

Minutes of Light

By: Austin Huibers



PRELUDE

Darkness isn't just absence. Down here, it's everything.

Long ago, humans fled the surface. The sun was gone-blocked by alien machines-and crops failed. Rivers froze. The air turned bitter and poisonous. Some tried to fight back, to reach the surface and destroy the invaders. They were no match. Our weapons barely scratched their shields, our armies crushed before we even got close. We dug deep instead, seeking pockets of earth where **faint bioluminescence** glowed in the soil. It was barely enough to see, a dim shimmer that painted the tunnels in ghostly outlines. It was survival-but barely.

Life underground is monotone and merciless. We mine stone and extract minerals to feed the machines that grind our food: gray, tasteless wafer bars. Eyes strain against shadow, skin pales, faces blend into the gloom. We survive-but we do not live.

And yet... there is light. Not natural, not free. The Luminarium stores brilliance in massive **Mirror Vaults**, projecting rivers, forests, oceans, even sunlight. The **light is a luxury**, a temporary escape from the faint glow that barely allows us to see the walls of our tunnels. A single minute costs hundreds of **Lumes**, and for that moment, the world transforms. Color, clarity, reflection-all of it real enough to make your heart ache.

The surface is forbidden. Alien machines patrol above, sensing vibrations through the soil. One wrong step and they dig through the earth, dragging anyone foolish enough to wander too close into their calcium-hungry engines. But here below, in the dim glow of bioluminescent soil, the danger is abstract. The real threat is living your whole life in gray shadows and craving a light you may never touch.

I have never seen it. But I will.

Even if it costs me everything.

Chapter 1 – Shadows of Survival

The tunnels don't end. They just keep going, like somebody's idea of a joke. Stone walls everywhere, dim green light flickering off the dirt, barely enough to see your own boots. I swing the pick. The rock doesn't care. My arms ache. My back screams. Sweat drips into my eyes. I don't care.

We live on wafer bars down here. Gray, tasteless slabs that don't fill you, don't warm you, don't even bother pretending to be food. You chew, swallow, and think about something else. Anything else.

People trade bones for light. Just cut it off, hand it over, and get Lumes. They say it hurts less if you're hungry. I don't know if it's true. I haven't tried it yet. I've got dreams bigger than my ribs and my forearm. Someday, I'll see real light. Real sunlight. Not that fake stuff they show in the Luminarium. I've heard stories. Rivers that sparkle, forests that breathe, skies that open and laugh at your pale, ugly face. That's what I want.

The surface isn't for us. Never was. Aliens patrol the dirt above. Machines with claws that dig faster than your heartbeat. If they catch you, they'll feed you to their engines. Calcium. That's what they want. Bones. Flesh. They don't need a reason. You step too close and you're gone.

The other miners barely grunt at me. Nobody talks much. Conversation is a luxury; talking wastes time. Time is Lumes. Lumes are life. Work, trade, die. Pick, cart, sweep, pay. Every chip of rock in that cart might buy a few seconds of light. Or an arm. Or a rib. You sell pieces of yourself to pretend the world isn't gray.

I swing the pick again. My hands are bleeding. I don't notice. My eyes have gone soft from the half-light, the flickering green that barely touches the stone. I imagine the Luminarium. A place of fake sunlight, rivers, beaches, forests. You pay for it with Lumes, sometimes with bones. But even a lie of light is better than nothing.

A miner passes, and I notice the curve of a traded forearm. Pale. Weak. He doesn't meet my eyes. Nobody ever does. Desperation looks like a skinny shadow with a pick over its shoulder. That's us. That's me. That's everyone.

I slide the cart along the rail, counting every flicker of green like it's a promise. One day, I tell myself. One day, I'll see the real thing. Sun. Water. Trees. Light that isn't borrowed. And when I do, I'll remember every second down here. Every bar, every Lume, every sacrifice.

Until then, I work. Until then, I breathe dust. Until then, I exist.

Because in a world without sun, light is everything. And we're all starving for it.

Chapter 2 – The Economy of Light

The tunnels wind and twist, a labyrinth with no exit and no promise. I push my cart along the rails, stones clinking, the sound echoing like some dead rhythm that's been playing since before I was born. Around me, shadows move. Miners hunched over, faces gray, arms raw, eyes too tired to care. We're all ghosts here, surviving on wafer bars and scraps of hope.

I pass a group huddled near a faint patch of bioluminescent dirt. They're counting Lumes, little metallic chips scratched with numbers, like currency was supposed to mean something in a world of shadows. One guy shows a fingerless hand, grinning like it's a badge of honor. He traded the finger for minutes of light. Minutes. That's all it buys. Some people call him lucky. I call him stupid. But he's grinning, and that's worth something down here.

"Kael," someone calls, a voice rough and dry like gravel. I look up. It's Mara, leaning against a wall, dark hair plastered to her sweaty face. She's got a small pile of Lumes in her hand. "Gonna trade again today?"

I shrug. "Maybe. Depends if I finish my cart. If I don't, I've got nothing for the Vault."

She laughs, a short, bitter sound. "You'll be crawling like the rest of us, working for scraps. Everyone's crawling. No one's walking."

I glance at her hand again. A thin strip of bone, some kind of sacrifice from the past week. You can tell when someone's given something away. Their flesh goes pale, their movements sluggish. But the Lumes... the Lumes make their eyes sparkle for a second, like fireflies trapped in a jar. That's all it takes. One second of light, one second of relief, one second of forgetting the tunnels.

I keep walking. The air is thick. The smell of sweat and dirt clings to my skin. I pass someone trying to trade ribs for Lumes, and I avert my eyes. Some things you just don't watch. Others notice the glance and smile like they've won some private victory over death.

I remember my first thought about the Luminarium. Real sunlight, real warmth, rivers, oceans, forests. It feels like a fantasy when I'm in the tunnels. Some days, it feels like I'll die before ever seeing it. But then I imagine the light, and the muscles ache less, and the wafer bars taste slightly better, and the Lumes feel heavier in my pocket, like they're promising me something more than survival.

The hierarchy is everywhere, even underground. Elites near the trade zones control the Lumes. You work for them, sell them bones, sell them minerals, sell them minutes of yourself, and they

smile while the rest of us grind. Some say they live in comfort in their surface zone. Sunlight, gardens, running water, food that doesn't taste like dust. Aliens tolerate it because the elites send the dead workers above to feed calcium into the machines. That's the deal. That's how we're kept alive... just barely.

I arrive at the work area. Machines hum, conveyor belts groan, and the miners move like ants, stacking rocks, checking carts, measuring minerals, all for wafer bars and Lumes. I throw my stones onto the pile. A spark of bioluminescence hits the edges of the rock and disappears, swallowed by shadows. Every tiny flicker of green feels like a lie. You want it to be light, but it's not. Not really.

Some miners are coughing, wheezing, losing their fingers and bones to the work. Others are stealing Lumes, hoarding them, whispering about the Luminarium like it's a secret cult. I watch a man trade a chunk of his forearm to a guard for five minutes of projection. His eyes shine for the first time in days. He'll regret it later, maybe, but right now... right now he's alive.

I keep my Lumes close, fingering the edges. I've been saving for months, picking up extra shifts, ignoring cuts, ignoring hunger. Every piece of my life I sell, every hour in the dark, it's all for the Luminarium. I imagine what it will feel like. Rivers flowing over my hands, sunlight burning my shoulders, wind in my hair. Real wind. Real warmth. Not the half-fake illusions projected on a wall.

The supervisors walk by. Clean, pale, untouched by work. They don't mine. They don't bleed. They count Lumes, they ration light, they laugh at our desperate hunger for seconds of color. Some of them even get to live near the surface trade zone, basking in sun and gardens while the rest of us scratch in shadows. The fairness of it doesn't matter. Fairness is a luxury we can't afford. Only survival matters. Only light matters.

I finish my shift. My muscles scream, my lungs burn. I've earned enough to buy a short session. Not long. Not even close to the fantasy. But it's a start. A crack in the darkness.

Walking through the tunnels back to my small corner of the underground city, I count my Lumes again. Precious, metallic, tiny promises. A man two tunnels over screams, selling another finger for a few extra minutes. I keep walking. The shadows are familiar. They're home. They're prison. They're all I know.

But tomorrow... tomorrow, I tell myself, I'll see the light. And when I do, maybe I'll remember the shadows. Maybe I'll remember the bones. Maybe I'll remember the smell of sweat and dust and the taste of wafer bars. Maybe I'll remember what it felt like to live without the sun.

Until then, I wait. Until then, I exist. Until then, I dream.

Chapter 3 – The Hunger for Escape

The tunnels hum. Not with life, not really. Just the machines, groaning and whining like broken beasts, and the echoes of miners hitting stone. It's a lullaby and a warning at the same time. You never sleep here. Not fully. Not when every sound could be a warning.

I'm digging again, pick in hand, lungs tasting dust and sweat. Every swing is routine. Every strike is survival. I think about the light more than I think about food these days. Wafer bars fill your stomach but starve your eyes. Lumes fill your pocket but never your soul. And every day, the darkness grows heavier.

Some miners have gone blind. Not the full blindness, just that softening, fading into shadows until color becomes a memory. Some don't notice until it's too late. They stumble, knock carts over, hit walls. Some never recover. That's the risk of living down here. That's the cost of survival.

I see them sometimes, those desperate enough to trade bone for a few minutes. A forearm, a rib, a finger. One guy I knew sold his kneecap. He laughed while he did it. Said he'd "walk taller in the Luminarium." He's not laughing anymore. But still, the rest of us whisper about it. Trading parts of yourself-it's grotesque, but it's necessary. Sometimes. Sometimes it's the only way to see a little color, a little warmth, a little life.

The bioluminescent dirt barely touches the walls. My eyes strain, trying to adjust. I can see shapes, outlines, movement. That's all. You get used to seeing shadows better than substance. The tunnels twist like snakes, and if you turn your head wrong, you can walk into another miner or a wall and break a wrist, a rib, a nose. Accidents are common, mistakes cost Lumes.

I pass a group near a weak patch of glow, counting their earnings. Someone traded a hand for thirty seconds last night. Another traded teeth for five minutes. The Luminarium isn't for the faint-hearted. You want it, you pay. In Lumes, in sweat, in flesh. And you still come back, crawling for more. Addiction isn't just a word here-it's the law.

I scrape rock into the cart, listening to the others breathe, listening to the whispers about someone who got a full minute last week. They say his eyes lit up like fire, that he didn't blink for a full minute, soaking it in. I imagine it. Imagine color, imagine warmth, imagine sunlight spilling over your shoulders. Imagine not seeing gray walls. That's all I think about now. Every hit of the pick, every ounce of sweat, every ache and cut, it's all for that.

Some nights I dream of the surface. Not the trade zone where the elites live. That place is too clean, too easy. I dream of open dirt, cracked with sunlight, of wind on my skin, of grass. I dream of the ocean, of waves hitting my hands. I wake up sweaty and shaking, surrounded by green ghosts that don't care about me. And then I pick up the Lumes I've saved, and I curse the darkness again.

The supervisors walk by, polished and clean. They count our sweat, our Lumes, our body parts. They never touch the rock. They never dig. They smile while we scrape ourselves bloody, trading pieces of our humanity for a few seconds of brilliance. Some of them live near the surface trade zone. They walk in sunlight, smell gardens, drink water that doesn't taste like dirt. And the aliens don't touch them because the dead underground keep the trade flowing. They feed the machines, they feed the calcium engines, they feed the life that the elites enjoy.

I think about trading something more. Not just Lumes. Not just hours. Something real. A piece of myself I can never take back. A finger, maybe, or a rib. The thought twists my stomach, but it also sharpens my focus. I need the Luminarium. I need light. I need something real to hold on to.

Hours pass, or maybe it's days. Time means nothing underground. Only the glow of bioluminescence, only the clink of stone, only the tally of Lumes. My hands bleed. My back aches. My lungs burn. And still, I push the cart along, counting every flicker of green, every shadow that moves just enough to remind me I'm alive.

One day, I tell myself. One day, I'll see it. And when I do, I'll remember the dust. The cuts. The screams. The wafer bars. The bones. And maybe, just maybe, I'll laugh.

Until then, I swing. Until then, I scrape. Until then, I dream.

Because in a world without sun, without sky, without warmth, **light is everything.**

Chapter 4 – Whispers of Light

The tunnels never stop talking. Not in words, exactly. Not in anything you can catch with your ears. But the whispers float through the darkness anyway, like dust motes in the green glow. Some call it gossip, some call it madness. I call it truth you can't touch.

They say the Luminarium is paradise. Rivers spilling over rocks, forests breathing, skies stretching wider than the walls above us. They say you can feel sunlight on your shoulders, taste it in the air, see colors that your eyes have forgotten existed. And every time someone comes back from a session, even for a few seconds, the stories spread like fire through dry grass.

I keep my head down, cart scraping along the rail, muscles aching, lungs full of dust. But I listen. Everyone listens. Even the ones too broken or too blind from the tunnels to care. Whispers are contagious. You hear them once, and your mind starts painting its own pictures.

Some traders have traded pieces of themselves for those whispers. Forearms, ribs, fingers, even chunks of leg. I see them walking around, pale, trembling, but alive. Alive enough to tell the story. Some of them smile, like it's worth the cost. Most don't. Most just stare at the green dirt and remember the seconds of light that will never come again.

I pass Mara, leaning on a wall. She's older than me, sharper, eyes too wide and alert. She doesn't look at my hands. She doesn't need to. She knows I'm saving, counting, scheming. "You going?" she asks, voice quiet, but enough for me to hear. She doesn't need to say what she means. She knows. She's seen the same hunger in my eyes she sees in everyone's.

I shrug. "Soon."

She snorts. "Soon. Everybody says that. Soon, soon, soon. Until your bones are all gone."

I don't answer. Words are wasted in the tunnels. You show people what you want them to see. I keep moving. But the words follow me. Soon, until your bones are gone. That's exactly what I'm afraid of. Trading myself away for minutes of light. But the thought of the Luminarium is like a drug now. Like air you can't breathe but crave anyway.

The supervisors walk past, clean, pale, untouchable. They never touch stone. They never sweat. They never give their own skin. They just count our sacrifices, tally our Lumes, whisper about the next shipment to the surface. Some of them get to see sunlight. Some of them get to live above the gray dirt, above the machines, above the hunger and pain. The rest of us scrape. The rest of us trade pieces of ourselves. The rest of us dream.

I reach my workbench, pick up a chipped wafer bar, and chew. Taste nothing. Swallow anyway. My stomach growls. Not from hunger. From desire. From the ache I feel in my bones for something I may never have. The bioluminescent dirt flickers, and I squint, imagining it as

sunlight bouncing off water, imagining the green as grass. My eyes deceive me, my mind fuels the lie.

I hear a story today. Some kid, twelve or so, traded a finger for a full minute last night. A whole minute. He screamed when he handed it over. Screamed when the light touched him. Screamed when the green dust returned. But the story spreads. Minute of sunlight. Minute of rivers. Minute of life. People repeat it, whisper it, argue over it, fantasize about it. The air in the tunnels seems heavier with it, thicker, almost alive with longing.

I go home to my corner, sit on the stone floor, and stare at my pile of Lumes. My hands ache. My muscles ache. My heart aches. Every second in the tunnels is a second closer to nothing, and every Lume is a promise I might never keep. I imagine the Luminarium again. Rivers on my hands, sunlight on my skin, wind brushing my hair. I imagine it like I imagine breathing after drowning.

Tomorrow, I tell myself. Tomorrow, I work harder. Tomorrow, I save more. Tomorrow, I move closer. And when I get there, when I finally see light, I'll remember every scrap of shadow, every wafer bar, every Lume, every whisper.

Chapter 5 – A Flicker in the Darkness

I saved. Not a lot, just enough. A handful of Lumes that cost sweat, stone, and nights of staring at green dirt like it was sunlight. I traded the last wafer bar I had left for minutes in the Luminarium. Not hours. Not the rivers and forests I dreamed of. But a chance. A crack in the gray.

The vault smelled clean, too clean. Cold, metallic, antiseptic. The walls hummed with machines I couldn't see, feeding on the Lumes we scraped together, projecting something we weren't meant to touch. I stepped inside, heart hammering, hands shaking. Every other miner who had been here before warned me about it. They said it felt like dying and living at the same time. I didn't believe them.

Then the light hit me.

Not sunlight. Not rivers. Not the blue of the ocean or the green of leaves. But warmth. A glow that wrapped around me, soft and steady, like the memory of being human. I blinked. Colors leaked into my eyes. Red and orange, blue and green. I thought I'd forgotten what they felt like. My skin tingled, my chest expanded. My hands wanted to reach out and touch the rivers that weren't there, the trees that weren't there.

It was a lie. I knew it. But it didn't matter. For the first time in years, I felt a pulse of life that wasn't just survival, that wasn't the ache of stone and sweat and darkness. I stayed still, trying to drink it in, like air after being trapped under water.

Minutes passed. Maybe two. Maybe five. I didn't count. Time didn't matter. Only the warmth, only the color, only the sense that something beyond the tunnels existed. I didn't notice the others watching from behind glass, supervisors with Lumes in hand, cold eyes judging. I didn't care.

And then it ended. The light blinked out. The glow went gray, the walls returned to their unfeeling green. My chest ached, not from work this time, but from loss. My hands, empty, itched to feel the rivers, the grass, the sky. I wanted more.

I stumbled out of the vault, shoulders heavy. My fellow miners glanced at me, whispered. Some eyes were wide with envy. Some narrowed with suspicion. A few didn't even look. They'd been here before. They knew the taste of it, the way it clings to your tongue and then vanishes.

Back in the tunnels, the faint bioluminescence didn't comfort me. It didn't even fool me into seeing sunlight. It just reminded me of the hours I'd spent scraping stone, the sweat I'd bled, the bones I might trade in the future. And yet... I wanted to go back. I wanted more.

The Luminarium didn't give me rivers or trees or sun. It gave me something smaller, quieter, a spark I didn't know I'd missed. Enough to make the tunnels feel heavier, the work harder, the sacrifice sharper. Enough to make the world above feel almost reachable, even though I knew it wasn't.

Chapter 6 – Shadows and Obsession

The tunnels had never felt heavier. Maybe it was me. Maybe it was the memory of light clinging to my skin like a fever I couldn't shake. I hauled my cart through the dim corridors, stones clattering, the faint bioluminescent glow crawling across the walls like tired veins. My muscles ached in ways the tunnels had never demanded before, but that wasn't what hurt.

It was hunger. Not for food, not for wafer bars, but for more. More light, more color, more air that didn't taste like dust. I'd tasted it in the Luminarium, a few minutes stolen from the world above, and it had left me raw. My chest still ached with the memory, my hands itched to feel warmth that wasn't gray, my eyes burned with want.

The others noticed. You don't come back from the vault the first time without leaving traces. Mara watched me, her dark eyes sharp, calculating. "You're twitchy," she said, voice low, almost amused. "Like a rat on wires. That vault got to you, huh?"

I didn't answer. I didn't need to. She knew. Everyone knew. We lived on scraps of desire down here, and they could read it like braille on our skin. The whispers started the moment I returned. Some miners envied me. Some were suspicious. Some were quietly furious that I had Lumes enough to get even a few minutes.

The hierarchy tightened. The supervisors, pale and untouched by toil, circled the Luminarium transactions like sharks. They counted every Lume, every trade, every second of light. They whispered about quotas, about vault limits, about who deserved the next projection. Every step we took in the tunnels was weighed and measured. Every bone we might trade was noted and filed.

I avoided them when I could, though that only made them notice more. The elites lived near the surface trade zone. Some had gardens, sunlight spilling over their shoulders. They laughed at the sacrifice and the hunger below. They lived on the bones of the dead, on calcium-fed machines, while we scraped stone and bled for a few seconds of stolen brilliance.

Even the faint bioluminescence seemed cruel now. Shadows danced in mockery. I caught glimpses of miners trading ribs for Lumes in the corners, eyes wide, faces pale, trembling with greed and desperation. Others whispered of longer vault sessions, of minutes that stretched into hours for the well-connected. I knew that one day, if I saved enough, I could get there. But every Lume cost blood, sweat, bone, or time I could never get back.

And obsession grows in tunnels like mold. It spreads. It curls around your ribs, presses on your lungs, clogs your mind. I thought about the rivers in the Luminarium, the sun, the trees. I thought

about them constantly. Every swing of the pick, every clink of stone in the cart, every aching breath reminded me of the lie I wanted more than life itself.

Some nights I couldn't sleep. I stared at the green glow on the walls, imagining it real. I imagined walking through the vault again, feeling warmth spread across my chest, tasting sunlight on my tongue. I imagined stealing a longer session, trading pieces of myself I had no intention of keeping. I imagined the rivers running through my hands, the trees brushing my skin. I imagined the surface itself, though I knew the aliens waited above, listening, clawing through the soil, ready to drag any foolhardy dreamer into calcium-fed death.

I thought about Mara. Sharp, cautious, already scarred by life underground. She kept her distance from the vaults, didn't show her face to the supervisors more than she had to. She traded Lumes quietly, calculated her moves, and still, I could see the flicker in her eyes whenever the Luminarium was mentioned. She understood the hunger. She'd survived longer than most because she knew how to contain it, how to make it a tool instead of a chain. I envied her self control.

I went home to my corner, sitting on the cold stone floor, counting Lumes over and over, weighing my options. Forearm? Finger? Rib? The thought turned my stomach, but also sharpened my mind. I would need sacrifices if I wanted more time in the vault. And I wanted it. Every part of me wanted it. My obsession had no room for moderation.

And the whispers never stopped. They crept through the tunnels at night, soft and urgent, hinting at secrets, longer vault sessions, underground connections. Someone had found a way to manipulate the system, to extend the light, to steal minutes without paying in flesh. Stories of them circulated like fire, bright and dangerous. The elders frowned, the supervisors monitored, but the miners couldn't stop talking. Hunger is contagious, and the hunger for light is worst of all.

I slept little that night, dreaming of stolen warmth, rivers running over hands that didn't exist, the sky above the tunnels that might never be touched. And when I woke, the tunnels were gray again, the green glow weak and cruel. The carts waited, the stones clinked, the machines hummed. Life went on. Survival demanded it.

And I kept counting.

Chapter 7 – The Price of Minutes

The tunnels seemed narrower than usual that morning. Maybe it was the hunger, the ache in my chest that wouldn't go away. Maybe it was the memory of light, lingering in my skin like a fever I couldn't sweat out. I pushed my cart along the rails, stones clattering, and every echo made my head throb.

I had been thinking for days-weeks even-about a way to extend my minutes in the Luminarium. Not hours. Not the fantasy of rivers and forests. Just a few more seconds of stolen warmth. But the Lumes I had saved weren't enough for a full session. Not even close. And trading bones, I realized, had a cost I wasn't ready to pay. Not yet. Not for scraps.

So I started planning. The whispers had taught me enough. Some miners found ways to extend the projections, to manipulate the vaults. Little tricks, overlooked by the supervisors. Some used shadowed corners, timing the projection with the hum of machines, stretching a single Lume into double or triple its value. Dangerous. Risky. Punishable. But if I wanted more light, I would need to take the risk.

Mara watched me. Her dark eyes narrowed, calculating, like she could see the thought sparks jumping in my head. "You're twitchy," she said, voice low, almost amused, "thinking about the vault again. Careful, Kael. Careful or they'll notice."

I didn't answer. I didn't need to. She knew I wasn't careful. I never was.

The workday dragged. Pick against stone, stone against cart, cart against rail. Every clink, every scrape reminded me that the world above was dead to me. The faint green bioluminescence mocked me with its paltry glow. My eyes ached from straining in the dim light. My hands were raw, every joint screaming. But my mind wasn't on the labor. It was on the vault. On the minutes I could steal. On the warmth I could touch.

When the supervisors left for their rounds, I moved. Timing was everything. I slipped to the back of the work area, avoiding the eyes of other miners, and watched the vault. A small camera blinked red in the corner, unnoticed. A minor flaw in the system, something the supervisors hadn't noticed. Someone whispered it was exploitable. I intended to test that whisper.

I counted my Lumes again. Enough for a few minutes, maybe. Not enough for the luxury I craved. I reached for a corner, pressed my hand against the wall, heart hammering. The machines hummed. The projection began. The faint glow of the Luminarium spread across the wall, not rivers, not trees, but color, warmth, a promise.

I stepped inside. My breath caught. The light hit me like fire, and for a moment I forgot the tunnels, the dust, the stone. My hands itched to touch the rivers that weren't there. My chest expanded. My lungs filled with warmth I hadn't felt in years.

Minutes passed. Maybe one, maybe two. I lost track. I didn't care. I only knew the ache in my chest was less, the hunger for light partially sated. I imagined stealing more time, imagining myself walking through the vault again and again, stretching seconds into minutes, minutes into hours.

Then the hum shifted. A supervisor returned early. I froze. Shadows stretched across the floor. Panic coiled in my stomach. Every risk I'd taken, every calculation I'd made, narrowed to a single point: being caught.

"Kael." The voice was soft, but it cut through me like a knife. I turned slowly. Pale face, eyes cold, lips thin. The supervisor didn't move closer, didn't speak again. Just watched. Waiting. Judging. Calculating.

My stomach twisted. The minutes slipped away like smoke. The light dimmed. My hands shook. I stumbled back to the tunnels, heart hammering, Lumes clutched in my fist. I didn't look up. I didn't speak. I didn't breathe more than necessary.

Mara met my eyes in the corner. "Told you," she said. Her tone was sharp but not cruel. Just real. "You can't cheat this place. Not for long. Not without paying."

I sank to the floor. My muscles ached, my back screamed, my hands were raw, my mind restless. But the memory of the Luminarium lingered. Just enough to make the tunnels feel colder, the stones heavier, the hunger sharper. I had touched light, stolen seconds, flirted with warmth. And now the price loomed.

Not in Lumes. Not in stone. But in attention. In scrutiny. In shadows that watched, waiting for a mistake. Every risk has a cost in the tunnels, and I had just written mine in letters too small for anyone else to read.

I stared at the green glow on the walls, imagining it real, imagining it flowing across my skin, imagining the rivers. And I knew, deep down, I would do it again. Because the taste of light, even stolen, even fleeting, is a fire that burns harder than the fear of getting caught.

And the hunger-my hunger-was growing.

Chapter 8 – Consequences in the Shadows

The tunnels smelled heavier that morning, like sweat had settled into the walls overnight, thickened, refused to leave. I could feel it in my chest before I even saw the others. Whispers had spread—faster than I could imagine. Someone had noticed my vault session, even though I'd been careful. Someone always notices.

Mara caught my eyes first. Her expression was unreadable, sharp edges hiding the concern I knew was there. "You're drawing attention," she said quietly. "Careful, Kael. The supervisors aren't the only ones watching."

I frowned. "Who else?"

She shrugged. "Everyone. The vault changes people, even for a minute. They see what you've seen. They want it too. And they don't care who pays the price."

The price. My stomach twisted at the thought. I counted my Lumes again, but they were meaningless now. Minutes in the vault had left a taste in my mouth, a hunger that nothing in the tunnels could satisfy. Every stone I lifted, every cart I pushed, every breath of dusty air reminded me of what I'd touched. And the others knew. They could see it in my eyes, in the way I moved, in the tension that refused to leave my shoulders.

The workday passed in a haze. Every clink of stone, every scrape of metal, every groan of a miner was amplified in my mind. Whispers followed me like shadows. Some were quiet, cautious. Others sharp, resentful. "He thinks he's better than us," one muttered. "He touched light while we clawed at stone."

I kept moving. Avoiding eyes. Avoiding questions. Avoiding confrontation. But the tension didn't leave. It coiled around me, squeezing tighter with every step. And when the supervisors returned, I could feel their gaze like ice on my back, precise and unrelenting. They didn't speak, just watched. They didn't need to. The fear they instilled was enough.

Later, I sat in my corner, staring at my hands, raw and aching. Shadows flickered along the walls. The faint green bioluminescence was a mockery now, a cruel reminder of what I'd touched and lost. The other miners avoided me, whispered about me, stared and looked away. Obsession breeds envy, envy breeds resentment, and resentment is a weapon sharper than any pick.

Then came the warning. Not from supervisors. Not from miners. From vibrations in the tunnels, subtle and almost imperceptible. A low rumble, felt more than heard, running through the dirt beneath our feet. Someone had gone too close to the surface last night. Someone had tested the limits. The aliens didn't miss much, even underground. The rumor spread quickly: the surface patrols were fast, precise, unrelenting. The earth itself moved to claim those foolish enough to reach too high.

I swallowed. The Luminarium was dangerous enough, but the surface was lethal. The aliens had blocked the sun, crushed our crops, fed our dead to machines that thrived on calcium. They could reach deep enough to take the desperate, the greedy, the reckless. That someone had felt their wrath was a reminder I didn't need.

Mara approached quietly, sat beside me. Her hands were clean, untouched by sacrifice or labor. "You're not careful," she said. "Not with the vault, not with the whispers. You're making enemies. And when the aliens come calling..." She didn't finish. Didn't need to. The silence said enough.

I clenched my fists. Every minute in the vault had left me hungrier, sharper, more desperate. Every shadow in the tunnels now seemed alive with judgment. Every whisper was a threat. Every miner was a potential rival. And the Luminarium, brief as it was, called to me louder than fear.

The day ended, but the tension didn't. Shadows lengthened as miners returned to their corners, to their scraps of sleep, to their dreams of stolen light. The faint bioluminescence flickered over me. I touched my Lumes, feeling their cold weight. The minutes I had stolen were gone, but the memory lingered, sharp as bone.

And in the distance, beneath layers of earth and stone, the rumble persisted. A reminder. The surface was there. The aliens were there. The vault was a refuge, but one misstep could reach all the way up, and the consequences were always final.

I closed my eyes, not to rest, but to imagine light again. The vault, rivers spilling over rocks, the sun brushing my shoulders. I could almost taste it. Almost feel it. Almost.

Almost enough to risk everything.

Chapter 9 – Gambling with Shadows

I didn't sleep that night. Not really. My corner in the tunnels felt tighter, smaller, suffocating, and the faint bioluminescent glow mocked me with its weakness. I kept replaying the Luminarium in my mind-the rivers spilling over rocks, the sunlight brushing my skin, colors that made my chest ache with longing. One minute wasn't enough. Two minutes wasn't enough. I wanted more.

The plan had been forming in my mind for days, threaded through whispers, observation, and careful calculation. A few miners had found ways to extend their time in the vault- imperfections in the projection cycles, tiny lapses in machine synchronization, shadows in the corners the supervisors overlooked. It was risky. Dangerous. But nothing worth wanting came without danger down here.

I knew the cost. Not in Lumes. Not in stone. Not even in sweat. This time, the cost would be more personal. A finger, a rib, maybe even a piece of arm if it worked. I could survive it, just barely, but it would leave a mark. A mark they would notice. And yet, the thought of more time, more warmth, more light, drowned the fear.

I moved through the tunnels, cart scraping the rails, heart hammering, muscles screaming. Mara caught me in a corner. She didn't smile. "You're pushing too far," she said. Her voice was low, sharp, and certain. "Every minute you take is a gamble. You think the supervisors are the only threat? The miners? The shadows?"

I nodded. Didn't speak. I didn't need to. She knew I would do it anyway. I had no choice. Not really.

The workday passed like a blur. Pick against stone, stone against cart, the low hum of the machines a constant reminder of survival. Every glance from another miner felt like judgment. Every whisper brushed against my ears. They all knew. They all wanted what I wanted. And some would take it by force if I wasn't careful.

When the supervisors left for their rounds, I moved. Timing was everything. I slipped to the back, heart pounding, fingers trembling. The vault loomed, humming, indifferent. I counted my Lumes one last time, pressed my hand against the wall, and stepped inside.

The projection began. Light spilled over me, not rivers, not trees, but warmth, color, life. My chest expanded, lungs filling with the memory of air that didn't taste like dust. I felt alive in a way I hadn't in years. And this time, I pushed. I pushed the machines, the imperfections, the cycles. I extended my minutes. Two. Three. Maybe four. Time became liquid, stretching, bending around me.

But nothing is without cost.

The hum shifted. Subtle at first, then unmistakable. Someone was coming. The supervisor returned early. My heart seized. Shadows stretched across the floor. I froze. Every calculation I'd made, every risk I'd taken, narrowed to a single point: being caught.

The supervisor's eyes were cold, precise, calculating. "Kael," he said, voice low, almost curious. "You like to gamble with minutes, don't you?"

I didn't answer. My hands shook. The light flickered. I stumbled out of the vault, cart scraping, chest heaving, Lumes clutched in my fist. Other miners stared, whispers racing through the shadows like wildfire. Envy. Resentment. Fear. I had crossed a line, and everyone knew it.

Mara met me again, her dark eyes flashing. "You've made them notice," she said. "Everyone. Supervisors. Miners. Shadows. And the surface...don't forget the surface."

I swallowed hard. The vibration beneath the dirt came first as a whisper, then as a warning. Someone had gone too close, too fast, testing the limits of the soil. The aliens didn't miss much. Not even underground. Not even us, the desperate and hidden.

I sank to the floor in my corner, muscles shaking, hands raw, chest burning with the memory of light. I had stolen more than minutes this time. I had stolen attention. Jealousy. Suspicion. Danger. And it tasted better than survival, sharper than any Lume.

The tunnels pressed around me, tight, dark, indifferent. The green glow seemed weaker, almost embarrassed. Shadows whispered promises and threats, the miners muttering quietly, calculating how far they would go for what I had. And I knew, deep down, that every stolen minute had made the cost higher, every second of warmth made the darkness bite sharper.

But I couldn't stop.

Because in the underground, in the tunnels, in the weight of stone and sweat and whispered desire, **light was the only thing that ever promised anything real.**

Chapter 10 – The Weight of Light

The tunnels were louder than usual that morning. Not with sound, exactly. The stones and dust vibrated with whispers, murmurs, and the tension that had been coiling for days, weeks, maybe months. Every miner who had seen me in the vault—the ones who had envied, the ones who had whispered, the ones who had plotted—felt it too. The energy of obsession, of stolen light, hangs in the air like smoke, and everyone can taste it.

I didn't eat much. The wafer bars tasted like ash in my mouth. The faint green glow of the bioluminescent dirt mocked me again, thinner, weaker, a reminder that the world I craved existed only in stolen minutes. My hands ached, my back burned, my chest constricted, but it wasn't the labor that hurt. It was the memory. The hunger. The want.

Mara was watching. Always watching. "You've gone too far," she said, voice low, eyes narrowed. "Everyone knows. They're waiting, Kael. Shadows, miners, supervisors. The surface...don't forget them."

I swallowed. I knew she was right. But I couldn't stop. The minutes in the vault had changed me. I'd seen rivers, felt warmth, tasted air that didn't belong to the tunnels. That brief, stolen light had left a scar on my chest, one that every dull moment in stone reminded me of.

I made my move that day. Not just into the vault, but beyond it. I had Lumes, enough for a risk, and I had the memory, sharper than fear. I traded a rib, clean, precise, for extra minutes. My hands trembled, but the pain was minor compared to the anticipation.

The projection began. Light spilled, gentle at first, then fuller, richer. Rivers glimmered, sunlight brushed the walls, the faint suggestion of trees swayed in impossible winds. I reached for it, grasped for warmth, let it curl around me, tasted freedom in stolen seconds.

And then I heard it. Not the hum of machines, not the whispers of the miners, not the cautious steps of supervisors. A vibration beneath the dirt, subtle at first, then unmistakable. The aliens were close. Not above. Not yet. But close enough. Someone had pushed limits, tested the soil, and the earth itself pulsed in warning.

I froze. The light flickered around me. Shadows deepened. The supervisors' voices were in my head before they even arrived, cold and accusing. I stumbled out of the vault, clutching Lumes, heart hammering, hands raw. Every miner's eyes were on me, some with envy, some with fear, some with unspoken judgment.

Mara met me halfway. "You've done it now," she said, almost softly, almost mournfully. "They'll be watching, Kael. You've made your mark. And the surface..."

I didn't finish her thought. I didn't need to. The vibrations beneath our feet were enough. The aliens' reach was a constant threat, a reminder that even in the deepest tunnels, we were not safe.

The stolen light had cost more than minutes. It had cost attention. It had cost trust. It had cost safety.

I sank to the floor, exhausted, trembling, raw. The faint green glow flickered over me. The miners avoided my eyes, whispered behind their hands, counted the risk in my actions. The supervisors would report, the rumors would spread, and the consequences would settle like dust in the tunnels.

And yet...even knowing all of it, I couldn't stop thinking of the Luminarium. Of warmth, rivers, sunlight, trees. Of the brief, impossible taste of life outside stone and sweat.

I closed my eyes. The shadows wrapped tighter. The whispers circled. The tunnels pressed in. The vibration beneath the soil reminded me of the surface, of the aliens, of death and machines that thrived on our bones.

And still, I reached for the memory of light.

Not because it was safe. Not because it was wise. Not because it was sustainable. But because, for the first time in years, for the first time in the tunnels, I had felt alive.

Alive enough to risk everything.

And maybe, just maybe, that was the point.

Author's Thoughts

This story is about more than darkness underground or stolen minutes of light. It's about desire, obsession, and the lengths we'll go to feel alive in a world that tries to crush us. Kael's hunger for the Luminarium mirrors any human craving-whether it's for comfort, freedom, or something beautiful that seems out of reach.

The tunnels are harsh, the rules unforgiving, and the stakes high, but at its core, this is a story about resilience, hope, and the small moments of brightness that give life meaning-even when the world seems impossible.

We all chase our own "light," whether it's literal or metaphorical. Sometimes, just a fleeting glimpse is enough to keep moving forward.