

CINDER

BOOK ONE
THE LUNAR CHRONICLES

MARISSA MEYER



Cinder's Story Continues....

Coming soon from Marissa Meyer:

Scarlett

2013

Cress

2014

Winter

2015



For my grandma, Samalee Jones, with more love than could ever fit into these pages.

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Acknowledgments



Book One

They took away her beautiful clothes, dressed her in an old gray smock, and gave her wooden shoes.

Chapter One

THE SCREW THROUGH CINDER'S ANKLE HAD RUSTED, THE engraved cross marks worn to a mangled circle. Her knuckles ached from forcing the screwdriver into the joint as she struggled to loosen the screw one gritting twist after another. By the time it was extracted far enough for her to wrench free with her prosthetic steel hand, the hairline threads had been stripped clean.

Tossing the screwdriver onto the table, Cinder gripped her heel and yanked the foot from its socket. A spark singed her fingertips and she jerked away, leaving the foot to dangle from a tangle of red and yellow wires.

She slumped back with a relieved groan. A sense of release hovered at the end of those wires—freedom. Having loathed the too-small foot for four years, she swore to never put the piece of junk back on again. She just hoped Iko would be back soon with its replacement.

Cinder was the only full-service mechanic at New Beijing's weekly market. Without a sign, her booth hinted at her trade only by the shelves of stock android parts that crowded the walls. It was squeezed into a shady cove between a used netscreen dealer and a silk merchant, both of whom

frequently complained about the tangy smell of metal and grease that came from Cinder's booth, even though it was usually disguised by the aroma of honey buns from the bakery across the square. Cinder knew they really just didn't like being next to *her*.

A stained tablecloth divided Cinder from browsers as they shuffled past.

The square was filled with shoppers and hawkers, children and noise. The bellows of men as they bargained with robotic shopkeepers, trying to talk the computers down from their desired profit margins. The hum of ID

scanners and monotone voice receipts as money changed accounts. The netscreens that covered every building and filled the air with the chatter of advertisements, news reports, gossip.

Cinder's auditory interface dulled the noise into a static thrumming, but today one melody lingered above the rest that she couldn't drown out. A ring of children were standing just outside her booth, trilling—"Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!"—and then laughing hysterically as they collapsed to the pavement.

A smile tugged at Cinder's lips. Not so much at the nursery rhyme, a phantom song about pestilence and death that had regained popularity in the past decade. The song itself made her squeamish. But she did love the glares from passersby as the giggling children fell over in their paths. The inconvenience of having to swarm around the writhing bodies stirred grumbles from the shoppers, and Cinder adored the children for it.

"Sunto! *Sunto!* "

Cinder's amusement wilted. She spotted Chang Sacha, the baker, pushing through the crowd in her flour-coated apron. "Sunto, come here! I told you not to play so close to—"

Sacha met Cinder's gaze, knotted her lips, then grabbed her son by the arm and spun away. The boy whined, dragging his feet as Sacha ordered him to stay closer to their booth. Cinder wrinkled her nose at the baker's retreating back. The remaining children fled into the crowd, taking their bright laughter with them.

"It's not like wires are contagious," Cinder muttered to her empty booth.

With a spine-popping stretch, she pulled her dirty fingers through her hair, combing it up into a messy tail, then grabbed her blackened work gloves. She covered her steel hand first, and though her right palm began to sweat immediately inside the thick material, she felt more comfortable with the gloves on, hiding the plating of her left hand. She stretched her fingers wide, working out the cramp that had formed at the fleshy base of her thumb from clenching the screwdriver, and squinted again into the city square. She spotted plenty of stocky white androids in the din, but none of them Iko.

Sighing, Cinder bent over the toolbox beneath the worktable. After digging through the jumbled mess of screwdrivers and wrenches, she emerged with the fuse puller that had been long buried at the bottom. One by one, she disconnected the wires that still linked her foot and ankle, each spurting a tiny spark. She couldn't feel them through the gloves, but her retina display helpfully informed her with blinking red text that she was losing connection to the limb.

With a yank of the last wire, her foot clattered to the concrete.

The difference was instant. For once in her life, she felt... weightless.

She made room for the discarded foot on the table, setting it up like a shrine amid the wrenches and lug nuts, before hunkering over her ankle again and cleaning the grime from the socket with an old rag.

THUD.

Cinder jerked, her head smacking the underside of the table. She shoved back from the desk, her scowl landing first on a lifeless android that sat squat on her worktable and then on the man behind it. She was met with startled copper-brown eyes and black hair that hung past his ears and lips that every girl in the country had admired a thousand times.

Her scowl vanished.

His own surprise was short-lived, melting into an apology. "I'm sorry,"

he said. "I didn't realize anyone was back there."

Cinder barely heard him above the blankness in her mind. With her heartbeat gathering speed, her retina display scanned his features, so familiar from years spent watching him on the netscreens. He seemed taller in real life and a gray hooded sweatshirt was like none of the fine clothes he usually made appearances in, but still, it took only 2.6 seconds for Cinder's scanner to measure the points of his face and link his image to the net database. Another second and the display informed her of what she already knew;

details scribbled across the bottom of her vision in a stream of green text.

PRINCE KAITO, CROWN PRINCE OF THE EASTERN

COMMONWEALTH

ID #0082719057

BORN 7 APR 108 T.E.

FF 88,987 MEDIA HITS, REVERSE CHRON

POSTED 14 AUG 126 T.E.: *A PRESS MEETING IS TO BE*

*HOSTED BY CROWN PRINCE KAI ON 15 AUG TO DISCUSS
THE*

*ONGOING LETUMOSIS RESEARCH AND POSSIBLE LEADS FOR
AN ANTIDOTE—*

Cinder launched up from her chair, nearly toppling over when she forgot about her missing limb. Steadying herself with both hands on the table, she managed an awkward bow. The retina display sank out of sight.

“Your Highness,” she stammered, head lowered, glad that he couldn’t see her empty ankle behind the tablecloth.

The prince flinched and cast a glance over his shoulder before hunching toward her. “Maybe, um...”—he pulled his fingers across his lips—“on the Highness stuff?”

Wide-eyed, Cinder forced a shaky nod. “Right. Of course. How—can I —are you—” She swallowed, the words sticking

like bean paste to her tongue.

“I’m looking for a Linh Cinder,” said the prince. “Is he around?”

Cinder dared to lift one stabilizing hand from the table, using it to tug the hem of her glove higher on her wrist. Staring at the prince’s chest, she stammered, “I-I’m Linh Cinder.”

Her eyes followed his hand as he planted it on top of the android’s bulbous head.

“You’re Linh Cinder?”

“Yes, Your High—” She bit down on her lip.

“The mechanic?”

She nodded. “How can I help you?”

Instead of answering, the prince bent down, craning his neck so that she had no choice but to meet his eyes, and dashed a grin at her. Her heart winced.

The prince straightened, forcing her gaze to follow him.

“You’re not quite what I was expecting.”

“Well you’re hardly—what I—um.” Unable to hold his gaze, Cinder reached for the android and pulled it to her side of the table. “What seems to be wrong with the android, Your Highness?”

The android looked like it had just stepped off the conveyer belt, but Cinder could tell from the mock-feminine shape that it was an outdated model. The design was sleek,

though, with a spherical head atop a pear-shaped body and a glossy white finish.

“I can’t get her to turn on,” said Prince Kai, watching as Cinder examined the robot. “She was working fine one day, and the next, nothing.”

Cinder turned the android around so its sensor light faced the prince.

She was glad to have routine tasks for her hands and routine questions for her mouth—something to focus on so she wouldn’t get flustered and lose control of her brain’s net connection again. “Have you had problems with her before?”

“No. She gets a monthly checkup from the royal mechanics, and this is the first real problem she’s ever had.”

Leaning forward, Prince Kai picked up Cinder’s small metal foot from the worktable, turning it curiously over in his palms. Cinder tensed, watching as he peered into the wire-filled cavity, fiddled with the flexible joints of the toes. He used the too-long sleeve of his sweatshirt to polish off a smudge.

“Aren’t you hot?” Cinder said, instantly regretting the question when his attention returned to her.

For the briefest moment, the prince almost looked embarrassed.

“Dying,” he said, “but I’m trying to be inconspicuous.”

Cinder considered telling him it wasn’t working but thought better of it.

The lack of a throng of screaming girls surrounding her booth was probably evidence that it was working better than she suspected. Instead of looking like a royal heartthrob, he just looked crazy.

Clearing her throat, Cinder refocused on the android. She found the nearly invisible latch and opened its back panel. “Why aren’t the royal mechanics fixing her?”

“They tried but couldn’t figure it out. Someone suggested I bring her to you.” He set the foot down and turned his attention to the shelves of old and battered parts—parts for androids, hovers, netscreens, portscreens. Parts for cyborgs. “They say you’re the best mechanic in New Beijing. I was expecting an old man.”

“Do they?” she murmured.

He wasn’t the first to voice surprise. Most of her customers couldn’t fathom how a teenage girl could be the best mechanic in the city, and she never broadcast the reason for her talent. The fewer people who knew she was cyborg, the better. She was sure she’d go mad if *all* the market shopkeepers looked at her with the same disdain as Chang Sacha did.

She nudged some of the android’s wires aside with her pinkie.

“Sometimes they just get worn out. Maybe it’s time to upgrade to a new model.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. She contains top-secret information. It’s a matter of national security that I retrieve it...before anyone else does.”

Fingers stalling, Cinder glanced up at him.

He held her gaze a full three seconds before his lips twitched. "I'm just joking. Nainsi was my first android. It's sentimental."

An orange light flickered in the corner of Cinder's vision. Her optobionics had picked up on something, though she didn't know what—an extra swallow, a too-quick blink, a clenching of the prince's jaw.

She was used to the little orange light. It came up all the time.

It meant that someone was lying.

"National security," she said. "Funny."

The prince listed his head, as if challenging her to contradict him. A strand of black hair fell into his eyes. Cinder looked away.

"Tutor8.6 model," she said, reading the faintly lit panel inside the plastic cranium. The android was nearly twenty years old. Ancient for an android. "She looks to be in pristine condition."

Raising her fist, she thunked the android hard on the side of its head, barely catching it before it toppled over onto the table. The prince jumped.

Cinder set the android back on its treads and jabbed the power button but nothing happened. "You'd be surprised how often that works."

The prince let out a single, awkward chuckle. "Are you sure you're Linh Cinder? The mechanic?"

“Cinder! I’ve got it!” Iko wheeled out of the crowd and up to the worktable, her blue sensor flashing. Lifting one pronged hand, she slammed a brand-new steel-plated foot onto the desk, in the shadow of the prince’s android. “It’s a huge improvement over the old one, only lightly used, and the wiring looks compatible as is. Plus, I was able to get the dealer down to just 600 univs.”

Panic jolted through Cinder. Still balancing on her human leg, she snatched the foot off the table and dropped it behind her. “Good work, Iko.

Nguyen-shìfu will be delighted to have a replacement foot for his escort-droid.”

Iko’s sensor dimmed. “Nguyen-shìfu? I don’t compute.”

Smiling through locked teeth, Cinder gestured at the prince. “Iko, please pay your respects to our customer.” She lowered her voice. “His Imperial Highness.”

Iko craned her head, aiming the round sensor up at the prince, who towered more than three feet above her. The light flared as her scanner recognized him. “Prince Kai,” she said, her metallic voice squeaking. “You are even more handsome in person.”

Cinder’s stomach twisted in embarrassment, even as the prince laughed.

“That’s enough, Iko. Get in the booth.”

Iko obeyed, pushing aside the tablecloth and ducking under the table.

“You don’t see a personality like that every day,” said Prince Kai, leaning against the booth’s door frame as if he brought

androids to the market all the time. “Did you program her yourself?”

“Believe it or not, she came that way. I suspect a programming error, which is probably why my stepmother got her so cheap.”

“I do not have a programming error!” said Iko from behind her.

Cinder met the prince’s gaze, was caught momentarily dazzled by another easy laugh, and ducked her head back behind his android.

“So what do you think?” he asked.

“I’ll need to run her diagnostics. It will take me a few days, maybe a week.” Tucking a strand of hair behind one ear, Cinder sat down, grateful to give her leg a rest while she examined the android’s innards. She knew she must be breaking some rule of etiquette, but the prince didn’t seem to mind as he tipped forward, watching her hands.

“Do you need payment up front?”

He held his left wrist toward her, embedded with his ID chip, but Cinder waved a gloved hand at him. “No, thank you. It will be my honor.”

Prince Kai looked about to protest but then let his hand fall. “I don’t suppose there’s any hope of having her done before the festival?”

Cinder shut the android’s panel. “I don’t think that will be a problem.

But without knowing what’s wrong with her—”

“I know, I know.” He rocked back on his heels. “Just wishful thinking.”

“How will I contact you when she’s ready?”

“Send a comm to the palace. Or will you be here again next weekend? I could stop by then.”

“Oh, yes!” said Iko from the back of the booth. “We’re here every market day. You should come by again. That would be lovely.”

Cinder flinched. “You don’t need to—”

“It’ll be my pleasure.” He dipped his head in polite farewell, simultaneously pulling the edges of the hood farther over his face. Cinder returned the nod, knowing she should have stood and bowed, but not daring to test her balance a second time.

She waited until his shadow had disappeared from the tabletop before surveying the square. The prince’s presence among the harried crowd seemed to have gone unnoticed. Cinder let her muscles relax.

Iko rolled to her side, clasping her metal grippers over her chest.

“Prince Kai! Check my fan, I think I’m overheating.”

Cinder bent over and picked up her replacement foot, dusting it off on her cargo pants. She checked the plating, glad that she hadn’t dented it.

“Can you imagine Peony’s expression when she hears about this?” said Iko.

“I can imagine a lot of high-pitched squealing.” Cinder allowed one more wary scan of the crowd before the first tickle of giddiness stirred inside her. She couldn’t wait to tell Peony. *The prince himself!* An abrupt laugh escaped her. It was uncanny. It was unbelievable. It was— “Oh, *dear*. ”

Cinder’s smile fell. “What?”

Iko pointed at her forehead with a pronged finger. “You have a grease splotch.”

Cinder jerked back and scrubbed at her brow. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m sure he hardly noticed.”

Cinder dropped her hand. “What does it matter? Come on, help me put this on before any other royalty stops by.” She propped her ankle on the opposite knee and began connecting the color-coordinated wires, wondering if the prince had been fooled.

“Fits like a glove, doesn’t it?” Iko said, holding a handful of screws while Cinder twisted them into the predrilled holes.

“It’s very nice, Iko, thank you. I just hope Adri doesn’t notice. She’d murder me if she knew I’d spent 600 univs on a foot.” She tightened the last screw and stretched out her leg, rolling her ankle forward, back, wiggling the toes. It was a little stiff, and the nerve sensors would need a few days to harmonize with the updated wiring, but at least she wouldn’t have to limp around off-kilter anymore.

“It’s perfect,” she said, pulling on her boot. She spotted her old foot held in Iko’s pincers. “You can throw that piece of junk awa—”

A scream filled Cinder's ears. She flinched, the sound peaking in her audio interface, and turned toward it. The market silenced. The children, who had switched to a game of hide-and-seek among the clustered booths, crept out from their hiding spots.

The scream had come from the baker, Chang Sacha. Baffled, Cinder stood and climbed on top of her chair to peer over the crowd. She spotted Sacha in her booth, behind the glass case of sweet breads and pork buns, gawking at her outstretched hands.

Cinder clamped a hand over her nose at the same moment realization skittered through the rest of the square.

"The plague!" someone yelled. "She has the plague!"

The street filled with panic. Mothers scooped up their children, masking their faces with desperate hands as they scrambled to get away from Sacha's booth. Shopkeepers slammed shut their rolling doors.

Sunto screamed and rushed toward his mother, but she held her hands out to him. *No, no, stay back.* A neighboring shopkeeper grabbed the boy, tucking the child under his arm as he ran. Sacha yelled something after him, but the words were lost in the uproar.

Cinder's stomach churned. They couldn't run or Iko would be trampled in the chaos. Holding her breath, she reached for the cord at the booth's corner and yanked the metal door down its rail. Darkness cloaked them but for a single shard of daylight along the ground. The heat rose up from the concrete floor, stifling in the cramped space.

"Cinder?" said Iko, worry in her robotic voice. She brightened her sensor, washing the booth in blue light.

“Don’t worry,” Cinder said, hopping down from the chair and grabbing the grease-covered rag from the table. The screams were already fading, transforming the booth into its own empty universe. “She’s all the way across the square. We’re fine here.” But she slipped back toward the wall of shelves anyway, crouched down and covered her nose and mouth with the rag.

There they waited, Cinder breathing as shallowly as possible, until they heard the sirens of the emergency hover come and take Sacha away.

CINDER

BOOK ONE
THE LUNAR CHRONICLES

MARISSA MEYER



Chapter Two

THE EMERGENCY SIRENS HADN'T FADED BEFORE THE HUM OF another engine rumbled into the square. The market's silence was split by feet thumping on the pavement and then someone spitting commands. Someone else's guttural response.

Slinging her messenger bag across her back, Cinder crept across the dusty floor of her booth and pushed past the tablecloth that draped her work desk. She slipped her fingers into the gap of light beneath the door and inched it open. Pressing her cheek to the warm, gritty pavement, she was able to make out three sets of yellow boots across the square. An emergency crew. She peeled the door open farther and watched the men—all wearing gas masks—as they doused the interior of the booth with liquid from a yellow can. Even across the square, Cinder wrinkled her nose at the stench.

"What's happening?" Iko asked from behind her.

"They're going to burn Chang-ji's booth." Cinder's eyes swept along the square, noting the pristine white hover planted near the corner. Other than the three men, the square was abandoned. Rolling onto her back, Cinder peered up into Iko's sensor, still glowing faintly in the dark. "We'll leave when the flames start, when they're distracted."

"Are we in trouble?"

“No. I just can’t be bothered with a trip to the quarantines today.”

One of the men spouted an order, followed by shuffling feet. Cinder turned her head and squinted through the gap. A flame was thrown into the booth. The smell of gasoline was soon met with that of burned toast. The men stood back, their uniforms silhouetted against the growing flames.

Reaching up, Cinder grabbed Prince Kai’s android around its neck and pulled it down beside her. Tucking it under one arm, she slid the door open enough to crawl through, keeping her eyes on the men’s backs. Iko followed, scooting against the next booth as Cinder lowered the door. They darted along the storefronts—most left wide open during the mass exodus—and turned into the first skinny alley between shops. Black smoke blotted the sky above them. Seconds later, a hoard of news hovers buzzed over the buildings on their way to the market square.

Cinder slowed when they’d put enough distance between them and the market, emerging from the maze of alleys. The sun had passed overhead and was descending behind the skyscrapers to the west. The air sweated with August heat, but an occasional warm breeze was funneled between the buildings, picking up whirlwinds of garbage from the gutters. Four blocks from the market, signs of life appeared again on the streets—pedestrians pooling on the sidewalks and gossiping about the plague outbreak in the city center. Netscreens implanted into building walls showed live feeds of fire and smoke in downtown New Beijing and panicked headlines in which the toll of infected mounted by the second—even though only one person had been confirmed sick so far as Cinder could tell.

“All those sticky buns,” Iko said as they passed a close-up shot of the blackened booth.

Cinder bit the inside corner of her cheek. Neither of them had ever sampled the acclaimed sweets of the market bakery. Iko didn’t have taste buds, and Chang Sacha didn’t serve cyborgs.

Towering offices and shopping centers gradually melded with a messy assortment of apartment buildings, built so close that they became an unending stretch of glass and concrete. Apartments in this corner of the city had once been spacious and desirable but had been so subdivided and remodeled over time—always trying to cram more people into the same square footage—that the buildings had become labyrinths of corridors and stairwells.

But all the crowded ugliness was briefly forgotten as Cinder turned the corner onto her own street. For half a step, New Beijing Palace could be glimpsed between complexes, sprawling and serene on the cliff that overlooked the city. The palace’s pointed gold roofs sparkled orange beneath the sun, the windows glinting the light back at the city. The ornate gables, the tiered pavilions that teetered dangerously close to the cliff’s edge, the rounded temples stretching to the heavens. Cinder paused longer than usual to look up at it, thinking about someone who lived beyond those walls, who was up there perhaps this very second.

Not that she hadn’t *known* the prince lived there every time she’d seen the palace before, but today she felt a connection she’d never had before, and with it came an almost smug delight. She had met the prince. He had come to her booth. He knew her name.

Sucking in a breath of humid air, Cinder forced herself to turn away, feeling childish. She was going to start sounding like Peony.

She shifted the royal android to her other arm as she and Iko ducked beneath the overhang of the Phoenix Tower apartments. She flashed her freed wrist at the ID scanner on the wall and heard the clunking of the lock.

Iko used her arm extensions to clop down the stairs as they descended into the basement, a dim maze of storage spaces caged with chicken wire.

As a wave of musty air blew up to meet them, the android turned on her floodlight, dispersing the shadows from the sparse halogens. It was a familiar path from the stairwell to storage space number 18-20—the cramped, always chilly cell that Adri allowed Cinder to use for her work.

Cinder cleared a space for the android among the worktable's clutter and set her messenger bag on the floor. She swapped her heavy work gloves for less grungy cotton ones before locking up the storage room. "If Adri asks," she said as they made their way to the elevators, "our booth is nowhere near the baker's."

Iko's light flickered. "Noted."

They were alone in the elevator. It wasn't until they stepped out onto the eighteenth floor that the building became a crawling hive—children chasing each other down the corridors, both domestic and stray cats creeping tight against the walls, the ever-constant blur of netscreen chatter spilling from the doorways. Cinder adjusted the white-noise output from her brain interface as she dodged the children on her way to the apartment.

The door was wide open, making Cinder pause and check the number before entering.

She heard Adri's stiff voice from the living room. "Lower neckline for Peony. She looks like an old woman."

Cinder peered around the corner. Adri was standing with one hand on the mantel of the holographic fireplace, wearing a chrysanthemum-embroidered bathrobe that blended in with the collection of garish paper fans that covered the wall behind her—reproductions made to look antique.

With her face shimmering with too much powder and her lips painted horrifically bright, Adri almost looked like a reproduction herself. Her face was made up as if she'd been planning to go somewhere, although she rarely left the apartment.

If she noticed Cinder loitering in the doorway, she ignored her.

The netscreen above the heatless flames was showing footage from the market. The baker's booth had been reduced to rubble and the skeleton of a portable oven.

In the center of the room, Pearl and Peony each stood swathed in silk and tulle. Peony was holding up her dark curly hair while a woman Cinder didn't recognize fidgeted with her dress's neckline. Peony caught sight of Cinder over the woman's shoulder and her eyes sparked, a glow bursting across her face. She gestured at the dress with a barely silenced squeal.

Cinder grinned back. Her younger stepsister looked angelic, her dress all silver and shimmering, with hints of lavender when caught in the fire's light.

“Pearl.” Adri gestured at her older daughter with a twirling finger, and Pearl spun around, displaying a row of pearl buttons down her back. Her dress matched Peony’s with its snug bodice and flouncy skirt, only it was made of stardust gold. “Let’s take in her waist some more.”

Threading a pin through the hem of Peony’s neckline, the stranger started at seeing Cinder in the doorway but quickly turned away. Stepping back, the woman removed a bundle of sharp pins from between her lips and tilted her head to one side. “It’s already very snug,” she said. “We want her to dance, don’t we?”

“We want her to find a husband,” said Adri.

“No, no,” the seamstress tittered even as she reached out and pinched the material around Pearl’s waist. Cinder could tell Pearl was sucking in her stomach as much as she could; she detected the edges of ribs beneath the fabric. “She is much too young for marriage.”

“I’m seventeen,” Pearl said, glaring at the woman.

“Seventeen! See? A child. Now is for fun, right, girl?”

“She is too expensive for *fun*, ” said Adri. “I expect results from this gown.”

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“Do not worry, Linh-ji . She will be lovely as morning dew.”
Stuffing the pins back into her mouth, the woman returned
her focus to Peony’s neckline.

Adri lifted her chin and finally acknowledged Cinder's presence by swiping her gaze down Cinder's filthy boots and cargo pants. "Why aren't you at the market?"

"It closed down early today," said Cinder, with a meaningful look at the netscreen that Adri didn't follow. Feigning nonchalance, Cinder thrust a thumb toward the hall. "So I'll just go get cleaned up, and then I'll be ready for my dress fitting."

The seamstress paused. "Another dress, Linh-ji ? I did not bring material for—"

"Have you replaced the magbelt on the hover yet?"

Cinder's smile faltered. "No. Not yet."

"Well, none of us will be going to the ball unless that gets fixed, will we?"

Cinder stifled her irritation. They'd already had this conversation twice in the past week. "I need money to buy a new magbelt. 800 univs, at least.

If income from the market wasn't deposited directly into your account, I would have bought one by now."

"And trust you not to spend it all on your frivolous toys?" Adri said *toys* with a glare at Iko and a curl of her lip, even though Iko technically belonged to her. "Besides, I can't afford both a magbelt *and* a new dress that you'll only wear once. You'll have to find some other way of fixing the hover or find your own gown for the ball."

Irritation hardened in Cinder's gut. She might have pointed out that Pearl and Peony could have been given ready-made rather than custom dresses in order to budget for Cinder's

as well. She might have pointed out that they would only wear their dresses one time too. She might have pointed out that, as she was the one doing the work, the money should have been hers to spend as she saw fit. But all arguments would come to nothing.

Legally, Cinder belonged to Adri as much as the household android and so too did her money, her few possessions, even the new foot she'd just attached. Adri loved to remind her of that.

So she stomped the anger down before Adri could see a spark of rebellion.

"I may be able to offer a trade for the magbelt. I'll check with the local shops."

Adri sniffed. "Why don't we trade that worthless android for it?"

Iko ducked behind Cinder's legs.

"We wouldn't get much for her," said Cinder. "Nobody wants such an old model."

"No. They don't, do they? Perhaps I will have to sell both of you off as spare parts." Adri reached forward and fidgeted with the unfinished hem of Pearl's sleeve. "I don't care how you fix the hover, just fix it before the ball —and cheaply. I don't need that pile of junk taking up valuable parking space."

Cinder tucked her hands into her back pockets. "Are you saying that if I fix the hover and get a dress, I can really go this year?"

Adri's lips puckered slightly at the corners. "It will be a miracle if you can find something suitable to wear that will hide your"—her gaze dropped to Cinder's boots—"eccentricities. But, yes. If you fix the hover, I suppose you can go to the ball."

Peony flashed Cinder a stunned half smile, while her older sister spun on their mother. "You can't be serious! *Her?* Go with *us?*"

Cinder pressed her shoulder into the door frame, trying to hide her disappointment from Peony. Pearl's outrage was unnecessary. A little orange light had flickered in the corner of Cinder's vision—Adri had not meant her promise.

"Well," she said, attempting to look heartened. "I guess I'd better go find a magbelt then."

Adri flourished her arm at Cinder, her attention once again captivated by Pearl's dress. A silent dismissal.

Cinder cast one more look at her stepsisters' sumptuous gowns before backing out of the room. She had barely turned toward the hallway when Peony squealed.

"Prince Kai!"

Freezing, Cinder glanced back at the netscreen. The plague alerts had been replaced with a live broadcast from the palace's pressroom. Prince Kai was speaking to a crowd of journalists—human and android.

"Volume on," said Pearl, batting the seamstress away.

"...research continues to be our top priority," Prince Kai was saying, gripping the sides of a podium. "Our research team is determined to find a vaccine for this disease that has now

taken one of my parents and threatens to take the other, as well as tens of thousands of our citizens. The circumstances are made even more desperate in the face of the outbreak that occurred today within the city limits. No longer can we claim this disease is relegated to the poor, rural communities of our country. Letumosis threatens us all, and we will find a way to stop it. Only then can we begin to rebuild our economy and return the Eastern Commonwealth to its once prosperous state.”

Unenthusiastic applause shifted through the crowd. Research on the plague had been underway since the first outbreak had occurred in a small town in the African Union over a dozen years ago. It seemed that very little progress had been made. Meanwhile, the disease had surfaced in hundreds of seemingly unconnected communities throughout the world. Hundreds of thousands of people had fallen ill, suffered, died. Even Adri’s husband had contracted it on a trip to Europe—the same trip during which he’d agreed to become the guardian of an eleven-year-old orphaned cyborg. One of Cinder’s few memories of the man was of him being carted away to the quarantines while Adri raved at how he could not leave her with *this thing*.

Adri never talked about her husband, and few memories of him lingered in the apartment. The only reminder that he’d even existed was found in a row of holographic plaques and carved medallions that lined the fireplace’s mantel—achievement awards and congratulatory prizes from an international technology fair, three years running. Cinder had no idea what he’d invented. Evidently, whatever it was hadn’t taken off, because he’d left his family almost no money when he had died.

On the screen, the prince’s speech was interrupted when a stranger stepped onto the platform and handed a note to

Prince Kai. The prince's eyes clouded over. The screen blackened.

The pressroom was replaced with a desk before a blue screen. A woman sat behind it, expressionless but with whitened knuckles atop the desk.

"We interrupt His Imperial Highness's press conference with an update on the status of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Rikan. The emperor's physicians have just informed us that His Majesty has entered into the third stage of letumosis."

Gasping, the seamstress pulled the pins from her mouth.

Cinder pressed herself against the door frame. She had not even thought to give Kai her condolences, or wishes for the emperor's return of health.

He must think her so insensitive. So ignorant.

"We are told that everything is being done to ensure His Imperial Majesty's comfort at this time, and palace officials tell us that researchers are working nonstop in their search for a vaccine. Volunteers are still urgently needed for antidote testing, even as the cyborg draft continues.

"There has been much controversy regarding the 126th Annual Peace Festival due to the emperor's illness, but Prince Kaito has told the press that the festival will continue as scheduled and that he hopes it might bring some joy in this otherwise tragic time." The anchor paused, hesitating, even with the prompter before her. Her face softened, and her stiff voice had a warble when she finished. "Long live the emperor."

The seamstress murmured the words back to the anchor. The screen went black again before returning to the press

conference, but Prince Kai had left the stage, and the audience of journalists was in upheaval as they reported to their individual cameras.

"I know a cyborg who could volunteer for plague testing," said Pearl.

"Why wait for the draft?"

Cinder leveled a glare at Pearl, who was nearly six inches shorter than she was despite being a year older. "Good idea," she said. "And then *you* could get a job to pay for your pretty dress."

Pearl snarled. "They reimburse the volunteers' families, wire-head."

The cyborg draft had been started by some royal research team a year ago. Every morning, a new ID number was drawn from the pool of so many thousand cyborgs who resided in the Eastern Commonwealth. Subjects had been carted in from provinces as far-reaching as Mumbai and Singapore to act as guinea pigs for the antidote testing. It was made out to be some sort of honor, giving your life for the good of humanity, but it was really just a reminder that cyborgs were not like everyone else. Many of them had been given a second chance at life by the generous hand of scientists and therefore owed their very existence to those who had created them. They were lucky to have lived this long, many thought. It's only right that they should be the first to give up their lives in search for the cure.

"We can't volunteer Cinder," said Peony, bunching her skirt in her hands. "I need her to fix my portscreen."

Pearl sniffed and turned away from both of them. Peony scrunched her nose at her sister's back.

“Stop bickering,” said Adri. “Peony, you’re wrinkling your skirt.”

Cinder stepped back into the hallway as the seamstress returned to her work. Iko was already two steps ahead of her, eager to escape Adri’s presence.

She appreciated Peony coming to her defense, of course, but she knew in the end it wouldn’t matter. Adri would never volunteer her for the testing, because that would be the end of her only income, and Cinder was sure her stepmother had never worked a day in her life.

But if the draft chose her, no one could do anything about it. And it seemed that lately a disproportionate number of those chosen were from New Beijing and the surrounding suburbs.

Every time one of the draft’s victims was a teenage girl, Cinder imagined a clock ticking inside her head.

Chapter Three

“YOU’RE GOING TO THE BALL!” IKO TAPPED HER GRIPPERS together in an imitation of clapping. “We have to find you a dress, and shoes. I will not allow you to wear those awful boots. We’ll get some new gloves and—”

“Could you bring that light over here?” Cinder said, yanking out the top drawer of her standing toolbox. She riffled through it, spare bolts and sockets jangling as Iko scooted closer. A wash of bluish light dispersed the dimness of the storage room.

“Think of the food they’ll have,” said Iko. “And the dresses. And music!”

Cinder ignored her, selecting an assortment of varying tools and arranging them on Iko's magnetic torso.

"Oh, my stars! Think about Prince Kai! You could dance with Prince Kai!"

This made Cinder pause and squint into Iko's blinding light. "Why would the prince dance with me?"

Iko's fan hummed as she sought an answer. "Because you won't have grease on your face this time."

Cinder fought down a chuckle. Android reasoning could be so simplistic. "I hate to break this to you, Iko," she said, slamming in the drawer and moving on to the next, "but I'm not going to the ball."

Iko's fan stopped momentarily, started up again. "I don't compute."

"For starters, I just spent my life savings on a new foot. But even if I did have money, why would I spend it on a dress or shoes or gloves? What a waste."

"What else could you have to spend it on?"

"A complete set of wrenches? A toolbox with drawers that don't stick?"

She slammed in the second drawer with her shoulder to emphasize her point. "A down payment on my own apartment where I won't have to be Adri's servant anymore?"

"Adri wouldn't sign the release documents."

Cinder opened the third drawer. “I know. It would cost a lot more than a silly dress anyway.” She grabbed a ratchet and a handful of wrenches and set them on top of the toolbox. “Maybe I’d get skin grafting.”

“Your skin is fine.”

Cinder glanced at Iko from the corner of her eye.

“Oh. You mean your cyborg parts.”

Shutting the third drawer, Cinder grabbed her messenger bag from the work desk and shoveled the tools into it.

“What else do you think we’ll— oh, the floor jack. Where’d I put that?”

“You’re being unreasonable,” said Iko. “Maybe you can trade for a dress or get one on consignment. I’ve been dying to go into that vintage dress store on Sakura. You know the one I mean?”

Cinder shuffled around the random tools that had collected beneath the worktable. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going.”

“But it does matter. It’s the ball. And the prince!”

“Iko, I’m fixing an android for him. It’s not like we’re friends now.”

Mentioning the prince’s android sparked a memory, and a moment later Cinder pulled the floor jack out from behind its tread. “And it doesn’t matter because Adri will never let me go.”

“She said if you fixed the hover—”

“Right. And after I fix the hover? What about Peony’s portscreen that’s always acting up? What about—” She scanned the room and spotted a rusty android tucked away in the corner. “What about that old Gard7.3?”

“What would Adri want with that old thing? She doesn’t have a garden anymore. She doesn’t even have a balcony.”

“I’m just saying that she has no real intention of letting me go. As long as she can come up with things for me to fix, my ‘chores’ will never be done.” Cinder shoved a couple jack stands into her bag, telling herself that she didn’t care. Not really.

She wouldn’t fit in at a formal ball anyway. Even if she did find dress gloves and slippers that could hide her metal monstrosities, her mousy hair would never hold a curl, and she didn’t know the first thing about makeup.

She would just end up sitting off the dance floor and making fun of the girls who swooned to get Prince Kai’s attention, pretending she wasn’t jealous.

Pretending it didn’t bother her.

Although she was curious about the food.

And the prince did know her now, sort of. He had been kind to her at the market. Perhaps he would ask her to dance. Out of politeness. Out of chivalry when he saw her standing alone.

The precarious fantasy crashed down around her as quickly as it had begun. It was impossible. Not worth thinking about.

She was cyborg, and she would never go to the ball.

"I think that's everything," she said, masking her disappointment by adjusting the messenger bag over her shoulders. "You ready?"

"I don't compute," said Iko. "If fixing the hover won't convince Adri to let you go to the ball, then why are we going to the junkyard? If she wants a magbelt so bad, why doesn't she go dig through the trash to find one?"

"Because ball or no, I *do* believe she would sell you off for pocket change if given a reason. Besides, with them off to the ball, we'll have the apartment to ourselves. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"It sounds great to me!"

Cinder turned to see Peony heaving herself through the doorway. She still wore her silver ball gown, but now the hems along the neck and sleeves were finished. A hint of lace had been added at her cleavage, accentuating the fact that, at fourteen, Peony had already developed curves that Cinder couldn't begin to hope for. If Cinder's body had ever been predisposed to femininity, it had been ruined by whatever the surgeons had done to her, leaving her with a stick-straight figure. Too angular. Too boyish. Too awkward with her heavy artificial leg.

"I'm going to strangle Mom," said Peony. "She's making me loony."

'Pearl needs to find a husband,' 'My daughters are such a drain,' 'No one appreciates what I do for them,' yap yap yap." She wobbled her fingers in the air in mockery of her mother.

"What are you doing down here?"