

The process of mining out the spice veins was simple but grueling. According to Azyter, the [Togruta](#) working on the same platform was the process's first step. We would mine into the stone, following the lines of mediari until they ran out. When a layer is clear, they come in with large machines and carve forward, pushing deeper into the spice vein. We would have to load up the crushed rock, as well as any carvings we pull free now. He gestured down to the piles of rock already forming at the bottom of the cave underneath us. We had managed to arrive just after the last major carving, meaning we had a few days of easier work ahead of us.

With a look and a nod, Tatnia and I both agreed that, for now, it was better to play along. The stunning effect, pain inducer, and whatever other surprises these collars had were too big of a problem to attack half-cocked. I wasn't about to try and shock them off me without knowing if they had a bomb in them. The foreman had intimated that leaving the field would kill us, but I needed to confirm how before we did anything risky.

With only a few grumbles of sworn revenge, I started carving into the rock, softening and breaking it up with the resonance grinder, before passing it to Tatnia, who started doing the same. While she worked, I pulled out my hammer and chisel and started to slowly pull out chunks of stone, stopping when I spotted a hunk of dark maroon material. I gingerly reached for it, not wanting to break it if it turned out to be fragile. I managed to get it out, hefting the dense chunk of stone about the size of a deck of cards. After a few seconds of examining it, I put it into my satchel and started hunting for the next piece.

After the first hour passed, and after weighing and dumping our satchels into one of the large mine carts full, I started to notice that my fingers were stinging, slowly becoming too much to ignore. Seeing me study them, Azyter once again chimed in.

"It's the spice," He explained, looking back to his work, never really stopping. "Its powder is caustic when it mixes with your sweat."

"How badly?" I asked, resisting the urge to wipe my hand off my clothes.

"It's slow, but you'll have blisters tonight," He answered, pulling out a sizable chunk of mediari stone, and putting it into his satchel without really even looking at it. "They spray us down with a neutralizing agent when our shift is over."

"Right. Thanks." I responded, shaking my head in frustration, noticing that Tatnia was suffering just as much as I was.

The forced labor continued for another two hours before a guard came into the active mining area, pushing a hovercraft laden with a large liquid-filled tank. One by one, the foreman called us down to the hover cart, where a guard would use a hose to spray water into our mouths. The water had *something* in it, giving it a light blue tinge that made me very nervous, but I focused on the fact that they wouldn't kill off their workforce while there was still work to be

done. I drank my fill, lifting up my mask, which after several hours of hauling, carving, and digging was a lot, before heading back up to the platform.

"That's not just water," I asked Azyter once he returned. "Any idea what it is?"

"Naturalizer." He answered. "It's impossible to keep the mediari from spreading, so the neutralizer keeps it from burning your insides."

My eyes went wide at that statement, and I shivered. Tatnia was next to get a drink, and she returned quickly, and we got back to work.

Eventually, after another four or five hours, they called us down for another drink, this time by the entrance into the mine, our shift apparently over. Tatnia and I stuck close together, both of us dragging the same cart full of mediari stone behind us as we were led back out of the mine, armed guards keeping a close eye on us, most of them thumbing familiar control units. Our carts were dropped off by the flattened loading area, and we were led up the long, slowly circling staircase to the top of the mine.

Once at the top, our masks were gathered, and we were herded into a massive cleaning room, where we were sprayed from head to toe with a blue foamy neutralizing agent. Once we had been thoroughly neutralized, we were forced into another room, where we were sprayed down with blue-tinted water, washing the foam away and down the drain.

I was hoping we would at least get a big fan to dry off in front of, but instead, they simply led us to our "barracks", soaking wet and miserable. As we stepped into what was essentially our prison away from the mine, a guard handed out a thick bar sealed inside some sort of plastic. It took me a bit to realize it was supposed to be food. Once we were inside, they locked the doors behind us, leaving us to our own devices.

"So do we order room service or..." I said, Tatnia giving me a look that told me to shut the hell up. "Right, sorry. Need to keep the sass to a minimum."

"... At least where they can hear," She said, looking around. "I don't want to go through that again unless it's really necessary."

"Yeah, I won't do that again," I assured her, doing my best to study our new temporary home.

The "barracks" were simple, a singular, large open room with a few tables in the center and three floors of cells around the central space. Everything was either metal or duracrete, a pattern that continued into the individual rooms. I peeked around a corner to see a room with four bunks, two on each side, with the far wall just a solid blank wall. All four of the beds had people in them, one of them giving me a nasty look as I peered inside. I stepped away to avoid pissing anyone, turning back to find most people already heading towards their rooms.

"They've pretty much already given up... haven't they?" I asked in a low tone, Tatnia nodding.

"Not a whole lot of options for people without your skills," She said. "Not sure I would be able to hold out hope without them, not even if I knew the rest of the crew was looking for us.... They are looking for us, right?"

"Nal and Miru wouldn't just call us a loss like that," I responded confidently, stepping forward to try and find a room for us. "I don't know the chances of them actually being able to find us... but it's not zero."

"Yeah..." She said, at least partially reassured. "Soo... what's the plan?"

"The plan... is we wait," I said, looking into the next room only to find it also full.

Azyter, one of its occupants, shrugged when he noticed us looking in.

"That's it? Boss..."

"Tatnia, relax. We know nothing about this place, how these collars work, the shifts, the guards," I explained, cursing under my breath as I realized the first floor was likely full, turning and heading for the stairs. "Are we being recorded? Are there people *listening in...*"

Tatnia's eyes went a little wide as she looked around, spotting the same security cameras I had earlier. She cursed under her breath as well, following me up the stairs to the second floor. A quick walk around the rooms' second story showed that they two were taken or had one space free. Clearly, there had been people already here when we arrived, though it took me a while to notice.

When we got to the third floor, half of the rooms were sealed shut, and all the rest were mostly filled. We finally found a room that was empty, the absolute furthest point from the entrance to the "barracks." I claimed one of the bunks, sitting down on the edge and studying the ration the guard had handed us.

"So... the first step is finding out if they are listening in on us?" Tatnia asked softly as she sat next to me. "Or watching."

"Mhmm," I said. "We can ask around tomorrow. Until then... Don't panic, and keep our eyes open."

"And if they are listening right now?"

"Then we are probably up for a beating or another round with that pain inducer," I responded with a wince. "Sorry."

"It's not your fault," She assured me, cracking open her rations and quickly eating whatever nutrient and protein-rich block was sealed inside. I idly noticed mine tasted like slightly off beef but felt a very dense cake in my mouth. It wasn't quite to revolting to eat, but it was very much straddling that line.

We both ate quickly, barely tasting the awful rations. It had been way too long since we ate, and we were both feeling the effects. When we were done, Tatnia stood and stretched before crawling into the bunk across from me. I rolled back onto my bed, closing my eyes and trying to get some sleep.

After the long day we had, it wasn't surprising that it only took a few minutes for us to pass out.

I was up, standing, tense, and ready for a fight before I was even fully awake. My heart was racing, and while my mind was struggling to catch up, my fight or flight was screaming at me. What my brain did comprehend was the guttural snarl that woke me, sounding like an angry, lashing-out wolf.

When my bleary eyes cleared, I saw a canine-like alien, a female Shistavanen, standing in the room. Surprisingly, she was facing away from us, standing over a grubby-looking human man.

"Alright! I'm sorry, I'm leaving!" He said, sliding further out of the room, looking up at the wolven-like woman in fear.

I looked over at Tatnia, who seemed to be equally as shocked but not nearly as confused. Instead, she looked angry.

"Tatnia?" I asked wordlessly.

"He was sneaking into the room," She said, barely controlling her anger, disgust, and not a small amount of fear hidden below it. "...coming towards my bed when she came in."

"Oh fuck that," I said, following the Shistavanen out of the room.

She had stopped right outside the door, the creep starting to pull himself up with the railing, obviously feeling a bit more confident since she hadn't attacked him yet. I completely ignored what he was saying and wound up, punching him directly in the forehead. He cursed and fell back to the ground, holding his head, only to shout when I grabbed his orange jumpsuit, dragging him back to his feet.

"You fucking degenerate piece of shit," I shouted, getting right up in his face. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Did you think the fresh meat would be an easy target? Tell me why I shouldn't knock out every single last tooth you have and make you eat them?"

"Y-you can't!" He said, eyes wide, trying desperately to pull free of my grip. "The guards-"

"You don't need teeth to mine spice!" I pointed out, shoving him back against the railing, his top half leaning slightly over the edge. "Try again!"

"I-I-I have friends! They will-"

"I don't care if you are butt buddies with the fucking EMPORER!" I screamed, my voice echoing through the prison, people looking up to see what was happening. "If I catch you sniffing around my crew again, trying to get your rocks off, I will ship your ass to him in a five-gallon bucket!"

I dragged him off the railing and threw him down the walkway, the near sobbing man falling, stumbling before finally half crawling, half running away. I follow behind him, kicking his ass, causing him to fall on his face a few more times. Eventually, when we got close to the stairs, I stopped and watched him flee, casting an angry look around me at our audience, resisting the urge to do anything more long-lasting. Counter to what I said, I was pretty sure the guards would lay into me if I started to brutalize him.

After a long moment, I turned around to go back inside the cell, walking by the Shistavanen female again. When I step inside, Tatnia is sitting up on the edge of her bed, clearly having been listening to me.

"Good job," She said with a nod. "Showing everyone else that we aren't to be messed with."

I stopped and looked at her, her words taking a minute to work through the anger. I snorted when I finally realized what she meant.

"Yeah, sure, let's go with that," I responded. "Definitely what I was doing."

"You..." She said, trailing off before looking down. "... Thanks, Boss."

"It's my job," I responded, sitting down beside her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, this isn't the first close call, I grew up on the streets, remember?" She said, wincing slightly. "Saying it out loud makes me realize that's not actually reassuring...But I am okay."

I patted her shoulder and gave it a squeeze before standing and turning to the Shistavanen, a hand outstretched.

"Thank you. I assume you were walking by and noticed it happening?"

"I...did," She said, looking down at my hand for a moment like she was surprised to see it before reaching out to shake it. "This is my room."

The hair-covered humanoid was clearly much bigger than me, but her natural posture, slightly crouched and hunched, meant the top of her head was only an inch, maybe two, above mine. Her voice was deep, deeper than you would expect from a woman, but it had a warm, rumbling quality that sounded oddly soothing, at least to my ears. She had a thick, light brown, almost blonde coat with faint brown highlights running around her arms and up the side of her head.

"Sorry, it was empty when we got back," I explained, scratching the back of my head. "It's also one of the only rooms with two empty beds... Unless you already have roommates?"

"No... no other prisoners wanted to stay," She admitted, hesitating for a long moment before finally. "My kind is not often trusted due to our isolationist nature."

"Well... if you don't mind the company..."

"...I do not have an issue with roommates," She admitted with a nod. "The defense of your ally speaks to your character."

"A boss is a good person," Tatnia explained. "Sometimes too good. That's what me and the crew are for."

"Crew?" The Shistavanen. "Do you have more allies here?"

"No, the rest of our team wasn't picked up when we got captured," I explained, giving Tatnia the stink eye. "Which is good, Miru shouldn't have to go through this."

"She has been through worse," Tatnia said with a frown.

"That doesn't make it better, she might be seventeen-"

"Fifteen, almost sixteen," Tatnia corrected. "She was afraid you wouldn't take her seriously."

"Really? Dammit, we really-"

"Are we getting off-topic?" The Shistavanen asked, looking between Tatnia and myself.

"Yeah, sorry, we are," I said with a smirk. "My name is Deacon, this is Tatnia. The circumstances aren't the best, but it's nice to meet you...?"

"Vaz Stross," She answered with a simple nod.

"It's nice to meet you, Vaz," I repeated with a smile. "Would you mind answering some questions about how things work around here?"

"...I suppose, but not for too long." She said after a moment of thought. "I must sleep before I return to work."