

THE  
SOUND OF THE  
STONES

BETH HAMMOND

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eLectio Publishing  
Little Elm, TX  
[www.eLectioPublishing.com](http://www.eLectioPublishing.com)

*The Sound of the Stones*

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ISBN-13: 978-1-63213-127-1

Published by eLectio Publishing, LLC

Little Elm, Texas

<http://www.eLectioPublishing.com>

Printed in the United States of America

5 4 3 2 1 eLP 20 19 18 17 16 15

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*For my parents, who support me beyond measure.  
For my husband, who never batted an eye when I told him I would write a book.  
For my children, who peeked over my shoulder every time I drew.*

*Above all, for my Savior.*

*John 3:16*



## The Winds of Change

The wind felt different today. Something nagged at her, not unlike every day before. But today felt more intense; anticipation hung like a blanket. The blanket didn't quite touch her skin but wrapped around her like a cocoon, encasing her with a sense of urgency. She quickened her stride. The smell of fall was heavy in the air as a crisp wind whipped past. Frankie tugged her jacket closed. Her steps were swift as she made her way down the small-town sidewalk.

She gave a passing glance to the old used bookstore to her right. Her heart stuttered. A going-out-of-business sign hung crooked in the window. Its message sent a sharp pang of regret through her chest. She didn't remember stopping. Her face pressed against the glass, fogging the window with each shallow breath. Boxes littered the floor and countertop, empty, yawning, and eager to be filled. She watched her hand numbly as it reached for the door. A gust of wind nudged her forward as the door swung wide. A tiny bell sounded its charming ding, and papers skipped around the room in welcome.

The air felt warm and inviting after her long walk in the chilled afternoon. The smell of old books and stale coffee brought images to mind of another time in her life, a simpler time when books could carry her away to worlds where she felt a sense of belonging. Life seemed more complicated now. She didn't get the same escape from literature that she used to. In her seventeen years she felt more yearning with each passing day. A yearning for what she did not know. Perhaps it was for freedom from the foster system, or the structure of school. Maybe it was normal teenage frustration. But in listening to her friends she didn't think it was any of those things exactly. Something pulled on her, tugging like a hidden magnet but never revealing its purpose.

The door clicked shut behind her, cutting off the wind. The crumpled papers that had greeted her in welcome now lay still at her feet. Her senses prickled as the cocoon of anticipation enveloping her turned to purpose. The purpose was not clear, but the desire to fulfill it nagged like an itch begging to be scratched.

An old man strode from the back room carrying an empty box. He hummed cheerfully, and his white hair stood in all directions as if dancing to his music. His wiry brows shot to the top of his forehead, mingling with his untamed hair.

“Well, hello there, young lady.” His voice was like a warm sunny day. A smile spread across his face, lending to his friendly disposition as he placed the empty box on the counter.

“Hey.” Frankie gave a small wave and shoved her hands in her jeans. She looked around at the disheveled state of the store. The old man’s eyes lingered for a moment. Frankie felt a flicker of something like a memory when she turned back to him. Her mind almost grasped it, but when he turned his eyes toward the box on the counter it was gone.

“Um, what happened to the Davenports?” she asked, and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

The old man looked up, his face pulled in concentration. “Oh, well, I’m afraid they are getting on in age. They decided to sell.” He gave an apologetic shrug.

“Oh,” Frankie replied. A pang of regret coursed through her at the realization that she would not see the old couple again. She swallowed the emotion and went straight to the shelves that held fantasy books. She had bought and resold most of the books there. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular. She just wanted to walk the shelves again. She ran her fingers over the worn bindings on the books and hummed. It wasn’t a distinct tune, just something that stuck in her head from time to time.

“What’s that you’re humming, young lady?” The old man held a book absently in his hand as he padded down the aisle toward her. His eyes were sharp, with a hint of curiosity. Frankie shook her head and cleared her throat.

“I really don’t know.” She shrugged one shoulder and her sleek black hair spilled over her flannel shirt. “Just something I get stuck in my head from time to time.” Her cheeks flushed pink and she turned back to the books. She bit her lip, willing herself not to hum. She could feel the old man lingering.

He made a noise in the back of his throat, but after a moment went back to shuffling boxes. Frankie made a few selections and went to the counter where the old man tucked books into a box. She placed the books on the glass counter and pulled a wad of money from her pocket. She didn’t want to leave, but couldn’t think of a reason to stay.

The old man rose from the depth of the box. “Ready?” he asked, but the tone in his voice held an odd resonance that made Frankie blink.

That flash of something familiar flickered in her mind again. She stood staring for a moment and the old man tipped his head to one side.

"Yes. Thank you," she said, and smoothed the money on the counter. Her dark eyes narrowed and studied the old man's features as he handled her book selection. He hummed appreciatively at her choices. Something like a slow frost tickled her mind. He looked up and gave a conspiratorial smile.

"You have good taste."

Frankie's face flushed. "Thanks."

The old man slapped a hand on the counter and Frankie jumped.

"How would you like to help me pack up here? I would need you for the next few days, and pay you twenty dollars an hour at the end of the week." He raised a finger. "And you can keep all the books you want." The expectation on his face was clear.

Frankie realized her mouth was hanging open in response to his slapping the counter. She closed it. She didn't need the money but spending more time here was exactly what she wanted.

"Hmm? What do you say, young lady?" He smiled a full-toothed grin surprisingly white for his age. They weren't dentures in that they were not perfectly straight, but lent character to his warm, weathered face. Frankie narrowed her eyes, studying his face for an answer to the strange sensation flitting through her mind. There...there it was. She almost had the thought situated.

"Oh, come on. I really could use the help." He waved a book enticingly. It was gone again, the fleeting sensation chased away by reality. She watched him wave the book and snorted.

"All right." She couldn't help the grin tugging at her lips.

"Ah, good, good," he said. "I am Mr. Malack." He held out his hand.

"Frankie...Frankie Sheba." She accepted his hand.

He nodded politely. "See you tomorrow, say three thirty p.m.?" he asked.

"Sure." Frankie scooped up the books and left, feeling something she couldn't quite put her finger on...hope?

## A Different Kind of Oppression

Frankie gritted her teeth as she stepped into the lavish home in which she was fostered. She had bounced around foster homes for much of her early teens. She had been with the Abensteins for three years now. She would be eighteen soon and couldn't wait to get out of the foster system. The Abensteins' home was nicer than most she had spent time in for sure. But Mrs. Abenstein was an uptight older woman who didn't much care for Frankie's choice of style, worn jeans and a baggy shirt, nor did she care for her name.

"Frances!" Mrs. Abenstein's high-pitched voice called from the kitchen. Frankie's eye twitched at the use of her proper name. "Set the table, dear."

Frankie put down her armload of books, reverently, on the foyer table. She took a deep breath, trudged to the kitchen, and gathered the plates. She performed the task with a practiced, pleasant expression. Mr. Abenstein sat stiffly at the dinner table, his glasses perched on the end of his nose, reading the paper. He looked up and his mouth curved with genuine warmth as Frankie set down the plates and flatware.

The Abensteins were an older couple but not ancient. Mrs. Abenstein had taken empty nest syndrome hard when her two children moved away to start their own lives. Mr. Abenstein had agreed to foster children, as long as he didn't have to trip over toys and change diapers. They decided that a teen would be the best choice. They had the best intentions but Mrs. Abenstein could be a bit much to stomach.

She insisted Frankie call them Mr. and Mrs. Abenstein. "The better to instill respect, Frances," Mrs. Abenstein had said upon Frankie's first meeting with them. Mrs. Abenstein's brows had been raised loftily, her lips pursed as if sucking lemons was part of her daily routine. Mr. Abenstein had smiled and readjusted his glasses, only to have them slip down the bridge of his nose moments later. They reminded Frankie of birds. If Mrs. Abenstein was a hen, Mr. Abenstein was an ostrich.

Frankie took small bites of roasted potato and pushed food around her plate. She smirked secretly as images of a hen and ostrich strutted through her mind.

"I see you brought some books home." Mrs. Abenstein pursed her lips. *There's that lemon.* Frankie's smirk dropped, the amusing bird images flitting away to be replaced with a sense of dread.

“The old bookstore is closing. I’m helping pack up. Mr. Malack, the man handling the store closing, said I could take books that I like.” Frankie realized she was talking through a mouthful of potatoes and swallowed hard. Mrs. Abenstein dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a cloth napkin pointedly. Frankie cleared her throat and stared at her plate.

“You know, Frances, reading is a good thing but” —she gestured to the stack of books across the room with a fork full of chicken—“you should read the classics. That is the way to sharpen your mind.” She raised an elegant brow. “That fantastical stuff you read is full of nonsense.” She punctuated her feelings with a curt nod of her head and her short, curly hair nodded with her. She glanced toward her husband for support. He stopped chewing and cleared his throat.

“Well, my dear, I see no harm in reading such fiction.” He met Frankie’s eyes and his lips curved up at the sides. “She does what she’s told and gets good grades.” He shrugged a shoulder, turning his eyes back to his plate. “Certainly it’s no worse than watching soap operas,” he mumbled, then took a mouth full of food much the same as an ostrich would thrust its head in the sand to avoid confrontation.

Mrs. Abenstein choked on a buttered roll. She coughed and sipped her wine with rose-tinged cheeks. Frankie glanced over in time to catch Mr. Abenstein’s fleeting wink.

Conversation faltered after that. “Thank you for dinner. It was delicious,” Frankie said, when it became clear they were finished eating. Mrs. Abenstein nodded and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin for the hundredth time.

Frankie helped clear the table in silence, much like every night before. They exchanged a few pleasantries, but it was formal and Frankie felt out of place. She always felt out of place. In fact, the only place she ever felt at home was in the fantasy world of a book. She had lived with the Abensteins for three years yet felt as much a stranger in their home now as the day she moved in. They weren’t cruel. In fact, they were very good to her. Mr. Abenstein even got her on some level. But she didn’t feel a bond with them.

“I have homework,” she blurted, after the kitchen was spotless. Mrs. Abenstein nodded distractedly. Frankie climbed the stairs to the safety of her room, toting her stack of books. She flopped down on the bed and opened a book to page one, drifting into another world for a time.

## It Is Time

Frankie took lighthearted steps. The fall air smelled sweeter and the wind was swift and playful, flushing her cheeks a happy pink. She reached the bookstore and opened the door. The bell chimed in welcome.

“Mr. Malack? It’s me...Frankie,” she singsonged. She heard shuffling in the back, followed by muffled grunts of irritation. Scattered about the room were empty boxes marked with various titles, romance, historical, self-help, and the like. She gathered an empty box and started to load them with the appropriate genre. She finished packing one box and dragged it to the center of the floor with other filled boxes. She wiped her hands on her jeans and looked at the box with self-satisfaction. Mr. Malack popped out from the back room. His brows were drawn, but when he saw her they shot up high, as if pointing to the disheveled state of his dust-covered hair. He looked at the packed box she was admiring and his mouth lifted at the corners.

“I knew I was right about you.” He pointed a finger in the air in illustration. “I know about people, you see.” He winked at her. The dichotomy of his self-assured demeanor against his wild hair and dusty garb sent Frankie into a fit of giggles. She punctuated the giggle with a snort, and then looked surprised by the noise she made. Mr. Malack threw back his head and laughed. The sound of it was so comforting and familiar; a small place in the back of her mind scrambled to locate the memory that would explain why. As quick as the prick of a needle, the flash of familiarity was gone, leaving Frankie with a sense of abandonment.

“You were busy when I came in, so I just took an empty box and loaded it with the proper genre.” She gestured toward the box, then let her arm fall to her side when she realized he already knew that. She shoved her hands in her pockets and kicked at a piece of lint on the floor.

“Fine, fine,” he said, glossing over her embarrassment. He patted her on the arm and glanced over his shoulder toward the back room with a scowl. “Yes, I’m just cleaning things up back there.” He shook his head and made a clucking noise with his tongue. “So many books,” he said, and fixed her with a stare. He studied her with piercing eyes for a moment and nodded. The gravity in the room seemed to cement her to

the floor. There it was again, that sense of something she should know. Mr. Malack smiled and things were normal again.

“Shall we keep going, my dear?” he asked, as he grabbed for another box.

“Sure,” she said, trying to swallow the sense that she was missing something.

They worked late into the evening. Frankie found that she very much enjoyed the company of the old man. He was warm and intelligent. Not the sort of stuffy old coot you felt judged by. The sun began to set, and the fluorescent lighting in the store grew harsher by the minute. Frankie finished packing another box and glanced out the store window. She dusted off her hands and sighed contentedly.

“Mr. Malack, I think it’s time I get home.” She looked around at the progress they had made. The shelves were halfway cleared and the boxes neatly stacked. Mr. Malack looked at her over his own box and nodded.

“Of course, my dear. Tomorrow then?” he asked.

Frankie nodded. “Tomorrow,” she said, and headed for the door. She hesitated, her hand poised for the handle. She felt a slow frost prickle up her neck and settle in her mind. She looked back over her shoulder. Mr. Malack waved. The prickle was gone. She tugged her jacket close, waved back, and ducked out the door. A brisk wind whipped inside the store and the bell rang in farewell. When the door clicked shut, silence fell.

Mr. Malack watched her disappear into the dusk and sat on a stool, his back resting against the counter. He looked toward the ceiling, his head bent to one side, as if listening to a faint whisper. After a good long while he nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “it is time...at long last. It is time.” He clapped his hands once and rubbed them together brusquely, then picked up another box and continued to pack.

## A Story Begins

Frankie was running late. It was pouring outside and by the time she reached the store she was soaked. She tried the handle of the door but it was locked. She pressed her face to the glass. It was dark and empty. Her heart sank. She didn't know whether from the closing of the store, all the books being gone, or from the thought she would not see the old man Malack again. She trudged home like a limp dishrag.

Dinner was much the same as the night before. She didn't bring any new books in, so that topic was thankfully avoided. The Abensteins chatted, but she didn't really hear them. Her mind was still back at the dark, empty bookstore. She helped clean up after dinner and headed for the stairs. She was halfway up when Mr. Abenstein spoke.

"Frances?"

Frankie paused, and turned to find him looking over his shoulder. Mrs. Abenstein was on the phone in the kitchen, her high-pitched chatter leaking into the foyer. Mr. Abenstein sighed and nodded, then pulled a bag from behind his back. He held the parcel out to Frankie with a hesitant smile. Frankie moved back down the steps, reservation bubbling in her stomach. She took the heavy bag from his hand. Mr. Abenstein cleared his throat and gestured toward the front door.

"A nice old man stopped by today. He gave this to me and asked that I give it to you. He said he was in a hurry so...." He waved a hand at the bag in illustration. He leaned in closer, glancing over his shoulder again. "I hope it's a great fantasy book," he whispered, his eyes filled with boyish wonder.

Frankie grinned. "Thank you," she whispered, and headed to her room with lighter feet. She closed her bedroom door and pressed her back against it. She clutched the package to her chest, and after a few breaths, moved to the bed. She slipped something heavy from the bag. It was wrapped in thick brown butcher paper and bound in twine. A note was tucked into the string, folded neatly in thirds. She opened the note and money tumbled out. She tucked it into her pocket without counting it and read the note.

*My dearest Frankie, I am sorry that I left so quickly. An urgent matter came up, and I had to finish my business here without further*

*The Sound of the Stones*

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*ado. I leave you this fine book, in hopes that you will enjoy the greatest story ever told. May it take you places no one has ever been.*

*Sincerely, Mr. Malack*

Frankie folded the note tenderly and put it her pocket. She slid the twine from the package and opened the paper. The book was heavy in her hands, the white, pebbled leather cover unmarred. A crystal plate, in the center of the book, was inlaid and glistening, in the shape of a double door. The doors had intricate scrollwork on its surface. She opened the book to the first page and the binding made crackling noises, indicating it had never been opened. She ran a finger over the fine vellum paper edged with gold. On the first page was an intricate drawing of a charm. It was a circle with seven lines in the center, running from top to bottom, and evenly spaced. On each line was a dot or circle. They were spread out over the lines to make a pattern. Frankie gasped and slammed the book shut. She lifted the sleeve of her shirt and looked at the wine-colored mark on her forearm that was a source of self-consciousness. She covered it up at all times. It was eerily similar to the drawing in the book.

Frankie stared at the book for a moment, then turned to the next page and started to read...



## You Don't Know Me

It was a clear day and the sky was a vibrant blue. Ashra turned her face toward the sun, allowing it to warm her skin. She inhaled a deep breath and closed her eyes, savoring a few brief moments alone. She didn't particularly want to be in the mines today. She sighed, sending stray hairs from her face. *Let today be a safe day. Let today be filled with better things.*

"Destiny often calls in the darkest of times."

An airy voice pierced her silent prayer. Ashra jumped, then turned to find a strange old man watching her. His garb was an unusually clean white robe, unsoiled from the ruggedness of Krad City. His hair was glacial and wispy and his eyes were alight with amusement. He wore a warm wrinkled smile. She stared at him, unashamed. Perhaps he was a man overcome with life in Krad City. Sometimes a person lived long enough in the harsh environment to reach a very old age. Those "lucky" enough to live so long eventually ended up mad, overtaken by thoughts of grandeur, unafraid of death. When that happened, they became dissenters, spewing ideas of release from Krad oppression. *It won't be long before they kill you, old man.*

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Ashra cocked a brow and pursed her lips primly.

His eyes flashed knowingly. In that instant, his wrinkles smoothed, and he looked perfectly sane. Ashra felt exposed. He looked at her for a few moments and searched her eyes. Her brow dropped from its annoyed position and she swallowed loudly. She couldn't look away.

"I know what you can do." He raised his chin in challenge. His grin widened, showing even more of his teeth. They were surprisingly white for a man of his age.

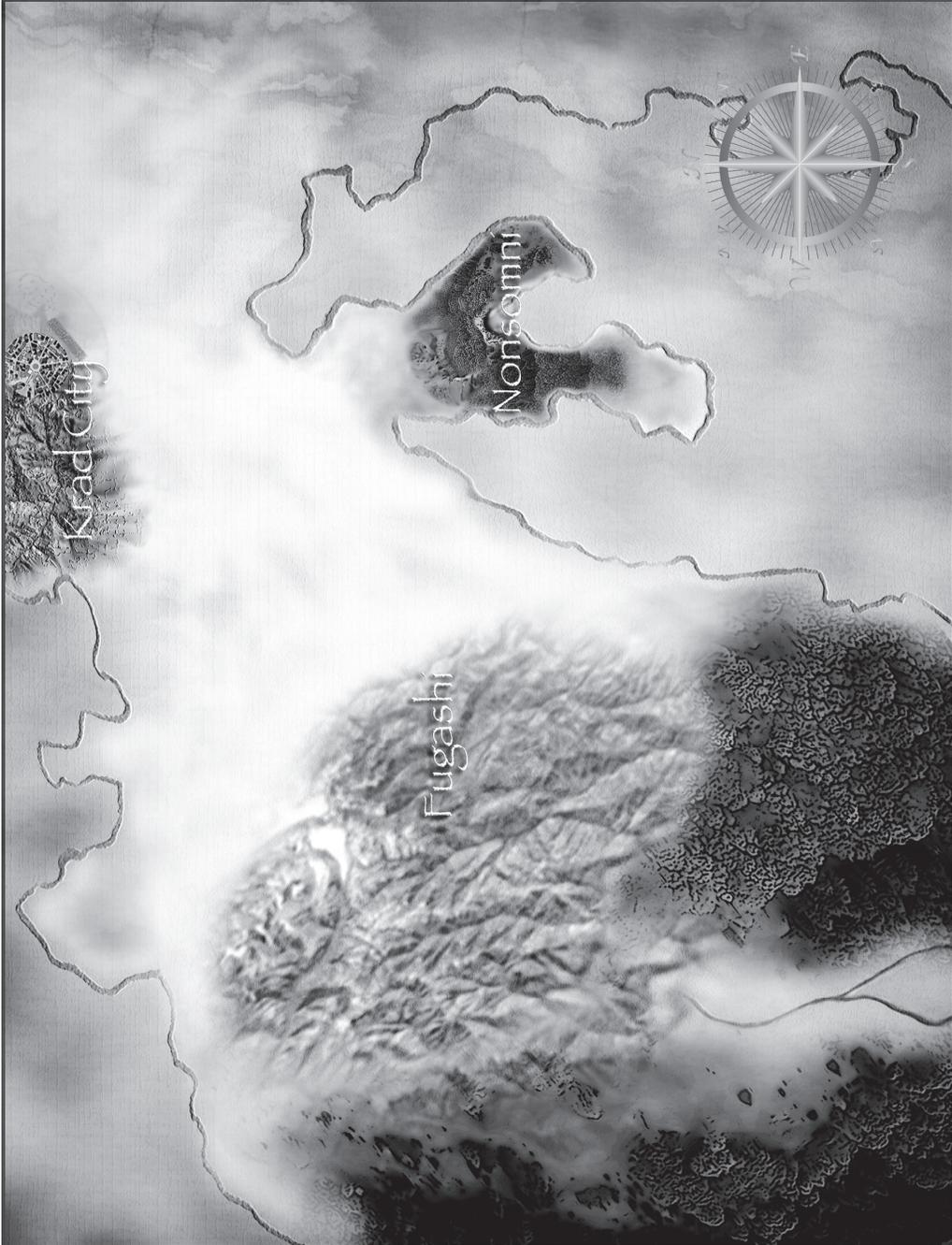
Ashra's eyes flashed fierce. Heat climbed up her neck and her cheeks flushed pink. "Look, old boy, I don't know who you are, or what kind of game you're playing, but I can assure you that you do NOT know me! I've never seen you in my..." She was cut off by an irritating chuckle.

She would have continued to berate him but the air began to shift, then it stilled. There was no longer a gentle morning breeze. The sounds of the mines ceased. She could hear nothing but eerie silence and the beating of her own heart, loud in comparison. It was as if she stood in a

vacuum, devoid of time and sound. The old man narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose.

“The time is drawing close for you to reveal who you are.” His voice held an odd resonance. He moved his lips, but his voice bled directly into Ashra’s mind. He wasn’t smiling anymore. His face was serious, almost threatening. As Ashra’s face changed from anger to confusion, his own expression turned from urgent to empathetic. She recognized that look. It was one her mother often held when she looked at her. She wanted to refute him, but the words wouldn’t come. She looked on mutely.

He nodded his head and turned away, his white hair dancing in the wind. The breeze was back, as were the sounds of people working in the mines. No one noticed the old man. He rounded the corner without a backward glance. She stared after him for a long few moments, wondering at the strange encounter. Then she shook it off and told herself it was just a crazy old man. *Wasn’t it?*



## Desperate Times

Dust and rock fragments rained down from the mine wall, finding homes on Ashra's clothing, skin, and hair. The fine powder stood out in stark contrast to her olive complexion, giving a silver sheen to her long dark mane, pulled into a knot at the base of her neck. Wisps of hair flared around her small angular face, lending to the effect of fierceness flashing in her dark almond-shaped eyes.

"There's a nice pocket in here," Ashra informed Blithe. She held her breath and braced herself for his snarky remark.

"I know," Blithe snapped. His lip curled ridiculously, and the words rolled off his tongue like bitterroot. He narrowed his gray eyes at her and lifted his too long nose, the better to look down on her. He knew the crystals were in there. He was a Krad, Crystal Sensitive, and she was just human. She worked in the crystal mines digging out the Krad Glasne's means of control. They were the mighty Krad. She was just a lackey, a cog in the mechanism. Such was the air he held himself with. Ashra lifted her chin and sniffed, a small spray of freckles accentuated by the scrunching of her nose. A smirk pulled at the corner of Blithe's thin lips. He wordlessly dared her to lose control. She cleared her throat and turned her attention back to the wall, resisting his provocation.

She was not supposed to know where to find the crystals. Furthermore, she was not supposed to know how they worked, but she did. The crystals sang to her in an ancient language. They had special powers encased in them, remnants from the early dawn of time. They held vibrations, like echoes from the Creator. Each had a unique purpose. Some crystals produced heat, some were used for ailments, and some recorded energy waves that could be played back for those who could hear them. They each hummed their purpose. Ashra could hear the crystals. Rolling vibrations formed songs. Her mind sought them and gave off their own, provoking song, its own answering call. It was a back-and-forth, a give-and-take. There was an art to it, and she was an artist.

The crystals that held energy waves like etchings were the ones Blithe was looking for. The difference between Blithe and Ashra was that Ashra could communicate with the crystals, while Blithe and other Sensitives could only hear them. The Krad needed the right kind of crystal to fabricate crystal modicums. More humans were born every

day, and every day those modicums were placed into the hippocampus of fresh, tiny human minds. Brain waves were recorded, and Krad Sensitives interpreted the waves embedded in the crystal. The Krad monitored thoughts, fears, and desires. This was how the human race was suppressed, controlled, and held captive. It all started long ago, much longer ago than human memory could reach.

Ashra set her jaw tight and bit back words that fought to escape. She would love to show Blithe and all of the Krad mongrels just how incompetent they really were. She knew the mines like a favorite book. The walls were full of verse and chapter, and she could read every one just by listening to what they said, and how they said it. Ashra continued to hide her gift with carefully guarded expressions. No one else could know what she was capable of. She wasn't sure what they would do to her, but death was probably the least of the punishments she would receive.

Blithe turned to the wall, straining to hear the crystal vibrations held within. His face was pinched, his body contorted as he followed along the narrow rock passageway. He stopped from time to time to listen, nodding to himself. Ashra resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"It runs from south to north at a fifty-one-degree angle from here, to here." He gestured at the wall, not bothering to look at Ashra as he spoke. "Have it finished in three days."

Ashra blinked, then nodded. Blithe skulked from the mine, nose turned up and hands gathered behind his back in a hard knot. A smug sneer pulled at his lips. Ashra visualized hurling a rock at his head, and felt better for the daydream. She blew hair from her face and shoved tight fists in her pockets.

Blithe was an arrogant nit. He was also wrong. The crystal vein did run from south to north at a fifty-one-degree angle for a small portion of the wall, but then it took a hard turn up for ten feet, and then over at an almost ninety-degree angle for the rest of the passage. Ashra shook her head and turned to leave. She kicked a stone in place of the face she pictured. It skidded across the ground and came to rest against the far mine wall with a satisfactory crack. *What a ninny.* She shook off the sour mood as best she could and donned a professional face.

Ashra walked to the far end of the walkway where her team was waiting. Haker, Jinka, Scoot, and Pooter stood making small talk. They turned as she emerged. "We have three days to excavate," she informed

them in a measured tone, her expression unreadable except for the slight crease in her forehead. She attempted a reassuring smile but it wavered and fell flat before it took hold.

“Ugh...Three days!?” Jinka spat. She was a spirited woman in her mid thirties. She was stout with wiry red hair and had a wide gap in her front teeth that seemed to punctuate her strong personality. It was like her teeth were forced apart by the sheer loudness with which her voice escaped its trap. She was a no-nonsense type of woman with a short fuse and the only other female on Ashra’s team. She rubbed the Krad the wrong way and often skirted on the fringe of dissent. In short, Ashra loved her. Ashra did manage a smile at Jinka’s protest.

“We’ll have to make use of a Giant. It’s the only way to meet the deadline.” Ashra’s voice held no hint of the uncertainty she felt. Grunts of acknowledgment with a twinge of apprehension came from her team.

Giants were another of the Krad race. They were a large mutation of muscle and strength. They had a nasty temper and lacked the ability to control their actions when provoked. Humans often relied on them to help accomplish the scope of work they were forced to achieve. Giants were useful, but risky. Lack of intelligence and short temper were a bad combination. Ashra had avoided using a Giant until now. But these were dire times, and the humans were kept in horrible conditions. They had no choice but to use the dangerous tools they were allotted.

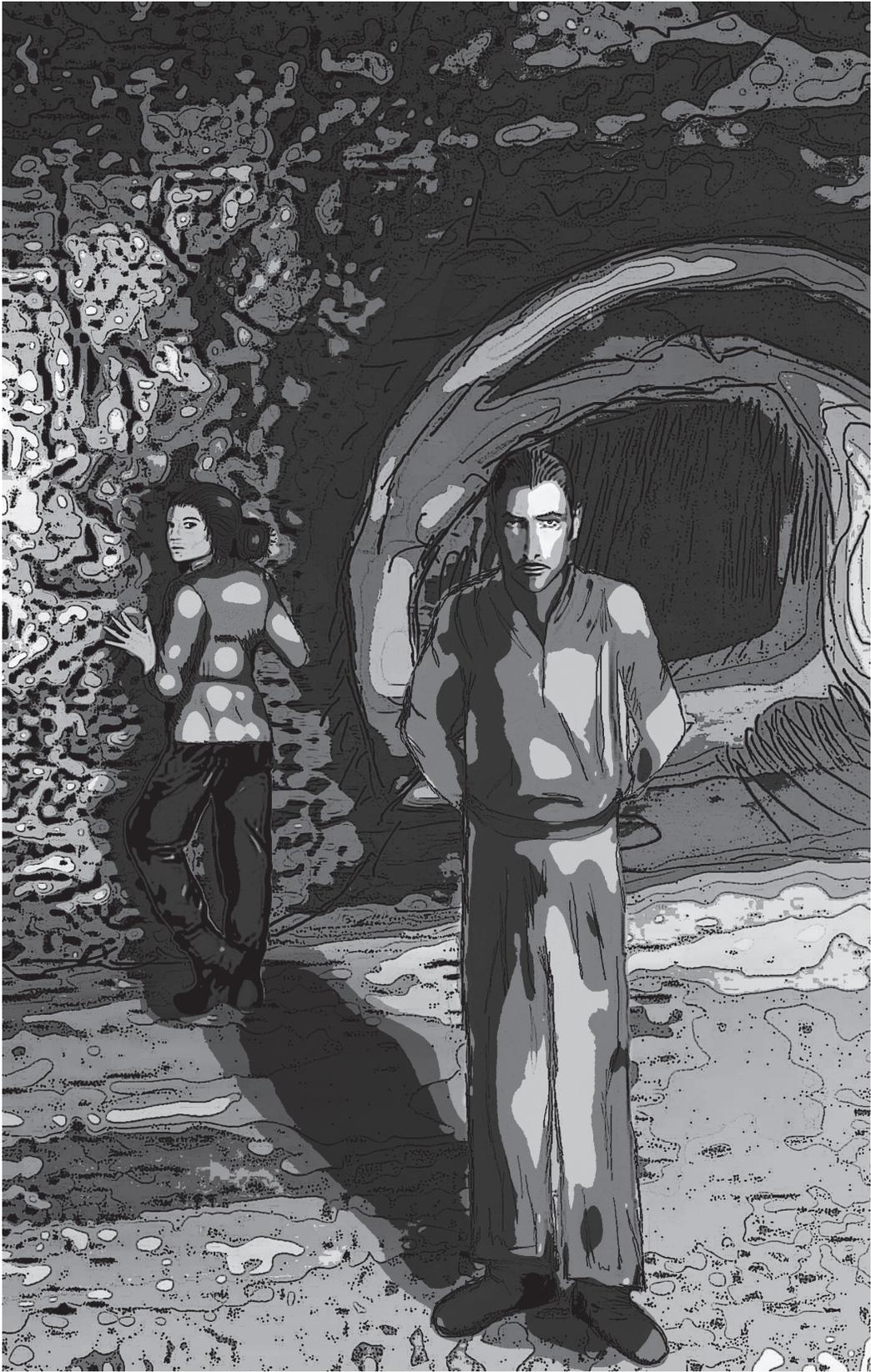
The team looked at Ashra in silent sulk. Her face was smudged with dirt and her clothes were dingy, but they were well mended against their constant use. Ashra stood proud, and appeared tall despite her small feminine frame. Her dark eyes seemed to spark fire with amber flecks glinting against the almost blackness of her irises. She was fierce and soft, loyal and wild in complementary dichotomy. “I’ll put in a request and you can get the equipment ready. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Ashra looked each of them in the eyes and gave what she hoped was an assuring nod. The three men and Jinka nodded their agreement, heaving sighs of resignation as they moved to ready the equipment.

Haker, the oldest member of the team, approached Ashra, his eyes tense. “You know, even with a Giant, three days is stretching it at best.” His voice was low and gruff. He scratched his scraggly, gray beard. His steely-eyed stare met her sparking, deep brown one with unspoken warning. He was matter-of-fact and never minced words.

Haker could have hated her when she was appointed lead on the team a year ago at the tender age of twenty, but he couldn't. She was good at her job, and too kind to hate. She came into the mines as a child many years ago and breathed life into the dark caves. She withstood the adversity with a steely resolve. While other children buckled and died under the harsh mine environment, she flourished. Each new challenge seemed to spur her strength. He couldn't feel resentful of this young woman. He grew to care for her as he watched how others fed from her strength. Even he, the crass old man that he was, felt drawn to the light within her.

"I know, Haker." She gave him a look that said, *Let's keep this between you and me.* "We'll figure something out. We will make the deadline."

His eyes stayed steel and his face rigid, but she didn't wither under his stare. A glint lit her eyes, and a crooked half grin tugged at the side of her mouth. His stern expression softened a bit, and his hard eyes returned some of her warm expression, even if it was barely detectable. She knew it was there, and that's all she needed. They always pulled through the tough jobs. Ashra was crafty and persistent. Haker kept the team grounded with his matter-of-fact look at life, and together they made the heart of the team. He chuckled to himself as he watched her walk toward Mine Central. The sloping ground beneath her feet seemed to bow to her.



## A Fateful Appointment

Ashra made her way up the crumbling rock hill toward Mine Central. The large stone building stood above the rugged quarry hills, overlooking the various mines. The building was clean and sleek, in stark contrast to the landscape of the mines. People stood outside making trades and speaking of small things as they waited for their team leaders to emerge from the building. The Krad issued weekly food and medical rations to all human families, along with quarterly clothing rations. The supplies people didn't need were traded for things they liked better or needed more. For humans, this black market trade felt something like control in the vast lack of freedom enveloping them.

Ashra hated visiting Mine Central. With her particular vocation she only interacted with Krad one-on-one in the mines, but she had to face many Krad when she needed to put in supply requests. She dreaded it, and as such took her time climbing the smooth, stone stairs. She exchanged hellos with people she knew, but her heart wasn't in it. Her feet felt like weights. She put one heavy foot in front of the other with considerable effort until she reached the entrance.

The soaring ceiling made her feel small as she stepped through ornately carved columns. *Humans carved these columns. We accomplished these great things.* All of the greatness the Krad enjoyed was borne on the backs of humans. As far as Ashra knew it had always been this way. She wondered what would become of the Krad if humans somehow broke free. She wondered what the humans could accomplish free from Krad oppression. The thought was scary and exhilarating all at once and she felt a familiar sense of obligation. She didn't fully understand it, but it was ever present and growing stronger with each passing day.

Humans stood in long lines and guards walked about with spears in hand. The guards were Krad Gravity Benders, the third kind of the Krad race. They were agile and dangerous, possessing the ability to repel the earth's magnetic force, giving them an advantage in any fight.

Ashra took her place at the back of the line some twenty people deep and waited with the other humans who were also there to put in requests. The stench of hard work and filth filled the air. Men and women with dirt-smeared faces shuffled back and forth on tired feet. Bender guards wove in and out of the crowd armed with sleek spears. They were dressed in tailored metal armor encrusted with tiny crystal

jewels. The ornate garb made them look ridiculous, like strutting Color Plumes. Those silly birds roamed the streets of Krad City, displaying their colorful feathers, calling to their female counterparts. Krad found them beautiful in their cocky display. Ashra found them pretentious. *Stupid rainbow bird.* Her lips turned up at the thought.

She was startled from her private joke by a shout that sent echoes through the large hall. Two men were arguing about who got in line first. The line was long; requests had to be made for specialty equipment or Giants. Their lives depended on completing assignments on time. It wasn't any wonder that tension filled the vast, stinking hall of Mine Central.

The Gravity Bender nearest the ruckus approached and held the men at spear point. He shouted a gruff command to stop. The larger of the men swatted at the spear in his irritation, and the Bender jumped into the air. He somersaulted above the man and came down, skewering the larger man's head. The skewered man stood stunned. Ashra thought perhaps he was trying to comprehend what had happened. But after a moment it was clear he was already dead, his spine having been separated from his brain stem. *No!*

It happened in an instant. His lifeless body slumped to the ground. His head bounced off the floor once before it settled, and the room fell silent. The Bender pulled his spear from the dead man's head. It made an awful sucking noise as it drew from his flesh. Ashra noted the Bender's boot, placed carelessly on the dead man's back for more leverage. She also noted the complacent look on his face as he completed his task. He could have been digging a hole or taking out the trash for the lack of feeling he showed.

The other man from the altercation stood frozen, his eyes fixed on the bloody spear tip. His expression begged his life to be spared. Another guard latched on to the remaining offender and dragged him from the hall, his pleas for mercy falling on apathetic ears.

"Please, I have children."

Ashra knew she would see him later, in the Death Bowl. Humans deemed unruly were forced to fight to the death. This was not an uncommon occurrence. Humans were killed every day in the name of peace. The body of the dead man was dragged from the building. The Bender's face held a well-composed, indifferent look as he proceeded with his task. The pool of blood was given a wide birth, but no one else

acknowledged the altercation. Humans waited in line for their turn and the hall stayed silent. The pool of blood called a silent warning, "You are ours to control." Ashra could hear something else. From the depths of the sticky, dark pool she heard the voices of thousands of humans cry out. She heard her own soul answering a quaking battle cry. Her body trembled and her eyes threatened to brim over. She could almost feel the floor answering her trembles with its own vibration. She glanced around at the faces of the other humans, searching for any recognition of this shared experience, but no one else seemed to notice. The expressions on the faces around her held practiced aversion. She drew deep breaths, attempting to dim the feeling.

Tightness resonated deep in her chest. She swallowed back her emotions and replaced her horrified expression with a forced blank stare. Her body calmed. The floor lay still once more. She averted her eyes from the dark pool of blood that contrasted against the light gray marble floor, and concentrated on the gentle vibrations from the stone building around her.

When Ashra reached the front of the line she shared her request with the Sensitive on duty. Her actions were commonplace. She pushed her threatening emotions deep, and replaced them with the foremost need, to accomplish her task and keep her team alive. There was no time to dwell. Not now, not while her team had an impossible job to do. Such was her life, and all humans' lives under Krad control.

"If you need a Giant today, you will take Krank," the sour-faced Sensitive said, drawing out his words as if she were too stupid to understand the normal speed of speech. One graceful brow arched over particularly beady gray eyes. The long slender nose perched on his face practically begged to be looked down. Ashra wondered if it was in his job description to hold that nasty expression on his face all day long. *He's a pro.* She was amusing herself with that thought when the name Krank registered. It made her flash cold and hot all at once. Her armpits began to itch from the adrenaline surge. *Krank?! Krank* was the most volatile Giant around. More human deaths occurred with Krank on the job than with any other Giant. He was generally reserved for the mining teams who failed to meet a deadline or infuriated a Krad in Mine Central. *Well-played, sour Krad.* She thought about scratching her armpits, but the sour Krad was looking her over with obvious disdain.

She opted to swish her arms in a vain attempt to relieve the discomfort, only to succeed in eliciting two raised eyebrows from the Sensitive.

“That will be fine, thank you,” she answered primly. Her nose was much too short to beg the looking down of, so she settled for a curt bob of the head. She refused to let him know she was troubled by this information. She took the crystal chip from the Sensitive’s long, skinny, pale hand. His face settled into boredom as she took the one-inch-by-two-inch slice of clear crystal with various lines etched into its surface. The chip would be used to summon the Giant. She tucked the chip in her pants pocket and watched as the Sensitive narrowed his eyes at her. Sensitive conducted random modicum scans. It was second nature for them. They listened to the vibrations, for signs of dissension embedded in the modicums of humans. Ashra felt the Sensitive scanning hers and inwardly rolled her eyes. She had learned long ago how to control her modicum so the Krad could not read all of her thoughts and memories. The Krad were unaware of Ashra’s ability. *Go ahead, big boy, give me all you got.* She blinked innocently at the Sensitive.

“Well, go on then, off with you.” The Sensitive motioned with one hand as if shooing away a dog. Ashra lifted her chin in rebellion to the dismissal and gave a curt nod. The prudish Sensitive, with too-long skinny hands, sneered at her as he sat behind the large marble desk. Ashra wanted to spit at him, but refrained from the urge to do so. She would not let them bring out the worst in her. It would only serve their purpose. Life was tenuous. Pride was better left hidden in the secret places of her mind.

## Meeting Krank

The lofty pillars of Mine Central cast long shadows over the earth. Ashra stepped from the shade and turned her face toward the sky. She raised a hand against the brightness and took a breath of dusty air. She reflected on the death she had witnessed. She would never get used to that. *Never.* She blinked up into the sapphire vastness. *Help us.*

One foot moved in front of the other. Loose gravel jumped and rolled beneath the treads of her boots as if skittering from her destination. She didn't remember the steps she took to get there. An ominous stone wall rose up before her, Giant encampment. Ashra pulled the crystal chip from her pocket and brought it near her face. She ran her fingers over its smooth surface and listened to its vibrations. With a breath of resignation she held it under a beam of light that streamed from a metal-encased crystal rod. The crystal scanner was affixed to a large stone obelisk. It towered over her, casting a long shadow in the morning sun. The scanner light blinked rapidly over the face of the chip. Tiny metal pieces affixed to the top of the obelisk vibrated against a blue crystal. It created a series of varied tones that burst forth like brass horns. A bone funnel amplified the vibrations from the top of the obelisk. Ashra jumped. She looked around. No one saw her reaction. *Good.* Eerie silence followed.

Ashra worried her bottom lip between her teeth and peered into the camp. Enormous tattered tents flapped like stray tails in the wind. Gnawed bones and bits of garbage lay strewn about the grounds. Giants were not held in high regard. They were shoved off in a camp, much the same as humans, in contrast to the ornate city the other Krad lived. The similarities ended there. Giants were mostly mute and had extremely violent tempers. If they were crossed, they smashed whoever was in their path, even if it was another Krad. It was not uncommon to see two Giants fighting for lack of a better thing to do. Sensitives and Benders gave the Giants a wide berth, leaving the humans to deal with the repercussions. They were like the unwanted stepbrother you couldn't disown, but refused to sit next to at family gatherings.

The stench in the Giant encampment made the smell of human sweat seem preferable. Ashra brought her durable cotton work shirt up to her crinkled nose in an attempt to inhale a more pleasant scent. It didn't help. She scanned the chip again and the same series of short