

LAST NIGHT

I stand rock steady on their hands. It's not that hard really; we've practiced. Neither of them will start drinking until their part is over, and their part is holding me above the heads of the rest of the crowd, above the highest reach of the flames from the bonfire. The men have become my legs, and I'm a twelve-foot-tall, four-legged girl because that's what I need to be. Because that's what they need me to be.

Wolf says, "Tell us, what do you see?"

"I see my mother and my father, waiting for me," I say, but I see nothing like that. I see the chopped path of moonlight

on the black lake water. My father, my mother, I do not see. I can't remember my mother's arms. I can't remember my father's eyes. I cannot walk into the past any more than I can walk across the lake on moonlight.

The men lower me until I can rest my hands on their shoulders. They lift me up again when Wolf says, "Tell us, what do you see?"

"I see a green world, and you all are there," I say, but what I really see is how the sparks from the fire rise up when the logs collapse. They float into the sky and disappear. They are only sparks. The stars are only sparks too, I guess. They will blink out some day. They will be swallowed by a ravenous wolf. With each star's passing, the cold and the dark will be more absolute. It will be so cold that snow will not fall. Even the snow will be dead. I've seen the future.

They lower me, and this time, I feel a hand on the inside of my thigh. To steady me? I'm steady. Maybe just to touch me because he can. Then I'm lifted again. Wolf is almost shouting now. "Tell us, what do you see?"

"I see Valhalla," I say. "Hel has parted the curtains between the worlds, and I see where she sleeps. She welcomes me."

I see Wolf's face, and he is not happy. I was supposed to see him, not Hel. I see the frame of birch saplings lashed

together to be a window to the next world, and I see those silly girls, Stormy and Sky, Wolf's daughters, holding it. They have already lost interest in the ceremony, so the frame is wobbling a little bit. It doesn't matter to them. They don't need to see through it to the other side. This is the present. They lower me to the ground, and then the two men walk me away from the fire, away from the lakeshore, to the place where precious and dangerous things are kept. Precious and dangerous things like me.

The door to the Quonset is locked from the outside. There is one little window; during the day, light sneaks through the wire-reinforced glass and dirt. Now all the light is inside, galvanized and grey, bouncing off the curved walls. It's locked in here with me.

I've got nothing to do until Wolf and Eva show up. I could sit on my cot. I could strip naked and wait under my wool blanket. Both of those things seem like too much trouble. Pretty soon, I'm not going to have any kind of trouble ever again.

Wolf and Eva are at the door. I can hear the keys in the locks. The door amplifies every sound, but that is no surprise to

me. I've lived here long enough. The door scrapes open. Wolf is carrying the computer. Eva is carrying my new clothes.

Wolf has rigged a tripod to hold the laptop camera steady. Now he needs to be sure that the picture is framed just right. He drags a box in front of it and then pulls the blanket off the cot and folds it. It will be a comfortable place to sit. The flags hang from a wire behind me. They are hanging flat so they will be easy to see. They are part of the message.

Eva brings the big metal washtub from the corner where I keep it. We had one like it at home. I was so little then, I could curl up under it and hide safe as a turtle. I stand up and pull off my hoodie, my T-shirt. I bend over to unlace my boot, but Eva is kneeling to help me, so I just wait while she loosens the laces. She lifts one foot at a time and pulls my boots off. I'm not rock steady now; I have to reach out and brace myself against her. She takes off my wool socks. Bo taught me I should always keep my socks dry. My socks are dry.

"Can I see Bo?"

"No, honey. You can see him in the morning. You both have other work to do right now," says Eva.

I haven't seen Bo for days. I don't know how many days.

I can hear Stormy and Sky coming up the path. Those

two are always noisy as squirrels. They carry white plastic buckets full of hot water for my bath. I need to smell like an ordinary girl tomorrow. I need to wash the wood smoke out of my hair. I step into the tub and Eva uses a coffee can to pour water over my head. Then she squirts soap on my hair. My scalp tingles. I smell like peppermint now, because it is peppermint soap. She washes my hair and my ears.

“Close your eyes, honey,” says Eva, so I do. If I get soap in my eyes, it will make me cry. I need to be clear-eyed. Eva washes my arms from my shoulders to my hands. She washes my breasts and between my legs. Then she washes my legs all the way down to my feet. Then she rinses me, once, twice, three times, and wraps a rough towel around my shoulders.

“She should wait until her hair dries.” Eva is talking to Wolf. “Your hair looks so pretty and white.” Eva is talking to me.

“We got all night,” says Wolf.

“She needs to sleep, too,” says Eva. “Go get the food now, girls. Get a move on.” Stormy and Sky move slower than usual, if that’s possible.

“Well, we can get her dressed and make sure everything is set up right. She can do it after she eats — or whenever,” says Wolf.

Eva hands me underpants, and I put them on. She helps me adjust the straps on the bra. I don't usually wear one, but I need to have one on tomorrow. She slides a pale blue T-shirt over my head. Eva picked it out to match my eyes. She hands me some jeans. The denim is new and dark. Then she leads me to the box and I sit down.

"Do you want your shoes on now, honey?" Eva asks.

I usually wear my boots day and night unless I'm wading through water and I need to keep them dry. I don't know if I want to wear these little silver shoes or go barefoot. I stick out my foot and Eva pushes a shoe into place. It pinches my toes. I shake my head, and Eva takes it off.

"You have to wear them tomorrow," Eva says.

I know what I have to do tomorrow. When the time comes, I'll wear the pinchy silver shoes.

"And this," says Eva, and she drapes a hoodie over the end of the cot. It has a camo pattern, but the colors are turquoise, white, and baby blue. I can't imagine any place where those colors would help a person hide, but Eva says I will blend right in with other people if I wear it. It is part of my disguise.

Stormy and Sky are back. Stormy is carrying a drinking horn and a quart box of milk. Sky has a wooden tray holding

a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios and dishes of smoked salmon, black cherries, and chocolate. These are the things I like to eat.

“Let’s get you set up,” says Wolf. So I turn to face the computer. He thumbs the clicker, and I can see myself on screen. The flags behind me are bright: red, white, and black; red, white, and blue; yellow, black, and green. The flags are always there. They will be there tomorrow.

“Let’s get this on you now,” says Wolf, and he wraps my black vest around me. The weight settles on my shoulders. It is a comfort to me. “The detonator isn’t rigged. We’ll do that in the morning. You can even take it off after you get done recording. I won’t rivet up the straps.”

Eva steps forward and rubs my hair between her fingers. “Almost dry already!” She brings me the drinking horn. “Just a sip now. You need to be real clear when you tell your story.” The mead tastes funny tonight, but every batch is different, because the honey is always different. It depends on the flowers the bees find. I don’t know the taste of these flowers, that’s all.

“You just go ahead and talk as long as you like. Don’t worry about making mistakes. We can edit it down and have it ready by the time you finish your job. So you just go ahead and say whatever you need to say — the battery is

charged up and there is plenty of memory,” says Wolf.

“Can I have the kerosene lantern?” I ask. I like the yellow light. It doesn’t glare as hard as the LEDs. The shadows cast by the live fire are softer. It throws a little heat, too. I shouldn’t feel cold—the night isn’t cold—but I do. I want the comfort of the kerosene. We used kerosene most nights at home, at least during dinner. When I remember my home, I remember being in that warm light.

“Sure, honey,” says Eva. She lights the lamp suspended from the arching metal ceiling. “Anything else you need, you just knock on the door. We’ll have a man out there all night. Anything you need.”

I stare at the screen. The girl I see there might as well be a picture in a book; she is so still. I never see her blink, because my own eyes close when that happens. I stare at her and it seems we have nothing to do with each other.

I swallow and take a deep breath.

“I’m Valkyrie White. I’m fifteen. Your government killed my family.”