

Chapter 1

A call rang out through distant forests, rocky plains and chasms, beckoning from far away...

The final embrace of winter slipped away from the terrain, the bitter, melancholy clouds turning soft and silvery, the punishing darkness and swirling winds fading into the distance.

The first time in the planet's orbit light had dusted the expansive plains. A chasm yawned in the frozen ocean, a toppled beast from beyond the stars, its metallic body hollow, the fire and smoke which had willed it to life, long since faded.

Large gashes savaged the metal beast's flank; when it had fallen, seawater had eagerly spilled in, but the low temperatures had stilled the invading waters.

What was once a raging torrent of dark liquid was now a bridge upon which life scrambled for freedom; small bodies clambering across the glistening ice to where the light finally shone. Behind them, a dark labyrinth, stretched deep beneath the ground, a place they had learned to fear fluorescent lights and distant sounds of scraping metal. They were small, nameless children wearing scars far too big for their bodies and clothes that barely clung to their skeletons.

Another world had enfolded through the tear in the metallic wall: an ever-expansive ceiling of celestial blues and mottled grey forms. What was formerly the ocean floor, was now vast, rolling plains of snow and ice.

The small group neared the edge, but most of them recoiled, awaiting the moment the seemingly impossible ceiling would collapse, trapping them in debris. The smell of crisp air and kiss of a bold breeze tossed the matted hairs of the children, the feeling foreign. The stagnant air of the mine shafts from which they fled seemed like cruel comfort. The group shrunk afraid.

Until one girl stepped forward, weary-eyed but undaunted as she felt the light caress her bronze skin for the first time. She was young, and far too small for her age; however, she defiantly stood in front of this new world, holding a withered, skeletal arm limply at her side.

She lowered herself down into the snow, the strange, cold sensation stinging her scarred feet. She dropped down and stared questioningly back up at the children she had followed. They all eyed her suspiciously, although some looked tempted to join her.

They jostled together, then stopped abruptly at the perimeter, eyes wide as they gazed horror-struck at something behind her. The girl spun around, her red iris landing upon a severed arm almost entirely blanketed by the snow.

From the arm, wires snaked across the snow, once shiny metal, now worn and dull. Bold white letters glistened in the sunlight, S-P-E-C-T-R-E. The girl glanced further; she could see fragments of a blackened skeleton beneath the snow, hungry, lying-in wait. She nudged it with her toe and was . . .

back cowering between the walls, her breath ragged in her chest as the low drumming of footsteps thundered above. She held her breath, her insides twisting as a tall, spindly shape glided through the space before her, slicing through the hallway and disappearing in the gloom.

The girl crawled along the edge of the wall, carefully easing to her feet. She glanced quickly around the hallway - empty. She kept her right arm close to her chest as she pulled herself through rooms upon rooms of the dim labyrinth. She hesitated on the threshold of a large room, walls disappeared into the darkness above and upon the floor lay forms splayed out upon the ground, their silent faces cast in shadow. The girl could almost feel the gazes of them upon her. The room smelt of ash, the warm air stuck to the girl like sweat.

She reached the edge of the room and found a figure stiffly propped up against the wall, her head hung forward. The girl offered the unmoving figure a tough, spongy object.

When the figure refused, the girl settled down next to her and began to break apart the foul-tasting food, eating some and placing smaller pieces into the hand of her companion.

Warmth began to crawl up her spine, the smell of ash was even stronger now lingering below an odd metal stench that made the girl shudder and wrap her arms around the figure next to her. She closed her eyes, burying her face into the figure's chest and . . .

. . . she was standing in snow, the wind cooling the sensation of heat. She gazed with confusion at the group of children, but they shrunk away, many already turning to make the return climb down to the mine. The girl squared her shoulders. She was going forward, no matter what. The other children slunk into the shadows and the girl walked on, not looking back, clutching her arm close to her chest, the noises of the children fading with each step.

Snow crunched under her feet just as a swath of black clouds gathered upon the horizon heavy, swallowing the light. The girl forged ahead, aching legs propelling her. Her skin itched, her feet burned and heat bubbled at the back of her throat so much so that she could hardly react when the snow gave way beneath her.

She landed twisted, disoriented, wet and cold, her arms thrown up and her legs tangled together. She shifted, drawing her head up. She had landed next to someone, a frozen adult body covered in snow. There were more forms that she could count ahead, some much larger than her, others smaller, all sprawled and half buried, stretching on beyond the horizon.

The girl looked behind her; the mines now a terrible smudge in the distance, a light flickering between the clouds. These people had also run from the mines, but their journey had ended here. She moved to get up but nearly wept as her body wouldn't obey. She saw movement just ahead of her, forms who were alive and darting quickly between the many bodies.

She watched warily, too weak to attract their attention. She would just rest for a moment. Her eyelid fluttered and darkness descended. She was out for hours or minutes, the

girl couldn't be sure. She was awoken by the heat bubbling underneath her skin. Her body felt hot and itchy, her fingers stiff, and she could hardly move; she felt exhausted, despite just waking up.

The group was still there. They were all wrapped in thick coats and rags. There was talking and yelling but wind whipped their voices away. They shook the frosty bodies and took from them, bags and pieces of equipment that she recognised from the mines. Weighed down by what they could carry, the group began heading away from the mass of immobile.

The girl wanted to call out, however her body felt like it was made of stone.

Descending from the sky was a grey curtain, a roaring drop of dark metallic grey, the air seemingly dragged away into darkness, sucked across the plains' inconceivable expanse. Though the girl did not understand what the darkening sky meant, her blood and bones knew, pulling her quickly to her feet.

She picked up her body, a feeling similar to transporting parts, and staggered after the group on rubbery legs. She could see footprints in the snow and began to follow the trail; however, the gentle breeze that she had first welcomed, transformed something harsher. It snarled as it flew past her, distorting the tracks

She pushed through, her ears ringing and the bitter cold tearing her skin. Reality was beginning to fade, her body was boiling, the snow and dark clouds transforming into...

unfeeling metal, hissing pipes, grey tiles, the warmth of a burning fire not too far away. She clung to a soft woman next to her. She could hear the distant sounds of drumming; boots striking metal floors, getting closer and closer. The heat was unbearable. Barely conscious, the girl lifted her head, removing herself from the figure slumped against the wall. Loud sounds bounced off the smooth, silver walls. Heavy, terrible footsteps neared the large room.

A scream of metal stopped the girl as she attempted to flee, a wicked orange light flooded the room. The bright light settled over the faces splayed out upon the floor, their eyes were wide and glassy, their lips parted and full of blood.

The sound was almost deafening now, the beating of metal against metal. Forms entered the room, in clear focus, the hollow shells of enforcers while others were merely silhouettes against the terrible orange light behind them. They marched over the still forms, steel shattering bones, twisting limbs and smashing heads wetly against the dusty tile.

Heat flooded the room. Blistering walls, smouldering air, the girl could not breathe. She tried to run, her hand tugging the figure along with her, but the body only crumbled forward.

The girl could only watch now as shadows began to pull still bodies upwards and feed them into the orange light. She couldn't tell where the light originated from as the glow was too harsh and the longer she looked, the more her eyes watered and vision blurred.

She buried herself into the crumpled figure, not letting go even as the shadows approached, reaching out to grab her and feed her into the terrible heat. . .

. . . and her body burned from the cold; as her breath escaped her lips, her lungs engulfed in flames, heat spreading through her chest like a virus. She felt blood pooling at the back of her throat. She struggled to stay conscious. The terrain sloped sharply upwards. Her feet unable to climb, her body powerless to continue, she crumbled to the ground. Wind tore through the darkened sky. Snow hungrily devoured the girl's still form.

She knew her journey was over.

She didn't hear the woman approach; the girl was far too focused on gasping in cold air between painful coughs, until she was weightless, held tightly by a figure wearing the same thick rags as her, drenched in snow and ice. The girl was carried through the wind and curtains of snow to a small group, barely visible against the swirling white.

The girl's eye soon caught the face of a young woman who she would come to know as Cantor. She had short, black curly hair speckled with white. Cantor only had one green eye, the rest of her face covered in healed-over scars. The girl was not deterred. She gazed intently upon the brave woman who charged through the storm undaunted.

The two soon reached the rest of the group; they were no longer forms swallowed up by the whirling snow around them but young children from the mines, all wrapped in ill-fitting clothing and heavy coats, their dark figures shivering, rocked by the howling wind.

Cantor walked past the group, taking the lead again, like she belonged there. The children followed behind her, continuing through the storm.

All at once it disappeared, the snowy flurries consumed by sloping rock walls, the angry winds muted ever so slightly. The girl was now upon the ground; it was cold and firm - her limbs rested heavily - her body splayed out.

The figures moved furtively around her, much like the snow they escaped. The girl's eyelid fluttered; she was so tired. Before she could drift off though, she was snatched from sleep - a heavy coat blanketed her and sudden pressure pressed up and down her sides. Alarmed, she struggled weakly. Cantor sat by her, rubbing her thoroughly, her breath misting past her lips as she surged forward and enveloped the shivering girl. The girl was small in her arms; Cantor seemed to consume her and the girl remained still, scared and cold.

The light from the fire flooded the room, washing over deathly faces, scarred and bruised children with little to no hair on the tops of their heads, much like the girl herself. There were young children and then Cantor and others who looked Cantor's size, snuggling under their heavy coats and Fourth-Class processing suits.

The fire flickered violently as the wind howled. The girl huddled in Cantor's coat, the heat from the flames washing over her. She felt a bit stronger, the cold in her blood, fading to a burning throb, the memories of another fire echoed across her skin. She curled her arm

protectively and pulled the coat up around her face. She was warm that night, protected from the cold, the mines and the burning. Cantor stayed close to her, letting sleep find the girl easily and safely for the first time in years.