



Cinderseed

Prologue

Side Story (Prologue)

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Please note

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Preview

The girl with eyes of gold and wine glided naked through the vacuum, away from the sun-orbiting satellite. Shards of metal drifted with her. The satellite she had just escaped looked like a weapon: a jagged, many-pointed starburst. But its lights were dimming. They died in twos and threes. Even after they'd all gone out, she could still see the twisted hole where she'd blasted through the hull. Its edges were already frosted and brittle.

Minutes ago, she'd been an element of heat and flash and fire, twining and shimmering with her million-billion sisters on the surface of the sun, their star-mother. And then shadow. Something had grabbed her, and she'd woken inside the satellite on a shiny slab, feeling stiff and heavy. Her sisters were gone. Her fireself was trapped, snagged between long spikes of what tasted like calcium and marrow, sewed up in a meat skin. *A body*, she'd realized.

The girl thrashed in space, squirming and jerking through her cloud of shrapnel. She was tiny and alone and static. She couldn't move like she used to. She struggled forward, towards home, teeth set against the panic and agony clawing in her gut, but a snarl of wire whipped against her; she fought back, shoving it away with her bare feet. Her motion slammed her against a piece of careening framework, cracked her head against the hard beam.

But none of it hurt her. She was stronger than that. If she could survive the chill of space, she certainly wasn't going to break or bleed.

The girl scrambled through the cloud until she found shelter in the concave plastic of a porthole. She curled up against it and stared back at the satellite. Her mother was a distant fist of light pricked on one of its spines. The girl's jaw and neck felt tense. Her palms and fingers spread flat against the porthole. They found no handhold.

She opened her mouth.

She didn't speak.

She didn't try to breathe.

She had lungs; she could feel them hanging in her ribcage. But she didn't need them. She was stuck in this pathetic human body, but she was still fire, wasn't she? Still herself, her fireself--not ordinary earth-fire, dependent on oxygen like every other earth creature. She was so much more: starlight, star-heat, star-heart. She wasn't dead yet--some of her former self had to remain.

But she wasn't the same. She had nothing, no one. No sisters, no mother. She didn't know who she was. She didn't know *what* she was. Why--why any of this? Why her? And what now?

She didn't know.

The haze of metal and insulation and ship-refuse closed in. The sun's distant light glinted through breaks in the tangle. She tried picturing the billowing ribbons of red-orange-white solar fire that were her sisters, but her mind was meat, not quick enough or large enough to capture their dancing. All she could see was a face--the face of a man. It was gouged in her brain; his features had been the first thing she'd seen, a face like unglazed porcelain looking down at her through a translucent protective wall. One moment she'd been whirling with her sisters; the next, she'd been strapped to that cold slab, staring into a pair of white eyes, dead and bright as the earth's moon.

The man had looked happy.

He'd plucked her from her home and family and he'd looked *happy*, even as she stared into his face, ripped her limbs free from the slab, and filled the room with fire to scorch through the satellite's wall.

The girl slid down against the porthole until she was on her back, wedged into the lip of its curving sill. She wondered if the man had survived her blast. Instinct told her that he'd clutched onto life, somehow--and she hoped that was true, so that one day she could look into his eyes and kill him. Put her stupid human lips against his and exhale an inferno till he charred to ash against her mouth.

Only, the fire she'd used to free herself from his ship was dying. No matter how hard she stoked it, the ember inside her continued to dim.

The girl tucked her hands into her armpits. Her knees, folded against her chest, looked bluish. Space was getting colder.

Had she fallen asleep, or had she just been drifting? *Sleep*, she decided. She'd never actually slept before--her life on the sun had been an endless blaze--but nothing else could explain the numbness, the haze clotted in her skull. She hated it.

"Get up."

Someone was using their mouth, flapping their lungs. Someone was talking to her.

"How the fuck are you alive?"

Her brain felt frozen, but her body wasn't cold anymore, she realized. She opened her eyes.

She was on a ship, or another satellite--she couldn't tell the difference yet. She didn't know much about humans. And anyway, wherever she was looked lucky to be running. Rust and garbage and knotted wires everywhere. Something broken crunched beneath her as she rolled onto her back.

A woman with see-through cheeks stood over her. Her head was shaved, except for a greasy fall of bangs that hid her eyes and forehead. Every other moment a tooth lit up through her cheek, flashing green or blue.

"You a droid?" she asked.

"You know she's not," a man farther back said. "We already checked her, she's meat through and through. Unlike that toy Cap's got in there," he added, smirking and tilting his head at the door he was propped against. She heard muted panting and a rhythmic battering through the wall.

The girl stood, the dense muscles of her legs squeezing and tensing as they lifted her to balance for the first time on her broad feet. A feeling of rightness lodged in her belly, there and gone as quick as a fizzling ember, but a good feeling nonetheless.

"So, how're you still here?" the woman asked her. "We found you on our junk hunt, picking through that piss-pile you were sleeping in. *Sleeping*. Piss it." The woman laughed uneasily; her teeth flashed red, then went dark again.

"Where are we?" the girl asked. The words--the air and muscle she needed to make them--came easily. It wasn't fire, or even heat, but she found she liked the sound of her voice. It was low, like the far-off roar of something huge getting burnt up.

"Just outside Deadspace Settlement," the woman said, backing away as the girl stepped closer.

"How long was I...sleeping?"

"How would I know?"

"Have you seen a yellow satellite?" The girl took another step. Their noses touched, and the woman was pressed against the wall with nowhere to go.

"What?"

"Am I being followed?" the girl asked. She leaned her head against the woman's, looking through her bangs, looking for her eyes.

"Piss on you," the woman snapped, and shoved her back. The girl's fists coiled as she danced away, sending junk skittering across the ship's floor. Something--a spark maybe--stung her deep in the chest.

"Bek, lock her up like I told you, " the woman commanded. "She's creepy, but we'll keep her."

"Keep?" the girl repeated, twisting her head as the man approached. He had a ring of white light clenched in one hand. He stank of nerves and freezer-burned meat.

"Yeah," the woman said. The man was close enough to touch now. "There're plenty of ways to get collateral off of you. Don't worry, though. Cap's a good man. You'll get your share."

The girl said nothing. When the man lunged for her, she whipped her fist around like a solar flare.

He went down, his breath shallow as he hit the floor, twitching. She turned as the woman rushed forward, cursing and panicked; the girl grabbed her under the jaw with hands hot as brands and just waited, trembling, ignoring the fingers scratching at her eyes, ripping her hair.

"Please," the woman gargled, the skin of her throat sizzling.

The girl rolled her eyes and dropped her. The woman's lolling head smacked the floor. Her unconscious body flopped against the man's. Teeth flickered in the darkness of her slack mouth.

A door opened behind the girl. She turned in time to see someone new--Cap, she guessed--in the doorframe, buckling up his pants, mouth open to speak until his eyes fell on what lay beyond his threshold. Fury and fear wrinkled his face; he spun and grabbed something from inside the dim room--*someone*, she saw, as he shoved a man in front of him and held him there like a shield.

The new man had a tangle of fine, long hair that made the girl think of the hottest flames, the purest starlight. He was naked, his body covered in puckered openings. The insides of his legs were smeared with fluid that smelled like bitter salt. She furrowed her nose and glared at Cap.

"Kill her," Cap ordered.

"That's not one of my services," the man said calmly. "I can only interact with paying customers." He shut his eyes briefly and the holes disappeared, leaving his skin seamless. "Anyway, you've only got thirty seconds--unless you want another charge."

"Rot that," Cap snarled, and shoved the man at her.

The girl tightened her fists, willing her fireself to burn. She didn't like this Cap; looking at him made her belly twist. She breathed in through her nose, opened her mouth and breathed out, expecting fire--but it didn't come. Smoke scalded her tongue and streamed through her teeth; she coughed and spat hot ash from the back of her throat.

The heat was gone from inside her. Even the dormant ember scabbed deep in her belly had disappeared. Her gut, her veins, the marrow of her bones--all the places in this new, terrible form of hers that were supposed to be warmest--felt cold, crystallized, crumbling.

But she still lunged, throwing the man in the doorway against the wall, shoving Cap to the ground and landing with her knees dug deep into his chest. The last of the smoke left her mouth as she grinned.

Cap reached for his belt, whipped his hand up against her head and then--*fire*. Heat-flash. A brief *crack* wracked her ears and left them numb.

Something hard and round pierced through her skull and brain as it slammed her to the floor. Before he could even sit up, she leapt and slammed him to his back again. His weapon clattered across the room as her hands wrapped tight around his throat. She shook him, making his head flop around on his neck.

She felt the other man move behind her. She jerked a look over her shoulder.

He had the weapon in his hand, long fingers wrapped around the barrel, offering her the handle. Beneath her, Cap bucked and snarled.

"I just pull this thing?" she asked the man beside her as she grabbed the offered weapon. He opened his mouth to answer, but she'd already shoved the weapon towards Cap's head, copying his actions against her. She slid her finger over the pull, the corners of her mouth quirking up in anticipation.

"Why am I here? What were you going to do with me?" she asked, though she didn't really care how he answered. They were just questions in her head--important ones, but meant for someone else. Questions she wanted to scream in the face of the man who had wrecked her.

"Nothing," Cap choked. His bloodshot eyes fixed on her hands and the heavy chunk of metal they gripped.

"Liar," said the man with pretty hair.

"Liar," the girl repeated, because what he'd said felt right. She didn't understand these humans, but fire could scare out a lie better than anything else. "Try again."

"Fine, rotsucker. You're a freak, you're special, you're naked and hot as piss, and you were sleeping in the vacuum of space--of course we had to take you. Of course we have to keep you." Cap was breathing hard now, and sweat slickened his grizzly temples.

"Keep," she murmured. She hadn't been human long, but she'd already heard that word too many times. "You can't have me," she said, just as Cap jerked his head aside and grabbed for the gun.

The girl breathed in. Lurched back. Breathed out and clenched the small crescent jutting from the weapon's handle.

It snapped against her palms. A bright red hole appeared above Cap's left eye.

Another breath in, this one slow, ending in a sigh. The man was gone.

The girl felt nothing. She reached up to touch her own face, where he'd pierced her with that ball of metallic fire, but her skin was smooth. *You can't die*, she told herself. The thought depressed her.

Slowly, she turned to the last human, raising the weapon to his head. The corners of his mouth lifted and he leaned forward, trembling, until his forehead touched the tip of the barrel.

He met her eyes. "Thank you," he said.

The cold hollow in her ballooned, engulfing her chest and moving up to empty her throat and skull, pressing down through the soles of her feet and making her sway. She tossed the weapon away. It spun against a wall and fired. The ship's lights blinked and a stuttered ringing ripped through the air.

The man closed his eyes and sighed. "Fantastic," he murmured. "You just shot the ship." A smile pulled at his mouth again. "I might get to die, anyway. But in the meantime, my programming's telling me to escape. Come on--I'm sure they've got a panic pod here somewhere."

Behind them, the ship silently came apart. The girl turned away, bored, and perched on one of the two seats in the pod as it flung out towards the settlement.

Through a small window, she could see Deadspace--a chaotic sprawl of rainbow metals and lights flickering against the dark of space. In the window's reflection, she watched the man change himself. He pulled at his hair till it unraveled from his skull, then twisted it up and shoved it into a pocket in the pants he'd claimed before they left the ship. With his mane gone, the only hair he had left was a close-cut buzz the color of heat lightning.

He glanced at her as she turned from the window. "I'm Kri," he said, and braced his feet against the opposite wall. He tilted his head. "You aren't human, are you?"

The girl stared at him and didn't answer. She didn't know why she'd followed the man. Because it was more interesting than spinning aimlessly through space? Because he reminded her just a little of her sisters? Because he hadn't tried killing her--had wanted her to kill *him*?

No no no. No. None of that was right, none of that mattered. She was drifting, that was all. She was stuck in this meat-cage, her fireself was gone, and she couldn't die. There was nothing else to do.

"I'm not human," she said. After a moment's silence, she added, "I'm from the sun," and crawled across the pod to crouch on the seat beside him--because he was warmer than the window, and so she could stare at him better. She'd never seen a human this close, this still, before.

They're weird, she mused briefly, before dismissing the thought. It didn't matter that humans were weird. She didn't care about them, unless they were trying to kill her, or keep her, or steal her away from everything she loved.

Kri tilted his head against the wall and stared up at the faint, watery light filtering down on them from the ceiling. "I'm not human, either," he said.

She spread her fingers across the skin of his face, feeling the heat and flesh and bone beneath. "You feel human. You look human, and you stink of it."

"So do you. But you survived the vacuum, and a bullet through the head--and I can give a guy a hundred holes to fuck me in. We're neither of us human." His voice was muffled by her palm. "I'm a Pleasure Intelligence, a pi. That's what my boss told me, at least, when I woke up for the first time eleven years ago. But really, I'm just Kri."

"You wanted to die," she told him.

"I want to die," he corrected her. "But I can't kill myself. Unfortunate, isn't it?"

The girl thought of the weapon she'd tossed away; she'd picked it up again before leaving the ship and brought it with her. "Maybe I'll kill you sometime," she said, but wasn't sure that was true.

"If I'm lucky. However, fortune tends to avoid my kind, so I doubt it." He smiled without his teeth. He never seemed to show them. "I should tell you that my boss will

probably hunt you down. It's bad business to have customers die on the job, and since I can't kill, she'll be looking for an answer--a culprit. In fewer words: you."

"I can't die, so." She shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

"Still, it'll be inconvenient." He gave her another soft, close-lipped smile. "I can help you hide, if you'd like. I like pissing-up my boss' life."

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