

IVORY AND BONE

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The darkness in this cave is so complete I can no longer see you, but I can smell your blood.

“I think your wound has opened up again.”

“No, it’s fine.” Your words echo against the close walls. Even so, your voice sounds small. “I ran my fingers over it. It’s dry.”

We need light and heat. I pat the ground, feeling for the remnants of the fire we made in here before.

“The wound is under your hair, Mya, and your hair is drenched.”

“My hair is *cold* – wet with rain and ice. It would be warm if it were wet with blood.”
Injured, bleeding, freezing – yet still stubborn.

“I’m going to try to get a fire going,” I say.

My hands search the floor, fumbling across silt and cinders, until they land on a chunk of splintered wood that flakes at the ends as if it’s been burned. A short distance away the ground drops down into a shallow hole – the fire pit.

I crawl further into the dark, one hand extended out in front of me, my knees grinding against knots of broken wood and nubs of rock. At last, my hand lands on what I remember as a deliberate, orderly stack of firewood piled against the far wall.

It's unnerving to be in a place so dark. It's even more unnerving to be here with you.

As I turn pieces of wood in my hands, my eyes begin to adjust to what little light filters in from outside. Black yields to gray as shadows become objects. I separate kindling and tinder. On a flat rock beside the wood I discover the starter kit – a whittled stick and fireboard. “Give me just a little longer and I'll get you warmed up, okay?”

I wait, but you don't answer.

“Mya?”

“Go ahead and make a fire. I think I'll just sleep a bit.”

“No – *no* sleeping. I need you to stay awake. I need company. Someone to talk to.”

“What are we going to talk about?”

Rolling the firestick between my fingers, I hesitate. “What do you think we should talk about?”

Maybe I shouldn't have asked this question. There are countless things that could be said between us, and probably countless more that should be left unsaid.

I grasp the firestick between my palms, one end buried in a notch cut in the fireboard, surrounded by fistfuls of dry grass like clumps of human hair. Rubbing my hands back and forth, I twirl the stick like a drill. As friction builds, a ribbon of smoke curls around the board.

Distracted by my task, I almost forget the question I asked you. I'm not sure how long you've been silent. “Mya?”

“Fine,” you say, the word scratching in your throat like you've swallowed bits of gravel.

“I'll try to stay awake, but you need to give me something to stay awake for.”

“Meaning?”

“Why don't you tell me a story?”

“I don’t know any stories.”

An ember catches. An orange glow blooms in the kindling. I lie on my side and blow a steady stream of breath into the grass, coaxing out garlands of smoke.

“Come on,” you say. “Everyone who’s ever lived has a story to tell, Kol.”

As the fire spreads I sit up, turning your words in my mind. What could I possibly tell you? All my stories have become entwined with yours. “What do you want to hear?” I ask.

“Tell me something *wonderful* – a story that’s startling and marvelous.” Despite your grogginess, there’s a lilt of expectation in your voice. “Tell me about the most startling and marvelous day of your life...”

Chapter One

I lie in the grass with my eyes closed, listening for the whirl of honey bee wings, but it's too early in the season for bees and I know it. I needed an excuse, I guess, something to say to get out of camp for a while, and the bees will be back soon, anyway. Before the next full moon comes, these wildflowers will be covered in bees and I'll be hunting for their hives. I'm just a little ahead of them.

"Kol!"

I sit up at the sound of Pek's voice, calling from the southern edge of the meadow. It's a wonder I hear him at all, with such a stiff wind pushing down over the Great Ice that forms the northern boundary of our hunting range. He waves his spear over his head, and a brief flash of sunlight reflects off the polished-stone point – a momentary burst of light, like a wink of the Divine's eye. Pek calls out again, and it sounds like "a boat," though that can't be right. From so far away, into the wind, he could be saying anything.

Pek is a swift runner, and he reaches me before I have time to worry about what he has to say to me that couldn't wait until I returned to camp. The skin of his face glows pink and tears run down his face from the sting of the wind.

"A boat," he says. He sets his hands on his knees and bends, sucking air.

"Did you run the whole way from camp?"

"Yes," he says, tipping his head to let the wind blow his hair from his eyes so he can look at me. Sweat glistens on his forehead. "A boat is on the beach. A beautiful long canoe dug out from the trunk of a single tree – you wouldn't believe how beautiful."

I run my eyes over Pek's face, still somewhat soft and boyish at sixteen. He favors our mother – he has her easy smile and eyes that glow with the light of a secret scheme. “Is this a game? Are you playing a trick on me-”

“Why would I bother to run all the way out here-”

“I'm not sure, but I know that there's no such thing as a boat made of the trunk of a single tree-”

“Fine. Don't believe me.”

Pek rolls his spear in his right hand and peers off into the empty space in front of us, as if he can see into the past, or maybe the future. Without warning, he takes a few skipping steps across the grass and with a loud exhale of breath, hurls his spear at an invisible target. He had the wind at his back to help him, but I can't deny it's a strong throw. “Top that,” he says, picking up my own spear from where I'd discarded it on the grass earlier.

I take it from him, tensing and relaxing my hand until the weight of it feels just right. I take three sliding steps and roll my arm forward, hand over shoulder, releasing the spear at the optimal moment. It is a perfectly executed throw.

Still, it lands about two paces short of Pek's. I may be his older brother, but everyone jokes that Pek was born with a spear in his hand. He has always been able to out-throw me.

“Not bad,” he says. “That should be good enough to impress the girls.”

“I'll try to remember that,” I say, forcing a laugh. There are no girls our age in our clan, something Pek and I try to joke about to hide the stress it causes us. But it's not a joke, and no one knows that better than Pek and I do.

“You won’t have to remember for long.” Pek’s gaze rests on something past my shoulder as an odd smile climbs from his lips to his eyes. Suddenly, this doesn’t feel like a joke anymore. My stomach tenses, and I spin around.

At the southern edge of the meadow, at the precise spot where Pek had appeared just moments ago, two girls come into view, flanked by our father, our mother, and a man I’ve never seen. “What-”

“Do you believe me now about the boat?”

I have no reply. I stand still as ice, unsure how to move without risking falling down. It’s been so long – over two years – since I’ve seen a girl my own age.

My eyes fix on these two as they approach, a certain authority in their movements. They practically saunter toward us, each carrying a spear at her side. One walks slightly ahead of the group, dressed in finely tailored hides. Her parka’s hood obscures her hair and her face is half hidden in shadow, but there’s no question that she’s a girl – the swing in her shoulders and the movement in her hips give her away.

The second girl is you.

From this distance I can’t quite see your face, so I notice your clothing first. Your parka and pants must have been borrowed from a brother – they’re far less fitted than those of the first girl – yet there is femininity in the smaller things, like the way you carry your head upon your shoulders. Your hood is back and your head is uncovered, letting your black hair, loose and unbraided, roll like a river on the wind behind you.

You come closer, and I’m struck by the beauty in the balance of your features. I notice the strong lines of your eyebrows and cheekbones tilting up and away from the softer lines of

your mouth. There is something unexpected about your beauty – something startling and marvelous.

This may be the most startling and marvelous day of my life.

As the group advances, I notice you drop back. There is no doubt you are miserable. Your expression – narrowed eyes, pursed lips – makes your annoyance plain. I imagine you've been dragged along on this journey. Your head pivots, your eyes sweep from side to side, taking in what must appear to you to be no more than a wind-beaten wasteland. To me, the grassland is like the sea, life teeming below the surface. But to most people – to you, clearly – it's just barren tundra. Nothing more.

My mind clogs with questions but before I can ask Pek a single one, the five of you stop in front of us.

“Son,” my father starts. There's tension in his voice. A stranger might not notice, but I can tell. “This day has brought us good fortune. These are our neighbors from a clan to the south. They visited us once – too briefly – several years ago, when they were traveling from their former home north and west of here, to the place they now call home.”

I remember this, of course. Our clan has very little contact with outsiders, so when a group stops and camps nearby, I don't forget. It was five years ago; I was twelve. I remember young girls of about my age. I realize, now, that I remember you.

You were traveling by boat, a small clan moving south in kayaks made of sealskin stretched over a frame of mammoth bones, just like the kayaks my own clan uses to fish and gather kelp and mollusks. I think of the boat Pek described – a canoe dug out of the trunk of a single tree – and I realize that all the things the elders of our clan have been saying must be true. The south must be rich in resources that we in the north lack.

There has already been much talk of the need for our clan to attempt a move further south. Our herds have been steadily dwindling – some have completely stopped returning from the south in the spring. Others, like the mammoths, have moved north, following the Great Ice as it slides away from the sea. But even more than a supply of game, our clan is in need of a supply of females. My generation will be the last of our clan if my brothers and I do not marry.

Yet there has been one insurmountable obstacle to any plan for a southerly move. When your clan departed our shores five years ago, you did not leave as friends, but as enemies.

Even now, with the years stretching out between that day and this one, I can remember the bitterness of your clan's departure. I remember the murmurs of a possible war. The fear that kept me awake as a twelve-year-old boy that my father could go off to fight and never return. Standing here today, with five intervening years to dim the memories, bitterness still takes its place like an eighth figure in this circle of seven.

Still, whether you brought the bitterness with you or it joined us, uninvited, the three of you are here, and that suggests new prospects for our clans. This would explain my mother's presence out here in the meadow, since she so rarely hikes this far outside of camp anymore. It would also explain the smile on my mother's face.

She knows opportunity when it lands on her shore.

"Father invited our guests to hunt with us," Pek says, raising his eyebrows while giving me a small nod – two things I think are supposed to hold some kind of coded meaning. All I can guess is that he's warning me to keep calm and not try to back off my role as a leader in the hunt.

Pek knows that I hate to hunt mammoths. Not because they are so dangerously immense, or because they are so difficult to bring down. Every prey presents its own difficulties and dangers. No, I hate to hunt mammoths because their intelligence is impossible to ignore. They

have more than a sense of fear; they have an understanding of death. They don't just run because they are being chased; they run to avoid being killed.

They know that I am trying to kill them.

I didn't always feel this way. Just a year ago, when I was Pek's age, I begged our father before every hunt to let me take the lead. Finally, he let me try. I went ahead of the rest of the hunting party. I gave the command when it was time to swarm the herd. And I threw the first strike that landed deep in the animal's side.

It was a clean strike, and as the mammoth ran, blood poured from his wound, leaving a bright red trail in the frost under our feet. That moment is forever fixed in my mind – as the blood dripped down, I believed I could feel the energy running out of the animal and flowing into me. I felt invincible. Pek landed a strike in the animal's throat, just below his chin. That weakened him quickly. Fluid flowed from both wounds as he staggered and fell to four knees. I ran up alongside him, ready to celebrate the success of the kill.

But when I came up beside the wounded mammoth, he wasn't ready to give in, wasn't ready to let go of the Spirit that dwelled within him. He struggled to raise himself once more, planting his left front foot and trying to stand.

The effort took the last of his strength. His huge frame shuddered, and he dropped heavily to the ground, his head falling right at my feet.

I couldn't avoid looking into the mammoth's huge dark eye. Though his head lay half in snow and half in mud, he stared right into me. The dark iris was like a hole I'd fallen into. There was knowledge in that eye. Knowledge that he was about to die and that I was the one who had caused it. But there was no condemnation. Only defeat.

A sudden gust of wind comes down hard from the north, shoving me out of my memories and back to the present. The same gust hits you in the face and you grimace and shudder. It was warm lying in the grass – almost warm enough to encourage a honey bee to fly – but standing in the raw wind makes the day feel cold. My mother clears her throat. I realize that no one's been introduced, and we've been standing staring at each other for a moment too long. I break the awkward silence by falling back upon tradition – I step forward and nod to the man in your group.

“I'm called Kol.”

The man nods his head in reply, the irresistible current of tradition pulling us along. “My name is Chev,” he says. “And this is my sister Seeri.” He motions to the first girl, and I smile but I doubt she notices. Her eyes are fixed on Pek. “And my sister Mya,” he says, motioning to you.

Unlike Seeri, you meet my gaze. Your eyes narrow and I hope this is a response to the wind in your face, but somehow I don't think it is.

“This is our younger son, Pek,” my mother says, stepping forward to pat Pek on the arm. Her eyes move to Seeri's face. She's seen the connection between Seeri and my brother and she intends to encourage it. “You are lucky to have him on the hunt today. He's gifted with a spear, this boy. He's-”

My father clears his throat. Mother's eyes flick to me and I know what she had almost said – *He's the best hunter in the clan.* It's true, but since I'm the oldest, it's probably not something my father wants her to say in front of these guests. Not that I would care. If they're going to hunt with us, they're going to find out anyway.

My father raises his eyes, judging the progress of the sun. “We should start on our way. If we're fortunate, we will have a kill before the sun is high in the sky.”

My mother pulls at the collar of my father's parka. He is stubborn and insists upon leaving it open at his throat on all but the coldest days of winter. He pushes her hand away, but he can't stop his lips from curling at the corners. "Don't fuss with us; we need to get going," he says. "Besides, when we get back, you will have six hungry hunters to feed. You'll need time to get the kitchen going for the mid-day meal."

My mother used to join in on the hunts, but that was a long time ago. Now, the clan kitchen has become her personal dominion. Knowing this, and knowing what your visit clearly means to my mother, I can only imagine what delicacies we have to look forward to.

Mother gives nothing away. She simply shakes her head and turns to our guests. "Be safe," she says. Then she pulls up the hood of her parka and starts back the way you all came.

Father defers to me to lead the way to the herd. I've been out here in search of honey every day since we last stalked mammoths – unsuccessfully – a week ago. I know where the herd is gathered, just on the other side of the hills that rise to the east.

If technically I'm leading the way, my father is close behind, but he makes sure he stays close to Chev, too. As we walk, my father explains features of the landscape and points out places where saber-toothed cats have been found to hide. This spring, these cats have become more active rivals for our game, but my father does not mention this. Pek walks almost shoulder to shoulder with Seeri, off to our right. I cannot see or hear you at all – not even your footfalls on the grass. I assume you are reluctantly following at a distance, but I don't dare turn my head to check.

Maybe the thought of hunting mammoths sickens you the way it does me. Maybe that's the cause of your sullen silence. I doubt this is true but I try to convince myself that it might be.

More likely, there is a boy waiting for you in your southern camp and your head and heart are with him instead of with us.

Once we cross the open grass I lead the group to a path that rises through the rocky foothills of the mountains that form the eastern boundary of our hunting range. Within these hills are tucked hidden plains and alpine fields where this particular herd of mammoths often chooses to graze, out of the open. As we walk, the grass gives way to gravel, and the grade becomes steeper as we slowly climb. At intervals, the path narrows. Rough boulders encroach from either side. By necessity, our party is forced to travel in single-file.

I look back once to make sure we are all together before we navigate the final set of turns. It's then that I see you, just a few paces behind me. I'm startled to find you there. My brother and your sister have dropped back, and I suppose you ended up in front by default. I'm certain my face gives away my surprise at finding you so close.

Your gaze is unflinching. It has weight. Part of me wants to shrug it off; part of me wants to hold very still so it doesn't slip away from me.

"What's wrong?" you ask.

"Nothing." Your eyes are heavy-lidded, but I know not to be fooled – you are not tiring. A spark glows in your dark eyes; they are at once impossibly dark and impossibly bright, a contradiction that unnerves me. They are alive with activity, as if a million thoughts churn behind them. I imagine a honey bee – the way it zips from bloom to bloom. That is how I imagine your thoughts moving behind those heavy-lidded eyes.

I let my own gaze drop to the rocks at my feet. "We're almost there. I wanted to let you know. The path gets a bit rough here. You should watch your step."

Thankfully, we are indeed almost there, and as we navigate the final bend toward the south, the scene that opens up in front of us is enough to distract from the awkwardness of the previous moment. The path widens and turns at the head of a broad mountain meadow blanketed by wildflowers and tall grass, irrigated by twin rivulets of meltwater that run down from the ice to the north and the snow caps that crown the peaks further east. The two streams merge about midway across the meadow, creating a deep, still pool. Around that pool stands a family of six mammoths, their light brown fur glowing almost red under the bright sun.

I stop and let everyone catch up. The herd is downwind from us, so I worry they will soon know we're here. I usher everyone to a space behind a large outcropping that acts as a natural windbreak.

My father steps up beside me, and it's clear that from here on, he is taking lead on this hunt. It doesn't wound my pride to yield to him. It's customary for the most experienced hunter to take the lead, and in our clan, that's always my father. He pats me on the shoulder, and I take my place a half-step behind him on his right.

My father crouches, and we all follow his cue. Bent low, we move through the shadows that obscure the eastern edge of the meadow. The sun beats bright against the low rocky wall to the west, but while the sun rises, the brush that grows along the gravel track to the east is still covered in cool morning shade. Out in the open, gusts of breeze flatten the tall grass, but in the shelter of the ledges, the air hardly stirs.

We move in silence. The mammoths do not appear wary – perhaps the wind didn't carry our scent to them after all. When we have come up alongside them on the edge of the meadow, my father squats down, but he signals for us to continue on beyond the herd. An animal with the

speed of a mammoth cannot be run down –it has to run to you. My father will get them moving. The rest of us will be ready to pounce.

Now they are extremely close, maybe just twenty paces away. I can hear the water splash from their trunks and see it spray across their backs.

Stay in the present, I tell myself. Let the past go.

My father raises his spear, and we all turn our eyes toward him. Then he stands and his arm comes down swiftly, signaling that the hunt is on. He plunges forward, racing across the meadow as swiftly as his feet will move.

The herd catches sight of him, and like one organism, they turn and run toward the south, toward the wide edge of the meadow that descends into a river valley. Once they are in motion the rest of us emerge, cutting across the open at an angle designed to intercept them. Maybe it's because you and your brother and sister are there, maybe it's because I have something to prove to myself and to Pek, but I run faster than I've ever run. The wind is at my back and it swirls in my hair. I imagine it sweeping away the memories that haunt me. I outrun your sister; I outrun Pek. Only your brother, Chev, is ahead of me. My legs pump, my heels dig, and finally, I am moving stride for stride with Chev. I exchange a glance with him before pulling ahead. Twenty paces more and I will intercept the mammoth at the front of the herd.

I close my mind, raise my arm, and ready my spear. I tune to the rhythm of the mammoth's steps. The ground shakes like the skin of a giant drum. *Boom... boom... boom....* I feel the percussion of his pace roll through me with each step. When I know I can run no closer without risking being trampled, I let the spear fly.

But my angle is too wide. The head of my spear – a thin razor-sharp point made of the ivory of another mammoth – grazes across a thick matte of hair on the animal's side and falls away.

I slow my steps – I need to retrieve my spear from where it fell. I turn, ready to dodge out of the way of the others in the hunting party, to yield my position to Pek or to your brother, but instead I find that you have all dropped back far behind. You are running hard with your spears ready, but you are not chasing the mammoths.

You are chasing the thing that is chasing me.

Chapter Two

In the space between us, a saber-toothed cat runs hard toward a kill. He runs with his head down, but I don't need to see his eyes to know he is coming for me.

Glancing right, I spot my spear in the tall grass, still intact. Retrieving it means running back a few paces in the direction of the cat, and my thoughts crash together as my feet crash over the ground. My hand grasps the spear; he is still a distance away but closing fast. I don't dare take the time to raise my eyes to see if any of you are close enough to take the shot.

Inwardly, I call on the Divine to help me. My thoughts go to my mother; I think of all the times she counseled me to ask the Divine for help in the hunt, and all the times I've ignored her counsel.

Yet even if all the power of the Divine were suddenly supporting my every move, I doubt that I could bring down this cat with one hurried shot. Only the perfect strike will stop him, and I know I will need stealth and surprise to make that strike. I am almost certainly doomed to miss from my current position, and he would be on me in moments.

I cannot stand my ground. My only choice is to run.

Before the thought has fully formed in my mind I am flying over the grass, back toward the shade of the ridge. As I reach the trail, I spot a narrow track up out of the valley into the foothills and I head for it with all the speed the Divine will grant me.

Rough rocks and sharply angled boulders form the floor of the path, but I move over them with surprising ease. Apparently fear reveals a grace and poise in my movements that has never been manifested before. In just moments, I reach the top of a rise where the path turns right

and heads more steeply into the rough wall of rock. I allow myself the luxury of one quick glance over my shoulder and gasp.

Nothing is behind me on the path – neither cat nor human.

The temptation to hesitate lasts no longer than a heartbeat. The crack of rock falling on rock comes from my left and I spin around, my spear ready, but still, I see no one... nothing.

Spooked, I turn slowly in place. My own feet send a few pebbles sliding downhill. Wind whistles past my ears. Otherwise, there is only silence.

Despite the urge to retrace my steps, despite the temptation to slide slowly down the path the way I came in hopes that the cat chose not to pursue me, I know I need to keep climbing. Cats, after all, are not restricted to paths. He could be overhead, I realize, as I raise my spear again and rake my eyes over the rock ledges above me. I navigate a tight turn that takes me out of sight of the valley below and wait, listening.

The faint sound of a skittering pebble reaches my ears from a spot on the trail just below the place where I stand. Then another...

Then another.

Steady steps are advancing toward me.

I squat against the rock wall, planting my feet wide so I won't lose my balance. I roll the shaft of my spear in my hand until it feels just right – or at least as right as it could ever feel in my damp and shaking hand – and then raise it so it rests lightly on my shoulder. Unblinking, I stare at the spot on the trail where the cat will appear as he rounds the turn.

One more moment... One more moment...

Just as motion breaks into my field of vision, I spring to my feet and raise my spear. Energy ripples from my shoulder to my fingers as I flinch forward, every muscle tensed.

But it's not the cat.

It's you.

In the smallest fraction of time – less than the time it takes an echo to fade or a snowflake to melt – your hand is over your shoulder and your spear is flying over my head. I duck, though your throw is more than high enough and your aim is true to its target.

I spin around in time to see the cat crouched on a crag of rock directly behind me, the spear buried deep in its chest. It opens its jaws in a final growl and its teeth flash, a row of perfect razors behind dagger-like incisors, but no sound comes. Instead, in one silent motion, it rolls onto its side and falls to the ground at my feet.

I drop to my knees. A thick red stream runs from the hole in his chest down the path toward your feet. My eyes follow it to the spot where it skirts around the tips of your soft leather boots.

Along with the pelt, this spear will be your trophy. Grabbing it with both hands, I pull it from the cat's body and a rush of blood and fluid pours from the wound. I straighten to my feet, but a sudden dizziness overwhelms me; I must have stood up too fast. Keeping my gaze fixed on the ground I try my best to stop my hands from shaking. After a few long moments, I feel composed enough to hold out the spear to you. "With my thanks," I say, my eyes still locked on your boots.

Moments pass, and yet you don't move. I notice a tune carried along on the wind as it gusts from the summit above us. I can't help but wonder if the Divine is singing in your honor. Still, my arm remains extended, but you do not claim your spear. At last, the peace of the moment is broken by the sound of feet hurrying up the path below. I raise my head and meet your gaze.

What I see there is easy enough to understand, but difficult to accept. Though you saved me, I can see that it wasn't an act of graciousness toward a peer, like bending to lift a friend who has stumbled, but an act of benevolence toward a fool, like lifting a careless child from the waters of a pool he's fallen into thanks to his own wild recklessness.

Disdain, sharp and clear, flows from your eyes to mine.

And I know at that moment... I will never have your friendship. I will never have your respect. If there was ever a chance for friendship, for trust, that chance was forever lost the moment I raised my spear as if to strike you.

I know that I would never have let the spear fly, would never have let it leave my hand until my target was in sight. I know this, but you don't. And though some would assume the best, you choose to assume the worst. You choose to condemn me for a flinch.

All this passes between us as I stand holding out your spear as if pleading with you to accept from me some exotic gift or to enter into some agreement the terms of which you find unfavorable. You stare me down, silently refusing to accept my terms. Finally, voices rise from the path just beyond our view, calling our names.

"We're here," you say. You begrudgingly jerk the spear from my outstretched hand while simultaneously dropping your eyes, making certain that no gift is accepted, no terms agreed to.

Pek is the first to make the turn and take in the scene. Seeri comes up behind him quickly. They both run their eyes from the cat to the pool of blood to the spear, glistening red in your hands.

"Well done," says Pek, his voice a low whisper.

"Simple necessity," you say. "Kill or be killed." Your eyes flick to mine, and I see that you intend to leave it at that. My shame is sufficient enough if you alone know the mistake I

almost made. Your lips press together and a momentary softness reaches your eyes, a hint of some past version of you who might have been able to forgive. But then you throw your arms around your sister and whisper something into her ear and I feel the gulf open between us again.

As you and your sister drift back down the trail leaving Pek and me behind, anger drains away from me and the void it leaves quickly fills with fatigue.

“After Mya followed the cat up the path, Father and Chev ran right after her. Seeri and I stayed on the mammoths, and together we brought one down. Seeri landed the first strike.” He pauses and licks his upper lip, as if the memory is something he can taste. “These girls...” Wind-burn reddens Pek’s cheeks and the cold sends tears running down his face, but his smile is all I notice when I look at him. “These girls are going to change our lives.”

I look away as he says these last words, as he declares this bold prediction. I don’t want him to read the worry in my eyes – the fear I feel of how my life may have already changed.