

FAITO WRKS PRESENTS

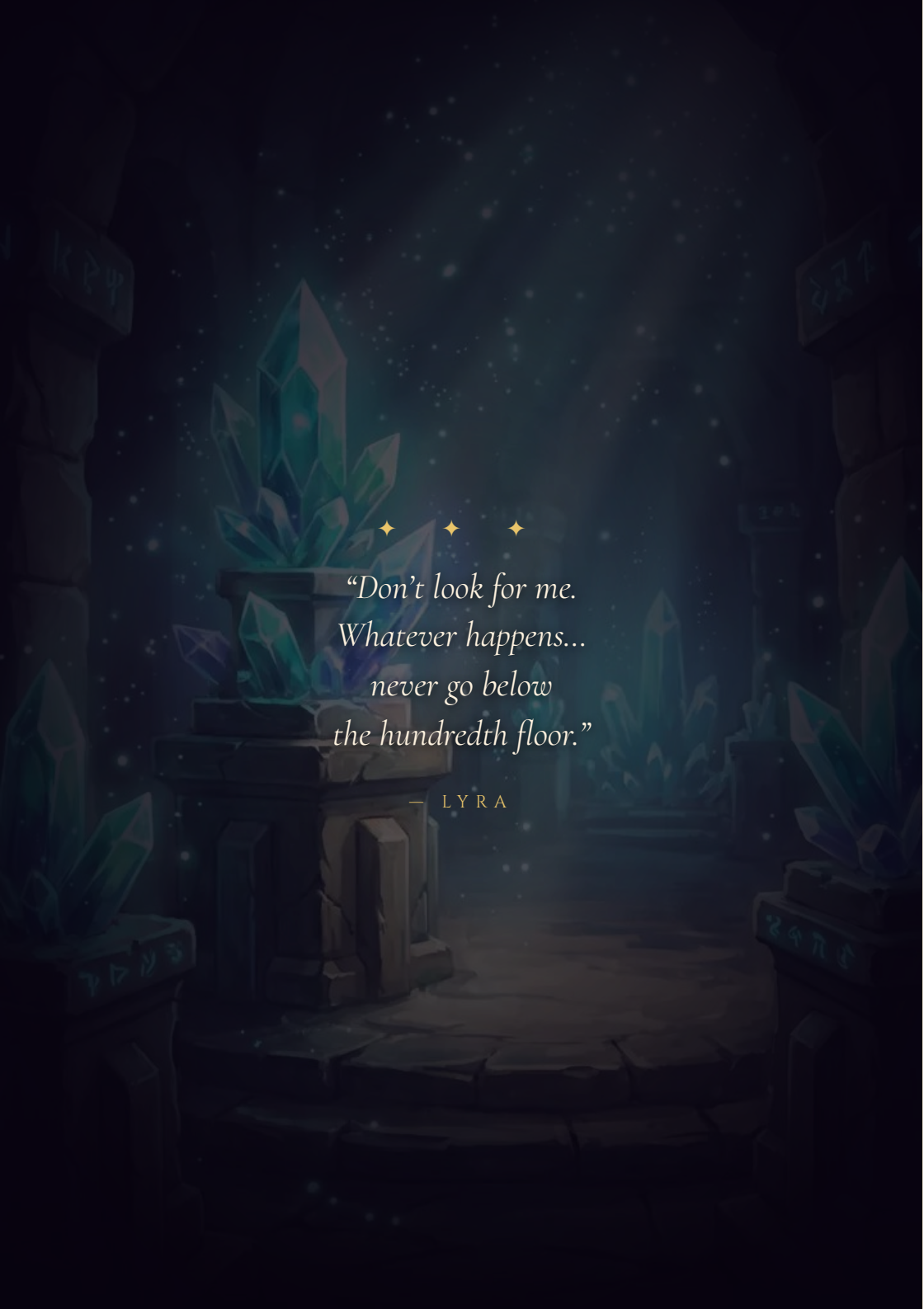
CRISTAL RUSH

The Chronicles of Lumen



A Novel

HANA'S STORY



◆ ◆ ◆
*“Don’t look for me.
Whatever happens...
never go below
the hundredth floor.”*

— LYRA

CONTENTS

APPENDIX	The characters · The descent	4
PROLOGUE	The Night of the Song	12
PART I · THE DESCENT		18
CHAPTER I	Initials	19
CHAPTER II	Heartbeats	25
CHAPTER III	The List	31
CHAPTER IV	The Black Sun	40
CHAPTER V	The Song	47
INTERLUDE I	The Ten-Year Contract	55
PART II · WHAT THE MOUNTAIN HIDES		60
CHAPTER VI	The Heir	61
CHAPTER VII	The Mural	68
CHAPTER VIII	The Last Time	73
CHAPTER IX	The City	80
INTERLUDE II	One Hundred Years	87
PART III · THE DOOR		93
CHAPTER X	The Core	94
CHAPTER XI	The Sleeping Queen	98
CHAPTER XII	The Key	103
CHAPTER XIII	The Betrayal	107
CHAPTER XIV	The Last Song	113
CHAPTER XV	The First Miner	120
CHAPTER XVI	The Reflection	127
ARCHIVE · SECRET FILES		132

THE CHARACTERS

HANA

The Girl of the Blue Lantern

“Sorry, Mom. It's too late for that.”

AGE

Seventeen... or so she thinks

ORIGIN

New Lumen, the last house on the mountain street

WEAPON

Her mother's old pick, with a notch in its head

APPEARS

Prologue



PERSONALITY

Stubborn, brave, and with more heart than common sense. She grew up alone, so she learned to ask for nothing and give everything. She offers food to anyone who threatens her, laughs when she's scared, and always strikes the same spot until the rock gives way.

THEIR STORY

Her mother went down into the mine when Hana was seven and never came back. She remembers nothing from before that morning: not a face, not a birthday. For ten years she washed crystals in the courtyards of House Aria and watched the mine from her window every night. She never gets sick, she's never cold, and she hums a lullaby nobody taught her.

THE CHARACTERS

FREYA

The Archer Who Never Stops Talking

“Arrows don't grow on trees. ...Shh.”

AGE

Nineteen

ORIGIN

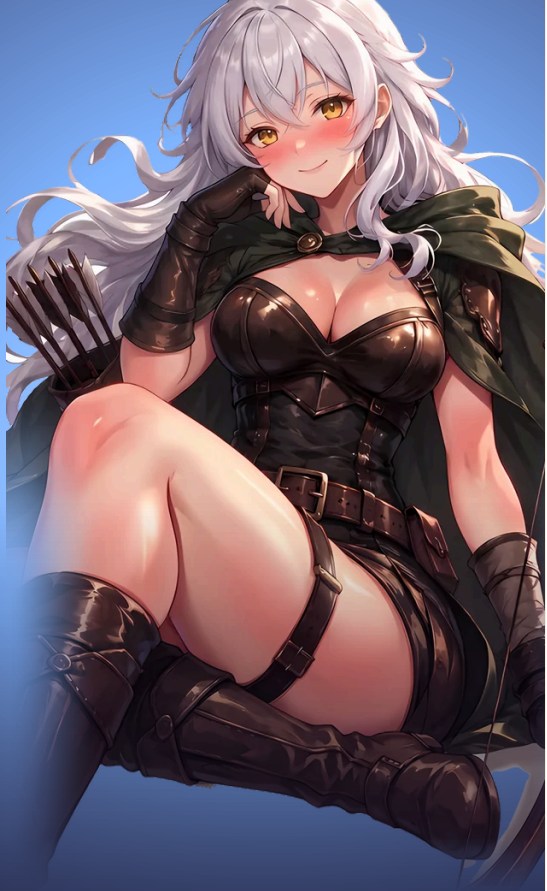
Daughter of a mine cartographer

WEAPON

A longbow and her brother's arrows, marked with an I

APPEARS

Chapter I



PERSONALITY

Optimistic, loud, witty, and a little greedy, or so it seems. She talks nonstop, tells bad jokes at the worst moments, and never misses a shot. Her secret, she says, is what her father taught her: don't aim at the target, aim at what's behind it.

THEIR STORY

Four years ago she went down with Ivar, her twin brother, to finish their father's maps. One morning in the Fungal Forest, Ivar was gone: only his bow and his boots remained. Ever since, she has paid the House Aria buyers to set aside every crystal with silver veins, the same color as her brother's hair.

THE CHARACTERS

TYR

The Savage Veteran

"If you cry during training, we'll talk about it afterward."

AGE

About fifty winters

ORIGIN

The fjords of the north

WEAPON

War axe and fists

APPEARS

Chapter III



PERSONALITY

Serious, gruff, lethal, and secretly tender. He trains Hana by yelling at her, scorns anything that isn't hard work, and quotes a grandmother who, according to him, killed a bear with a spoon. He sleeps little and watches a lot.

THEIR STORY

He was the leader of the Pack, twelve northern mercenaries dressed in wolf pelts, the best band ever to cross the sea. The Crystal Guild hired them to kill the Coral Kraken. One moonless night, the Kraken took them all. Tyr wears twelve fangs around his neck, one for each lost brother and sister.

THE CHARACTERS

VIDAR

The Finishing Blade

"If you hear footsteps, it's me. If you hear nothing... also me."

AGE

Twenty-nine

ORIGIN

An orphan from a valley convent, raised by the Soundless

WEAPON

A long, thin blade, and boots that make no sound

APPEARS

Chapter IV



PERSONALITY

Reserved as the night, precise, and almost humorless, except for a very dry streak. He speaks little and never lies. When nobody offers him anything he doesn't know what to do, and when somebody does, he doesn't either.

THEIR STORY

He was raised by the most expensive guild of assassins in the valley, descended from the old guard of the kings below. In ten years he hasn't failed a single contract. He was offered a fortune for Hana's head, sealed with a black sun. He said no, because he wanted to know why anyone would pay so much for a crystal washer.

THE CHARACTERS

ARIA VALMONT

The Capricious Treasurer

"Ten percent, darling. And the pretty crystals are mine."

AGE

One doesn't ask a lady

ORIGIN

Lower Lumen

WEAPON

A little leather notebook and an unerring eye for gold

APPEARS

Chapter V



PERSONALITY

Stubborn, stingy, charming, and a leading light of the gem market. She haggles in the middle of a cave-in, calls everyone "darling" and "partner," and charges ten percent of everything. In secret, she slips coins into Freya's bag and mends Tyr's clothes while he sleeps.

THEIR STORY

Hana finds her trapped in a block of crystal in the Stellar Abyss, weeping. She has the same face as the portrait of the founder of House Aria, which has hung in the jeweler's hall for over a hundred years. She claims it's her great-great-grandmother. She counts numbers nonstop, to the rhythm of the mountain.

THE CHARACTERS

SISTER FRIGG

Mother of the Lost

“Coming all the way down to The Abyss with no coat. No food. With those dark circles.”

AGE

She looks forty; her almanac says otherwise

ORIGIN

The chapel of Lower Lumen

WEAPON

Sacred staff, almanac, and hymns

APPEARS

Chapter VIII



PERSONALITY

Scolding, protective, and warm, with plenty of bread and a hug for everyone. She can't stand anyone going cold or hungry. She sings so that The Abyss will let the lost go free, and she always goes a little off-key at the end.

THEIR STORY

For years she has kept a chapel in The Abyss, guiding those who get lost back up, and the names of all of them are written on its walls. Her almanac holds thirty-six thousand four hundred and ninety-eight tally marks, one for each day. As long as she sings, she says, time waits for her.

THE CHARACTERS

LYRA

The Last Queen

“Hana... I told you not to come down.”

AGE

A hundred years in the Core

ORIGIN

The palace of Lower Lumen

WEAPON

A pick with a notch in its iron head

APPEARS

Chapter X



PERSONALITY

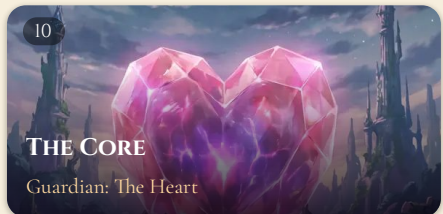
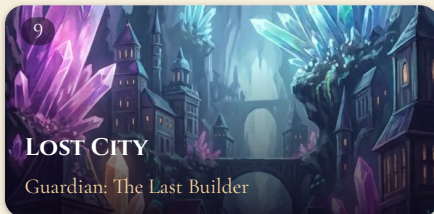
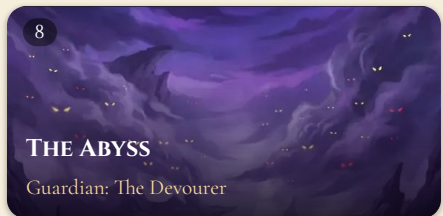
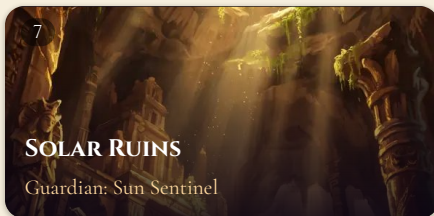
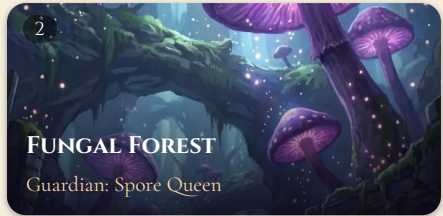
Firm, stubborn, and able to make the decisions no one else would make. She loves with an intensity that makes her unfair. She always sang the last note of the lullaby going up, because she said a child should never fall asleep sad.

THEIR STORY

She was the last queen of Lumen, a descendant of King Haldor, the one who dug too deep. On the Night of the Song she went down into the mine with her daughter by the hand and never came back. Her name is engraved on a throne of black crystal, in the center of a city no one remembers.

THE DESCENT

The ten worlds beneath the mountain





PROLOGUE

THE NIGHT OF THE SONG

Lower Lumen · One hundred years ago



I'm going to put her to sleep.



The novice was nineteen years old and had only one task that night: to keep the chapel candles lit.

It was an easy task. The chapel of Lumen was carved into the rock at the end of Lantern Street, and down there the air never moved. Candles didn't go out on their own. But that night, one after another, the flames began to bend toward the floor, as if something beneath the city were breathing in.

She knelt, laid her palm on the stone, and felt it. A heartbeat. Slow, enormous, so deep it wasn't heard with the ears but with the bones.

Then came the song.

It wasn't a voice, or many voices. It was something older than voices: a wordless melody that rose through the cracks in the floor, filled the streets, and slipped in under the doors. In the houses, children woke and lay staring at the ceiling. The dogs stopped barking. A blacksmith closing up his workshop dropped his hammer and didn't pick it up.

The novice ran out into the street. The whole city was standing, silent, listening. And down Lantern Street, at an unhurried pace, came the queen.

She wore no crown. She carried a miner's pick over her shoulder, her hair pinned up in a hurry, and by the hand she led a seven-year-old girl in a white nightgown, with hair the color of cherry blossoms. The girl was barefoot and wasn't crying. She was humming. Humming the song, note by note, as if she had always known it.

"Your Majesty," said the novice, and didn't know what else to say.

The queen stopped in front of her. Her eyes were red, but her voice was steady.

"Go to the chapel in the Abyss, sister. Take everyone you can. And sing. Whatever happens, don't stop singing."

"And you?"

The queen looked at the girl. The girl looked back at her and smiled, with that fearless smile only people who don't yet know what it is to lose something can smile.

"I'm going to put her to sleep."

The novice never knew whether the queen meant the girl or the mountain.

She watched them walk away toward the mouth of the deep tunnels, where the song was loudest. Before vanishing into the darkness, the girl turned and waved goodbye. On her chest hung a silver pendant that glowed with its own light.

That was the last time anyone saw the city of Lumen alive.



A hundred years later, in the valley, people still told the story by the light of the hearth. One night, the mountain swallowed an entire town. No one heard screams. No one saw smoke or rockfalls. The next morning, where there had been houses, streets, and lanterns, there was only rock, smooth and silent, as if the city had never existed.

Those who lived in the valley swore they had heard something that night. Not a lament. A song.

Ever since, the crystals from the mine of Lumen had been worth more than gold. They shone with a light no gem on the surface had, they grew warm in the hand like something alive, and merchants from three kingdoms paid fortunes for them. Over the invisible ruins grew a new

town, New Lumen, with its market, its guild, its tavern at the mouth of the mine, and its stone houses climbing the mountainside.

And no one, ever, asked where the crystals came from.



Hana was seven when her mother went down into the mine.

She remembered few things from that day, and she remembered them with a strange sharpness, as if they were all she had. The smell of fresh coffee. The blue light of the crystal lantern hanging over the table. Her mother's pick on her shoulder, with a notch in its iron head. A kiss on the forehead, long, too long for an ordinary day.

"I'll be back before supper, my little light."

She never came back.

Before that morning, Hana remembered nothing. Not a face, not a birthday, not a lullaby. It was as if her life had begun with that kiss. When she told people, they said it was normal, that children forget, that grief erases things. Hana would nod and not tell them she felt no grief. She felt a hollow, and that's not the same.

She grew up alone in the house of the blue lantern, the last one on the street, where the town ended and the mountain began. The neighbors brought her bread the first few years; after that she learned to earn it. At ten she was washing crystals in the courtyards of House Aria, the largest jeweler in the guild, scrubbing them with warm water and a linen cloth until they shone. The pay was poor, but Hana didn't mind. She liked the work. The crystals warmed between her fingers before anyone else's, and sometimes, when she was alone, she could have sworn they had a pulse.

There were other strange things about her, and she had learned not to talk about them. She never got sick. She was never cold, not even in the

dead of winter. And sometimes, while she worked, she caught herself humming a melody she didn't know where she'd picked up: slow, sad, with a last note that always slipped away from her.

She also learned not to look at the mouth of the mine. She did anyway, of course. Every night, from the window, she watched the miners' lanterns climb and descend the slope like fireflies, and wondered whether any of them had seen a woman with a pick with a notch in its head.

Ten years later, on an ordinary night, someone slid a letter under her door.

Hana heard no footsteps. She heard nothing at all. She only saw the envelope on the floor when she went to put out the lantern, white against the dark stone. It had no sender. It was sealed with black wax, unstamped.

But the handwriting... she knew that handwriting. She had seen it a thousand times on the only thing she had kept of her mother: a forgotten shopping list in the pantry, which Hana had treasured for ten years. *Flour. Honey. Candles. Something sweet for H.*

She opened the envelope with trembling hands.

"Don't look for me. Whatever happens... never go below the hundredth floor."

Nothing more. No "I love you." No "forgive me." No explanation of why a woman missing for ten years was writing to her now, or how she knew Hana was alive, or what there was on the hundredth floor that could be worse than ten years of silence.

In one corner of the paper, nearly faded, was a small drawing in ink. A black circle with rays. A sun, but a black sun. Hana paid it no

attention. Not that night.

She read the letter three times. Then she folded it carefully, tucked it against her chest, and took the old pick down from the wall. It was the only one in the house. It had hung there by the door for ten years, and Hana had never wondered why her mother had gone into the mine with one pick and left another behind, identical, with the same notch in the same iron head.

The blue lantern flickered, as if someone on the other side had held their breath.

"Sorry, Mom," Hana whispered. "It's too late for that."

That same night, for the first time in a hundred years, someone went down into the mine of Lumen looking for something more than crystals.



PART I

THE DESCENT

Crystal Caves · Sunken Lake · Stellar Abyss

CHAPTER I
INITIALS

Crystal Caves · Floors 1 – 11

◆
And beneath it, a single letter: “L.”
◆

The Broken Pick Tavern never closed. It was built against the very mouth of the mine, its back wall carved into the rock. People said that if you pressed your ear to that wall on quiet nights, you could hear the mountain.

Hana walked in a little before midnight, pick on her shoulder and hood up. It smelled of beer, sweat, and iron. On the contract board by the fireplace, dozens of papers were nailed up: *Escort wanted down to floor 20. Good pay for blue crystal from floor 8. Bounty for the head of the Quartz Golem: 300 rune gold.* Below them, set apart from the rest, were a few envelopes sealed with black wax. The private contracts. Nobody touched them unless they were meant for him.

"First time?" asked the tavern keeper, a fat man with a glass eye.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You're holding your pick upside down."

Hana flipped it over, red to the ears. The tavern keeper laughed, poured her a glass of hot milk she hadn't ordered, and gave her the only advice that, in his opinion, was worth giving to anyone going down for the first time:

"Always strike the same spot. And if the crystals start singing, come back up."

"The crystals sing?"

The man shrugged and went off to tend another table. Hana finished her milk, left a coin, and passed under the stone arch that separated the tavern from the dark.



The first floors of the mine were almost pretty.

The Crystal Caves glittered in shades of blue and turquoise, and every swing of the pick sent sparks of light leaping into the air, where they floated for a moment before going out, like snow falling upward. Hana learned fast. The tavern keeper was right: crystal broke better if you always struck the same spot, and the rune gold the fragments gave off was enough to buy better tools at the forge on floor three, where a bad-tempered dwarf sharpened picks to order and asked no questions.

At first her hands ached. Then they stopped aching. Then, without noticing, she began striking to the rhythm of something. She didn't know what. A slow beat that climbed up her arms from the rock: *one... two... one... two...*

On floor five she found the first sign.

On the cavern wall, at eye level, someone had carved a pick. Not just any drawing. It was *her* pick: the same worn handle, the same curve, the same notch in the iron head, carved in such detail that Hana held hers up to compare. They were identical.

And beneath it, a single letter: **L**.

"L... Lyra," Hana murmured, running her fingers over the mark. "That was Mom's name."

She knew it from the name embroidered on a handkerchief, from the shopping list, from the neighbor who sometimes, after a few drinks, said Lyra had been the most beautiful woman ever to set foot in the town, and the saddest. Hana ran a fingertip along the groove of the L. The edge was sharp. There was fresh rock dust on the ground below the mark.

The marks were recent. Far too recent for a woman who had been missing for ten years.



Farther down, on floor ten, the mine's first guardian was waiting for her.

The miners called it the **Quartz Golem**. It was a hulk of living rock, three times the height of a man, with veins of crystal running through its body like glowing arteries. It attacked no one who stayed on the upper floors. But nobody had gone farther down without breaking it first, and many had come back to the tavern with one arm fewer and a strong desire to change professions.

Hana found it asleep in the middle of a round cavern, surrounded by the broken picks of those who had tried. She took a deep breath, found the spot where the veins crossed on the creature's chest —*always the same spot*— and struck.

The golem woke with a roar that rained stones from the ceiling.

What followed was long, filthy, and far less heroic than Hana had imagined as a child. She rolled across the ground, cut her forehead, lost her pick twice and got it back three times. But the spot on the golem's chest cracked, blow by blow, until the light inside began to leak through the fissures. Hana raised her pick for the final blow...

And an arrow whistled past her ear and buried itself exactly where she had been about to strike.

The golem split in two with a crash of breaking glass.

"Oops! Sorry, sorry... well, not that sorry. That shot was mine."

From atop a rock, a silver-haired girl was lowering her bow with an enormous grin. She looked a couple of years older than Hana. She wore a green cloak covered in patches, a half-empty quiver, and an old bandage on her left wrist.

"You almost hit me in the head!?"

"Almost. If I'd wanted to hit you, we wouldn't be having this conversation." She leapt off the rock with ridiculous agility and landed beside her. "Freya. The best archer in the whole mine."

"The best?"

"Also the only one," she admitted at once, "but that doesn't take away from it, does it?"

She talked very fast, as if she were afraid someone would interrupt her, or that silence would fall. In the time it took Hana to dust herself off, Freya had already told her she'd been in the mine for four years, that she knew every shortcut down to floor thirty, that the dwarf at the forge owed her money, that farther down there were creatures that would make the golem look like a baby chick and that, by the way, she was hungry.

"Here's my offer," she said at last, pointing an arrow at her. "You hit hard. I don't miss. Anything shiny we find, half and half." She thought better of it. "...Okay, sixty-forty. Arrows don't grow on trees."

"...Literally they do."

"Shh."

Hana laughed for the first time since the letter. She didn't know if she could trust her. But it had been ten years since anyone had offered her something that started with "you and me."

"Sixty-forty," she said. "But the sixty is mine."

Freya opened her mouth, shut it, and held out her hand with a look of deep offense.

"I like you. Don't get used to it."



Among the remains of the golem, when the dust finally settled, something gleamed that wasn't quartz.

Hana crouched and picked it up. It was a silver pendant, worn with age, with a fine chain and an oval locket engraved on the front with a small cherry blossom. It was warm. It was warm as if someone had only just taken it off.

Her hands began to tremble.

"Mom had one just like it," she said, and her voice came out very small. "She never took it off."

Freya stopped talking. For the first time in all that while, she said nothing. She just stared at Hana with an expression Hana couldn't read, then turned away and pretended to check her arrows.

"How does a woman's pendant end up inside a golem?" Hana asked.

"Golems swallow anything that shines," Freya replied, without looking at her. "But this one didn't have it a week ago. I saw. I'd been watching it for a month."

Hana tried to open the locket. It wouldn't open. It had no hinge or clasp; it was as if the silver had grown shut. She hung it around her neck. It settled right over her chest, in the exact hollow where, without knowing why, Hana had always felt something was missing.

Far below, somewhere neither of them could see, the song stopped for an instant... as if it had heard her.



CHAPTER II

HEARTBEATS

Fungal Forest · Floors 20 – 30



When I don't talk, you can hear it.



Freya never stopped talking.

She talked as they went down the carved stairs of floor twelve, as they crossed the rope bridge on floor fifteen, and while Hana broke crystals on eighteen. She talked about the dwarf at the forge, about the tavern keeper with the glass eye ("a bat took it out, he says, but I think he bet it"), about the price of blue crystal, about the cold, the damp, and one time she got lost for three days on floor twenty-two and survived by eating a mushroom that made her see her grandmother dancing.

At first Hana found it funny. Then she found it exhausting. Then, one night, while Freya slept by the fire, she understood.

She woke before dawn and the mine was in total silence. Freya's eyes were open. She was sitting with her knees against her chest, staring into the darkness of the tunnel, moving her lips without making a sound, as if she were counting something.

"Freya?"

She jumped and laughed, a laugh that came too fast.

"Oh! You were awake? Nothing, nothing. I was counting bats. It's a method. For sleeping. I'm at a hundred and twelve. Did you know the bats on this floor have bigger ears than...?"

"Freya."

The archer fell quiet. For a long while she said nothing. The fire crackled. And in the silence, from very far off, Hana heard it: a soft sound, like someone humming behind a wall.

"That's why," said Freya, very quietly. "When I don't talk, you can hear it. And when you hear it... sometimes I think it's his voice."

"Whose?"

Freya took a long time to answer.

"My brother's. Ivar. We're twins." She touched her silver hair. "Same hair, same ugly face. He was the good one with the bow. I was just the one who talked." A crooked smile. "Four years ago we went down together to the Fungal Forest. Dad was a cartographer, you know? He made the maps of the first thirty floors. Ivar wanted to finish what he'd started. One morning I woke up and he was gone. His bow was there, his arrows, his boots. Not him."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's not dead." She said it with a certainty that was frightening. "The dead stay where they fall. He didn't fall anywhere. I looked for him every day of those four years, in every crack, under every stone. And the only thing I found was a crystal."

Freya reached into her bag and took out a stone the size of an egg, pale blue, crossed by a single vein of silver. She held it up for a moment in the firelight and put it away at once, as if she were embarrassed.

"I know it's silly," she said. "I know it's just a crystal. But it was right where he slept. And the vein is the same color as his hair. So every time the House Aria buyers bring up crystals with silver veins, I pay them to set them aside for me. All of them. Just in case." She laughed without humor. "Hence the sixty-forty. I'm not greedy. I'm just poor in a very specific way."

Hana didn't know what to say. She took her hand. Freya's was ice-cold.

Hers wasn't. Hers never was.



On floor twenty, Hana noticed something that made her stop with her pick in midair.

The crystals were beating.

It wasn't a figure of speech. It was exactly that. Slowly, with a light that grew and faded, grew and faded, like the breathing of someone asleep. Like a heart. All of them at once, in the walls, the ceiling, the floor, across the whole cavern as far as the eye could see.

"...Are they alive?" she asked in a low voice.

Freya didn't answer. From far below, something answered for her: a heartbeat, slow and deep, that climbed the walls, came up through her boots, and settled in her chest. Hana put a hand over her heart. She felt it pounding against the silver pendant.

It had exactly the same rhythm as the mountain's heartbeat.

One... two... one... two...

The rhythm she had been striking the rock to for days without knowing why.

"Freya," said Hana, and had to swallow. "Does yours beat like that too?"

Freya put a hand to her chest. She waited. She shook her head, slowly, and for the first time since they'd met she looked at Hana with something like fear.

"No," she said. "Only yours."



The tunnel opened onto the **Fungal Forest**.

It was another world. Giant mushrooms, tall as towers, with violet and orange caps that disappeared into the darkness of the ceiling. Moss

that glowed underfoot. And spores: millions of spores floating in the air like stardust, turning slowly in currents that came from nowhere.

Freya grew serious. This was where she'd lost Ivar, and Hana could see it in the way she walked: slowly, watching every shadow, an arrow always nocked on the string.

On floor thirty, the spores began to move on their own.

First it was a small swirl, at ground level. Then another. Then all the spores in the clearing came together, spun, and drew in the air, in points of light, the figure of a woman. Tall. Slender. Her hair pinned up in a hurry and a pick over her shoulder.

Hana stopped breathing.

"Mom...?"

The figure turned. It looked at her. Hana would have sworn it smiled, though it had no face, only light. Then it raised an arm and pointed down.

Down, into the dark, to where the mountain's heart was beating.

Then it dissolved into a thousand points of light, which fell over Hana like a warm rain, and the forest went silent again. Except for a deep hum, growing louder, that came from the center of the clearing.

"Hana," said Freya, drawing her bow. "Don't move."

The **Spore Queen** emerged from among the mushrooms. She was enormous, a mass of filaments and overlapping caps, with a hundred small, bright eyes that opened and shut out of sync. When she moved, she released clouds of spores that put to sleep anyone who breathed them in.

That was how miners got lost in the Fungal Forest. They fell asleep, and never woke up.

"Cover your mouth," Freya ordered. "Hit her where the caps meet. I'll take care of the eyes."

It was a strange fight, almost silent, among clouds of golden dust. Hana struck with her mother's handkerchief tied over her nose; Freya shot without pause, arrow after arrow, and each one buried itself in a different eye. She didn't miss. Hana saw it with her own eyes: a hundred shots, a hundred eyes. Later, by the fire, Freya would explain her secret with a shrug: *"My father used to say you shouldn't aim at the target. You should aim at what's behind it."*

When the Spore Queen collapsed, Hana found, tangled among her filaments, something she hadn't expected: a leather quiver, old and rotten, with three arrows inside. Each arrow had, carved beside the fletching, a small notch shaped like an I.

Freya took it without a word. She sat on the ground in the middle of the clearing, her brother's quiver clutched to her chest.

That night she didn't talk. Not a single word.

And for the first time, Hana listened with her to the mine's humming, and stayed awake until Freya fell asleep, so she wouldn't have to hear it alone.



CHAPTER III

THE LIST

Sunken Lake · Floors 40 – 50



*It's easier to live as a man who was late than as a man who was
afraid.*



The water of the Sunken Lake was so still it looked like glass.

The cavern was so vast you couldn't see the ceiling. A white mist hung just above the water, and on the shore lay the wrecks of old boats, rotten ropes, and a wooden pier that sank away into the dark. Through the mist, something enormous watched them from the depths. It couldn't be seen. It could be felt, the way you feel eyes on the back of your neck.

Hana was breaking a crystal on the shore —it wasn't easy; the lake crystals were hard as diamond— when a deep voice spoke behind her.

"Ten blows. Ten blows for one crystal."

Hana spun around with her pick raised. Leaning against a rock was a huge man with a gray beard and scars, wearing a wolf pelt that covered his head and shoulders. His arms were crossed and his face was a picture of profound disappointment.

"My grandmother split them in three. And she had no teeth."

"Are you following me?"

"Since floor twelve." He scratched his beard. "You make more noise than a boar with hiccups. Even the mushrooms were complaining."

"Mushrooms don't talk."

"Those ones do. You didn't hear them because you were busy making noise."

Freya, who had appeared behind him with an arrow aimed at his ear, asked very politely whether he'd like a new hole in his hood. The man didn't even turn around.

"Your string's slack, girl. If you shoot like that, the arrow will drift half a finger to the left."

Freya looked at her bow. She looked at him. She lowered the bow, red-faced.

"...He's right," she whispered to Hana. "I hate him."

His name was **Tyr**. He came from the north, from the fjords where the sea freezes over in winter, and he said it the way someone says a curse word. When he came closer to the fire, Hana saw a necklace of fangs hanging from his neck. Large, yellowed, tied with strips of leather. She counted twelve. Too many for a single wolf.

"They were my pack's," he said, though no one had asked. "Every one of them."

"Your wolves?"

"My brothers and sisters." Tyr sat down, and the ground seemed to creak. "In the north, mercenaries don't have surnames. They have packs. Mine was the best that ever crossed the sea. Twelve, thirteen with me. They called us the Pack, nothing more, because there was no need to say which one." He touched one of the fangs, the smallest. "The Crystal Guild hired us to kill the Coral Kraken. It was blocking passage across the lake and the crystals from below weren't coming up. They paid a fortune."

"What happened?"

"The Kraken dragged them to the bottom one moonless night." Tyr looked at the water. The mist shifted, as if something had breathed beneath it. "I got there too late."

Hana looked at him. Really looked: the white knuckles on his knees, the clenched jaw, the eyes fixed on a point in the lake that had nothing special about it except, maybe, that it was *there*. She thought of her mother, of the kiss on the forehead, of ten years waiting for something that wasn't coming back.

"We'll find it," she said.

Tyr was silent for a long time.

"It's been years since anyone said 'we'll' to me." And then, recovering his tone, he got up and pointed at her pick. "I'm going to teach you to fight for real. You hold that like a broom. If you cry during training, we'll talk about it afterward."



Tyr was the worst teacher in the world and the best. He yelled. He mocked. He made her get up before the mine did ("the mine never sleeps, but neither do you"), made her carry stones, made her strike the same rock a thousand times with her eyes closed. When she got something wrong, he said his grandmother would have done it better, and his grandmother, according to Tyr, had been blind, one-handed, deaf, and terribly good at everything.

"Did your grandmother really exist?" Freya asked him one night.

"She existed. She killed a bear with a spoon."

"That's not possible."

"Not with that attitude."

But there were things Tyr didn't do. He didn't go near the water. Ever. When they had to skirt the lake, he walked along the highest rocks, far from the shore, and sometimes, when he thought no one was looking, he'd stand stock-still and tremble. Hana noticed. She said nothing. Freya noticed too, and for once she didn't say anything either.

And there was one fang he never touched. The smallest. The other eleven he sometimes stroked absently while sharpening his axe. Not that one.



On floor forty they found an abandoned camp.

It was in a dry cave above the waterline. There was a wooden table, two stools, a carefully folded blanket, and the remains of a campfire. On the table, two clay cups. Hana touched one. It was warm.

"Someone was here just now," said Freya, drawing her bow.

Tyr sniffed the air like a dog. He frowned.

"It doesn't smell like anyone. That's the strange part. It smells like... nothing. Like stone."

Next to the cups was a sheet of paper, held down by a stone. It was a list of names, written carefully in a small, round hand. There were dozens. They recognized some: names of miners who had vanished on the lower floors, whose faces still hung on posters in the tavern. Others were ancient, names nobody used anymore. *Brann. Odila. Gerd. Maelis.*

Every one of them was crossed out. A fine line, straight and decisive, through each name.

Every one... except the last.

"Hana."

Hana felt the floor tilt. She picked up the sheet. The paper was warm, like the cups. Like the pendant. Like everything in this mine that had been touched by someone who had just left.

"There are lots of Hanas," said Freya slowly. "It's a common name. My aunt was called Hana. She was horrible, by the way, but that was her name."

"Who... is waiting for me?" Hana whispered.

No one answered her. And Hana didn't tell them what frightened her most, because she didn't know how to say it: that there was something in that handwriting, in the round shape of the *a*, in the slant of the *H*, that felt familiar. It wasn't her mother's handwriting.

It looked like her own.

She put the list in her pocket, next to the letter. That night, while the others slept, she took it out and compared it with her own signature on the tavern contract. Then she put it away again, very quickly, and didn't take it out again for a long time.



Ten floors farther down, the walls of the lake were covered in crystal eyes.

They were round crystals, the size of a fist, set into the rock by the hundreds, the thousands, from floor to ceiling. As Hana passed, all of them turned toward her at once, with a soft click, like a thousand eyelids opening.

"Well," said Freya, in a thin voice. "This is new. I don't like it. I want that on the record."

From the depths, the song rose in pitch. It no longer sounded asleep. It sounded... impatient.

Hana stood in the middle of the corridor of eyes. She didn't know why, but she wasn't afraid. She felt something worse: the sense that she had been awaited for a very long time, and that she was late.

"I'm coming," she said, looking into the dark. "Just wait for me a little longer."

The eyes all closed at once.



That night, the **Coral Kraken** rose from the water.

First came a tremor on the surface of the lake. Then the mist parted like a curtain and there it was: a mass of red coral and pale flesh, with tentacles as thick as trees, covered in glowing suckers. It was bigger than the tavern. Bigger than House Aria. It had a single yellow eye, the size of a door.

Hana froze. Freya froze.

Tyr didn't.

Tyr was already running. Toward the shore. Toward the water. The man who wouldn't come within ten paces of the lake waded in up to his knees, up to his waist, axe raised, shouting something in his own language that Hana didn't understand, but that sounded like a name.

He fought as if every blow carried the name of one of his wolves. And maybe it did. Hana heard him shout *Bjorn!* as he cut the first tentacle, *Halla!* with the second, *Eirik!*, *Sólveig!*, *Thorgall!*, one by one, eleven names, eleven blows, while Freya shot at the yellow eye and Hana struck the coral of its head on the same spot, always the same spot, to the rhythm of the mountain's heartbeat.

One name was missing. Hana noticed. So did Tyr.

The Kraken seized him around the waist with its last tentacle and dragged him toward the bottom. Tyr vanished beneath the water. The surface closed over him.

"TYR!"

Hana didn't think. She jumped into the lake. The water was so cold it should have stolen her breath, but she didn't feel cold—she never did—and she opened her eyes in the dark and saw him: Tyr, sinking, eyes

open, not fighting. Not fighting. As if he had been waiting years for that moment.

Hana grabbed his wolf pelt and pulled. Freya shot an arrow at whatever was behind the eye. The Kraken let out a shriek that made the water vibrate, loosened its tentacle, and Hana dragged Tyr to the surface, to the shore, to the rocks, coughing, shaking, alive.

The beast sank for the last time. The lake fell silent.



Tyr didn't speak for a long time. He sat on the shore, soaked, staring at the water. No one dared interrupt him. At last, when the fire had nearly burned out, he said, without looking at anyone:

"I didn't get there too late."

Hana looked up. So did Freya.

"That night. I was there. Sigrun told me not to cross at night. She was sixteen. The youngest. The smartest. She told me the water was too still." He touched the small fang, the one he never touched. "I told her the Pack wasn't afraid of a big fish. We crossed. The Kraken came up. And I..." His voice broke. "I froze. I froze in the boat while it took them one by one. She called to me. She screamed my name. And I couldn't move a finger."

No one said anything. The mist drifted slowly over the water.

"For twelve years I've said I got there too late," said Tyr, "because it's easier to live as a man who was late than as a man who was afraid."

He took off the necklace. He untied the small fang with clumsy fingers and held it a moment in his palm, in the firelight. Then he stood, walked to the shore—to the water, until it soaked his boots— and let it fall into the lake.

"She always wanted to see the bottom," he said.

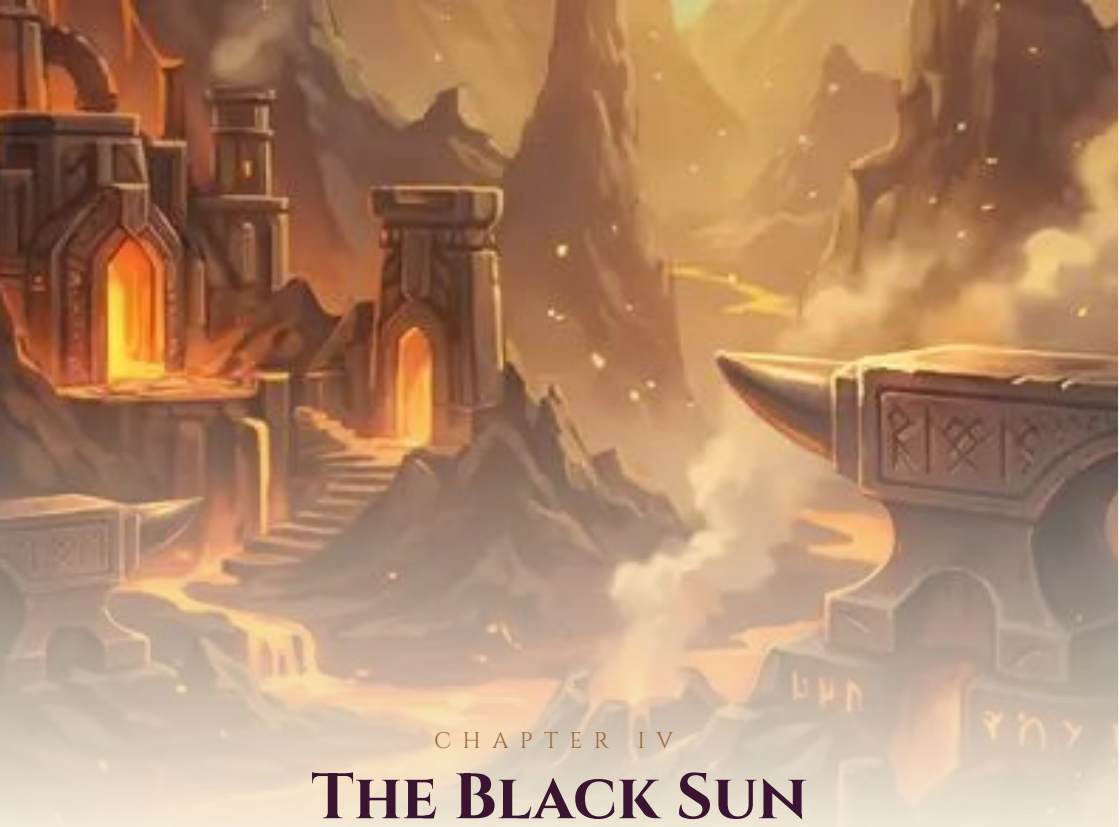
When he came back to the fire, he sat down beside Hana, very close, like an old bear drawing near the warmth. He didn't thank her. He ruffled her hair with one enormous hand, just once, and said:

"Tomorrow we train double. You jumped into the water without taking off your boots. My grandmother would have died of shame."

"Your grandmother killed a bear with a spoon."

"Exactly."

Hana laughed. Freya laughed. And Tyr, for the first time, smiled.



CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK SUN

Magma Forges · Floors 60 – 70



If you hear footsteps, it's me. If you hear nothing... also me.



The deeper they went, the hotter it got.

After the lake, the tunnels turned red. The rock glowed from within like live coals, the air shimmered over the ground, and sweat dried before it could fall. Freya tied her hair back and cursed in three languages. Tyr took off his wolf pelt for the first time, and his back turned out to be covered in tattoos: twelve wolves running in a circle. Hana didn't sweat. Nobody asked her why, and she was grateful.

The **Magma Forges** were a world of lava rivers, obsidian bridges, and natural chimneys spitting sparks into the dark. The **Lava Dragon** lived there, and there it fell, after a fight that lasted from one meal to the next and left Hana's hands covered in blisters, Freya without arrows, and Tyr with half his beard singed.

"Not a word," Tyr growled, touching his face.

"It suits you," Freya lied.

In the silence that followed, someone clapped. Slowly.

"Nice work."

All three turned at once. On a rock a few steps away —so close that any of them could have touched him with an outstretched arm— a man was sitting. Hooded, dressed in black from head to toe, with a long, thin blade hanging from his belt and leather boots that, Hana would realize later, made no sound when he walked. None of them had seen him arrive.

"Since when have you been there!?"

"Since before you."

Tyr raised his axe. Freya, out of arrows, raised her bow like a club. The man didn't move. He didn't even seem tense. He had a pale face, young and tired, gray eyes that almost never blinked, and a thin scar on his lip.

"Vidar," he said, by way of introduction. "I had a contract on that beast. Six months' pay." He looked at the smoking corpse of the dragon, then at Hana. "Which you just ruined."

Hana, not knowing what else to say, did what anyone would have done who grew up alone and learned that people calm down when you feed them:

"Sorry... can I buy you something?"

Vidar looked at her as if she had spoken another language. Freya looked at her as if she'd gone mad. Tyr lowered his axe a little, just a little, out of sheer curiosity.

"No one's ever offered to buy me anything," Vidar said at last. "It's strange. I don't like strange." A long pause. "...I accept."



They ate hard bread and cheese beside a river of lava, which was all Hana had. Vidar ate very slowly, in silence, his back against the rock and his eyes always on the tunnel entrance. When he finished, he wiped his fingers on his trousers and said, without changing his tone, the way someone mentions the weather:

"Yesterday someone from the Core offered me a fortune for your head."

Freya spat out her cheese. Tyr had his axe in hand before Hana could blink.

"And what did you tell them!?"

"No."

"Why?"

Vidar shrugged.

"Because no one pays a fortune for the head of a seventeen-year-old crystal washer. So you're not a crystal washer." He looked at her, and there was something in his eyes Hana couldn't name. "I want to know why you're worth so much. Until then, I walk behind you." He adjusted his hood. "If you hear footsteps, it's me. If you hear nothing... also me."

"That's not reassuring," said Freya.

"I wasn't trying to be."



It was Tyr who said it, that night, while Vidar stood watch outside the circle of the fire, so still he looked like one more shadow.

"I know him."

"Vidar?" asked Hana.

"I know the name. On the surface they call him the Finishing Blade. He's one of the Soundless." Tyr lowered his voice. "A guild of assassins, girl. The most expensive in the valley. They say they come from the old guard of the kings below, from before the Night of the Song. They say Vidar is the best they've ever had. That in ten years he hasn't failed a single contract."

"And before those ten years?"

Tyr looked at her, surprised by the question.

"Don't know. Nobody talks about before."

Hana looked into the darkness. She didn't see Vidar. But she was certain he was looking at her.



On floor sixty, Vidar showed her the contract.

He did it without warning. He sat down beside her while she was sharpening her pick and held out a folded sheet of paper, very worn, as if it had been opened and closed many times.

"It's yours," he said. "More or less."

Hana unfolded it. It was written in an elegant, slanted hand, the hand of someone used to giving orders. It bore no name. It said only: *The girl of the blue lantern. She must not pass the hundredth floor. By any means.* And the sum. A sum so large that Hana had to read it twice.

"Whoever paid for your head signed the contract with a seal," said Vidar. "A black sun."

Hana went cold. For the first time in her life, she felt cold.

She took her mother's letter from her pocket and unfolded it carefully. In the corner, nearly rubbed away by the fingers of so many nights of reading, was the same drawing. The black circle. The rays. The same black sun.

Vidar looked at it. He said nothing. He didn't seem surprised. And that was what frightened Hana most.

"Mom..." she murmured. "What did you get yourself into?"

"The black sun," said Vidar slowly, "is the oldest seal we Soundless have. It was the seal of the kings of Lower Lumen. When a contract arrives with that seal, you don't ask. You don't argue. You carry it out." He stood. "It's the first time in a hundred years anyone has used it."

"But you didn't carry it out."

Vidar was already walking away. He stopped with his back to her.

"We're not on the hundredth floor yet," he said.

And he went off to stand watch. Hana watched him until the darkness swallowed him, and wondered whether she had just received a threat or a promise, and why, in some way she didn't understand, they seemed to be the same thing.



On floor seventy they discovered something stranger still.

At the far end of the Forges there was a smithy. Not a cave with an anvil, like the dwarf's on floor three. It was an immense workshop carved into the rock, with dozens of lit forges, bellows that worked by themselves, and hammers that struck the anvils to the rhythm of something. Hana recognized it at once. *One... two... one... two...* The mountain's heartbeat.

There was no one there. The coals never went out. The hammers struck on their own. And no one, not Tyr nor Freya nor Vidar, knew who worked there.

"I'm not touching anything," Freya announced. "For the record."

On the walls, hanging from iron hooks, were picks. Hundreds. Thousands, in rows that vanished toward the ceiling. New picks, gleaming, freshly forged. And every pick had a name engraved on its handle.

Tyr read some aloud. *Brann. Odila. Gerd.*

"They're the ones on the list," said Hana.

The crossed-out names. One by one. Each had its pick, and beside each name, a date. Some from years ago. Others from decades ago. Some so old the iron had turned black.

Hana searched among them with her heart hammering against her ribs. Row by row. Hook by hook. Until she found one with her name.

Hana.

It was identical to hers. The same handle. The same curve. The same notch in the iron head. And beneath the name, a date.

Tomorrow's.

"What does it mean?" Freya asked, her voice a thread.

No one answered. Tyr gripped his axe. Vidar came up behind Hana, looked at the date for a long while and, for the first time since they'd known him, took a step without thinking: he put himself between her and the wall.

"It means tomorrow you don't leave my side," he said.

Hana left the pick on its hook. She didn't take it. She didn't want to touch it. But that night, when she closed her eyes, she kept hearing the hammers, and in their rhythm she thought she heard something else: a woman's voice, very far away, humming a lullaby and getting the last note wrong.



CHAPTER V

THE SONG

Stellar Abyss · Floors 80 – 100



If you cross the hundredth floor, you'll never again be just Hana.



On the day of the date, Hana woke before anyone else and spent an hour sitting, staring at her hands, waiting to die.

She didn't die. They had breakfast. They went down. Tyr made her train double, as he'd promised, and she silently thanked him for every shout, because they kept her from thinking. Vidar walked all morning half a step from her shoulder, so close their cloaks sometimes brushed, without a word. Freya told bad jokes for six hours straight. No one mentioned the date. Everyone had it on their mind.

On floor eighty, the tunnel ended in emptiness.

"Ah," said Freya. "Well. Now we're really done for."

It was the **Stellar Abyss**. A cavern so vast it had no walls, no ceiling, no floor: only darkness, and in the darkness, millions of points of light. Floating crystals. Big as houses, small as grains of sand, turning slowly in the void like stars, as if someone had put a night sky inside the mountain. Between them, rock bridges thin as threads stretched from one crystal to the next, with no railings, nothing below.

And the song.

Here the song was no longer a murmur. It could be heard clearly, as if someone were singing on the other side of a door. A slow, sad, wordless melody. Hana knew it. She knew it in a way that hurt, the way you know the smell of a house you lived in as a child.

And it was saying her name.

Not with words. With the melody. Every turn of the song ended in two notes, one high and one low, which sounded exactly like someone calling to another from far away. *Ha-na. Ha-na.*

"Do you hear it?" she asked.

"I hear a song," said Tyr slowly. "I don't hear names."

"I do," said Vidar.

They all turned to look at him. He had his eyes fixed on the abyss and his hand on his hilt.

"I've heard it before," he said, and didn't explain where.



They crossed the bridges one at a time, with Tyr in front and Vidar at the back. At the end of the tunnel on floor ninety, in an enormous crystal floating in the center of the abyss, Hana saw her.

Sealed inside a block of transparent crystal was a woman. Golden from head to toe: golden hair, skin gilded by the light, an old-fashioned garnet velvet gown, and jewels on every finger. Her eyes were open. She was looking at her. And she was crying. The tears ran slowly down her face, inside the crystal, and never fell.

Hana took a step forward and stopped, because she knew that face.

She had seen it every day for seven years. It hung in the main hall of House Aria, above the table where the crystals were weighed, in an oil portrait in a gold frame: the founder of the house, the first great jeweler of Lumen, the woman who had turned the crystals into the fortune of three kingdoms. When Hana was a child washing crystals in the courtyard, she would sometimes sneak into the hall just to look at that portrait. She liked the smile. It was the smile of someone who knows something you don't.

"Twenty more floors," said Hana, her voice breaking, and she didn't know whether she meant the woman or herself. "Just twenty."

But the letter still weighed in her pocket. *"Never go below the hundredth floor."*



Between the golden woman's crystal and them, on the last bridge, stood a girl.

They hadn't seen her arrive. She was simply there, standing in the middle of the bridge, as if she had always been. She was about seven, barefoot, in a white nightgown. And she was made of crystal. All of her: hair, skin, nightgown, eyes. A pink, transparent crystal through which you could see the stars of the abyss.

She didn't move. But she spoke, in a voice that sounded at once very young and very old, like an echo that had taken a hundred years to return.

"If you cross the hundredth floor," she said, "you'll never again be just Hana."

Hana stepped closer. No one stopped her. Not even Vidar, who had his blade half drawn and an expression Hana had never seen on him, as if he had seen a ghost.

Up close, the girl had her face.

Not a similar face. *Hers*. The one she saw in the only mirror in the house of the blue lantern when she was little and climbed onto a chair to brush her hair. The same nose. The same shape of the eyes. The same gap in the smile where a tooth had fallen out. On her crystal chest, over the heart, gleamed a silver pendant with a cherry blossom.

"Who are you?" asked Hana.

The girl tilted her head.

"The one who fell asleep."

Hana gripped her pick. She thought of the letter. Of her mother. Of ten years of waiting at a window. Of the warm pendant beating against her chest and the pick with her name and today's date. She thought of all

that, and in the end the answer came out by itself, without thinking, the way her blows came when she struck the same spot:

"Then I'll be something more."

The girl smiled, with the gap in her teeth.

...and shattered into a thousand pieces.

The fragments didn't fall. They floated, scattered across the abyss like sparks, and came to rest on the golden woman's crystal, which began to crack with a sound like ice in spring.

That was when the ceiling began to fall.



It all happened very fast.

A roar. A tremor that shook the bridges like harp strings. Enormous rocks breaking loose from the darkness, falling among the floating crystals, smashing them, raining stardust. Tyr shouted something. Freya grabbed Hana by the arm. Vidar shoved her forward just as a rock the size of a cart crashed where she had been a second before.

Hana ran. Not back. Toward the golden woman's crystal.

She struck once, in the center of the cracks. *Always the same spot.* The crystal burst. The woman fell forward onto her, heavy and warm and alive, coughing like someone who hasn't breathed in a long time. Hana took her by the hand and ran.

They all ran, across the last bridge, through falling rocks, while the whole abyss seemed to collapse behind them. And in the middle of the run, the golden woman stopped dead and pulled them all up short.

"Wait. Before we go on, there's something important to discuss."

"Now!?" Hana shouted. "Everything's falling apart!"

"Exactly why." The woman brushed the dust from her gown with absurd calm. "My fee."

"Your *WHAT!*?"

"I know where every vein of gold in this abyss is, darling. I know which bridges hold and which don't, I know where the tunnels nobody knows about are, and I know exactly what every crystal you've been selling for half its price is worth. That doesn't come free." She raised a finger covered in rings. "Ten percent of everything we take. And the pretty crystals are mine."

A rock fell three steps away. Nobody moved.

"Deal," said Hana. "Deal! *Run!*"

"That's what I like to hear." But she didn't run. For a moment, in the middle of the collapse, the woman lowered her eyes and stood still. She squeezed Hana's hand. Her voice changed.

"...And thank you. Truly. I thought I was going to die alone in there. I thought no one would come down that deep for me."

Hana looked at her. The woman's eyes were wet. Then she shook herself, like someone shrugging off a wet cloak, and smiled again with that smile from the portrait, the one of someone who knows something you don't.

"Well, enough drama. Run, partner! Last one there buys dinner."

And so, amid nervous laughter and falling rocks, the group crossed the hundredth floor.

The letter stayed behind, at the bottom of Hana's pocket. There was no going back.



On the other side of the collapse, in a quiet tunnel that smelled of wet earth, they slumped against the wall, gasping, covered in dust. Freya laughed until she cried. Tyr checked his arms to make sure they were still there. Vidar stayed on his feet, looking back toward the hundredth floor, like someone watching a door that has just closed.

"My name is Aria," said the golden woman, fixing her hair. "Aria Valmont. Charmed."

Hana stared at her.

"There's a portrait of you in House Aria."

Aria blinked. Just once, very fast.

"Oh, is there?" She smiled. "That'll be my great-great-grandmother, darling. All the women in my family are gorgeous. It's a curse."

Hana didn't believe her. But she was too tired to ask, and Aria had started counting under her breath, in a low, constant murmur, without realizing she was doing it. Counting numbers. Very fast. Like someone who has counted for so long she no longer knows how to stop.

...thirty-one million four hundred thousand... thirty-one million four hundred thousand and one...

"What are you counting?" Freya asked her.

Aria broke off. She looked at Freya as if she didn't know what she was talking about. Then she laughed.

"My ten percent, dear. What else would I be counting?"

But Hana, who had her ear pressed to the rock and the pendant beating against her chest, noticed something that made her shiver. Aria

was counting to the rhythm of the mountain. One number for each heartbeat.

As if she had been doing it for a very long time.



INTERLUDE I

THE TEN-YEAR CONTRACT

New Lumen · Ten years ago



I choose the one who already failed once.



Vidar was nineteen the first time he entered the house of the blue lantern.

It was winter. Snow was falling on New Lumen, a fine, silent snow that suited him, because it erased footprints. He had been with the Soundless for six years and had never failed a practice assignment. His teacher, an old woman with perfect hands whom everyone called the Crone, had told him that morning that he was ready for his first real contract.

The contract came from the Crystal Guild. Sealed with red wax, the color of money. It was simple. Too simple. *A girl of about seven lives alone in the last house on the mountain street. She has no family. No one will come looking for her. She must not see the dawn.*

"Why?" Vidar had asked.

The Crone had looked at him with something like pity.

"We don't ask why. But I'll tell you, because it's your first time and I want you to understand what kind of world this is." She lowered her voice. "A week ago, some miners on floor twenty saw a woman come up from the depths, from where no one returns, with a sleeping girl in her arms. The girl wore a white nightgown a hundred years out of fashion. The next morning, the woman went back down into the mine. Alone. The girl stayed behind in a house at the foot of the mountain, and she doesn't have a scratch on her." The Crone tapped the table with one finger. "The Guild lives off that mountain's crystals, boy. And there are things about those crystals the Guild would rather no one asked. A girl who comes up alive from the depths is a question. Questions are bad for business."



The house had no lock. Vidar walked in through the door.

Inside it was warm, though the hearth was cold. Everything was clean and tidy in the way adults tidy things when they aren't coming back: the dishes washed and stacked, a blanket folded over the chair, a shopping list stuck to the pantry door. *Flour. Honey. Candles. Something sweet for H.* Over the table hung a lantern of blue crystal that had no wick and no oil and yet glowed.

Vidar would always remember that light. It didn't shine like a lantern. It watched.

The girl was asleep in the bed at the back, curled into a ball, her pink hair spread across the pillow and one bare foot poking out from under the blankets. Vidar approached without a sound. He drew the blade. He had practiced that movement a thousand times on straw dummies. It was easy. It was the easiest thing in the world.

Then the girl hummed.

Asleep, without opening her eyes, she began to hum a melody. Slow, sad, wordless. A lullaby. And when she reached the end, the last note, she got it wrong. She went up where she should have gone down. And she smiled in her sleep, as if someone, far away, had laughed along with her.

Vidar stood motionless with the blade in his hand for as long as it takes a candle to burn down.

He knew that song too. He didn't know from where. He was an orphan; the Soundless had taken him at four from a convent doorstep and hadn't let him keep anything, not a name, not a memory. But he knew that song. Someone had sung it to him once, before everything, before the Crone and the straw dummies. Someone who had loved him.

He put the blade away.

On his way out, he stopped under the blue lantern. The light flickered, just once, like an eye slowly closing. Vidar had the absurd, impossible certainty that someone on the other side was thanking him.



He told the Guild the girl didn't exist. That it was a rumor from drunken miners. That the house was empty. He paid the money back out of his own pocket, with interest, and accepted the Crone's punishment without a word: three weeks in the stone cell, without light.

When he came out, the Crone asked him only one thing:

"Will you fail again?"

"Never," said Vidar.

And he never failed again. Never. For ten years he was the Finishing Blade, the best of the Soundless, the one who never hesitated. He became so good at not hesitating that sometimes he forgot he had ever hesitated.

But every winter, when it snowed, he walked down the mountain street. He would stand for a while at the corner, in the shadows, watching the house of the blue lantern. He watched the girl grow up. He watched her learn to wash crystals, to count coins, to look at the mine from her window every night. He never went near. He never let her see him.



A few weeks ago, a contract arrived at the house of the Soundless. It bore no red wax. It bore black wax, and in the wax, a seal the Crone had never seen in her whole life, though she knew it from the oldest books of the guild. A black sun.

The seal of the kings below.

Inside were two assignments and a sealed letter. The first was to deliver the letter. *Tonight, under the door of the blue lantern. Without her seeing you.* The second was the one Hana would later read beside a river of lava. *She must not pass the hundredth floor. By any means.*

And at the end, on a line of its own, a sentence written in the same elegant hand and written only for him:

"I choose the one who already failed once. I know you'll know when to do it again."

Vidar burned that sentence. He carried out the first assignment that very night, in silence, one more shadow on the mountain street. And then he stayed at the corner, under the snow, watching the girl of the blue lantern take the pick down from the wall and leave her house for the mine.

He didn't stop her. He followed her.

Weeks later, on floor sixty, while she slept by the fire, a crystal in the wall lit up in front of him. From inside came a woman's voice, tired and very distant, repeating the order and offering him double. Someone, from the bottom of the mountain, was nervous. The next day, Vidar sat on a rock beside a dragon's corpse and clapped.

He still didn't know what he would do when they reached the hundredth floor.

The only thing he knew, with the same absurd certainty as that night, was that the song she hummed in her sleep was the same one someone had once sung to him. And that he meant to find out who.



PART II

WHAT THE MOUNTAIN HIDES

Crystalline Forest · Solar Ruins · Lost City



CHAPTER VI

THE HEIR

Crystalline Forest · Floors 110 – 130



Everything lost is found on the other side.



Byond the hundredth floor, the mine changed.

It wasn't only deeper. It was different, as if by crossing the collapse they had passed from one house into another. The **Crystalline Forest** was beautiful and strange: quartz trees with transparent trunks, branches fine as glass needles, roots that glowed underfoot with a green light that came from nowhere. When a draft blew through, the crystal leaves chimed against each other and the whole forest rang like a thousand little bells.

"I hate this place," Freya said on the first day. "It's gorgeous. I hate it."

"Why?"

"Because gorgeous things down here always want to kill you."

She was proved right twice that week. Once by crystal spiders the size of dogs, which hid among the branches and dropped without a sound; once by the **Root Guardian**, an old, gnarled tree that woke when Tyr leaned his axe against its trunk and took them a whole day to bring down. Hana split it at the end with a single blow to the center of its rings, *always the same spot*, and from the trunk fell a rain of seeds of light that hung in the air for hours.

Aria, for her part, kept her word with chilling efficiency. She knew every tunnel. She knew where the richest veins of rune gold were, which crystals were worth a fortune and which were shiny trash, which bridges would hold and which water was safe to drink. In three days the group brought out more gold than in the entire journey before. And Aria counted all of it. Every coin, every fragment, every gem. She wrote it down in a little leather-bound notebook she'd pulled from some secret pocket of her gown.

"Your ten percent comes to twenty-three coins and forty," she informed Tyr one night. "Oh, no. Sorry. That's *my* ten percent. Your share is the

one below."

"The one below says zero."

"Exactly. Your meals were deducted."

"I hunted those meals."

"With my knife, darling."

Tyr stared at her for a long time and then told Hana, very seriously, that the next time they rescued someone from a crystal they should ask first how much they charged. But Hana noticed that, when she thought nobody was looking, Aria slipped coins into Freya's bag. And that once she mended Tyr's wolf pelt while he slept, with stitches so fine he never noticed.



One night, by the fire, Aria spoke without looking at anyone.

She was counting again. She always did when there was nothing else to do: a low, constant murmur, like a fountain. But that night she broke off in the middle of a number, stared at the flames, and said, in a different voice, slower:

"When I was trapped in the crystal, I heard a voice."

They all looked at her.

"I don't know how long I was in there. A long time. At first I screamed. Then I stopped screaming, because no one could hear me and screaming inside a crystal is..." she laughed without humor, "rather inelegant. So I started counting. I counted the mountain's heartbeats. One, two. One, two. If I counted, I didn't go mad." She moved her fingers in the air, as if still counting. "And sometimes, very rarely, a voice spoke to me. It came

from below. It always said the same thing. It asked me to wait. To hold on. Not to give up. To wait for 'the heir.'"

"Heir to what?" asked Hana.

Aria looked up. She looked her in the eyes, and there was something in her gaze Hana hadn't seen before: something very old and very tired.

"To all of this."

No one said anything for a long while. The crystal leaves tinkled in the dark.

"What was the voice like?" asked Vidar from the shadows. It was the first time in three days he had spoken.

Aria took a while to answer.

"Kind," she said at last. "It was the kindest voice I've ever heard. Like a grandfather's. It promised that everything lost is found on the other side."

Freya, who was sharpening one of her brother's arrows, stopped.



Ten floors farther down, Aria drew Hana away from the group.

She did it on a silly pretext —"come, I want to show you a vein so lovely it'll make you cry"— and led her down a side tunnel to a small cave where crystal roots hung from the ceiling like curtains. There she stopped, her back turned, and when she turned around she was no longer smiling.

"Hana... I have to tell you something. And you're not going to like it."

"What is it?"

"The woman who sealed me in that crystal..." Aria swallowed. "She had your eyes."

Hana laughed. A nervous, broken laugh.

"That's impossible."

"I know."

"No. You don't know." Hana stepped back. "You told me you didn't know how long you were in there. That portrait in House Aria is over a hundred years old, Aria. The crystal merchants say so. If it's you..."

"Hana."

"...if it's you, then you were in there for a hundred years, and the woman who sealed you..."

"Hana." Aria took her hands. Hers were cold, in a way that wasn't normal, as if there were still a little crystal inside them. "I won't lie to you about this. Not about this. She was tall. Her hair was pinned up in a hurry. She carried a pick over her shoulder. And she looked at me with your eyes while she did it, and she was crying."

Hana couldn't answer. Aria said nothing more. She just held her hand, hard, for a long time, until the trembling in Hana's hands stopped.

When they went back to the others, no one asked anything. But that night Hana saw Aria sitting alone, far from the fire, the little leather notebook open on her knees. She wasn't writing down coins. She was looking at a page with a pencil drawing, very worn: a small girl with light curls, smiling. Beneath it was a name Hana couldn't make out.



On floor one hundred and thirty they found the altar.

It stood at the heart of the forest, in a circular clearing where the quartz trees leaned toward the center as if kneeling. It was a flat white stone, carved with symbols none of them recognized, except one, engraved in the middle: a black sun.

On the stone were two handprints. One large and one small. Side by side, like a mother and daughter pressing their palms to a window.

"I'm not touching it," said Freya. "For the record. I've been saying it the whole trip and nobody listens, but for the record."

Hana stepped closer. She didn't think. It was like on floor ninety, like with Aria's crystal: things in that mine came out of her on their own, as if her body knew something her head didn't yet. She placed her hand on the small print.

It was too small. It was a child's hand.

And yet, it fit perfectly. Not because Hana's hand grew small, but because the stone softened beneath her palm, warm as clay, and shaped itself to her, the way a pillow shapes itself to a head it knows.

The altar lit up.

The light climbed the quartz trees, branch by branch, until the whole forest shone like a chandelier. And a song filled the clearing. Not the mountain's song, deep and wordless. A lullaby. Soft, ancient, sung by a woman's voice that sounded very close, as if she were leaning over a bed.

Hana knew it. She had hummed it all her life, washing crystals, watching the mine from her window, without knowing where it came from. But now, for the first time, she heard it with words:

*Sleep, my light, the mountain watches over you,
sleep, the sun is hiding just for you.
If you wake one day and I'm not near,*

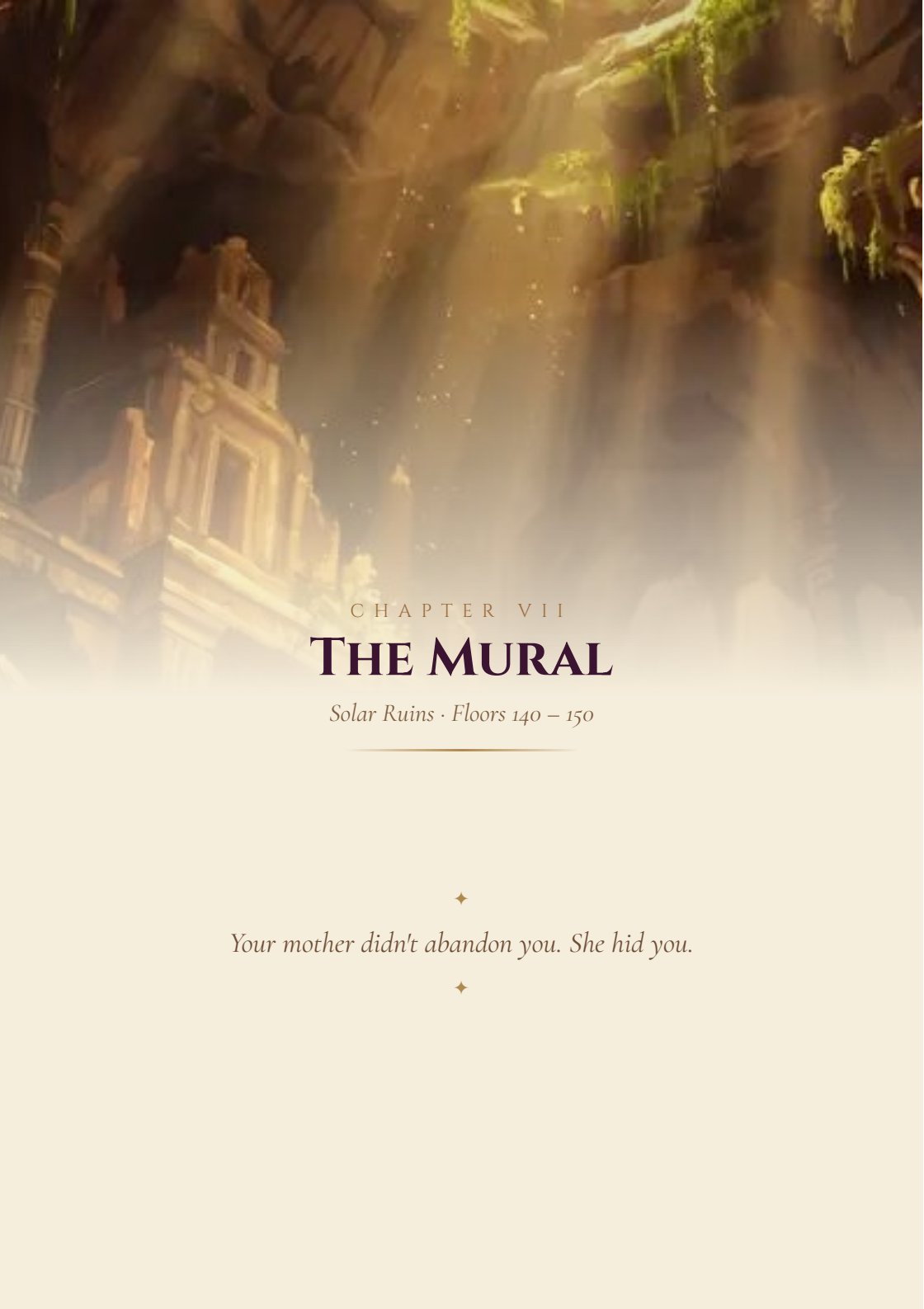
look into the stone: I'm still here.

And at the end, on the last note, the voice went up where it should have gone down. Just like Hana's. Just like always.

"I..." said Hana, and her eyes filled with tears. "I know that song."

Behind her, no one spoke. But when Hana turned around, she saw she wasn't the only one crying. Tyr's eyes were red and he was pretending it was the smoke. Freya had grabbed Aria's sleeve. And Vidar, who never showed anything, was very pale, a hand on his chest, as if someone had just pulled out of him something he had kept inside his whole life.

"They used to sing it to me," he said, so softly only Hana heard. "Someone used to sing it to me."



CHAPTER VII

THE MURAL

Solar Ruins · Floors 140 – 150

◆

Your mother didn't abandon you. She hid you.

◆

The **Solar Ruins** weren't a cave. They were a city.

Or what was left of one: golden columns, broken arches, staircases leading nowhere, all made of a yellow stone that glowed from within as if it had stored the light of a sun it had never seen. The walls were covered in reliefs, carved in golden stone by hands that had been dead for centuries.

"Lumen didn't make this," said Aria, running her fingers over a column. "It's much older. A thousand years, at least. More."

"How do you know?" asked Freya.

"Because I..." Aria stopped. "Because I read about it. In the archives of House Aria. My great-great-grandmother collected odd things."

Hana said nothing. She had stopped asking about the great-great-grandmother.



The walls told a story. It took them a whole day to follow it, relief by relief, while the **Sun Sentinel**—an enormous empty suit of armor with a spear of light—chased them up and down the staircases. They defeated it on floor one hundred and forty-five, when Vidar found a crack in the back of its neck and Hana drove her pick into the same spot. Then they went back to the mural.

At the beginning there was a man. A king, crowned, digging with a pick. He dug downward, very far down, with infinite patience, while above his head the sun shone ever more distant. In the next relief, the king reached a door. An enormous round door, at the bottom of everything. And he opened it.

In the next, the sun in the sky turned black.

"The sun seen from below," murmured Vidar. "That's what the Crone called it. The seal of the kings. The sun seen by the one who digs."

Then the king disappeared, and the door closed, and the mountain grew over it to cover it. And the reliefs went on: generations of kings and queens, all with the same black sun on their chests, all standing guard beside the mountain.

And at the end, the last mural.

It was newer than the others. You could tell from the stone, paler, and from the lines, more hurried, as if it had been carved in haste. It showed a queen, beneath a black sun, kneeling. Before her stood a girl. The queen was holding her hands. And behind the girl, the mountain opened its mouth, enormous, like someone yawning.

A queen, beneath a black sun, was giving her daughter to the mountain... in exchange for the mountain staying asleep.

The girl in the mural held a pick in her hand.

And a pendant.



Hana stood in front of the mural for a long time. So long that the others made camp right there, at the foot of the wall, and lit a fire, and ate, and she was still standing. Freya brought her a plate. Hana didn't touch it. Tyr laid his wolf pelt over her shoulders. She wasn't cold, but she didn't take it off.

It was Aria who came over in the end. She stood beside her, in silence, looking at the stone.

"Your mother didn't abandon you, Hana," she said quietly. "She hid you."

"From what?"

Aria didn't answer right away. She reached out and touched the face of the queen carved in the stone. She touched it carefully, tenderly, the way you touch the face of someone you know.

"From what's behind the door," she said. "Or from herself. Or from me." She laughed softly. "Don't mind me. I'm tired."

Hana looked at her. Aria's eyes were fixed on the queen, and there was something in them Hana couldn't name. Anger, perhaps. Or love. Or both, so tangled together they could no longer be separated.

That night, at last, the silver locket opened.

Hana was alone, her back against the mural, turning it over between her fingers as she did every night. And suddenly, silently, without her doing anything, the silver parted into two halves, like a flower opening.

Inside there was no portrait. There was an inscription, engraved in small, elegant letters, the same hand as Vidar's contract, the same as the letter:

"So that you remember me when I can no longer remember you."

And beneath it, very small, a black sun.



Farther down, on the last floors of the ruins, every crystal they broke let out a sigh.

At first they didn't notice. It was a very soft sound, like the air escaping a bottle when it's uncorked. But after a while it was impossible not to hear it. Every time Hana's pick split a crystal, the stone exhaled. A long, soft, almost relieved sigh. Like someone setting down a burden. Like someone who, at last, after a long time, can rest.

"Are we... setting them free?" asked Hana, her pick in midair.

Freya had gone very still, her hand on the bag where she kept the silver-veined crystal.

A voice answered from the darkness, and it belonged to none of them. It was a kind voice, warm, very old, the voice of a grandfather beside a fireplace. It came from everywhere and nowhere:

"Or you're waking whoever had them trapped."

They all froze. Tyr raised his axe. Vidar drew. Freya aimed her bow at nothing.

Only Aria didn't move. Aria closed her eyes, and for an instant, barely an instant, Hana thought she saw her smile.



CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST TIME

The Abyss · Floors 155 – 165

◆

Someone is singing... and going a little off-key.

◆

In **The Abyss**, the whispers never stopped.

It was a world without light. No crystals, no lava, no mushrooms. Only a thick darkness, almost solid, where torches lit half a step and then gave up. And the whispers: thousands of very quiet voices, all talking at once without saying anything, like a crowd on the other side of a very thick wall.

No one slept well in The Abyss. Freya stopped talking on the first day, because her voice got lost among the others and she was afraid of not finding it again. Tyr walked with his hand on his axe at all hours. Aria counted aloud, faster and faster. Vidar didn't leave Hana's side by a single step. And there, in the dark, **The Devourer** was waiting for them: a shadow made of mouths, with no body, that couldn't be struck, and that only yielded when Hana, desperate, stopped swinging and started humming the lullaby. The shadow stopped. It listened. And it dissolved like smoke.

No one could explain why. Hana couldn't either. But from that moment on, in The Abyss, they all hummed.



Until, all at once, the whispers fell silent.

In their place came something else. Someone was singing. A single voice, a woman's, clear and strong, advancing through the darkness like a candle. She was singing the lullaby. Hana's. The one from the altar.

And she went a little off-key at the end.

"THERE you are! Do you have any idea what time it is?"

A white light flared in front of them. Behind the light stood a woman: white robe, nun's coif, a wooden staff with a glowing stone at its

tip, and an enormous almanac under her arm, its covers tied shut with string. She had a round face, red cheeks, and her hands on her hips, and she was looking at them the way a teacher looks at children who show up late to class.

"Coming all the way down to The Abyss with no coat. No food. With those dark circles."

"We're fine, thanks," Hana tried.

"That's what they all say. And then I find them hugging a rock, crying for their mother." The woman clicked her tongue and went up to Tyr, who was two heads taller, and lifted his eyelid with her thumb. "You. Anemic. Eat red meat." To Freya: "You don't sleep. It shows in your skin." To Vidar, who for the first time in his life took a step back: "You don't either, and you're also too thin and too serious." Aria she looked at one second longer than the others, and something crossed her face very quickly, too quickly to read. "And you... your hands are cold, woman. Sit close to the fire."

And last, Hana.

To Hana she said nothing. She just looked at her. The light of the staff trembled a little. The woman's eyes were very wide, and for a moment it seemed she was going to cry, or laugh, or hug her. But she did none of the three. She took a deep breath, straightened her coif, and said, her voice a little hoarser:

"Sister Frigg, my child. I've spent years looking after those who get lost down here."

My child. Hana noticed it. She didn't know why, but she noticed it.



Frigg had a camp in a chapel carved into the rock on floor one hundred and fifty-seven, with a small altar, a fire that never went out, and shelves full of blankets, bandages, jars of herbs, and bread. Lots of bread. It seemed her only mission in life was to make sure that no one, ever, went hungry in The Abyss.

"Eat," she ordered. "Then we talk. Then you sleep. And then, if you behave, I'll let you keep going down. Or not."

Hana ate. As she did, she looked at the chapel walls. They were covered in names. Written in charcoal, in chalk, carved with a knife. Thousands.

"Those are the ones I found," Frigg explained, without looking. "The ones who got lost down here. I guided them up, one by one, singing. The Abyss doesn't let anyone out who doesn't sing." She touched the almanac. "I have them all here. Every day. Every name."

"How many days?" asked Freya.

Frigg opened the almanac. The pages were filled with small tally marks, five by five, in tight rows. Hundreds of pages. Thousands of marks.

"Thirty-six thousand four hundred and ninety-eight," she said. "Tomorrow, thirty-six thousand four hundred and ninety-nine."

No one did the math out loud. There was no need. Hana did it silently and felt her stomach drop to her feet.

Nearly a hundred years.

"Sister," said Tyr slowly, "you don't look a day over forty."

"Thank you, son. It's the diet." Frigg closed the almanac. "The Abyss doesn't let those who sing to it grow old. It's the only good thing about it. As long as I sing, time waits for me."



That night, when the others were asleep, Hana sat beside Frigg at the altar.

"You know the song," she told her. "The lullaby."

"Everyone in my order knows it, my child. It's our song. We sing it to the lost, to the sick, to orphans." Frigg stirred the fire. "In the convents of the valley they still sing it to the children left at the door."

On the other side of the fire, Vidar, whom everyone thought asleep, opened his eyes. He said nothing. But Hana saw how his fingers trembled.

"Why do you go off-key at the end?" asked Hana.

Frigg went still. Then she laughed, softly, with a tenderness that hurt.

"Because that's not how it ends. The last note goes down. It always went down. But someone I loved very much used to change it. She'd raise it instead of lowering it. She said a lullaby can't end going down, because then the child falls asleep sad." She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "And I never learned to sing it right after that. Neither her way nor mine. I got stuck halfway."

"Who was she?"

Frigg looked at her. She tucked a strand of hair behind Hana's ear, the way you do with children.

"Tomorrow, my child. Tomorrow I'll tell you everything. Tonight, sleep."



The next morning, Frigg was waiting for them with the blankets folded, her staff in hand, and an enormous pack on her back.

"What you woke up there above..." she said, and suddenly she clutched the almanac to her chest and her voice changed. "I saw it once before. A long time ago. That time I couldn't save anyone." She took a deep breath. "This time I won't fail. So that's the end of the discussion: I'm coming with you."

"There hasn't been any discussion," said Freya.

"And there won't be." A pause. "...And bundle up."



On floor one hundred and sixty, Frigg told her story.

They had stopped on a ledge above a bottomless pit, the last stretch of The Abyss before the City. From below came a hot wind that smelled of stone and dried flowers. Frigg sat on the edge, her legs dangling over the void, like a girl on a pier.

"I was a novice in the chapel of Lower Lumen. I was nineteen. My only task was to keep the candles lit." She smiled. "I wasn't very good at it. They kept going out. But I had a good voice. That's why the queen chose me to sing to her daughter."

Hana stopped breathing.

"The queen had a seven-year-old girl with hair the color of cherry blossoms and a laugh you could hear from the other end of the palace. She was stubborn, brave, and didn't have a drop of common sense. She'd sneak off to the mine to chip crystals with a toy pick her mother had made for her, identical to her own, with a notch in the head." Frigg swallowed. "I was her godmother. I sang to her every night. The lullaby. And her mother would lean in the doorway and sing the last note upward, and the girl would laugh."

"Frigg..."

"Let me finish, my child. I've waited a hundred years to tell it." Her voice trembled. "The last time the Abyss woke, a woman went down alone to put it back to sleep. With her daughter by the hand. She asked me to come here and sing. Not to stop singing, whatever happened. And I did. I sang to her until her voice was lost among the crystals. I sang to her for a hundred years." She wiped her eyes. "Her name was Lyra. I never knew whether she succeeded... or whether the Abyss kept her."

Hana couldn't speak. Freya had taken one of her hands and Tyr the other. Vidar was standing behind her, so close Hana could feel his breath on the back of her neck. Aria, on the other hand, had moved away. She was at the edge of the pit, her back to everyone, looking down.

"And the girl?" Hana asked, her voice a thread. "What was the girl's name?"

Frigg looked at her. She opened her mouth to answer.

From below, the song turned into a scream.

It was an immense, harrowing sound that rose up the pit like a wave and threw them all against the wall. The rocks shook. The hot wind became a hurricane. And in the middle of the scream, so loud it rang above everything else, there was a word.

It wasn't Hana's name.

It was "*Aria!*"

When the shaking stopped, they all turned to look at her. Aria was still at the edge of the pit, disheveled, covered in dust, the little leather notebook pressed to her chest. She turned slowly. She was smiling, but her face was wet with tears.

"How odd," she said. "I think someone misses me."



CHAPTER IX

THE CITY

Lost City · Floors 170 – 190



The crystals we sell up there... are them.



Beneath the mountain there was an entire city.

They saw it from the top of the last staircase of The Abyss, at a dawn that wasn't a dawn, when the darkness suddenly opened and there it was below, in a valley of stone, lit by a pink light that came from everywhere. Streets. Houses with pointed roofs. Squares with dry fountains. A stone bridge over a river that no longer flowed. A tower with a stopped clock. And at the very top, on a hill, a palace with crystal domes.

And people.

Thousands of people, in the streets, in the squares, at the windows. Motionless. Turned to crystal in mid-step, mid-laugh, mid-embrace.

They went down in silence. No one dared speak. The streets of the **Lost City** were intact, as if life had stopped in a single second: a crystal baker with a tray of crystal bread; two crystal children chasing a crystal dog; an elderly crystal couple sitting on a bench, holding hands, looking up. All of them looking up. All with the same expression. It wasn't fear. It was surprise. The surprise of someone who hears a beautiful song and lifts their head to see where it's coming from.

It was the town the mountain had swallowed a hundred years ago.



Tyr took the wolf pelt off his head and walked with it in his hand, the way one walks in a temple. Freya covered her mouth with both hands. Aria went ahead, very fast, through streets she seemed to know by heart, without looking to either side.

Vidar stopped in front of a market stall. There was a crystal man behind a crystal counter, and on the counter, crystals. Small ones, blue, shining. Just like the ones sold in New Lumen. Just like the ones Hana had washed for ten years in the courtyard of House Aria.

Vidar picked one up and held it to the light. Inside, if you looked closely, you could see something. A shape. The tiny silhouette of a hand.

"The crystals we sell up there..." he said, and for the first time his voice shook. "...are them."

No one said anything for a long time.

Hana thought of her hands. Of ten years scrubbing crystals with warm water and a linen cloth until they shone. Of how they warmed between her fingers. Of how, sometimes, she could have sworn they had a pulse. She thought of the merchants of three kingdoms who paid fortunes for them. Of ladies' necklaces, kings' crowns, engagement rings.

She had to sit down on the ground. Freya sat with her.



It was Freya who broke first.

She did it silently, without warning. She was sitting next to Hana on the rim of a dry fountain, and suddenly she reached into her bag and took out the silver-veined crystal. She looked at it. She held it up to the pink light of the city, the way Vidar had.

Inside there was no silhouette. No hand. Only a vein of silver, crystal, and light.

"It's not him," said Freya.

Hana didn't know whether she said it with relief or despair. She suspected Freya didn't know either.

"Four years," said Freya, and her voice broke. "Four years paying the House Aria buyers. Four years keeping silver-veined crystals under my bed, in a box, because I thought..." She laughed, and the laugh broke into

a sob. "I thought if I gathered them all, if I gathered them all, at some point he... he..."

The crystal fell from her hands. It rolled across the ground. Freya watched it roll and then burst into tears with her face between her knees, the way children cry, loudly, without shame. It was the first time Hana had seen her cry. It was the first time the silence of the city was broken.

Tyr knelt beside her and held her, all of her, wrapping her in his arms and his wolf pelt, the way a bear wraps a cub. He said nothing. He just held her.

"He's not here," said Freya into his chest. "Hana, he's not here. These people have been here a hundred years. Ivar got lost four years ago. If he's not here... where is he?"

It was Aria who answered, from a distance, without turning around:

"The mountain keeps taking, dear. It didn't take only once."

They all looked at her.

"What it took on the Night of the Song is here. What it's taken since..." Aria pointed down, to where the pink light was pulsing, "is closer to the door."



In the center of the city, at the top of the hill, stood the palace.

They climbed a long staircase lined with crystal soldiers holding crystal spears, a black sun engraved on the chest of their armor. The palace doors were open. Inside, everything was crystal: the floors, the columns, the lamps, the tapestries. The pink light filtered through the domes and tinted everything the color of cherry blossoms.

Aria led them through the corridors without hesitation. She knew every door. Every staircase. She stopped only once, in front of a small room with its door ajar, and stood looking in, motionless. Hana peered over her shoulder.

It was a little girl's room. A small bed, a rag doll, a toy pick leaning against the wall. On the floor, a crystal girl of about five, with light curls, sitting cross-legged, looking up with her mouth open in a surprised *oh*.

It was the girl from the drawing in Aria's notebook.

"Elin," said Aria, very softly. "My little sister. She loved playing in the princess's room, even though she wasn't allowed." She laughed without humor. "She always sneaked in here."

Aria went into the room. She knelt in front of the crystal girl. She stroked her cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"It won't be long now, Elin," she told her. "It won't be long now."

Then she stood up, wiped her face with the sleeve of her gown, fixed her hair, and left the room as if nothing had happened.

"Come along, partners. The throne room is this way."

Hana didn't move. She stood looking at the room. The small bed. The doll. The toy pick leaning against the wall, with a notch in its iron head.

The princess's room.



In the center of the palace stood a throne of black crystal.

It was the only dark thing in the whole city. A tall chair, carved from a single piece, that seemed to absorb the pink light instead of reflecting it. It was empty. But when Hana touched it, it was warm. Warm like the

cups at the camp. Like the pendant. Like everything touched by someone who had just left.

On the backrest shone a black sun, and beneath it, a name engraved in golden letters:

"Lyra, the Last Queen."

Hana read the name three times, the way she had read the letter. The letters didn't change.

"Mom..." she said. "You were a queen?"

No one answered her. There was no need. Frigg had closed her eyes and was moving her lips in a silent prayer. Vidar had leaned against a column, very pale. Tyr and Freya were looking at her as if seeing her for the first time. And Aria was standing beside the throne, one hand on the backrest, stroking the black sun with her thumb, slowly, over and over.

"She was the best queen Lumen ever had," said Aria. "And the most stubborn. And the most unfair." She took her hand away. "And she was my best friend."

This time, Hana didn't ask about the great-great-grandmother.



On floor one hundred and ninety, the heartbeats no longer came from below.

They came from everywhere: from the walls, the floor, the air itself. And from Hana's own chest, which pounded against the pendant so hard it hurt. *One... two... one... two...* The rhythm of the mountain and the rhythm of her heart were now one and the same, without the slightest difference, like two clocks someone had synchronized a long time ago.

The crystals of the city were beating too. All of them. The thousands of motionless people in the streets, all at once. And in the last square, before the final descent, appeared **The Last Builder**: a giant made of houses, bridges, rooftops, that rose from the city's floor as if the city itself had stood up to bar their way. They defeated it at the end of a long and terrible day, and when it fell, its stones settled back into the streets as if they had never moved.

"If the Core wakes," Frigg warned, leaning on her staff, out of breath, "the whole mountain will wake with it."

"And what happens if it wakes?" asked Tyr.

Frigg looked at Aria. Aria looked at no one.

"No one knows," said Frigg. "The only one who knew went down a hundred years ago and never came back."

Hana adjusted the silver pendant. She gripped it until her fingers hurt. She thought of the crystal girl on floor ninety, with her face and her missing tooth. Of the princess's room. Of the toy pick. Of the handwriting on the list, round and familiar, so much like her own.

"Ten more floors," she said. "This time I won't be late."



INTERLUDE II

ONE HUNDRED YEARS

The Core · Since the Night of the Song



But a mother has to try.



Lyra counted the first days. Then she stopped counting them, because counting was Aria's thing.

The first year was the worst. She sang without pause, on her knees before the crystal heart, her throat raw, while inside the heart her daughter slept with her eyes closed and her hands crossed over her chest, over the silver pendant. Sometimes the girl smiled in her sleep. Sometimes she frowned. Once, in the third month, she said *Mommy* out loud, very clearly, and Lyra had to bite her own hand until it bled so as not to stop singing.

If she stopped singing, the mountain would wake. If the mountain woke, the door would open. If the door opened, whatever was on the other side would come up. That simple. That impossible.

In the second year she learned to sing in her sleep.

By the tenth, to sing without a voice, with breath alone, because the mountain didn't need to hear the song: it needed to feel it. By the twentieth, her skin began to turn hard and shiny, like quartz, first on her hands, then her arms. It didn't hurt. It was like becoming part of the stone. It was, Lyra thought, what the mountain did with everything it loved: kept it.

In the thirtieth year she discovered she could see.

It happened by chance. She was looking at a crystal in the wall of the Core, a small pink crystal, and suddenly the crystal showed her something else. A street on the surface. People walking in the snow. A market. A woman selling a necklace of blue crystals to a man in a hat. All the crystals in the mountain were connected, like the roots of a single tree, and from the heart one could look through any of them.

That was how she watched New Lumen grow over the grave of her city. How she watched the crystal merchants sell her people, piece by

piece, in the markets of three kingdoms. How she watched House Aria—the house of her best friend, the one they had dreamed up together at fifteen, sitting on the palace roof— become the richest jeweler in the world, selling the bodies of their neighbors as if they were gems.

She could do nothing. Only sing.



Every so often, the other one spoke to her.

His voice rose from the other side of the door, warm and kind, like a grandfather's by a fireplace. He never threatened. He never demanded. He asked.

Let me see them. Only see them. A thousand years digging, my child, a thousand years in the dark, and you shut the door in my face. Is that how you treat your family?

Lyra didn't answer. Lyra sang. She had read the murals of the Solar Ruins when she was twelve. She knew who he was. She knew what King Haldor had done, the founder, the first, the one who dug too deep looking for something no one ever knew, and opened the door, and crossed. She knew that the black sun on her own chest was his seal. She knew that the crystals —the people, her people— were not the mountain's curse but its defense: what the mountain did to hide the living from what lay on the other side. So that he wouldn't find them.

And she knew that Aria had heard him before anyone else. That Aria, who had lost Elin a year before the Night of the Song —the first child in Lumen to turn to crystal, one ordinary afternoon, playing in the princess's room—, who hadn't smiled since, had gone down alone one night to the hundredth floor, and pressed her ear to the rock, and the voice had told her: *everything lost is found on the other side.*

Lyra had sealed her with her own hands. Her best friend. In a block of crystal in the middle of the abyss, like a cork in a bottle. She had wept while she did it. Aria had looked at her through the crystal, eyes very wide, and Lyra never knew whether there was hatred in those eyes, or forgiveness.

After that, to close it completely, the mountain had needed a key. And the key had to be of royal blood.

Lyra had looked at her daughter. Her daughter had looked back and smiled, with that gap in her smile where a tooth had just fallen out.



In the ninetieth year, the mountain trembled.

It wasn't the other one. It was the mountain itself, tired, old, stirring in its sleep. A crack opened in the crystal heart, a small crack, the size of a girl. And through the crack, Lyra saw her daughter open her eyes.

It was the hardest decision of her life, and she had made many.

If the girl stayed inside the heart, awake, the mountain would wake with her. If she came out, the door would be left without its key, held shut only by Lyra's song. But the door would hold. A few years. Maybe ten. Maybe twenty. Long enough for her daughter to have what the mountain had taken from her: a life.

Lyra broke the crack open with her hands. She took the girl out. She was warm, tousled, in the white nightgown of a hundred years before and with the same face as on the Night of the Song. She hadn't grown a single day. She said *Mommy* in a sleepy voice and fell asleep again in her arms.

Lyra climbed the two hundred floors with her in her arms. She never knew how. She passed Frigg in The Abyss without Frigg seeing her —

Frigg sang with her eyes closed, as always—, crossed the City, the lake, the caves, and came out onto the surface one winter night through a crack on floor twenty, where some drunken miners saw her pass and thought she was a ghost.

She found an empty house at the foot of the mountain, the last on the street. She hung a crystal from the mine over the table, a blue one, so she could watch her. She left on the wall a pick identical to her own. She wrote a shopping list and stuck it on the pantry door, so the girl would have something in her handwriting. And before dawn, she pressed her forehead against her sleeping daughter's forehead and took away, very carefully, one by one, all of her memories.

All but one.

In the morning she made coffee. The girl woke to the smell. Lyra kissed her forehead, a long kiss, too long for an ordinary day.

"I'll be back before supper, my little light."

And she went back down.



For the next ten years, Lyra watched her daughter through the blue lantern.

She watched her cry the first nights. She watched her learn to light the fire by herself. She watched her go off to wash crystals in the courtyards of House Aria, Aria's house, scrubbing with her child's hands the bodies of her own people, and she had to keep singing. She watched a nineteen-year-old boy come in one winter night with a blade in his hand, stand motionless beside the bed for as long as it takes a candle to burn down, and leave without doing anything. Lyra flickered the lantern's light to thank him, and never knew whether he understood.

She watched him come back every winter to the corner of the street, in the shadows, just to look.

And she watched her daughter look at the mine from her window, every night, for ten years.

Lyra knew that one day she would come down. She knew it from the first night. She was her daughter. She was stubborn, brave, and didn't have a drop of common sense.

When the door began to give, when the voice on the other side grew stronger than her song and she felt the mountain beginning to wake, Lyra wrote two things. A letter for her daughter, so she wouldn't come down. And a contract for the boy who once couldn't do it, so he would stop her if she did.

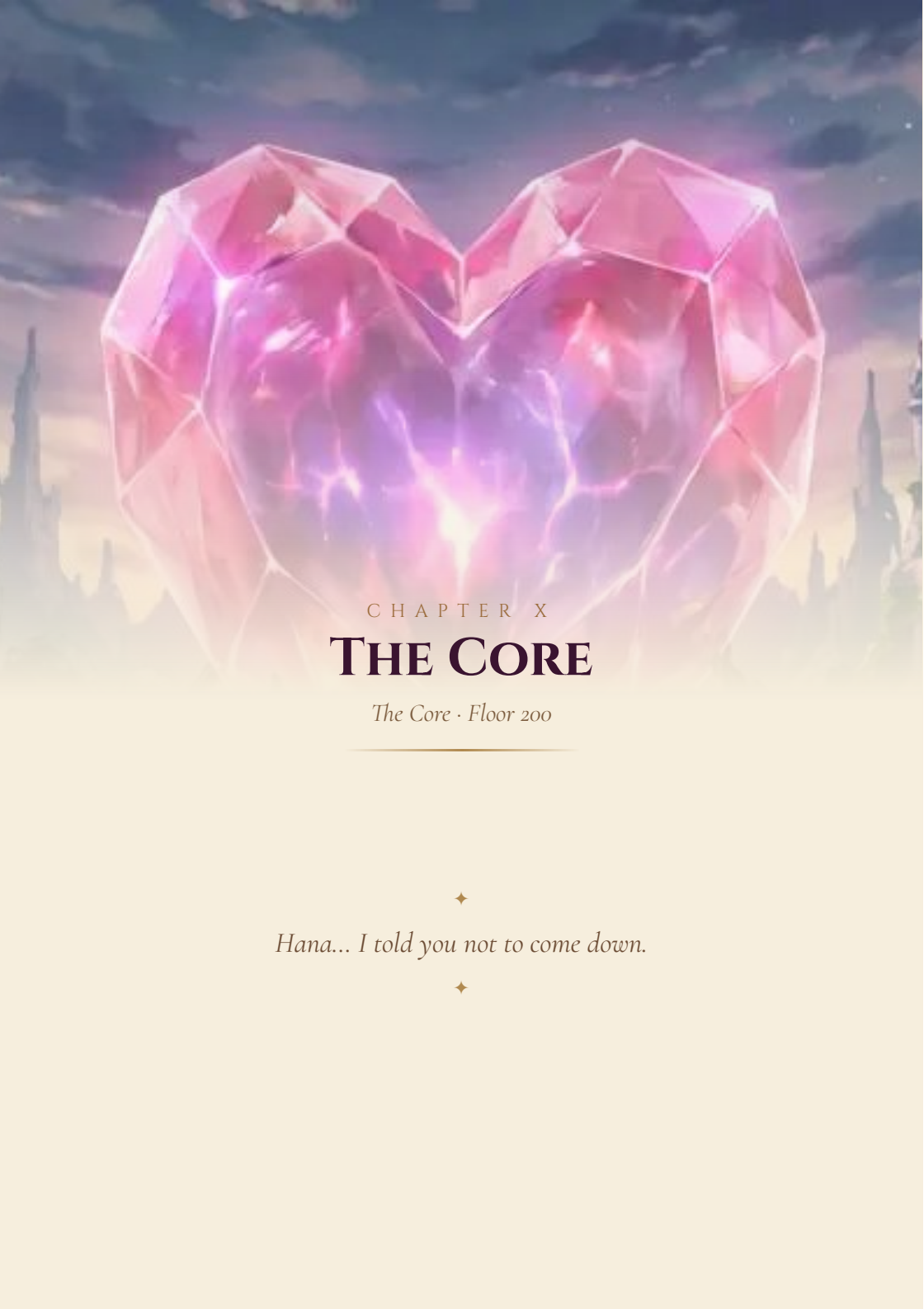
Both were useless, and she knew it.

But a mother has to try.

PART III

THE DOOR

The Core · The Other Side · Floor 300



CHAPTER X

THE CORE

The Core · Floor 200



Hana... I told you not to come down.



The final descent had no stairs.

It was a spiral ramp, wide and smooth, carved from a pink rock that glowed brighter the farther down they went. The walls were beating. The floor was beating. The air itself vibrated, *one... two... one... two...*, so strongly that Freya's nose bled and Tyr had to hold her up. Frigg sang quietly, without stopping, and every time she sang the heartbeat grew a little slower, a little gentler, like an animal calming under a hand.

Aria went ahead. Far ahead. So far that sometimes they lost sight of her on the curves of the spiral. She was no longer counting. She hadn't counted in hours.

Vidar walked beside Hana. Since the City he hadn't left her side for an instant, and since Frigg's chapel he had been different: quieter still, if that were possible, with a strange expression, like someone trying to remember a word on the tip of his tongue.

"Vidar," Hana said on one of the curves, quietly. "Why didn't you carry out the contract?"

He took a while to answer.

"I don't know yet," he said. "When I know, I'll tell you."

It was the first time Hana had heard him lie. She knew because he didn't look at her when he said it, and Vidar always looked.



The ramp ended at a stone door, open. And behind the door was the **Core.**

It was a round cavern, perfect, so high its ceiling was lost in a pink mist. The walls were covered in crystals, millions of them, all the color of

cherry blossoms, all beating at once. And in the center, floating a hand's breadth above the floor, a heart was beating.

A crystal heart the size of a cathedral.

It wasn't heart-shaped. It was shaped like a real heart: chambers, veins, valves, all of transparent crystal, all glowing from within with a pink and violet light that bathed the whole cavern and tinted everyone's faces. Every beat made the air vibrate. Every beat made the stones of the floor tremble, and the crystals on the walls answered at the same moment, like an echo.

Frigg stopped singing. She stood with her mouth open, voiceless. Tyr knelt without realizing it. Freya grabbed Aria's arm, and Aria let her.

Inside the heart, a figure slept, hugging a pick.

It was a woman. She lay curled in the largest chamber, on her side, knees to her chest and the pick in her arms, the way a child hugs a doll. Her hair was long, pinned up in a hurry, a color that had once been pink and was now almost white. Her skin shone like quartz. She didn't move.

Hana took a step. Then another. Her legs were shaking. They shook so badly she had to lean on her pick not to fall. The pendant pounded against her chest to the same rhythm as the crystal heart, and the crystal heart beat to the same rhythm as hers, and there was no longer any difference between the three.

She reached the heart. She laid her hand on the crystal. It was warm.

"...Mom?"

The figure opened her eyes.

They were her eyes. Hana's. The crystal girl's on floor ninety. The eyes of the woman who had sealed Aria and wept while she did it. Gray, with

a golden ring around the pupil. Hana had never met anyone else who had that golden ring.

The woman looked at her through the crystal. She looked for a long time. Then she smiled, with infinite sadness, and moved her lips. Her voice came through the crystal, hoarse, worn, like a song someone has sung too many times.

"Hana... I told you not to come down."

And the truth was only beginning.



CHAPTER XI

THE SLEEPING QUEEN

The Core · Floors 205 – 215



I sent the only one I knew would fail on purpose.



Lyra came out of the crystal.

She didn't break it. She passed through it, the way you pass through water, slowly, and the crystal closed behind her without a crack. Her skin still shone like quartz, and as she moved she left a trail of light-dust behind her, like the spores of the Fungal Forest. She was tall, much taller than Hana, slender as a branch, the pick still in her hand. She walked like someone who hasn't walked in a long time and is afraid of forgetting how.

She stopped in front of her daughter.

Hana had imagined that moment a thousand times. Ten years of imagining it, every night, watching the mine from her window. She had imagined she would cry. That she would scream. That she would ask why. That she would hug her so hard she'd break her ribs. That she would slap her.

She did none of that. She stood still, looking at her, and the only thing she could say was:

"Your hair is white."

Lyra laughed. It was a broken, surprised laugh, as if she hadn't known she could still laugh.

"A hundred years, Hana. A hundred years singing to the Abyss so it wouldn't wake." She touched her hair. "Something had to wear out."

"But I saw you leave..." Hana felt her voice crack. "I was a little girl. Ten years ago. You made coffee. You kissed me. You said you'd be back before supper."

"I know."

"Ten years, Mom. Ten years I waited for you at that window."

"I know." Lyra reached out slowly, the way you approach a frightened animal, and touched her cheek with her fingertips. They were cold and hard as stone. "No, my love. I watched you grow up from down here. In every crystal you broke. In the blue lantern on the table. I watched you learn to light the fire. I watched you cry the first nights. I watched the first time you cut your own hair, badly, and cried more over the hair than over me." She smiled. "I watched you every day of those ten years, Hana. I didn't miss a single one."

Hana felt the floor shift beneath her feet. And it wasn't the mountain.

"Then..." she said, very slowly, "how old am I, really?"

Lyra didn't answer.



It was Frigg who broke the silence. Frigg, who had stayed behind by the door, her staff gripped in both hands and the almanac against her chest. She took a step. Another. And on the third, her voice came out in pieces:

"Lyra?"

The queen turned. The two of them looked at each other across the cavern, across a hundred years, one with white hair and skin of quartz, the other with her coif askew and the round face of a nineteen-year-old girl who had grown old only on the inside.

"Frigg," said Lyra. "You kept singing."

"You told me not to stop."

"I didn't think you'd listen. You never listened to me."

Frigg dropped her staff. She dropped the almanac, which fell to the floor and fell open, and thirty-six thousand five hundred little marks lay

staring at the ceiling. She ran across the cavern, robe hitched up, like a girl, and threw herself into the queen's arms. Lyra held her. They stayed like that a long time, rocking slowly, and Frigg was crying and scolding her at the same time, *you're freezing, you're so thin, look at your hair, a hundred years without eating, do you know what you did to me?*, and Lyra laughed with her face hidden in her shoulder.

Freya wiped her eyes on her sleeve. Tyr pretended to cough. Aria didn't move. Aria stood by the door, the little leather notebook gripped so hard in her hand that her knuckles were white, looking at Lyra the way you look at a wound that won't close.

Lyra saw her over Frigg's shoulder. For a very long moment, the two of them looked at each other.

"Hello, Aria," said Lyra.

"Hello, Lyra." Aria smiled. "You look terrible."

"You haven't changed at all."

"That's the good thing about spending a hundred years inside a crystal, dear. It preserves."

No one else said anything. But Hana, standing between them, felt the air between the two women the way you feel the air before a storm.



Vidar, on the other hand, wasn't looking at anyone. He was staring at the queen's hand. The hand that held the pick. On her ring finger she wore a silver ring, broad and ancient, engraved with a seal.

A black sun.

The same seal as the contract.

Vidar said nothing. But Lyra noticed what he was looking at, and gently let go of Frigg, and turned toward him.

"Yes," said Lyra, without taking her eyes off her daughter. "I paid to have you stopped before the hundredth floor."

Hana spun around as if she'd been struck.

"You sent an assassin after your own daughter!?"

"I sent the only one I knew would fail on purpose."

The silence that followed was the longest of the whole journey.

Vidar looked away. He had never told Hana why he didn't carry out the contract. Not the one for the hundredth floor. Nor the other, the one from ten years ago, the night of snow and the blue lantern, which Hana knew nothing about. And he didn't tell her now.

But Lyra looked at him —truly, for the first time, with those gray, gold-ringed eyes that had watched him through a lantern for ten winters — and gave him a small bow, very slight, barely an inclination of the head. The bow a queen gives a knight.

"Thank you, Vidar," she said. "For both times."

Vidar didn't answer. But Hana saw his jaw tremble, and his eyes were wet, and for the first time since she'd known him he didn't know what to do with his hands.

"Both times?" asked Hana.

"Ask him," said Lyra. "When you're ready for the answer."



CHAPTER XII

THE KEY

Behind the Door · Floors 225 – 235



None of it had been a lie. It was just smaller than the truth.



That night —if there were nights in the Core— they camped beside the crystal heart. Lyra didn't eat. She hadn't been hungry in eighty years, she said, and Frigg made her eat half a loaf with honey anyway, by force, scolding her the whole time. Freya and Tyr fell asleep at once, exhausted. Aria sat far away, against the wall, alone.

Hana couldn't sleep. She sat beside her mother, facing the heart, and for a while they watched it beat.

"Hana," Lyra said at last, "the Core isn't the bottom of the mine."

"It isn't?"

"It's a door." Lyra pointed down, at the base of the heart, where the crystal grew darker and denser, and you could make out a shape, round and enormous, like the mural in the Solar Ruins. "The door the first king opened a thousand years ago. The one the mountain grew over to cover. The heart is the lock. And the key..."

Lyra looked at her.

"The key is you."

The crystal heart began to beat to the rhythm of Hana's. It wasn't new. It had been doing it since floor twenty. But now, standing before it, Hana felt it differently: not as an echo but as an answer. As if the mountain's heart and her own were two halves of the same thing.

"That's why the crystals answered you from floor twenty," Frigg realized, having come over without a sound. "That's why you were never cold. That's why they warmed in your hands. That's why the eyes in the lake followed you." She covered her mouth. "That's why the Devourer stopped when you sang."

"That's why," said Lyra.



Behind the heart, in the far wall, was another door. Small, of stone, which only opened when Hana laid her hand on it. Behind it was a narrow tunnel, and at the end of the tunnel, a chamber.

And in the chamber, another mural. Older than the mountain itself.

It wasn't carved. It was *grown*: drawn in the veins of the rock, as if the stone had formed it on its own over centuries, the way a tree forms its rings. It showed a girl with pink hair, standing, a pick in her hand. She wore a pendant with a cherry blossom. She had a gap in her smile where a tooth had fallen out.

And beneath it, in ancient numerals, a date.

From a hundred years ago.

"That..." said Hana, "is me."

"You slept down here for a hundred years, with me," said Lyra. "Inside the heart. You were the key. While you slept, the door was shut." Lyra went to the mural and touched the girl's face, just as Aria had touched the queen's face in the Solar Ruins. "When the mountain trembled, ten years ago, the heart cracked and you opened your eyes. I carried you up to the surface... and erased your memory so you could have a life."

"A life?" A broken laugh escaped Hana. "I lived alone, Mom. I washed crystals. I washed..." Her throat closed. "I washed our people. For ten years. With these hands."

"I know."

"Stop saying you know!"

Her shout bounced off the walls of the chamber and came back multiplied. Lyra didn't move. She didn't defend herself. She stood before the mural, her quartz hands hanging at her sides.

"I'm not going to ask your forgiveness, Hana," she said, very calmly. "Because I would do it again. Every single thing. The letter, the contract, the coffee, the kiss, the lie. All of it. I gave you ten years of a small life, and a sad one, and a lonely one. But it was a life. Yours. With sunlight. With snow. With bread." Her voice trembled for the first time. "The other choice was to leave you asleep forever inside a stone. And I couldn't. I'm a bad queen, my child. A good queen would have left you there."

Hana didn't answer.

She thought of the smell of coffee. Of the kiss on the forehead. Of the promise to be back before supper. For ten years she had believed that morning was all she had left of her mother, the only thing that had survived some grief too large to remember.

No. It hadn't survived. It had been *left* to her. It was a gift. The only memory her mother hadn't taken.

None of it had been a lie. It was just smaller than the truth.

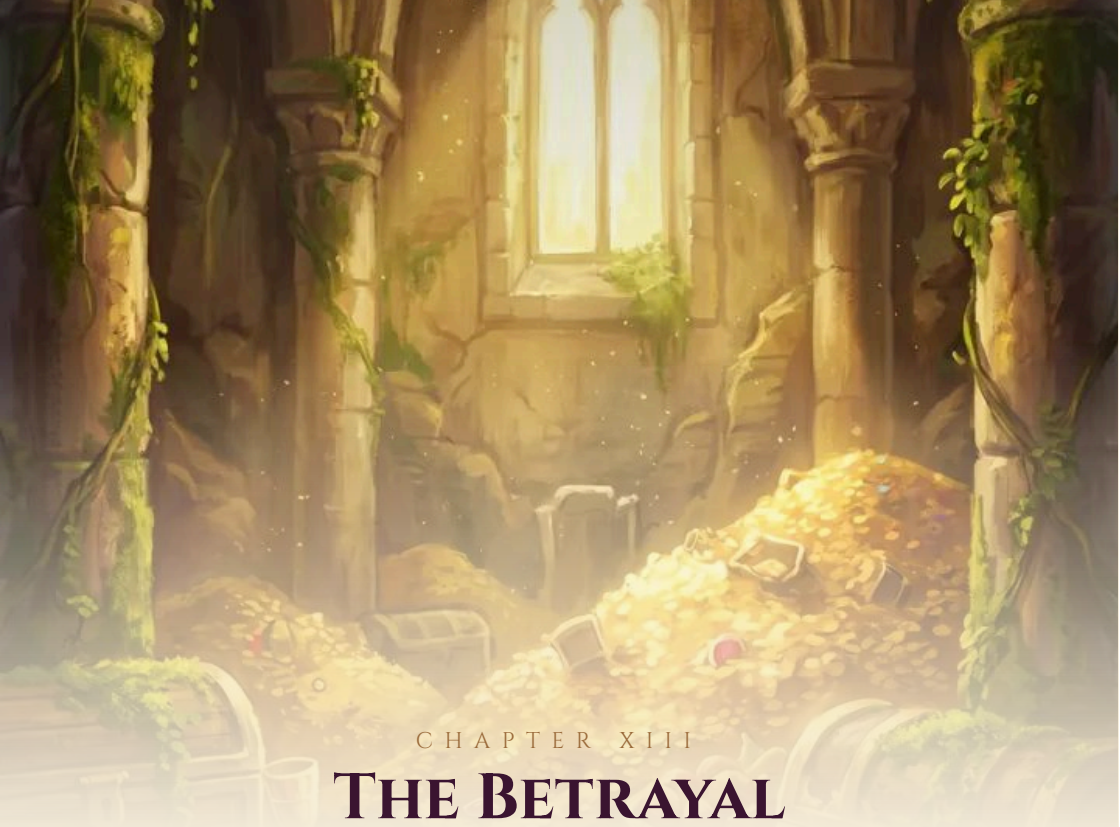
"Why that one?" Hana asked. "Of all the memories. Why did you leave me that one?"

Lyra smiled.

"Because it was the only one where I promised to come back. I wanted you to have something to wait for."

Hana stepped closer. She took her mother's quartz hand, cold, hard, shining. She held it. And the two of them stood like that, before the girl in the mural, saying nothing, until the crystal heart, on the other side of the wall, beat so hard the whole chamber shook.

On the other side of the door, something had begun to knock.



CHAPTER XIII

THE BETRAYAL

The Crystal Choir · Floors 245 – 255



Did you really think they sealed me away to protect me?



The knocking on the other side of the door didn't stop.

It was slow, patient, regular, like a pick against rock. *One... two... one... two...* The same rhythm as the mountain, the same as Hana's heart, as if whoever was knocking had learned it by listening for a thousand years. With every blow, the crystal heart shuddered and a hairline crack, thin as a single hair, crept a little farther across its base.

"I have to go back in," said Lyra.

She said it without drama, the way you say you have to get home before it rains. She was standing before the heart, pick in hand, looking at the crack.

"No," said Hana.

"Hana..."

"No. I just found you. I spent ten years..." Her voice broke. "No."

"If I don't sing, the door opens. You know that."

"Then I'll sing!"

Lyra looked at her with a tenderness that hurt.

"You're the key, my light. The key doesn't sing. The key sleeps."

Freya, Tyr, Vidar, and Frigg stood around them in silence. No one knew what to say. No one knew what to do. Only Aria moved.

She got up from her corner by the wall. She brushed off her gown. She fixed her hair with two quick movements of her ring-laden fingers, the way she always did before closing a good deal. And she walked toward the crystal heart at a calm pace, smiling.

"Thank you for bringing her all this way, Hana."

Hana turned.

Aria's voice had changed. It was no longer the cheerful voice of the merchant who haggled over every pretty crystal, who called her *partner* and *darling*, who slipped coins into Freya's bag when she thought no one was looking. It was another voice. Deeper. Older. A voice Hana knew.

It was the same voice that sang from the depths.

The one from the Stellar Abyss. The one that repeated her name in two notes, one high and one low. *Ha-na. Ha-na.* The one that had called her from floor eighty, from inside a block of crystal, day after day, floor after floor, until she arrived.

"It was you," said Hana. "All along. You were the one calling me."

"A hundred years, darling," said Aria. "A hundred years waiting for the heir. Someone had to let you know we were waiting for you." She tilted her head. "And who were you going to listen to, if not a voice that says your name?"

"You got me out of the crystal for this," said Lyra.

"No, Lyra. *She* got me out." Aria gestured at Hana with a wave of her hand. "And she got you out. You weren't going to leave that heart for anything in the world. A hundred years in there, singing, without moving. Not for me, not for Frigg, not for our people." She smiled. "But for her you would. I knew you'd come out for her. All I had to do was bring her here."

Lyra went pale. Paler than the quartz of her skin.

"And now," said Aria, "no one is singing."



Aria stopped in front of the heart. She laid both hands on the crystal, over the crack. And she sang.

It wasn't the lullaby. It was the other one. The first. The one that rose through the cracks in the floor on the Night of the Song, the one that woke the children and silenced the dogs. A deep, wordless melody, older than voices. The one the other had taught her through the rock, a hundred years ago, on the hundredth floor.

The heart answered. The crack widened. On the other side, the knocking quickened.

"Aria, stop!" Hana shouted.

"Did you really think they sealed me away to protect me?" asked Aria, without taking her hands off the crystal. She spoke and sang at the same time, in two voices, as if she had two throats. "That good old Lyra locked me in a stone to save me from something?"

"I sealed you," said Lyra, stepping in front of her daughter, "because you were the one who wanted to open the door."

"Of course I wanted to open it!" For the first time, Aria shouted. "Elin was up there, Lyra! Turning to crystal in your daughter's room, little by little, for an entire year, while you and I and every sage in your court watched and could do nothing!" Her voice shook. "And one night someone spoke to me through the rock and told me that on the other side everything lost is found. What did you want me to do? What would you have done, if it had been Hana?"

Lyra didn't answer.

She didn't have to. Everyone knew what Lyra had done for Hana. It was written on the walls of the Solar Ruins. On the mural of the heart. In a hundred years of song.

"Aria..." said Hana. She took a step toward her. Vidar caught her by the arm. "Aria, you were my friend."

Aria looked at her. And for a moment, just a moment, the other voice vanished and her usual one came back: the merchant's, the partner's, the voice of pretty crystals and ten percent.

"I still am," she said. "That's why I want you to see what's on the other side."



Then the thousands of crystals in the city began to sing.

It could be heard from far away, from high above, from the Lost City forty floors up: an immense sound that came down the spiral ramp like an avalanche and filled the Core to the ceiling. They were voices. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Men, women, the old, children. The baker with his tray, the two children with the dog, the elderly couple on the bench, the soldiers on the staircase. All at once, without words, a harrowing choir that made the whole mountain shake.

And the crystals of the Core answered. And the ones in the lake walls, the eyes. And the ones in the Crystalline Forest, and the Stellar Abyss, and the Crystal Caves. And up above, far above, on the surface, in the display cases of House Aria and the ladies' necklaces and the crowns of the kings of three kingdoms, the crystals of Lumen began to sing.

Freya covered her ears. Tyr fell to his knees. Vidar pulled Hana against him, her head against his chest, as if he could shield her from the sound with his body.

"It isn't the Abyss that's singing," whispered Frigg, her eyes full of tears. "It's them. They're asking to get out."

"If the door opens all the way..." Vidar asked, shouting above the choir, "do they become people again?"

Lyra took a long time to answer.

"Or they become the same thing as Aria," she replied.

Aria laughed. She took her hands off the crystal for a moment and, with one hand, opened the collar of her garnet velvet gown.

On her chest, over her heart, Aria's skin was no longer skin. It was crystal. A black crystal, opaque, that didn't reflect the pink light of the Core. And in the center of the crystal, like a tattoo, shone a black sun.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Aria. "It grew in the crystal on the hundredth floor. Slowly. A little bit every year." She put her hands back on the heart. "It doesn't hurt at all, Hana. You'll see."



CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST SONG

Before the Door · Floor 265



Lyra sang for a hundred years. I can sing for a few minutes.



The crack in the heart was already wider than a hand.

Through it came a light that wasn't pink. It was white, cold, like the light of a winter morning, and it smelled of something Hana didn't recognize at first, and then did: it smelled of open air. Of sky. Of wind over snow. On the other side of the door, the knocking was so fast the blows could no longer be told apart. They were a single roar.

Lyra tried to reach the heart. Aria sang louder, and the floor rose between them like a wave of stone. Tyr hurled himself at Aria with his axe raised; a crystal hand came out of the wall and caught him in midair, without harming him, just holding him, the way a child holds a toy. Freya shot an arrow. One of Ivar's, with the I-shaped notch. She aimed at what was behind Aria, as her father had taught her: at the heart's crystal, at the crack, at the exact spot where it was opening.

The arrow stopped in the air, a hand's breadth from the crystal, and fell to the floor.

"I'm sorry, dear," said Aria, without turning around. "No one fails me."

Hana was on her knees. She couldn't get up. The choir went through her body like the heartbeat on floor twenty, but a thousand times stronger, and every voice in the choir was calling her, and every voice was a person, and she was the key, and the key wanted to *open*. She felt it. She felt the crystal heart pulling at her, at her own heart, the way a magnet pulls at iron.

It would be so easy. All she had to do was get up, walk to the crack, and lay her hand on it. Like at the forest altar. Like at the door to the mural chamber. The stone would soften beneath her palm, warm as clay, and shape itself to her, and the door would open, and the choir would stop hurting.

Vidar was holding her shoulders. He was saying something to her. Hana couldn't hear him.

That was when Frigg stood up.



She stood slowly, leaning on her staff. She straightened her coif. She brushed off her robe. She picked the almanac up from the floor, where it had lain open since her embrace with Lyra, closed it carefully, and tucked it under her arm, as always.

"Lyra sang for a hundred years," said Frigg, stepping forward. "I can sing for a few minutes."

"Frigg, no," said Lyra.

"Frigg, no," said Aria, and for the first time she sounded afraid.

Frigg paid no attention to either of them. She had never paid attention to either of them, not as girls in the palace and not now. She walked until she stood between Aria and the crack, her back to the heart, facing Aria. And she sang.

It was the same song she had sung so many times for the lost of the Abyss. The lullaby. The one from the chapel, from the forest altar, the one Hana had hummed all her life. The one Frigg used to sing every night to a pink-haired girl in a palace of crystal, a hundred years ago.

*Sleep, my light, the mountain watches over you,
sleep, the sun is hiding just for you.*

Frigg's voice wasn't beautiful. It was hoarse, a little nasal, with an old woman's tremble in a young woman's throat. But it was strong. Stronger than the choir. Stronger than the knocking. It crossed the Core the way a

candle crosses the dark, and the choir, little by little, began to fall quiet, like a crowd going silent to listen.

If you wake one day and I'm not near,

Aria stopped singing. She didn't want to. She couldn't help it. Her throat closed. Hana saw her: hands still on the crystal, eyes very wide, mouth trembling. It was the song Frigg used to sing to the three of them—to Lyra, to Aria, to Elin—when they were girls and stayed over at the palace. Before everything. Before the voice in the rock and the Night of the Song. Before the crystals.

look into the stone:

And then came the last note.

The note Frigg had been singing wrong for a hundred years. The one that should go down and Lyra sent up. The one Frigg had never learned, neither her own way nor Lyra's, and that always got stuck halfway, off-key, a little crooked.

This time, Frigg sent it up.

...I'm still here.

She didn't go off-key. Not even a little. The note rose clean, clear, perfect, exactly the way Lyra sang it when she leaned in the doorway of the room and the girl laughed. It rose through the Core, up the spiral ramp, through the City, through the Abyss, through the forest and the lake and the caves to the surface, and every crystal in the mountain, every one, the ones in the walls and in the display cases and in the crowns, fell silent at once.

The door, which had already begun to open, stopped.

The crack in the heart stopped growing. The knocking on the other side broke off, as if someone there had stopped to listen.

In the silence, Frigg's voice shattered like glass.

It was a small sound. A dry snap, like a branch breaking. Frigg opened her mouth to keep singing, and nothing came out. Not a note. Not a whisper. Only air.

And then it went out.



"Frigg!"

Hana was the first to reach her. She caught her before she fell. Frigg weighed almost nothing, like a bird. She was still smiling. Her eyes were full of love, and she opened and closed her mouth without a sound, and Hana couldn't understand what she was saying, and she was crying, and shouting at her, and Frigg stroked her face with a hand that trembled.

Lyra knelt beside them. She took Frigg's other hand.

"You sang it right," she told her, her voice broken. "At last. A hundred years waiting and you sang it right."

Frigg smiled wider. She moved her lips. Lyra understood. Hana didn't. But Lyra laughed through her tears and answered:

"Yes. I can't believe you listened to me either."

Hana looked at Frigg's hair, escaping from under her coif. There was a white streak in it. It hadn't been there an hour before. As she watched, another appeared. *The Abyss doesn't let those who sing to it grow old.* Frigg had stopped singing. Time, which had waited for her a hundred years, was remembering her.

Frigg saw her looking. She shrugged, as if to say *about time*, and pointed ahead.

Toward the door. Toward the crack in the heart, still, half-open, through which that white winter-morning light was coming. Toward what still remained to be done.



Aria was sitting on the floor beside the heart, hugging her knees.

She wasn't singing anymore. She wasn't smiling anymore. She had the little leather notebook open in her lap, on the page with the drawing of Elin, and she was crying without a sound. Through the opening of her gown you could see the black sun on her chest, which had grown. It reached her neck.

Hana went over. No one stopped her.

"It was our song," said Aria, without looking up. "Frigg used to sing it to the three of us. To Lyra, to me, to Elin. On the palace roof." She laughed softly. "Elin always fell asleep before the last note. She never heard it go up."

"Aria..."

"Don't forgive me, Hana." Aria closed the notebook. "Don't forgive me, darling, because I'd do it again. Just like your mother."

Hana sat down beside her. She said nothing. She took her hand. Aria's was ice-cold, colder than ever, and beneath the skin you could feel the crystal.

They stayed like that for a while. And in that while, the crack in the heart, which had stopped growing, began to open again. Slowly. From the other side.

Someone was pushing it with their hands.



CHAPTER XV

THE FIRST MINER

The Other Side · Floors 275 – 285



The mountain didn't swallow a town. It was hiding it... from me.



They went through the crack because there was no other choice.

The door wasn't going to close on its own, Lyra said. Frigg had stopped it, but she hadn't closed it. And on the other side, whoever was pushing it wasn't going to give up. He hadn't given up in a thousand years. The only way to close it was from inside.

"From inside what?" asked Tyr.

Lyra didn't answer. She looked at Hana. Hana understood, and said nothing, and Lyra saw that she had understood, and said nothing either.

They left Frigg beside the heart, wrapped in Tyr's wolf pelt, her head resting on the almanac. A wrinkle had appeared on her forehead. She was smiling. Aria stayed with her. No one asked her to. She sat down beside Frigg without a word and took her hand, and that was how Hana saw her for the last time: the merchant with ten ring-laden fingers, disheveled, a black sun creeping up her neck, holding the hand of the nun who had sung to her as a child.

Then they crossed.



On the other side of the door was a mine identical to theirs.

The same tunnels, the same crystals, the same veins of gold. Hana recognized the Core, the spiral ramp, the shape of the walls. It was like stepping into a mirror. Everything was the same, in the same place, with the same glow.

But its tunnels went up.

It was hard to explain and easy to feel. In their mine, everything pushed down: the rock, the air, the light, the heartbeat. Here, everything pulled upward. The ramps climbed. The stairs climbed. The crystals in

the walls grew with their points toward the ceiling, like plants seeking the sun. And the light wasn't pink. It was white. Cold. The light of a winter morning that never quite dawned.

And the air smelled of sky.

"I don't like it," Freya whispered. "For the record."

No one answered her. But Tyr put a hand on her shoulder.



They followed the knocking. There was no need to look for it: it was everywhere, in the floor, in the air, in their teeth. *One... two... one... two...* They went down the mirror's ramp —up, actually, though their legs told them down— for hours, until the ramp ended at a wall of rock.

And in front of the wall, an old man was striking with a pick.

He was very old. Older than anything Hana had ever seen: older than the tavern keeper, than the dwarf, than the mountain. His back was bent in a perfect arc, his hair and beard so long they dragged on the ground, white as the light on that side. He wore a tunic that had once been red and was now gray, and an iron crown, rusted, fused to his brow. On his chest, over the tunic, shone a black sun so large it covered his whole torso.

He struck the wall with a worn pick, over and over, with the patience of someone who has nothing else in the world. The pick had a notch in its iron head.

He didn't turn when they arrived. He kept striking.

"I've been digging toward you for a thousand years," he said, without stopping.

It was the voice. The kind voice. The grandfather's by the fireplace. The one that spoke to Aria through the rock, that asked her to wait for the heir, that said in the Solar Ruins *or you're waking whoever had them trapped.*

"Haldor," said Lyra.

The old man stopped. He lowered the pick. He turned slowly, very slowly, as if every bone in his body had to remember how it was done. His face was wrinkled like a raisin and his eyes were gray. With a golden ring around the pupil.

"My child," he said, with a smile full of tenderness. "Child of my child of my child. So many generations. I've lost count." He looked at Hana. "And the little one. The key. How big you've grown."

"I'm not your child," said Lyra.

"All the kings of Lumen are my children." Haldor leaned on his pick like a cane. "I founded your city. I carved the first tunnel with this very pick. I went deeper than anyone, looking for..." He laughed, a laugh like dry leaves. "I don't remember anymore what I was looking for. Something. Something important. I opened a door and crossed, and the door closed behind me. And the mountain, my own mountain, grew over it so I couldn't come back."

He looked at Hana with eyes that were far too much like her own.

"The mountain didn't swallow a town, girl," he said. "It was hiding it... from me."



Freya was the first to see him.

He was behind the old man, in the shadows, in a side tunnel. A young man. Thin, with silver hair. He was carrying stones. He took them from

the hole Haldor was opening, put them in a basket, carried the basket off down the tunnel, and came back with the basket empty. Over and over. With the same patience as the old man. With empty eyes, staring ahead, seeing nothing.

On his chest, over his shirt, was a small black sun, the size of a coin.

Freya stopped breathing.

"Ivar."

The young man didn't stop. He didn't turn.

"IVAR!"

Freya ran. Tyr caught her in midair, lifted her off the ground, held her against his chest while she kicked and screamed her brother's name over and over, *Ivar, Ivar, it's me, Ivar, look at me!*, and the silver-haired young man kept carrying stones, one after another, without looking at her, as if she didn't exist.

"It's all right, girl," said Haldor, with infinite kindness. "It's all right. No one is lost here. Everything the mountain takes from your side ends up here. That boy came down to my door four years ago, looking for something, the way we all come down. Now he helps me. They all help me." He spread his arms, taking in the tunnels, the crystals growing upward. "When the door opens, we'll all go up together. Yours. Mine. The ones of crystal. And there will be no more mountain between us."

"And what will they be?" asked Lyra. "When they go up."

Haldor looked at her the way a grandfather looks at a granddaughter who has asked a silly question.

"They'll be mine."



Lyra took Hana by the shoulders. She turned her to face her, her back to the old man, and spoke very low, very fast, her eyes locked on hers.

"Hana, listen to me. Listen carefully, because there's no time. The door is closed from here. From this side. Only the key can close it, and the key..." Her voice trembled. "If the key closes the door, the key stays inside."

Hana looked at her. She wasn't surprised. She had known since the Core. Since Lyra looked at her instead of answering Tyr.

"Just like you a hundred years ago," she said.

"Just like me."

"But you're not the key. I'm the key."

"That's why I have to do it," said Lyra. "I've done it once. I can do it again. I'll stay here, on the other side, singing, and you go back with your friends and..."

"And what?" Hana pulled free. "And I go back to the house of the blue lantern? To washing crystals? To waiting another ten years at the window?" Her eyes filled with tears. "No, Mom. Not this time. This time you're not leaving me with a kiss and a cup of coffee."

Behind them, Haldor had started striking the wall again. *One... two...*

And then Vidar drew his dagger.

The blade left its sheath without a sound, as always. Vidar put himself between Hana and the old man. Then he looked at Lyra. Then at Hana again. Then at Freya, crying in Tyr's arms. Then at the silver-haired young man, carrying stones with a black sun on his chest.

For the first time in his life, he didn't know whom to protect.



"Hana," said Vidar.

She looked at him. He wasn't looking at her. He was watching the old man, blade raised, and he spoke very fast, very low, like someone letting go of something he has carried far too long.

"Ten years ago I was paid to kill a seven-year-old girl who lived alone in the last house on the mountain street." He swallowed. "I went in at night. It was snowing. There was a blue lantern over the table. The girl was asleep, and she was humming. A lullaby. And she got the last note wrong. She took it up." At last he looked at her. "I couldn't. That's the first time. The second was your mother's contract."

Hana couldn't speak.

"I didn't stop you at the hundredth floor," said Vidar, "because I'd already failed once, and I never regretted it. And I wasn't about to regret it a second time." He looked back at the old man. "I don't know what you're going to do now. I don't know if you want me to stop you, or follow you, or stand still. But I'm asking you. Not her. You."

Hana looked at her mother. She looked at Vidar. She looked at Freya and Tyr. She thought of Frigg, on the other side of the crack, with her first wrinkle. Of Aria, with her black sun and her little notebook. Of the crystal city looking upward. Of ten years at a window.

"Follow me," she said.

And she ran. Not toward the door. Toward the bottom.



CHAPTER XVI

THE REFLECTION

The Bottom of the Bottom · Floor 300



I'm the Hana who did open the door.



She ran past Haldor before the old man could turn. She ran past the silver-haired young man, who for an instant, just an instant, looked up from his basket and followed her with his eyes. She plunged into the last tunnel, the narrowest, the one that neither rose nor fell, the one that pulled at her heart the way a magnet pulls at iron.

She heard Vidar behind her. She heard her mother scream her name. She heard Tyr, Freya.

Then the tunnel closed behind her, with a soft sound, like a stone settling into place, and she heard nothing more.



Floor two hundred and ninety. Two hundred and ninety-five. Hana went down—or up, she no longer knew—through a tunnel that kept narrowing, until she had to edge sideways, back against one wall and chest against the other. The pendant beat against her ribs. The heartbeat was so loud it could no longer be heard: it could be seen, in the trembling of the stones, in the dust falling from the ceiling in the same rhythm, *one... two... one... two...*

Floor three hundred. The bottom of the bottom.

The tunnel suddenly opened into a small round cavern, and the heartbeat stopped.

There were no more tunnels, no more crystals, no more song. No knocking. No choir. No voices. Only silence. A silence so complete that Hana could hear her own blood. And a pale light that came from nowhere, neither pink nor white, the color of things that haven't yet decided what to be.

In the center of the cavern was a wooden table. Two stools. A carefully folded blanket. The remains of a campfire. And on the table,

two clay cups.

Hana touched one. It was warm.



In front of her, on the other side of the table, stood a girl with pink hair, a pick in her hand.

Hana hadn't seen her arrive. She was simply there, like the crystal girl on floor ninety. Standing. Calm. Waiting.

She had her eyes, gray, with the golden ring. Her silver pendant, with the cherry blossom, open on her chest. Her pick, with the same notch. Her smile, without the missing tooth. Her hair was a little longer, she had a thin scar on her eyebrow that Hana didn't have, and her hands were covered in calluses, like someone who has broken rock for a long, long time.

But on her chest shone a black sun.

Not small, like Ivar's. Not creeping up her neck, like Aria's. Whole. It covered her heart, perfect, black, opaque, and it didn't reflect the light.

"Who... are you?" asked Hana.

The other Hana tilted her head, like someone looking at an old photograph of herself. There was tenderness in that gesture. And weariness. An enormous weariness, like Frigg's with her almanac, like Aria's counting heartbeats.

She reached into her pocket and took out a sheet of paper, folded, worn. She unfolded it on the table, between the two cups.

It was the list. The list from floor forty. The same names, the same small, round handwriting, the same slanted *H. Brann. Odila. Gerd. Maelis.* All crossed out, with a fine, decisive line.

All... except the last.

Hana reached into her own pocket. She took out her list. She unfolded it beside the other.

They were identical. Down to the last line. Down to the grease stain in the corner, where she had touched it with fingers dirty from bread on floor forty.

Hana looked up. The other Hana held her gaze.

"I wrote it," said the other. "You're going to write it."

She picked up a piece of charcoal from the dead campfire. She leaned over the table. And with a fine line, straight, decisive, she crossed out the last name on her list.

Hana.

Then she straightened, set down the charcoal, and looked at her with a smile Hana knew by heart, because it was her own.

"I'm the Hana who did open the door," she said. "And I came to warn you: you're late."

She smiled.

"Again."



TO BE CONTINUED...

Hana's story continues in upcoming Cristal Rush updates

CRISTAL RUSH · FAITO WRKS

SECRET FILES

What each of them was hiding. Read it after the story.

HANA · THE GIRL OF THE BLUE LANTERN

She is the princess of Lower Lumen, the key to the Door. She slept for a hundred years inside the crystal heart of the Core. Her heart and the mountain's beat to the same rhythm, and the list on floor 40 is written in her own handwriting.

FREYA · THE ARCHER WHO NEVER STOPS TALKING

She talks so she won't hear the silence, because in the silence the mine hums and it sounds to her like Ivar's voice. On the other side of the Door she finds him alive, carrying stones for the First Miner, with a black sun on his chest. Ivar doesn't recognize her.

TYR · THE SAVAGE VETERAN

He wasn't late. Sigrun, the youngest, warned him not to cross at night, and he didn't listen. When the Kraken attacked, fear froze him in the boat and he couldn't move a finger while she screamed his name. That's why he's terrified of water.

VIDAR · THE FINISHING BLADE

Ten years ago he entered the house of the blue lantern at night with orders to kill a seven-year-old girl. He heard her humming in her sleep a lullaby someone had sung to him as a child, and he couldn't do it. He was also the one who slid the letter under Hana's door.

ARIA VALMONT · THE CAPRICIOUS TREASURER

She is the founder, in person. She was royal treasurer and Queen Lyra's best friend. When her little sister, Elin, turned to crystal, she heard a voice on the other side of the rock promising that everything lost is found on the other side. She tried to open the Door, and Lyra sealed her in that crystal. Hers was the voice calling Hana from the depths.

SISTER FRIGG · MOTHER OF THE LOST

She is the novice from the Night of the Song and Hana's godmother. She has sung for a hundred years without growing old. She goes off-key on the last note because Lyra always took it up instead of down, and she never learned to sing it right. She finally does, before the Door, and loses her voice.

LYRA · THE LAST QUEEN

She sealed her best friend in a crystal and gave her daughter to the mountain as its key. She sang to the Door for a hundred years. Ten years ago she took Hana out of the heart, erased all her memories but one morning, and watched over her through the blue lantern. She also paid the assassin she knew would fail.