

# A CINDER'S TALE

By Stephanie Ricker

*First Chapter Sample*



IN ITS GLORY DAYS, Aschen had been a gas giant. Circling too near its sun, it was a roaster—a hot Jupiter—locked in tight orbit around a red giant star. Gradually, over many years, hydrodynamic escape had stripped the planet of its atmosphere, leaving only the metal-rich core behind.

Elsa skimmed her miner's coach low across Aschen's molten surface, her eyes flicking from the heat-resistant controls in front of her to the carefully darkened viewscreen protecting her from the sun's intensity. The planet's fast rotation and proximity to its star meant that each miner spent a hefty portion of each shift on Aschen's blistering-hot dayside.

A deep, gruff voice came through the comm line inside her helmet. "Watch yourself, Elsa. Reading a lot of activity in the pumpkin patch to your left."

"Copy that, Bruno," she told the older miner. "I'm watching."

Through her viewscreen, Elsa eyed the patch of bubbling lava warily. Pumpkin patches, so named because the superheated lava puffed out in large bubbles, were notorious for blowing up without a moment's notice. Any sane person would want to get as far away from them as possible.

Of course, any sane person wouldn't sign up for a job as a cinder in the first place. The pay was good, but the life expectancy left something to be desired.

The work was necessary, if perilous. Aschen had made its debut on the galactic scene as soon as long-range mining scouts determined that the planet's volatile outer atmospheric layers had boiled away sufficiently to allow the deployment of mining teams. The big mining companies sniffed at roasters like hungry dogs, waiting for their moment to harvest the planetary dregs.

And few worlds were so ripe for the harvest as Aschen.

The substance that put hitherto-ignored Aschen on the map was cendrillon. Strong enough to withstand the tidal forces of planets and light enough to manipulate even in standard gravity, the material could be found only in the forged remains of a chthonian planet, a gas giant compressed and drained of its atmosphere. From such planets, named after the denizens of the Greek underworld, came the cendrillon to build better space stations, starships, and weapons. The galaxy could hardly spin without the stuff.

*Pity it lurked in the hottest, most inhospitable corners of the worlds,* Elsa thought. She maneuvered her coach closer to the pumpkin patch, avoiding the hottest spots, her eyes glancing from the heat sensors to the spectroscope on her console and back again. The patches harbored large concentrations of cendrillon. The temptation of a big ore haul lured many cinders to brave the dangers of explosive magma.

Her machine picked its way daintily over the lava flow, and Elsa edged the coach right up to the perimeter of the patch. Her spectroscope chimed obligingly. A lovely concentration of cendrillon lay just beneath her. Elsa deployed the collectors, watching as the arms descended from the body of the coach, plunged elbow-deep into the lava, and scooped up the heavier cendrillon beneath.

Dripping liquid fire, the collector scoops emerged again, dragging their burden into the body of the coach. Elsa's gloved fingers hovered over the thruster controls as she kept her gaze on the heat sensors. She couldn't stay in this position much longer. The first of the heat alarms sounded quietly just as the scoop arms completed their retraction. Time to go.

She slapped the thruster controls, and her coach leapt into the air. The pumpkin patch exploded in a fiery splash, the superheated magma splatter just missing the underside of Elsa's coach.

Elsa let her breath out in a whoosh, enjoying the adrenalin rush and checking her displays for damage to her vehicle. The reports were all clear. She grinned and activated her comm line. "I can feel your disapproval from here," she told Bruno, "but I was timing it carefully."

He grunted. "You know how I worry," he said dryly. "But you also know what you're doing. Get a good haul, did you?"

"That I did," she said, unable to keep a smug note from her voice. From her higher vantage point, she saw Bruno's coach arc away from the planet's turbulent surface. "Calling it a day?" she asked in surprise.

"Yep. Bells are in only ten minutes."

Elsa glanced at the chronometer. Bruno was right; the shift was nearly over. She saw several other coaches making their way across the planet surface like a small swarm of grasshoppers above the swirling magma. She followed suit in her own vehicle, feeling the slight drag of the full load she carried. High winds, whisking heat from the dayside of the planet to the nightside, buffeted the coach, and she had to work to maintain her course. The end-of-shift bells rang on her comm line as the heavily laden coaches around her flung themselves at the sky towards the gleaming space station.

Tremaine Station, the current darling of the Tremaine Mining Company, was ringed with docking ports for ships of all sizes, but the coaches had a different destination. The station's mining hub, set at a distance from the main station to accommodate the loading of the gargantuan ore barges that transported the cendrillon to distant star systems, was designed to unload and house the coaches. The hub rotated to provide each approaching coach with an

available dock. As the coaches drew close enough, the mining hub caught each one in a tractor beam and drew it into position, a mother hen gathering in her chicks at the end of the day.

Elsa felt the tug of the tractor as it caught her coach. The vehicle gently sidled up to a free dock set into the giant hub, and the automated system began unloading. She waited patiently while the cendrillon ore was sucked out of her coach and stored deep within the hub to be processed.

Her day's numbers scrolled across the controls as her newly harvested ore registered in the system. She couldn't help but smile in triumph; she had beaten her old record for one day's ore haul.

When unloading was complete, the airlock between mining hub and coach engaged with a hiss of equalizing pressure. Elsa unbuckled her harness, sliding it past her helmet. While heavy shielding protected the coach from lava and from solar flare radiation from Aschen's sun, cooling the cabin of each coach enough for human comfort would be a waste of money. Each cinder wore a spacesuit, creating his or her own tiny livable atmosphere inside the furnace of the coach.

Elsa punched the door controls and stepped into the open airlock. Supercooled air blew from vents around the airlock, and smoke rose from her suit as it cooled rapidly. Once her suit reached the appropriate temperature, the second set of airlock doors slid open.

She emerged into the employee center of the rotating mining hub, which was a welter of activity. Cinders hustled out of their suits and scampered about in their grey undersuits, all eager to snag an available shower stall in the post-shift rush. Supercooled ash from their suits drifted gently in the air, no matter how careful they tried to be. The thin soot that settled on their undersuits and skin was an unfortunate byproduct of their work; no matter how the miners scrubbed, a few smudges of soot always seemed to remain after showering. There was no help for it, and it had quickly prompted the cendrillon miners' nickname: Cinders always smelled slightly of brimstone, always had a touch of soot in their hair.

Elsa quickly shed her suit and put it in her locker until her next shift. Each suit was adjusted to the individual, but hers had been custom-made—being the shortest cinder in the locker room had one advantage. She climbed on the bench just outside of her locker to enable her to reach the shelf where her helmet belonged.

Behind her, the whine of hydraulics signaled the hub's rotation and the arrival of several more cinders. A moment later, Bruno came through one of the airlocks and pulled off his helmet.

"Heads up," the veteran cinder said to Elsa as he walked past her to his locker. "Nebraska wants to see you when you're finished here." He straightened Elsa's helmet on its shelf as he walked by.

Elsa groaned. "Why?"

Bruno shrugged. "Some paperwork thing; she didn't say."

Jaq, one of their newer crewmates, chimed in from his locker farther down the aisle. "Want me to fake an episode of cardiac arrest in front of her desk? Or I could activate the alarm system."

Elsa laughed. "I appreciate the offer, but no. I'd best just get it over with." She sighed. The mining office manager seemed to despise her, and it bothered Elsa more than she cared to admit.

Bruno gave her a shrewd glance. As if reading her mind, he said, "Don't take it personally. She hates everyone. And she obviously hates her job even more," he finished dryly.

"You watch, I'll win her over one of these days," Elsa vowed, rubbing at a patch of soot on her undersuit. "I really thought the candy would do it."

"You couldn't have known she couldn't process sugar. That wasn't your fault," Jaq said, gathering his belongings to enter the men's showers.

"Yeah, well, it didn't exactly put me in her good graces." Elsa gave up on the soot; she was just rubbing it more deeply into the fabric.

"I wouldn't worry. She doesn't have good graces to be put in." Bruno's usual hangdog expression didn't vary, but his eyes twinkled at her from behind their crows' feet.

Elsa smiled. "I do feel sorry for her, though. She must be lonely." She craned her neck to look at Bruno around the door of her locker. "You know, the other day I saw her carrying some sort of case, down near the personnel quarters. I waved at her, and she spooked and took off. Well. In as much as she can really take off," she amended. "You'd have thought I caught her smuggling contraband, from the look on her face."

Bruno frowned. "What kind of case was it?"

Elsa shrugged. “Some sort of musical instrument case, maybe? It was half as big as she was.” She closed her locker with a bang. “I’m hitting the showers. I’ll see you on the shuttle.”

Bruno waved at her and hung his suit in his locker.

After scrubbing as much soot as she could from her hair, Elsa emerged from the women’s changing rooms into the shuttle waiting area. At the end of each shift, shuttles ferried the cinders from the mining hub to the main space station, where the commerce center and personnel quarters were located.

The shuttles docked and disgorged their cargo of the next shift’s workers. As soon as the coaches were unloaded and checked for any damage, they were sent straight back out with fresh cinders aboard. Elsa waited until the new workers had streamed past into the locker rooms, waving at a few members of the swing shift whom she knew personally, before she boarded the now-empty shuttle that would take her shift home.

Elsa chose a set of six seats, three on each side facing each other, and buckled herself into one of them. She was so small that the harness didn’t really fit, no matter how she adjusted it, but the alternative was to be tossed around the temperamental shuttle. Bruno plunked down next to her. Jaq and Gus, another crewmate, took two of the seats opposite as the shuttle filled with cinders.

“Have you heard the news?” Gus asked as he struggled to buckle his harness over his rather ample stomach. *One size fits all* continued to be a lie perpetuated around the galaxy.

“What news?” Elsa asked.

“A frigate from the galactic fleet is stopping at Aschen,” Jaq interjected before Gus could get a word in. Gus glared at him.

“What in the worlds for?” Bruno asked.

Gus put a hand over Jaq’s mouth to stop him from answering. “Rumor has it they’re passing through for a little shore leave before shipping out to patrol the outer edge of the quadrant,” he replied. “I heard it from one of the stewards who orders the fuel and supplies for the ships docking at the station. The station received a requisition so large, it can only mean a frigate is arriving.”

“Any idea which ship it is?” Elsa asked. *A proper frigate, docking at Tremaine Station? How did we get so lucky?*

Gus shook his head. “I’ll keep my ears open, though.”

As the shuttle launched itself from the mining hub, the artificial gravity shut off for a moment, not an unusual occurrence on the old transports. Jaq flailed an arm and just managed to catch his floppy hat as it drifted from his head.

Bruno groaned. “Again?”

The shuttle intercom crackled. “Sorry, ladies and gents, won’t be but a moment.”

There was a startled yelp from behind Elsa. She twisted in her seat to see that the occupant of the seat back-to-back with hers had been thrown into the air by the jolt of the launch and the sudden loss of gravity. The drifting cinder was tiny, slimmer than Elsa and not much taller. She had somehow flipped upside down, and her silvery cornsilk hair waved gently as she floated past Elsa’s chair.

“Hello,” the drifter said, and her voice had an unusual lilt Elsa had never heard before; she couldn’t place the accent. “Slipped clean out of my harness. Now what?”

“Best watch out,” Bruno warned. “The gravity could come back on at any—”

The intercom crackled simultaneously: “There, now, told you it wouldn’t be long.”

Elsa reached up as high as she could (which wasn’t very), snatched at the drifting woman’s hand, and just managed to catch her thin, cool fingers. She pulled hard, and the woman bent like a whip, swinging right-side up over Elsa and her friends. Elsa yanked the woman down into the seat next to her by her feet just as the gravity came back on, and the woman fell the last few inches into the chair.

“Many thanks,” she gasped, clutching the armrests but grinning at Elsa. “I fell asleep,” she admitted, hastily buckling the harness around her. She was so slender, Elsa could easily see how she had slipped free. “I should know better. The gravity cut out yesterday as I was first arriving at the station, but I just hung on to the harness to stay in my seat. I could have cracked my head like an embryo.”

“Sorry, like a what?” Gus asked.

“Er, like an unborn . . .” she trailed off, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “You know, the kind that you eat.” She looked from Jaq to a horrified Gus.

“Do you mean an egg?” Jaq asked. His voice had an odd tone, and Elsa glanced at him. He was staring at her new seatmate. With good reason, Elsa realized, as she caught a glimpse of the woman’s eyes: She was a fay. That explained the hair, at any rate.

“Yes! Thank you,” the fay replied.

Elsa coughed delicately. “Er, I’m glad you weren’t hurt.” She kicked Jaq, who finally closed his mouth. “You’ll have to pardon us. We’ve never seen a fay before. I wasn’t completely sure you were real,” she confessed.

The fay laughed, a sound like a carillon. Her unearthly, quicksilver eyes gleamed merrily. “Oh yes,” she said, “very real, as you can see. Though not many of us have left the homeworld yet. I’m a bit of a pioneer,” she said, tossing her head and smiling. Her fine hair settled around her shoulders, thistledown soft.

“I know every cinder on this shift,” Bruno said, “but I don’t believe we’ve met. You say you’re new?”

“Aye, brand. Today was my first day on shift.”

Jaq rediscovered his voice. “Welcome to Aschen, in that case! If you ever need anything, just you look us up and we’ll come a-running.” He grinned widely.

Gus elbowed Jaq in the ribs, ignored the dirty look Jaq shot his way, and said, “I’m Gus, and the lout here is Jaq. The one with the hound-dog face is Bruno.”

The fay turned to fix Elsa with an unsettling, alien stare. Elsa forced herself not to look away. “And my tiny savior?” the fay asked.

Elsa laughed. “You’re one to talk. I’m Elsa. And you?”

“I’m called Marraine,” the fay answered. “Or at least that’s close enough to what I’m called.” She paused. “I don’t forget a favor, Elsa.” Again, that unblinking stare.

Elsa smiled. “No worries, glad to help. What brought you to Aschen? You’re a long way from home.”

“Oh, I have my reasons,” Marraine replied. “A healthy desire for exploration primary among them. When starships from elsewhere first visited my homeworld, we asked them what made them come to our part of the galaxy in the first place. ‘Because it was there,’ they told us. I thought it an intriguing reply.”

The shuttle jarred as it docked with Tremaine Station proper, and Marraine unbuckled her harness and rose before anyone could comment.

“Enchanted to meet all of you,” she said. She looked at Elsa. “And thank you again for your help. Should you ever be in need, I’m at your service.” She turned and was gone, slipping through the disembarking crowd.

Elsa blinked, and Bruno shook himself as if waking from a dream. Jaq hadn’t moved since Marraine stood.

“I guess it’s true,” Gus said. “They really don’t blink. She never did, the whole time.”

“Her eyes were incredible,” Jaq said, looking dazed.

“When the fay homeworld was first discovered, I heard there was some debate about whether the inhabitants were human or a separate species,” Bruno mused. “I’m still not sure myself. She was beautiful and unsettling, certainly, but I don’t know that I’d call her a different species.”

Elsa stood up and hustled the boys out of the seats. “Who are you and what have you done with my crewmates? You’ve all been magically transformed into love-stricken teenagers. Now, let’s get out of here before the shuttle leaves with us still aboard.”

Still discussing their new acquaintance, the cinders emerged from the shuttle bay into Tremaine Station and were immediately caught up in the bustle of the crowds. Many people were hurrying home, some were shopping at the array of vendor booths, and some were dining at the assortment of available restaurants. The Tremaine Mining Company was one of the largest in the galaxy, and its holdings stretched across the stars. Aschen was lucky to have its own full-fledged space station nearby; most chthonian worlds boasted little in the way of civilization. Tremaine Station was home to the mining company offices and quarters for the cinders, but it was also rapidly becoming a port of call for galactic commerce. Cendrillon buyers came through almost daily, and a growing number of goods traders made it a regular stop on their routes as well.

*Close your eyes and squint*, thought Elsa, *and you could almost imagine this was a planetside city*. Not that she had visited many such cities since becoming a cinder; she had been bouncing from one mining station to another for the last several years, chasing the cendrillon.

“Want to catch a bite?” Gus asked the group at large.

“Suits me,” Bruno replied, ever amiable. Jaq was still daydreaming and ignored the question, so Gus grabbed his arm and pointed him in the direction of the food vendors.

Elsa clapped a hand to her forehead. “I forgot about Nebraska.”

“Ooooh. Better run,” Bruno said.

“I’ll catch up with you later. Message me with your restaurant choice so I can find you later?”

“Naturally,” Gus replied, making a shooing gesture with his hands.

“Thanks!” Elsa tossed the reply over her shoulder, already on her way.

*End of Sample*

[Purchase this story and the rest of the \*Five Glass Slippers\* collection.](#)

*affiliate link*