

THE CREATIVE FIRE

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||| BOOK ONE *of* RUBY'S SONG |||

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*To women everywhere who have fought for rights and freedoms.
Also to my mother: mothers are priceless.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story was inspired by *Evita*, the musical about Eva Peron. It is not an account of a life exactly like Eva's, although as I prepared this novel I watched documentaries about her and read books about her and by her.

This is the story that grew inside of me after I was teased by Evita's legend. I am grateful, in advance, to all of the modern women who will forgive me for the way this story is told. I set the story far into the future, but I could not remove the patriarchy or the story would not have felt possible. But after all, the patriarchy remains in many places on Earth today.

PART ONE
YEARNING

ONE

A HOLE IN THE SKY

Four men in red uniforms surrounded three men wearing dirty gray work clothes. The reds muscled the less fortunate men down an orange hallway. Uneven light showed scars where bots and cargo carts had bumped the metal walls and two places where graffiti had been painted over.

Ruby pressed her back hard against the wall and waited for the group to pass her. She recognized all seven, even though they worked a different shift from hers. The looks on their faces were familiar: the reds stoic to boredom, their meanness hiding just under their bones, and the grays at once anxious and resigned.

She kept her silence as the knot of people passed. The closest red elbowed her in the stomach and stepped on her foot casually, as if she couldn't have been avoided. She knew his name. Vidal. He spoke without looking at her. "Waiting for your turn Ruby? Keep being a little bitch and we'll get you as soon as you're old enough."

"Be nice, Vidal, and I won't have to talk truth."

The red didn't respond, but neither did he touch her a third time.

The youngest gray looked at her in desperation. She remembered his name. Hugh. They'd talked during the last Festival of Changes, and he'd been sweet and hadn't tried to kiss her. He was just a year older, but that made him an adult, which made it legal to lock him up without as much provocation as they'd need for her.

There were enough of them to take her, too. Ruby hesitated a moment, thinking through the odds.

She slid her journal free of her pocket and set it on record, glanced up to be sure they weren't looking back at her, and shoved the journal in the loose waistband of her gray uniform pants. The sharp edge rubbed painfully against her skin in one place, but she might need the recording. She'd just have to keep their attention on her face. Or her face and her breasts, she thought. Damned reds.

The group had gotten well past her before she took off after them. "Stop!" she shouted.

They didn't.

She dodged for an opening and passed around them as fast as she could, so they couldn't grab her. Their hands were busy restraining the grays, anyway.

Vidal almost managed to trip her, and she kept herself from stepping down hard on his foot—hurt any of the reds, and she *would* go with the other grays. She looked at the leader, a tall man with silver hair that she had no name for. "Hugh. The young one. What'd he do? I know him. He doesn't break your rules."

The man spoke to his fellow reds. "Don't listen to her. She's not here." He kept the group going. Ruby moved ahead of them, walking a little backward and a little sideways, careful not to slow them down while remaining impossible to ignore.

Hugh glanced at her and jerked his head sideways. Signaling for her to give up?

Ruby reached for her best sure-of-herself voice. "You gotta let him out by the morning anyway. They'll need him. He runs the trash compactor and his shift mate's been sick a week."

No response.

She sighed. "Let him go, or I'll report you."

Still no response. The reds had picked up their pace; they were getting too close to her.

She turned to face them, backing up as fast as she could.

They kept coming, Vidal's eyes so angry she'd be dead if they were weapons.

"I have the right to ask what he's being detained for."

Hugh spoke, his voice strained and shaky. "I didn't do a thing. I was just in the same galley with these two. I don't even know what they did."

The other grays were both older, people she'd seen but not talked to. Nothing she could do for them, for sure. Probably not for Hugh, but the fear in his eyes made her keep trying. "Let him go. He's never been in lockup. He doesn't deserve it now."

"Get out of our way," Vidal growled at her, tightening his grip on Hugh's arm.

Ruby ignored Vidal. He wasn't the power anyway. She looked directly at the older man. "I'll report you. Maybe it won't matter, but maybe it will. You don't need him."

Vidal's upper lip curled. "Are you sweet on him? Should I be jealous?"

The older gray winced and gave Vidal a harsh look.

Good. She had him. "He's just my friend," she said, dropping some of the anger in favor of sounding like she needed help. "Please don't hurt him."

"When you get old enough, we're taking you," Vidal hissed.

The older man looked genuinely irritated.

Ruby took another step back, keeping her eyes on the leader.

"What's that in your belly?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Lying could be bad. "Let him go, please." She fought the urge to touch her journal, kept her fists at her side. "Please."

He had stopped, so the others stopped. He looked at Hugh. "You don't know these two?"

Hugh swallowed. "Of course I know them. Know who they are. They work in the orchard. But I don't work there, and I don't know what they're in trouble for."

The other two grays were still silent, and one of them narrowed his eyes and bit his tongue. The other one said, "He's telling the truth."

"Shit," the leader said. "You could have told me that."

She'd won. It was the gray's fault now, or at least the reds could pretend that was so. It meant the other two would have it harder, but with someone to blame, the reds would let Hugh go. Surely they would.

The leader kept looking at her. When he spoke his voice was low. "I'll remember you."

She didn't say anything.

He did. "Hand me your journal."

Her mouth had become dry, and it was hard to even get the words out. "I need it back. I'm a student."

"I'll drop it at your parents."

He probably would. He'd actually been pretty straight with her, all things considered. Almost fair. "My mother's hab. Siri Martin. I have no father."

The man nodded and then spoke to Vidal. "Let him go."

Vidal slammed Hugh into the metal wall so hard that she heard Hugh's shoulder pop and the hard outflow of his breath on impact.

She stayed still until they left.

Hugh looked up at her, hugging himself and shaking. "Thanks."

She nodded. "Go. I know you have a girlfriend. Go to her."

"Can I thank you?"

"Maybe when they remember me." She smiled at him, trying to break the thick fear he was still wearing on his skin and in his eyes. "You're all right. They'll leave you for now." She didn't want him to stay. She wanted to be alone. "Go on."

He did, limping a little, but moving reasonably fast in the same direction he'd come from. Hopefully they *would* leave him alone. She didn't trust Vidal out of her sight, but the tall man might keep him in line. Reds needed some reason to lock up grays. Thin excuses were enough. But they needed something.

She let Hugh turn a corner before she took off, running. Her footsteps echoed in the long metal box of the corridor, the cadence of her anger matching her strides, hot and familiar.

She ran longer than she needed to, circling the whole pod twice before making a sharp right and emerging in an open space, trading the greasy orange of the ship's corridor for the pastels of the C-pod park. She barely slowed to swipe her wrist past the reader on the metal post marking the entrance.

On the far side of the gate, she stopped to catch her breath, drinking in the clean, airy smell of her favorite place. The open space rested in default mode. Thin white clouds slid across a pale blue roof. A soft breeze blew across blossoming orchard trees and sweetened the air. It was nearly shift change, and so everyone else was probably prepping or sleeping, not coming home late after a singing lesson.

Far off, a siren sounded. Ruby ignored it, muttering under her breath, "Damned sirens. Too many drills."

The siren stopped.

Her chest felt tight and her thighs hurt from running. Not running away from the reds. Never running away. Just running.

With luck she could be alone here for a few hours. She went to the control panel, forcing deep breaths.

Still no sign of anyone else. No noise.

The panel rose as she approached, stopping at the perfect height. It tilted toward her, as if requesting her touch. The oils of thousands of fingers had

smear the controls into a sea of red and blue and gray, but Ruby didn't hesitate. She tapped it into expert mode, playing it like she played her sound sheet, confident and familiar.

The surface flashed light back at her, conversing.

Ruby commanded the blue color of the roof to deepen and light to gather in the right-hand corner, flowing into a single yellow-white orb so bright she squinted. She sent a flock of virtual birds winging in random patterns across the fake sky. She strengthened and cooled the wind until the air flowing past her cheeks stung them red.

She shook her head, her arms, letting the scene in the corridor with the reds slide away from her. She needed to forget she was a grease monkey, a gray girl, someone who might end up in lockup. The park was the only place Ruby had the right to be where she could forget herself.

She left the controls and took the path, glancing up from time to time at the fake birds flocking above her. If she and Onor were right, and the other level of the ship was above her, then the birds winged below the floor of other habs the same way the cargo holds existed below her feet.

The path she walked circled and looped, sometimes recrossing the places it had been. A trick of the programming to fool her into thinking the space was bigger. The surface gave beneath her feet, absorbing the sound of her passage. Here and there, empty benches sat lonely in the pretend vastness of the park. It was big, bigger than any other open space in C-pod, and its connection to the fruit orchard and the vegetable garden made it seem even vaster. Display surfaces on the walls and the roof added depth, so it looked almost like she imagined a planet would, as if the sky were truly far above and the park went on forever.

She stopped at one of the benches beside a spindly tree. The trunk was only three inches wide, the top of the tallest branches just out of reach if she jumped. Probably a fruit tree that would get moved in next time the orchard lost one. The tree's roots were channeled into pots that hung below the surface, trimmed by some of the very bots she was learning to clean and test.

She touched the bark, running her finger across small knots and twists. The tree had real life in it. More real than the path or the sky or the birds. She plucked a leaf and crumpled it between her fingers, touching her tongue to the thin strip of bitter green blood that oozed from the severed stem.

Her throat choked up. She didn't let the tears come. If she were to start crying, her anger would leak away, and she liked her anger. It made her bigger.

The path bucked under her feet.

She drew in a breath, ready to scream. Instead, the floor slapped the air out of her, so she gasped and choked. She rolled. The tree was closer to her than the bench, so she reached for its trunk.

Light flashed bright and then dimmed. The displays that made the walls and floor and ceiling flickered and then faded to blank surface.

A crack opened across the floor, now a dead black, and the bench tilted but didn't fall.

Ruby pulled herself up, gripping the slender trunk so tight that the rough bark hurt her palms as her body lightened, the change in weight fast enough to unsettle her stomach and make her mouth taste bitter.

The ship kept tearing, metal pulling and screeching away from metal above her head. The roof opened almost directly above her, a slit longer than five or six people and as wide as one.

Ruby clutched the tree and looked up. The wind had picked up so much her shirt flapped against her belly and her hair stung her neck.

Through the crack, details competed for her attention. Stairs and corridors and handholds and flooring, all off kilter. Figures running away from the rent, grasping handholds and pulling themselves out of her vision. A light winked off. Another winked on, illuminating a humanoid robot that gripped the hand of a compact man in a blue uniform, keeping him from falling.

The sky of the new level was black, dead black. The roof above her and the roof above that, all black. The few lights above her were small points of white. She'd learned from drill instructions that power would be stripped from unnecessary things in an emergency, but her sky had never been black.

Broken pipes and wires protruded from the space between the levels.

A woman's scream came from far away.

The park jerked again.

The surface under her feet canted further, and she spared a glance for the bench just as it tilted almost straight up. A hole, like the one above her.

Gravity hadn't fallen quite low enough for her to float. Besides, all the drills said hold on, hold on, hold on. There were stories of people caught in gravity fluxes who floated up and then smashed down. Below, only the tall,

cluttered service floor and beyond that, between her and the great rushing void of space, the cargo pods, and outside of those, the wall of the ship itself. If the outer shell of the *Fire* had been breached, she would already be dead.

She needed to stay calm in spite of the ever-cooler air rushing about and the thinness of her breath.

The hole in the floor of the park was immediate and close. It mattered now.

She redoubled her grip on the tree, whispering, "Please don't fall, please don't, please stay."

Another shudder opened the crack further. The bench dangled. The bolts that held it to the floor ripped away and it clattered below.

Ruby looked up. Where there had been birds, the man the robot had been reaching for fell through the rent in the roof. The ripped reflective surface of the roof flapped loose. The man caught it, swinging in slow motion, reaching impossibly toward the place he had come from. The metal man reached for him, then overreached. It tumbled slowly through the opening, its trajectory taking it right to the man, bumping him. Both fell slowly.

The pod jerked again.

The tree stayed in place. Ruby maintained her grip, holding her feet on the ground. The man and the robot fell, the two forms separating in the air.

Above them, the torn roof bled misshapen spheres of water and other fluids that refracted the emergency lights in shifting prisms behind the tumbling figures. The man tried to flap his arms like a bird, a reflexive silliness in the low gravity. He looked incredulous, his mouth open but not screaming as he fell through the air, now twenty feet above her. She hung on with one hand and reached toward him even though he was too far away to grab.

All lights switched off, except for three or four thin beams. The gravity generator activated and she was suddenly heavy.

The man thudded to the surface of the park with a grunt, a whoosh of breath escaping his lungs. He lay between her and the hole the bench had slipped through, the surface canted slightly toward the opening, like one of her shallow oil funnels. The robot fell feet first down the hole, reaching for an edge and missing. The expression on its face showed the placidity of all humanoid bots, and Ruby choked back a nervous giggle at the absurd vision.

Then her weight felt right. The gravgens balanced. She reached a hand out to the man. "Here," she called.

He twisted to look at her, his eyes wide. "I'm hurt."

"What? Can you reach me?"

The muffled ring of metal on metal told her the robot had collided with the floor far below.

The man slid sideways toward the hole, using one leg but not the other. "My foot."

"You have to," she said.

He crawled toward her, his face contorted with the effort.

She forced her hands free of the tree trunk and went to him, pulling him up.

His right leg buckled, taking him to his knees. "I can't. Walk."

"You must."

His muscles bunched across his neck and jaw. His brows drew in over startlingly blue eyes. Sweat shone on his forehead, but he stood, wobbly, one hand on her shoulder.

The floor shifted underfoot and he fell again. Ruby tugged on his arm with both her hands. "Come on. You can do this."

He shook his head.

"You'll die."

Another effort, and he was up. She took as much of his weight as she could, wishing for less gravity. His clothes felt slick and unfamiliar. She tested the ground in front of her as they went, unsure how stable anything might be. He grunted with each step, crying out once. "Keep going," she encouraged him. "We need something else to hang onto."

"It hurts."

"Less than death." Sweat stung her eyes as she supported him and led him to a different bench by a different tree, helping him sit. She grabbed onto the back of the bench with one arm and used her free hand to curl his hand around the top slat. "Hold on."

He did. At first that's all he did, grip and look around, his brows drawn together and his face white. The dim, strange light barely defined his features. A shock of red hair hung over bluer eyes than any she'd ever seen. He was older than her brothers. Maybe twenty-five? He wore a clean blue uniform with a darker blue belt. She blinked at the color; she'd never been so near a blue.

Clean. He looked and even smelled clean.

The ship shuddered and he gripped the bench so tightly his knuckles whitened. “What’s happening?” he whispered.

Ruby shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe we hit something.”

He winced. “If we hit something we’d be dead.” He sounded entirely sure of himself.

“So what do you think?”

“Something broke.”

Another sound of metal screeching and giving way came from below them.

Sirens started up, strident but far away. Probably from the living quarters. “Someone’s alive,” Ruby said.

“Is it always so cold in here?”

“No.” She glanced at the hole in the floor. “The temp systems must have gone wonky.”

“I can breathe okay.”

“Me, too.” The sirens stopped, the silence ominous if also a relief.

He seemed to focus on her for the first time. “Thanks for helping me.”

“We all help each other. It’s how we stay alive.”

He hesitated, then asked, “You’re a gray?”

Surely he could see her worn-out uniform. Really, who else lived down here except a few reds, and even in the awful light here he could tell she wasn’t wearing red. “I’m Ruby.”

It was the first time she’d seen him smile, and it made him look younger. “Glad to meet you. I’m Fox.”

The light flickered up and then down. Nothing moved in the park, including them. It felt to her like *The Creative Fire* held its breath, unsure how to react to whatever had torn bits of its guts apart. She’d only ever seen a small part of the ship, but there had been pictures of *The Creative Fire* in school, so she knew it as a fat disk. She had been shown the layouts for the cargo bays and the places the grays inhabited: eight self-contained pods between the cargo ring and whatever hung above their heads. “Do you know if the whole ship’s falling apart?”

He shrugged. “How would I? There wasn’t any warning. The sirens went off just before the floor opened up under me. Thank god it wasn’t during shift change. There’d have been more of us in the corridors.” He rubbed at his ankle and grimaced.

Someone would come for them. Ix would know everything, Ix always did. Ix watched over everyone's safety. "At least the *Fire's* not tearing herself up any more."

"If we're lucky."

Ruby sat curled opposite him on the bench, the armrest digging into her back. It gave her a good view of his white face and the pain in his eyes. She pointed toward the roof. "Where did you come from?"

"J-pod."

That didn't tell her anything except that he wasn't from anyplace the grays lived, but she'd known that. Still, she hesitated, and finally chose not to admit she didn't know what he meant. "I've never been there."

He grimaced. "Of course you haven't. And I haven't been here. I never—" he shifted his position on the bench, grimacing—"thought grays would be so pretty. What do you do?"

She blushed, caught off guard. "I'm studying to maintain the repair bots. This is my last year."

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't look old enough."

She bristled. "I'm sixteen."

"It takes us longer." He looked lost in thought for a moment, chewing at his lower lip, then he smiled and said, "I guess we're slower." He looked around. "Someone will come, won't they?"

"They're probably worried about other things."

The idea seemed to surprise him. He sat back and closed his mouth tight, then nodded. Maybe he was right. Maybe the reds would worry about him and come rescue him. Blues must matter more than an apprentice robot-repair girl. "At least we can breathe. It could be worse."

He gave her a soft smile at that, like he approved of her positive statement or maybe needed it. "I might freeze to death."

"Ix'll get to us. It must have our body stats and know that you're injured and in the wrong place. So there's worse going on than us being cold and your ankle."

"I hope someone comes soon." He drew his arms in close to his chest.

He was a bit of a baby for a blue, she thought. His foot must be hurting badly.

Cold seeped into her lungs. With Fox's injury, he probably felt it even more than she did.

Someone should have come by now.

She didn't have her journal, so she couldn't use it to call out. Fox didn't have anything with him. At home, school, any of the work places, there would be first-aid gear. There would be a kit in the walls here, too, but she couldn't risk moving them away from the safety of the bench. There were no handholds on the floor of the park, and she didn't trust the gravgens. Not yet. If the gravgens switched off while she walked through an open space with no handholds, she could lose her grip on the floor.

Her shirt was a hand-me-down, big on her except across the chest and too long. She ripped a strip of material off the bottom and held it out to him.

"What?"

Whoever this Fox was, no one had apparently taught him basic first aid. She let go of the bench and knelt by his ankle, which was in front of him, his knee bent so his foot rested bottom-down on the middle of the seat. "I can give it some pressure, maybe stabilize it a little. If the gravgens go wonky again, grab me? I don't want to float away from you."

He nodded, finally offering a smile. "Be careful. It hurts like . . . a . . . like a lot."

She probably knew more curse words than Fox. Still, it felt sweet that he'd been careful not to repeat them around her. Even though his boot pulled off fairly easily, he grunted when she made her last tug. His ankle was twice the size of the other one, but the skin hadn't broken. He only cried out once while she wrapped it. When she finished, she said, "That should help. Not stop the pain, but maybe keep it from getting more swollen. We should get a cold pack for you."

"It's getting cold enough."

She laughed.

The lights went out, and she clutched his hand. She didn't think about it, she just did it. They were so alone, and everyone else could be dead.

If only she'd told someone where she was going.

The lights flickered again and came up lower than before. She let go of him, her cheeks hot.

"Here," he said, scooting along the bench and pulling her up beside him, his back against her shoulder. "There. I can keep you warm."

She wasn't ready to trust him, but she didn't mistrust him either. At least

not like she did most men. Except for her shoulder being a rest for his back, she didn't touch him.

The act of breathing together in and out of the same dangerous dark made them almost like one being. She felt floaty, suspended between anxiety about the safety of the ship, and her family, and the strange excitement of being warmed by a blue.