'll force you into the breeding house.”

I looked up at him, fear hitting me square in the chest. His hazel eyes, mirror images of my own, were bleak.

I glanced toward the winding trail that led to the jungle, which would take us to Tubatse, to King Hector's palace. And his breeding house. The army was getting closer. Too close.

“Maybe if I show them how well I fight, they'll let me join the army instead?” The panic in my voice was matched by the desperate pounding of my heart.

Marcel shook his head. The wind turned, and the smoke blew into our faces for a moment, burning my nose and obscuring

Marcel from view. His hand tightened around my hair, which he still held back from my face.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s do it. Hurry,” I added, spitting into the dirt one last time, trying to get rid of the bitter taste in my mouth. My knees were still weak when I stood up. Marcel grabbed the shears he’d managed to save before the fire grew too large, and moved to stand behind me.

When the blades bit through my hair and the first long, dark strands landed on the ground at my feet, I had to choke back a sob. It was stupid and vain, but my hair was the one feature that had truly been *mine*. Looking so similar to my twin brother had been fun as a child, but as we grew older, it became irritating. My jaw was too square, I was too tall, I hadn’t even managed to grow breasts yet. Other than my hair, I could have passed for a boy.

But now the very traits that I’d always been frustrated with would hopefully save me.

When the last lock of hair fell, my head felt lighter, colder, naked. I reached up with trembling fingers, but couldn’t make myself touch it.

“How do I look?” My voice wobbled, but I refused to let myself cry again. The army would be here any minute.

“Like me,” Marcel said.

Together, we hurried to pick up all the hair and threw it into the flames that were consuming what was left of our cottage. The long strands, years’ worth of growth, curled up and burned away in moments. Gone. Like my parents. Like my home. All taken, burned, hewn down, and turned to ash.