

The Ledger in Her Head



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Seat Kayla Doesn't Take

On the morning of the school lecture, Tiferes arrives early and puts her bag on the chair beside her.

That is the chair Kayla sits in. Kayla has sat in it for three years, whenever Tiferes gets there first. It is not a rule and nobody has ever called it a rule. It is simply the shape their friendship takes at 8:20 in the morning.

Today Kayla comes in late, with the rush of girls who heard the second bell. She takes a seat in the back row with the other latecomers and gives Tiferes a small wave over the heads.

It is nothing. Tiferes knows it is nothing.

In her head, a mark goes down anyway, in a column she does not admit exists.

The column has been running for months. Tiferes can recite parts of it. She walked Kayla's project board home twice, in the rain, because Kayla's hands were full. She lent her notes before the midwinter tests. She has saved this seat more times than Kayla has saved hers, and until this year she never counted.

Now she counts.

Tiferes is seventeen. She takes her bag off the empty chair and puts it under her own. The lecturer begins. Tiferes hears every word and none of them.





Chapter 2: The Evening Out

On Thursday, Tiferes does not save the seat.

Kayla arrives on time and finds the chair beside Tiferes taken by a girl from the parallel class. She sits one row back. Tiferes feels the small satisfaction of a column moving toward level.

"It is only fair," Tiferes thinks to herself. "The account was due to balance."

The next week, Kayla asks to borrow the history notes. Tiferes says she will look for them, and does not look very hard, and brings them two days later instead of the same evening.

Her answers get shorter. She still says please and thank you.

"Nobody could write a complaint about this," Tiferes tells herself. "That is the point. The columns move, and there is nothing anyone can hand back to me and say, fix this."

Kayla can. On the way out of school, Kayla falls into step beside her.

"Are you upset with me?"

"No," Tiferes says.

It has the shape of a true answer. Upset is loud. What Tiferes is doing is quiet and, in her columns, justified.





Chapter 3: The Page

That night, Tiferes decides to prove to herself that she is not being petty.

She takes a notebook and rules a line down the middle of a page. At the top of the left side she writes GIVEN. At the top of the right side she writes RECEIVED.

The left side fills quickly. Project board, twice, rain. Notes before tests. Seats saved. The list of times she has waited for Kayla after davening? No. She stops. That one belongs on the other side, she realizes, and writes it on the right, because Kayla waits for her too. The right side fills slowly. Brought soup when the whole house was sick in the winter. Waited after davening, always. Told the teacher where my essay was when I thought it was lost.

Tiferes looks at the two columns. The left is long. The right is short and heavy.

She wanted the page to prove the account was owed to her. The page is not doing that. The page is doing something else: it is showing her that she has been keeping it.

She closes the notebook before anyone can see what kind of person keeps such a page.





Chapter 4: Mommy's Question

In the morning, the notebook is still on the kitchen table when Mommy sits down with her coffee.

Mommy does not open it. Tiferes opens it for her. It is easier to show the page than to explain the months.

Mommy reads both columns without a comment on either. Her face does the thing it does when she is being careful not to have a face.

Tiferes appreciates the effort and is exhausted by it at the same time.

"This left column is what you gave her," Mommy says. "Where is the column of what you asked her for?"





Tiferes looks at the page. "There isn't one. I never asked. She should know what a friend does."

"Maybe she should," Mommy says. "So she has a bill she never saw, for a return you never named? Did you know what a friend does, when you saved the seat? Or did you just do it because it was hers?"

Tiferes does not answer that one.

Mommy taps the page once, not unkindly. "A gemach keeps a list because the things are supposed to come back. What is supposed to come back to you?"

Tiferes opens her mouth to say nothing in particular, and finds that it is not true. There is something particular. She has known all along, and it is not on the page.





Chapter 5: The Real Line

The school fair is in six weeks. Every year, the older girls run booths in pairs, and the pairs form in these weeks, and Tiferes wants Kayla to ask her first.

That is the real line. It was never in either column, because it is not a debt. It is a wish.

She has been putting favors into the account like coins into a machine, expecting the machine to pay out as being chosen. Kayla does not know there is a machine. Kayla thinks the notes were notes and the seat was a seat.

Tiferes looks at the left column again. Half the things on it, she did gladly at the time. The gladness was real. It is only the counting afterward that made them into a bill.

She thinks about the right column. The soup. The waiting.

"Kayla is not a girl who does nothing for me," Tiferes thinks. "She is a girl who does not keep count. She would lose every argument with a girl who does."

Tiferes takes a pencil and circles the fair booth in the margin, where there was no column for it.





Chapter 6: The Ask

After davening, Tiferes waits for Kayla. Kayla looks surprised to be waited for, these weeks.

"Be my partner for the fair booth," Tiferes says.

It comes out as a sentence, not a question, and it costs her something.

"Yes," Kayla says, right away. "I was going to ask you, and then you got so quiet I thought you'd rather not."

They walk. It is the first time in weeks that Tiferes has chosen Kayla's company on purpose, instead of measuring it. Kayla is quiet for half a block.





"Were you angry at me? You said no, before."

Tiferes owes that no something. "That no wasn't straight with you," she says. "You asked me plainly, and I answered to make the question go away. I'm sorry for that one."

Kayla takes a few steps with it. "Thank you for saying it now," she says, and does not make a ceremony of it.

"I was keeping score," Tiferes says. "In my head. Favors, seats, who owes. I'm stopping. I'm not going to hand you the page, so don't ask to see it."

Kayla laughs, a little. Then she sees Tiferes is serious.

"I don't want to see it," Kayla says. "I probably lose."

"You don't," says Tiferes, and leaves it there.





Chapter 7: The Test

The week before the fair, Kayla forgets the price cards.

She promised them for Wednesday. On Wednesday she arrives without them, and says sorry, she left them on her desk at home, she will bring them tomorrow.

Tiferes feels the old machinery start up. A mark wants to go into a column. The column is not there anymore, and the mark looks for somewhere to live.

She lets it wait while she thinks.

This is not a seat. This is the booth, and the booth is theirs together, and the cards matter. Some things are for releasing. This one is for words.

"I need them tomorrow," Tiferes says. "If you can't, tell me now, and I'll make them tonight. Either is fine. Not knowing isn't."

"I'll bring them," Kayla says. "Tomorrow. First thing."

She brings them.

That Friday, at the planning meeting, Kayla takes the last good chair without noticing Tiferes behind her. Tiferes feels the twitch, names it for what it is, and lets it go without writing it anywhere. It is a chair. The cards were the booth. She is learning the sizes of things.





Chapter 8: The Booth

On fair day, their booth sells bookmarks, two for three dollars.

The torn-out ledger page is on the table, blank side up, then not blank: Tiferes writes the prices on the back of the GIVEN column, and the tally of sales on the back of RECEIVED.

Kayla counts the cash box wrong twice. Both times, Tiferes recounts it quietly and hands back the correct number.

Neither time does a mark go anywhere.

At the end of the fair, Kayla divides the profit for the class fund and holds out the envelope. "Same time next year?"

"Same time," Tiferes says.





She takes the envelope to the office. The page goes home in Tiferes's bag, prices on one side, old columns on the other.

That night she copies the prices and the tally onto a clean page, so the fund has a record that never carried columns. The next day, the teacher who oversees the fair fund counts the envelope with Tiferes and Kayla, checks it against the clean page, and signs the class fund book. The clean page goes into the fund's folder.

Only then, with the money counted and signed for, does Tiferes take the original page - prices, tally, columns, all of it together - and tear it into pieces small enough that no name survives. She said she would not hand the page to Kayla, and she does not. She retires it instead, after the fund no longer needs it.

