

## CHAPTER ONE

I keep ending up in labyrinthine mazes. There's a psychological diagnosis in there, somewhere.

On the surface, Bariish displayed its harsh beauty in jagged mountains undulating in parti-colored heaves of red, yellow, and white. But beneath the planet's landscape lay a hostile, ugly environment. Valuable ore streaked the planet's crust in tight wires, a coveted material bringing astronomical prices in the open market. Danger lurked in the greed of fellow miners who would just as soon steal the ore someone else coaxed out of the rocky matrix to increase the weight of their own day's take, and thus the credits received at the end of their stint. Guards maintained a presence in the shaft, but the dark, noisy area contained warrens of tunnels which couldn't all be patrolled at once.

The heat in the mineshaft stifled me. Vibration from the pneumatic hammer pounded my bones as I chiseled out narrow fragments of rare metal and dropped them into a half-full bucket anchored between my boots. Sweat rolled off my back underneath the protective coveralls, burned my eyes behind the goggles I wore, and noise-canceling headgear formed a swamp around my ears. I didn't look forward to removing any of it.

Bitter dust rimed my mouth as I leaned the hammer against the stony wall and dug a water ration out of the deep thigh pocket of my coveralls. Heads-up informatics in my goggles displayed the depth from the surface, the air quality, and the time remaining on my shift. Fifteen minutes, all conditions green. I was ready to get out. The claustrophobic awareness of two kilometers of rock overhead remained a constant companion and pressed as heavily as the still atmosphere in the tunnel. I finished the water and picked up my hammer again.

For more than two months, Ziggy and I had been undercover in this illegal mining operation. The first couple of weeks, I did little but register my take with the clerks, go back to our ship on the sandy apron where the rest of the itinerant miners camped, and pick blistered skin off my hands before collapsing into an exhausted coma. The hard physical labor on a planet where gravity was denser than my accustomed Gs proved a new conditioning challenge. My endurance increased each day, but there were limits on the number of hours we were allowed to scrape our take from the mine, and the sound of the warning klaxon brought a sense of relief.

Many Nos, Cthash, and Tolkish drifters worked on the day shift: humanoid, oxygen-breathing species like mine, all drawn by the promise of galactic credits, having left their home

systems for reasons of their own. I was the only human in the shaft, night or day. The only one in camp at the time. I kept a low profile, but oddities tend to draw attention.

I hate it when that happens.

A shove to the middle of my back sent me off balance. The powerful excavator danced in an uncontrolled frenzy across the rocks, and I spun, the container of ore threatening to spill. I managed to right it with one heel and shut off the hammer.

Two Nos stood behind me, sneering beneath steamed-up goggles and safety helmets. Tracks of sweat traced pale lines against their grime-covered, glacial skin. The taller of the two thrust a quarter-full ore bucket at me and pantomimed I should empty my take into his.

I'd seen these assholes before. They performed the same act with other workers that week, beating the shit out of anyone who refused.

A quick glance around showed no guards close by—not that they would have heard anything over the din of mining activity. I leaned the equipment against the rock wall and capped my ore canister, leaving it inside the alcove where I worked. Empty-handed, I stepped out.

My specialized senses can't help me where the Nos are concerned. They're flat nulls, a blank broadcast muffling the spread of my empathic nets, but I've come to learn from close work with a Nos crewmate all I need to know is written in their body language.

Tall guy pointed to my bucket again and then to his. Tense, jerky. The smug, shorter Nos behind him stood in a relaxed, expectant slouch. So, he was the one in charge.

I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest. *What are you going to do about it?* Excitement sang through my bloodstream, anticipating a fight. The pain of muscle beginning to shift in response to my changeling hormones remained invisible under my coveralls. The ache between my shoulder blades throbbed in a knot of eager, pent-up energy.

The taller Nos shoved his container at the short guy, who calmly took it and stepped back. I used the time to move into the center of the shaft, into the clear space between the magnetic tracks upon which the crew carrier rode.

He swung at me. Here we go.

I blocked the punch with my left hand and jabbed up with my right, striking the sensitive cartilage beneath his chin with the sharp angle of my thumb and fingers. His head jerked and he uttered a surprised grunt of pain. His other hand lashed out to sweep air as I ducked and punched both fists into his exposed left flank. He staggered back. I eased into a waiting stance, my fists

raised as I circled and tried to keep both Nos in my line of sight. The little guy raised his goggles to his forehead and paced, trying to get behind me.

Rubbing his ribs, the tall one eyed me warily. His scrawny friend bounced on the balls of his feet and gestured impatiently for him to get in there and finish me.

The final klaxon signaling the end of the shift sounded as the tall one charged me again. I grabbed the wrist of his coveralls and spun my body in three quick steps, crossing his arm over my back. I hooked my other arm around his knee and pulled him into a forward roll. He landed on his back with me on his stomach, and I struck his face before I rolled free. His nose crunched beneath the edge of my hand. I came up and scrambled to get some distance as he howled.

Other miners appeared at intervals down the shaft and headed toward the equipment racks near the platform. They noticed what was happening, and we started to draw a crowd.

It had to end quickly.

His smaller friend finally left the pail beside the tracks and came at me. He threw a punch, sloppy and inexperienced. No fighter there. I blocked his blow easily and reciprocated. My knuckles connected with the fragile bones and tender nerves around his eye, and he stumbled back, cursing. The taller Nos, bright ichor streaming over his lips and chin, lurched in for more. I grabbed their bucket and swung it into his head. His goggles shattered. Nuggets of ore spilled to the ground as the cap dislodged. A side kick into his chest as he flailed sent him all the way back. He tripped over the rails and went down hard against the wall.

I tossed the bucket away and stood, panting, to see if the smaller guy wanted to come back. He looked like he was done, grimacing on the floor of the mine as he clutched the blood-streaked canister and scooped the ore back inside.

Movement out of the corner of my eye raised my hackles. I whirled into a defensive posture and found myself staring down the business end of an energy rifle.

The Nos guard behind the sights narrowed her eyes at me and glanced at the two on the ground. Her expression stayed cool, unreadable, but blue-dyed brows rose in approval behind her goggles. I massaged my bruised knuckles and didn't react. The rifle came down, and she jerked her head for me to retrieve my equipment.

Other beings stared at me as I walked toward the platform to await our ride to the surface. By the time the crew car glided in, the guard managed to convince the smaller Nos to get off the tracks before he got smashed, and the other sat groggily, but upright, against the wall of the

tunnel.

I replaced the pneumatic hammer in the racks and stepped onto the magnetic-drawn transport. Once I clipped my safety harness to the hooks in the center of the platform, I sucked down my last water ration as the open-framed cars lurched into motion. We whooshed the big limping Nos and his handler, and I waved at them in cheery farewell. They were not amused. I found the guard staring at me from the end of the car, and a grin flitted across her mouth before she looked away.

Outside the working areas, the shaft dropped into profound darkness. Only the heads-up readout inside my goggles provided light, luminescent numbers and script ticking off the dwindling number of meters to the surface ascent and the air quality. Fresh, cooler oxygen filled my lungs, temperatures plunging into a far more comfortable range when we neared the surface. The pale illumination of the entrance created a false dawn break against the sides of the uneven, machine-hewn cavern.

The oncoming shift waited to board the platform. I glimpsed Ziggy among the crowd, clad in protective gear, and they greeted me with a nod. Via the implanted coms we both possessed, I heard their translated voice, though no one else could.

“Stay out of trouble.”

I touched my chest innocently, hoping they could see the *Who, me?* expression through the dusty goggles. Zig couldn't know about the fight yet. My friend's wry amusement touched my empathic nets, so I gave them a tired thumbs-up.

The stream of dusty shift workers headed for the scales where the take for the day would be weighed and credited to our individual pay account. I fished the ID tag from around my neck for the surly Ferian clerk to scan and dumped my canister into the hopper.

He shoved my tag into the data slot, eyed the readout on the scale, and plugged numbers in with one furry digit. “Your share is—”

“Wait. This belongs with the load too.” A voice speaking heavily accented Remoliad Standard interrupted the clerk. The Nos guard from the mine appeared behind the counter and tipped the contents of a familiar blood-streaked bucket into the hopper. She gave me a curt nod, and I returned the acknowledgment, veiling my surprise. She stared a little longer than even Nos politeness allowed, an enigmatic curve to her lips.

I was intrigued.

The Ferian cleared the numbers sourly, his lip curled back from lengthy canines, and re-entered a figure. The new total showed up in my goggles, and I registered my agreement of the percentage. Best payday so far.

I headed for the hard-sided tent where the locker area and sonic cleansers were located, stowed my gear, and retrieved clean clothes. My unexpected bonus paid for an extra-long session in one of the cleansing booths where I reveled in the warmth and vibration for a full five minutes. With sweat and mineral dust gone from my skin and hair, I pulled on my clothes, dumped the coveralls in the locker, and went to find food.

Nothing changed hands for free in the mining camp, everything extortionate in price since the operation flew under the radar. With the off-going shift of miners paid, the temporary settlement teemed with activity. In the center of the tent city stood a canteen providing water rations and protein-packed, tasteless, obscenely expensive prepackaged meals from off world. On the edges of camp, dozens of enterprising beings had set up shop.

The best kind of food on any planet comes from the street vendors, and here was no exception. I avoided the meat when I purchased these offerings though. Bariish's arid landscape could not support any sort of animal large enough to butcher, and although what lay skewered on the smoking grills smelled good, I could not identify it. Many outlying worlds didn't hold the same dim views of sentient meat, banned by Remoliad-allied planets. I chose vegetables surrounded by a wrap of tough sour flatbread baked in a stone oven and ate while pacing the sandy maze interweaving the fingers of rock.

The sun never fully set on the camp. Dusk stretched for twelve long hours in Bariish's northern hemisphere, and the slanted, carnelian light played capricious tricks on human eyes. Hard lines softened; pools of violet shadow formed between the metallic badlands of twisted ore poking up through the planet's crust. In the dry desert climate, temperatures plunged in the shadowed hours, daylight trapped in a memory of warmth within the rocks. The wind had the same tang of earth and copper the atmosphere my adopted home of Zereid carries but none of the moisture. Naturally circulated air of any humidity is still sweeter than the sterile, canned oxygen mix of a starship or space station.

On the fringes of the camp, drug dealers and peddlers offered distractions from the tedium of shifts in the mine. Canopies out front of the deeper recesses in the badlands advertised the sale of pornography, and if holovids alone didn't scratch the itch, paid companionship. Even

though they appeared to be independent sex workers, I couldn't bring myself to give them business. My first mission instilled an abiding hatred of sex trafficking.

But I was ohso-fucking bored.

Boredom is my enemy. It gives me too much time to think, to twist the wedding bands on either hand against grooves worn into my skin and remember why I came.

Whose trust I betrayed to get this far.

The information I stole from the Shontavian Market pointed to this mining enterprise as a major funnel of income for several unsavory groups, including the one I believed responsible for the terrorist act that killed my husband, my wife, and our unborn child. We were supposed to identify the reclusive head of this operation, known only as the Overseer. So far, our target remained a faceless entity, and not one goddamned interesting thing had happened.

It didn't take long for my restlessness to build into the state where I dozed only a few hours at a time. While the rest of the day shift slept, I paced the silent camp in endless circles and looked for something stupid to do.

Ziggy, my partner in this mission, remained so incredibly focused on their undercover role as a miner they may as well have been a microscope. A Cthash, whose reptilian people lived mostly underground in their home system, Zig was in their element in the hot, stifling confines of the mineshaft. The small contingency of Cthash expatriates had welcomed them into the fold with open arms.

Like me, Zig is neither male nor female. Ziggy is an *ix*, a Cthash third-gender. As luck would have it, their specialized gonads were in demand by one of the mated pairs, and while Zig might be getting laid in their off-hours, I was not.

Dangerous liaisons have been my downfall in the last year and a half. That cold, glinting edge of the unknown, the threat of violence, is my weakness. It allows me to feel something—a pulse-quickenning semblance of passion—and reminds me I'm still alive: a situation in which I'm still not completely vested despite the efforts of beings much wiser and more compassionate than I am.

And on Bariish, just like anywhere else, there were opportunities to meet a willing stranger.

