

THE DIAMOND DEEP

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

BRENDA COOPER



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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 I watched documentaries about her and read books about her and by her as I prepared this novel.

This is simply the story that Evita's legend teased out of me. Since I am a science fiction writer, I placed this story of love and revolution in the future. In this novel, the culture is a mix of old and new. I am grateful in advance to all of the modern women who will forgive me for the way this story is told. I could 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.

*To women everywhere who have fought for rights and freedoms.
And to Katie Cramer, who still has all of her choices before her.*

PART ONE
INTO ADIAMO

CHAPTER ONE

Ruby sat on the edge of the bed, as silent and still as possible. Now, more than ever before, she felt all of the generations that had been born and died in *The Creative Fire*. Their work, their hope, their dreams, and their pain seemed to float around Ruby like a fog of intent.

Joel's quiet breath filled the room, punctuated with the creaks and groans of the great ship around her, the sigh of machinery that filled the space inside with air and delivered water to grow food, to drink, and to clean. Living so near the center not only sounded different, but it felt different; as if the entire mass of *The Creative Fire* centered here on Joel's room.

On their room. It was their room, and she would stay in it. She would share his power, and she would do it well. She had earned it. She would find a way to fit here.

Beside her, Joel rolled over and stretched. She put a hand on his shoulder, kneading softly to work at his stiff muscles. As her fingers worked, Joel's breath lost the even rhythm of sleep.

He pushed himself up on his elbow. "You might as well be pacing."

"I can feel the ship around me. At home," she gestured outward, toward the working habitats, "at home there would be robots going by and children laughing and bells for shift change."

"Isn't your home here now?"

"Of course." The tone of her whisper was a caress to match the hand that trailed along his back. "You worked out hard yesterday."

"Winning has given me more enemies." He touched her hair, stroking it. "You have them, too. You should start working with KJ again. It's been five weeks since the last actual fighting. Get back into routines. I'll send two guards with you."

Ruby laughed. "No guards."

He turned her face toward his. "It's not a request. You don't know who hates you yet. It's a risk of being with me."

"I'll take friends. Like Ani and Dayn."

"Good thing there isn't a stubborn bone in your body."

"Or yours." She fell back onto the bed against him. "Ix!"

"Yes, Ruby." The ship's AI chose a soft female voice.

“Bring up the Adiamo system.” She loved having a display in the bedroom. A luxurious manifestation of Joel’s power as captain of *The Creative Fire*. The screen sprang to life, presenting a view of a single brilliant sun with two gas giants, and cradled between, two inhabited planets. Tiny lights blinked for the orbiting space stations. “Is that real yet?” she asked Ix.

“It’s still the game view. I can see the sun, Adiamo, but we aren’t close enough for the cameras to pick up planets or stations.”

She frowned and whispered into Joel’s ear. “What are we going to find there?”

One hand roamed her torso. “Our home.”

“Our destiny.”

She closed her eyes. Change. She loved change, she had made change, created it with all of her being.

So why did she feel so unprepared?

CHAPTER TWO

Onor had to work around small crowds in the park on B-pod as he searched for Marcelle. He finally spotted her walking so fast it was nearly a jog, her dark curly hair bouncing against the shoulders of her blue uniform shirt. Onor's face broke into a grin he wasn't really expecting. After all, it had only been a few weeks since they'd last been on a patrol together. She sped up and reached him, smelling like sweat and stim, and punched him in the arm. "Long time."

"Not so long."

"Long if you're me."

He shook his head at her. "Joel wants a report about how dangerous it is out here."

"And you?"

"Wanted to say hi to you."

"That's better."

He felt awkward around her even though she was his next-to-oldest friend. The fighting had changed everything. The different places they'd all ended up had changed them more. The three of them had been inseparable once, but now he was standing next to Marcelle for the first time in weeks. "You could live near us. Ruby's offered to find you work in command."

"She needs me out here more. Someone has to remind people Ruby cares about them."

"She'll be doing that herself today or tomorrow. I overheard her and Joel talking about it."

"Good." Marcelle plucked at his sleeve. "Let's go."

Something above them groaned and the floor gave a slight shudder. Marcelle stopped and turned to look at him. "The *Fire* knows she's going home," she whispered. "Only I don't think she wants to get there."

Onor laughed louder than he meant to.

"Well," Marcelle started walking again. "She seems to be falling apart a little more every day."

"We'll make it."

"Too bad I'm almost the only gray who believes you."

"There are no grays."

“Being able to wear blue and red doesn’t make people forget who they really are.”

“Do you really believe that?” he asked her. “Isn’t it better now?”

“You are so naïve, Onor Hall.”

They hit the end of a corridor and Marcelle consulted her journal, sending them left. She stopped and he ran up against her, her back and shoulder suddenly tucked into his body. Warm. She whispered, “How long until we get there? You should know.”

“I don’t.” He forced himself to step slightly back.

“Doesn’t Joel tell you anything? Or Ruby?” A slight edge in her voice made him wince.

“No one knows,” he replied. “We know how far away Adiamo is, and Ix is working on calculating the other orbits now that it’s found one of the gas giants.”

“We’re close enough for Ix to see the planets?”

“Just Mammot so far. Not Lym.”

“So we’ll get home this year?”

“Ix will tell us when it knows. I’m as anxious as you are to see a sky.”

“I can’t imagine it. Nothing above you. What does nothing look like?”

He laughed. “I have no idea.”

“You’re infuriating.”

“If I knew when we’d get home, I’d tell you.”

She stopped right in front of him, blocking his way. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Be quiet. We’re getting near the danger zone.”

For the next hour, they patrolled as silently as they could. They noted a pile of debris and Onor pulled out his journal and called a cleaning bot for it, but nothing more eventful happened until they slid out of the maintenance corridors and into the B-pod maintenance galley.

Ruby sat in a chair, a half-full cup of water in her hand. “There you are.”

She’d been waiting for them. She wore a flowing green shirt over gray pants and low-heeled gray boots. Her red hair had been pulled back from her face and braided on top of her head, the back left flowing over her shoulders. She looked so beautiful that he felt awkward, his cheeks hot and his tongue

tied. The worst of it was that he felt sure she knew what her simple presence did to him.

Ruby rose and gave Marcelle a long hug.

He and Marcelle both waiting for Ruby to speak.

“I’ve got a few hours before I promised to be in common.”

“Joel said you wouldn’t be here for a few days.”

Ruby ignored his comment. “Ix told me where you two were, and I thought we could be together for a bit.” She looked from Onor to Marcelle and back. “I miss how it used to be. Can you tell me how things are out here?”

Marcelle started talking so he sat back to listen.

“It’s fractured. The Jackman and Conroy roused a whole cell of true reds yesterday—I think there were seven of them. They’re in lockup. But we didn’t see any trouble today. The living areas feel more normal. Most of the repair and maintenance shops are back up.”

Ruby looked pleased. “Does it feel better? You know—safer?”

Marcelle got up and poured two cups of water. “We lock the reds up now. That’s better than them locking us up.” She set the two glasses of water down, making a little show of taking care of Onor. “But it’s hard to tell who to trust.”

Ruby leaned in and whispered, “Will you keep it secret that I’m here?”

Before they could answer, the door opened. The boy Haric led a much older man in behind him. Ben. Ben looked older than Onor remembered. His eyes were almost buried in shadowed cracks, his face framed with wispy gray hair. He moved stiffly. This man wouldn’t be able to chase recalcitrant children through corridors and force them to go home. He still dressed in red, though. Ben’s only concession to the new order was that he wore the multi-colored necklace Ruby had beaded him right on top of his shirt where everybody could see it. He stood for a bit, looking at Ruby curiously. “Good to see you’re safe.”

Ruby took his hand, and kissed it. “You kept me that way for years.” Her voice sounded thick, almost choked.

Haric pulled a chair out for Ben and waited until the old man sat down before he looked at Ruby.

“Thank you,” she told him. “See you in common in an hour.”

Haric looked disappointed at the dismissal, but he obeyed.

After the door shut behind him, Ruby leaned over Ben, giving him a hug. "Can I get you anything?"

"No." Ben looked pleased and awkward in Ruby's arms. "I'm glad you got my message."

She poured him water anyway. "I wasn't sure Haric could find you."

"He found me yesterday. I was overseeing a group of teenagers in E-pod, and it took a while to get here on the train."

"I'm sorry. We haven't got them all repaired yet," Ruby said. "What do you need to tell me?"

Ben gave her a long, hard look that reminded her of how he used to look at her when she was a child. Like she was being reckless. "You should have more bodyguards with you."

"I've got Onor."

Not true. She'd gotten here by herself.

"You never did listen." Ben shook his head, his eyes unfocused in remembrance. "Not one day. But you've got to be more careful than you used to be."

"Surely I'm safe *here*," Ruby said.

Ben leaned in toward her. "That short blue, Ellis, he's trying to make trouble for you for sure. He's stayed true."

"Sylva's stayed true, too. She's as red as my hair, and a bitch besides."

"So you know this? You're watching for it?" Ben asked. "That some of us might be out to hurt you?"

"Grays? My own people?"

Ben dropped his eyes, like he didn't want to tell her any more. "Lya. She's recruiting women and getting them to hate you. And Ellis and Sylva have a few, at least."

Ruby worried her lower lip. "I didn't know they were recruiting grays."

"I don't know how many," Ben said. "Or exactly who."

Ruby's eyes widened and she spat out, "Joel. What about Joel? Do they intend to hurt him?"

"I expect so."

"Do you know about any plans?"

"Nothing specific. I'll watch for you, let you know. I want you to tell Joel, too. I couldn't get a message to him."

"Did you try?"

“He’s surrounded by keepers these days.”

Ruby gave a soft smile. “I’ve not taken good care of you. I’ll see that Joel meets you and knows all you did.”

“Oh, I know Joel well.”

That made Onor curious, but he didn’t want to interrupt. Besides, this was their lunch break, and he was hungry. He turned to open the refrigerator, half listening as Ruby chattered with Ben and Marcelle about less critical things like her songs (yes, she was writing new ones) and her mother Siri (who loved Ruby’s power and tried to take credit for it). Onor found two orbfruit a bit past their prime, and some stale bread. He peeled the fruit and put the bright yellow-orange slices right on the bread to soften it, then rummaged in the cupboard for stim. The whole conversation felt surreal. If the world were the old way, Ben would be chasing them instead of bringing warnings.

How had Ruby gotten away by herself anyway? Clearly she’d come here to meet Ben.

As they finished, Ruby said, “I’ve got to go. Either of you coming to hear me?”

“I am,” Onor said.

“Me, too,” Marcelle added.

Good. She’d have both of them for protection.

Ruby cocked her head at Ben. “Will you come, too?”

“No.” Ben pushed himself up from the table. “I’ve got to start back. I’m on patrol tomorrow.”

“All right. Stay safe.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

Ruby gave him yet another hug, as if she were starved for it. They fell silent until the door closed.

“I bet he’s lonely,” Marcelle said. “It must be tough to be an old red and have to patrol for groups of true reds or true blues.”

At least he and Marcelle hunted old enemies and not old friends.