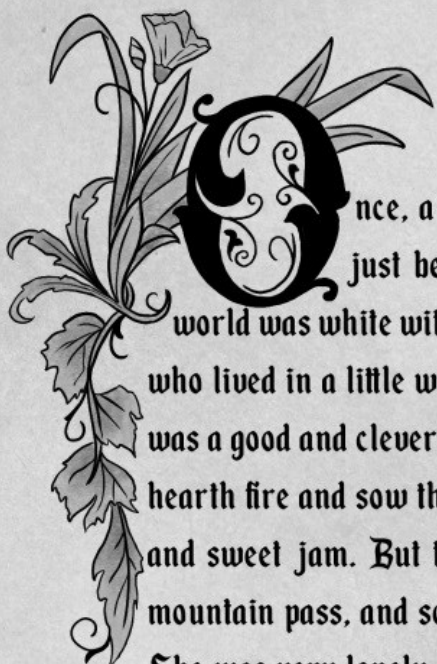


WINTER'S
STORY

AN EXCERPT FROM
IRON HEART

AUTHOR OF *CRIER'S WAR*

NINA VARELA



Once, a very long time ago, when the mountains had just begun to sprout from the earth and the whole world was white with newborn snow, there was a girl called Hana who lived in a little wooden cottage with her mama and papa. Hana was a good and clever girl. She helped her mama chop wood for the hearth fire and sow the fields with barley, and her papa make bread and sweet jam. But the nearest village sat beyond a snow-choked mountain pass, and so Hana did not have any friends to play with. She was very lonely. She tried to play with Mama and Papa, but they were grown-ups and thus did not remember how.

One day, after Hana finished her morning work, she was overcome with a rush of such loneliness that it felt like an ice-prick in her heart. She sat below a white birch and let her tears fall to the snow, and quietly she sang:

“Sister Winter, Sister Winter,
Will you let me sing for you?
Will you join me with your reed pipes?
Can we play like children do?”

Hana didn't know it, but Winter was watching from nearby. She could hear the soft little pulse at Hana's throat, taste the salt of

Hana's tears. Winter was not softhearted, but something about the girl's song burrowed its way inside her snowbank chest and stayed there. Winter closed her eyes and made the Northern Wind sing alongside Hana. A cold, howling duet.

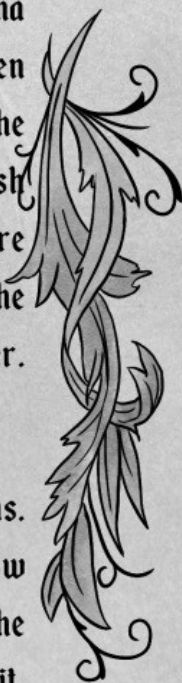
Hana laughed. The Northern Wind laughed with her.


And Winter, who could take any form, turned herself into a little girl, and she crept out of the woods and sat with Hana under the white birch, and that was that.

Years passed. Winter was a monstrous friend.

Oh, sometimes she was good: Sometimes she was a girl who played and laughed and would dance all night to amuse Hana and Mama and Papa. Sometimes she kept their fields unfrozen, their garden green till solstice. But sometimes Winter stumbled through the doorway, clutching a ragged cloak in both hands, shaking fresh snow all over the floor. Sometimes she stretched gracelessly before the hearth fire, bony limbs akimbo, and sneered at the fire, and the yawning hearth, and the snow-damp firewood heaped in a corner. The chimney, cobbled together from bricks of black mud. The ax.

Sometimes Winter made herself at home and stayed for months. Those were bad times for Hana's family. Winter never let the snow melt, not even in summer. There was so much ice caked onto the ground, so much permafrost, no lukewarm summer could touch it.





For months, the sun was nothing but light: pale, watery light, refracted by the frost-bowed trees, flung in strange patterns, scattered glass-like across the snow.

Winter was beautiful and terrible, always both at once.

Years collected like tree rings. Still Hana called Winter her friend, and still she opened the door when Winter showed up shrieking. Slowly, Winter began to soften her sharp edges. How could she not? Being cruel to Hana was like trying to stave off daybreak by shouting at the sun. Cruelty was wasted on the kind. Winter stirred up snowstorms, painted the sky gray for weeks, and still Hana sang:

“Sister Winter, Sister Winter,
Let me wash your aching back.

I have watched you work from dawnbreak
Till the gloaming fell to black.”

And Winter sighed her windy sigh and let Hana wash her, and she didn't even turn the bathwater to ice. Hana grew into a strong young woman. Her hair was black and plaited; her eyes were rich dark earth. Her heart was a snow-bright star behind her ribs.

But there must be a balance in all things, so as Hana burned brighter, Mama and Papa began to fade. Mama got very, very sick. Papa summoned healers from a dozen villages, but no mountain teas or tisanes could save Mama. She needed a medicine made only by the

fishing villages on the banks of the Steorran Sea, all the way across the tundra. Papa was too old to make the journey. Mama begged Hana not to go, but for all the girl's kindness she was still stubborn as a goat. She left the very next day.

Half way through her journey, Hana was caught in a snowstorm and became hopelessly lost. She stumbled for days across the ice fields, starving and freezing, and she sang:

“Sister Winter, Sister Winter,
I am lost and scared to sleep.
I have kept my lantern glowing
But the dark is very deep.”

Hana was so small, and the tundra was so big. Winter didn't hear her. Finally, Hana was too weak to keep going. She lay down in the snow, weeping for her mama, and she sang:

“Sister Winter, Sister Winter,
Hear me knocking at your door.
Hear me whispering your name.
Hear my footsteps cross your floor.”

She settled deeper into her snow bed. She looked up at the night sky and tried to think of good things: Mama and Papa and their little cottage, their hearth fire, their mud-cobbled lives. The taste of bread and honey. Winter's barefoot dancing, the flash of her grin. Hana





Hana thought of all those things, and the cold sank into her bones, and she sang:

“Dearest Winter, sweetest Winter,
I feel your kiss now at my core.
I will sleep with you till morning,
Then I’ll sleep forevermore.”

Hana sang until her throat was raw and her skin webbed with frost and her mouth too cold for words. Slowly, the heat left her body. The blood froze in her veins. Her heartbeat faded to a moth-wing flutter, and then silence.

Snow fell down to cover her body like pyre ash. The Northern Wind, who had sung along with Hana so many years before, swept over her and played with her black hair one last time, and then carried on westward to the mountains.

The Northern Wind told Winter what he’d seen out on the tundra. He braced himself for her howling, earth-splitting rage.

But Winter was already gone. She could cross entire ice fields in the span of a breath, and she was leagues away. She found Hana’s body easily. The girl was dead, but a tiny spark had survived in the core of her, the last pinprick of heat in a cold hearth. You did not burn so bright for so long without such a spark.

Winter didn't know much about humans—the soft golden years she'd spent with Hana were only brief moments compared to all the millennia that had come before—but she knew that. She had seen that spark once or twice before in the kindest, warmest souls.

Winter, of the snowbank breast and icy dark heart, whose touch made green things wither with frost, knelt down beside Hana in the snow. She cupped Hana's face in her hands and pressed her frozen mouth to Hana's forehead. She let her breath fan out across Hana's body.

In the purple dusk, between the snow and the rising moon, the spark in Hana's heart flickered and flared.


Without opening her eyes, Hana sang:

“Dearest Winter, sweetest Winter,
I hear you knocking at my door.
I hear you whispering my name.
I hear your footsteps cross my floor.”

Winter took her hand.

Together they crossed the tundra to the Steorran Sea and fetched the medicine that would save Mama's life. Together they crossed all the way back. Together they helped Mama drink the medicine, and they helped Papa when he broke his shinbone, and they helped sow the fields and tend the garden and reap the summer harvest for





years to come.

Winter still brought snow down to blanket the mountains, and she still brushed the barley and cabbages and all the wildflowers with her killing touch, but her heart had shifted. There was a darkness in death, but Winter knew from Hana that it wasn't emptiness or shadows or the absolute black between the stars. Death was dark soil. Death was a soft and ancient womb.

After a great many years together, it was finally time for Hana to die. She was ready for it. She lay in her bed and waited. Her starlit heart burned steady.

Winter held her as she died.

Winter carried Hana's body out of their house, past the garden and the barley fields. Past the river that had long since carried Mama and Papa's ashes. Past the foothills and up into the mountains. She laid Hana down in a cradle of stone. The mountains wrapped their arms around Hana. They were one.

That persistent spark, all that was left of Hana, sank deep into the stone. It was not her, but it was the old ache of her. The bright of her. The spirit of her, which would glow until even the mountains died.

And Winter sang:

“Dark-heart lover, death-part lover,
Lay you with me in the snow.
May you miss me dear each summer
May your bones be stone below.”

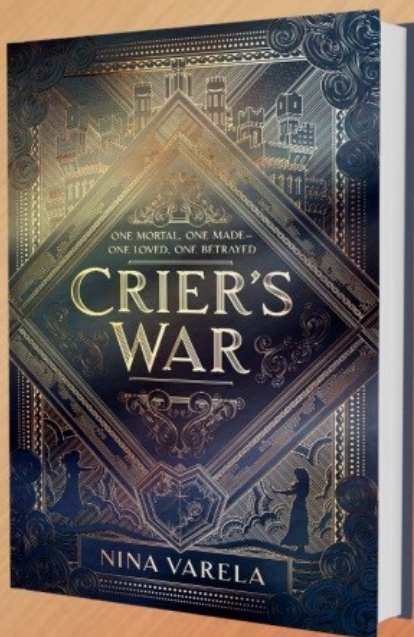
THE END

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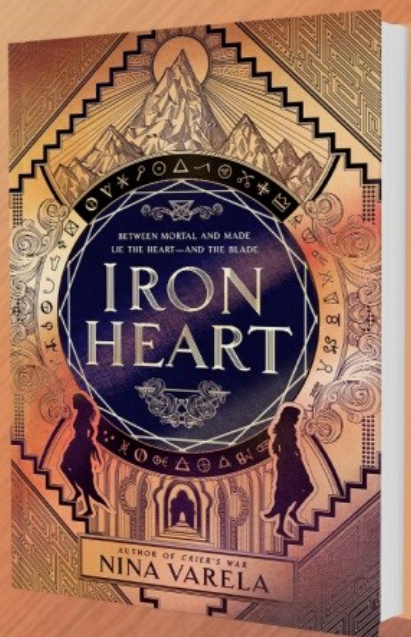
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