

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 farther 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 long whittled stick and fireboard. “Give me just a little longer and I’ll get you warmed up, all right?”

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. My hands pass down the entire length of the stick once, twice, three times. Friction builds, and at last 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.

“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. . . .”