

THE DIGGING CREW

Prologue

I think my cellmate is dead. She hasn't moved for quite a while now. With my luck she probably is. I don't want to look at her, yet I do anyway and curse the morbid curiosity that keeps pulling my eyes there; God knows my nightmares are inspired enough as it is.

Although her bunk is only three feet from mine, our cell is so dark that it takes me a minute to distinguish its contour. Gradually a small bundle of tattered brown blanket appears. Underneath this thin piece of wool is my cellmate. She is nothing but skin and bones and barely bumps the blanket. I stare at the bundle for a long minute. It's not moving, not breathing.

"Yeah," I sigh. "She's dead all right." But worse than my cellmate's death is the numbness I feel. I have no emotions. All I care about is for one of the droids to come and pick her up before she attracts the coupases, the small scaly rodents infesting this cellblock—this whole place for that matter. Staring at the neighboring bunk again, I try to muster some feeling, try to convince myself that I'm sorry for her death; it has suddenly become very important that I do. This place kills you inside long before it kills you outside—I can't let it do that to me.

"What was her name? Oh God, I can't remember it." She was inmate 5639. But her name, what was her name? C...Celia? Yes, it was Celia. Should I say a prayer for Celia or, if not for her, for me? This could be me lying dead in my bunk, next month or next week, and who will remember my name then?

Sitting up in my bunk, I search for the hole in the side of my thin mattress. Inside is a small white porous rock not unlike a piece of chalk. It's tallac, a lightweight mineral widely used as a buffering agent and the reason of my presence here in the prison-mine of Carmel 5. Whoever decided that mining tallac was appropriate work for women should be hanged by his feet. Obviously they've never spent a day in a mine—certainly not in this one.

Grabbing the white chunk firmly between my fingers, I write SAMANTHA WAS HERE in big bold letters on the concrete wall. I feel better now, breathe more easily now, even though no one besides my mother has ever called me Samantha. For everybody else I was fatty, tubby, or just plain "Hey you, fat girl!" Funny how those words used to hurt my feelings—shows how little I knew about what could really hurt me.

Another ironic twist I've recently discovered is that although my entire life has changed, one thing hasn't: my obsession with food. I'm counting calories again, not for the usual reason, though. My *fat* reserves are getting low. I'm already swimming in my clothes, and there is still one month to go before they're done weeding the weak from the strong. Celia was weak; I'm not. I'll survive this—one more month, just one more.

Chapter 1

The cave was shivering. I could feel its slight vibration under my feet. Although fear pinched my side, I remained calm; here self-control is a survival skill. My cellmate, Jenny, probably knew what was happening, she knew everything about this prison-mine; especially what could kill you—which was almost everything.

Dropping my shovel, I looked over my shoulder. Jenny's post by the ore trolley was vacant. That startled me; only moments ago she'd been there shoveling tallac ore, the mineral we were condemned to mine. Now all I could see was Jenny's shovel thrown on a mound of rough whitish nuggets as if discarded in a hurry. Uh...I didn't like this. Jenny knew better than to abandon her post in mid-shift...and leave me alone.

"Jenny...?" I peered about my corner of the cave and found nothing besides trolley tracks, piles of ore, and discarded dirt mounds. Had she gone out? From my stand I had a good view of the steel support arches and the black protective meshing of the cave's only exit. To access it Jenny needed to pass my post. Had she done it without my noticing?

My gaze flew to the back of the cave where two dozen women were mining tallac out of the walls with pickaxes. The russet stone of the mine's upper levels was soft and friable enough for the ore to be mined the old-fashioned way. This crumbling stone was also what made this job so dangerous.

Under the yellow glow of the cave's floodlights my teammates looked scruffier than ever in their dirty, baggy, gray coveralls. They too had dropped their tools and now stood immobile, heads tilted, listening. Listening for what? I couldn't hear anything. Then a tall brunette with a miner's helmet hooked to her belt stepped out of the group and touched the wall. She was our team leader and an unpleasant woman at best—prone to kick, I'd discovered on my first day here. Just remembering it made my backside throb.

"What's this rumbling?" the brunette asked. Turning a dust-encrusted face to me, she shouted, "Hey shrimp, do you feel a vibration back there?"

I sighed; this was one of those times when I wished I were taller than my five feet.

"Yeah! It's coming from under us," I said, ignoring the insult. I ignored a lot of things here—kept me alive to do so. That was one of Jenny's tips, along with: "keep your head down, don't look people in the eye, and don't ask questions—especially personal ones."

Deep growls echoed throughout the cave. They sounded as if produced by the walls themselves. A series of sharp cracking sounds followed. The lights blinked. The women at the back of the cave looked up at the ceiling, then my way.

Get out. Get out now, my instinct begged in a whimpering childlike voice. I hated that baby voice. It kept popping up in my mind whenever I was scared. Since I'd come here, it was a daily occurrence. My legs began shuddering; maybe the crybaby in me was right this time—better check the exits. As I turned toward the tunnel's mouth, the shivering of the cave became trembling. The tickling that had been under my feet seconds ago jumped to my bones, rattling them like toys.

"Cave-in!" someone shouted.

At that instant, the ground shook so violently it was as though the entire cave was being rocked back and forth. I fell to my knees. When I straightened I saw my teammates dashing my way like a herd of frightened deer. Using my shovel, I tried to prop myself up and get out

of their way but kept falling over. A rolling quake crossed the cave, raising the floor under me and throwing my teammates to the ground. Pebbles rained down on my head. My eyes went up. I froze. Fissures were splitting the ceiling apart.

“Ching—c’mere!” someone hollered. “Move, Ching. Get outta there quick.”

It had to be Jenny—only Jenny called me Ching instead of Chang.

“Move where?” I bellowed. “Where?” A picture of the two support arches near the exit tunnel flashed in my mind. *The arches, the arches are safe. GO!* The second one was closest to me. I tried to walk in its direction but immediately fell to my knees. Pushed by fear, I stayed on all fours and crawled toward the arch. Gravel stabbed my hands and bit my knees throughout my progress, yet it failed to slow me down.

The floor suddenly rippled and buckled. Behind me my teammates yelled in terror. Driven by their screams, I plunged ahead and gripped the arch’s beam. Only then did I look back again. My mouth went slack.

A wall of debris and piled up stones now divided the cave. The women trapped behind it were screaming, begging for help. Powerless to do anything, I wanted to cover my ears and not hear their laments any longer. But I couldn’t even do that: my whole body was glued to the beam by fear, squeezing it so hard its rivets dug into my cheek. Another tremor hit. The lights dimmed. With a deafening roar the back cave floor crumbled away, dragging most of the rubble wall and dozens of screaming women down a giant hole.

Then just as suddenly as it had begun, the ground stopped moving. Now only I still trembled. I took a deep hacking breath and gagged as the dust packing my nose found its way to my lungs. I coughed until my throat was raw.

“Ching, is that you?” Jenny called, her voice coming from my left.

“Y...Yeah.” Squinting, I tried to pierce the thick white dust that saturated the air. “Jenny, the women of section five...they all went down.”

“I know. We’re the only ones left.” With the dust settling, Jenny’s fuzzy form became visible. She too had taken refuge under the exit’s arch.

“We’ve got to help them.”

“Get real, Ching. No one can survive that kinda fall, and if they did they’d cry out, don’t you think?” Jenny cupped a hand around her ear and listened for a moment. “Nothing, not even a moan. I think they died on impact—Thank God for small favors.”

She was right. The cave was eerily silent. All I could hear was the odd pebble tumbling. I bit my lower lip and swallowed my tears—Jenny didn’t like my crying. “Tears are useless,” she’d say, “anger you can use.”

“Hate this place!” Jenny spat on the ground. “I ain’t staying here a minute longer. I’m going back to the lift; see if it’s still working. Are you coming, Ching?”

“Go ahead,” I said, still too shaken to move. When certain that my legs would hold me, I dragged myself up. Fissures riddled the ground everywhere. My eyes raced to the huge gap ahead of me. It looked like a crater, as though some bomb had gone off in the center of the cave. Only the trolleys’ tracks suspended in the air across the gap proved that there used to be a floor there. “What did this?” I questioned aloud. “What happened below?”

Noises coming from the gap reached my ears. Scratching noises. I took a tentative step toward the crater and immediately spotted a hand.

Someone’s hanging on the edge. Someone did survive after all. Despite the danger I rushed ahead, even though I knew that none of my team would have done the same for me. I couldn’t let anyone die like this; this place hadn’t hardened me yet—not to that extent anyway. Once at the rim, I peeked down.

Damn! It's only a stupid droid. I was more disappointed than surprised. Almost all employees here were droids. Management didn't trust real people to guard us; machines, on the other hand, couldn't be bribed or tempted by anything we possessed. This one must have fallen through the hole in the ceiling.

Holding on to the edge with one hand, the droid was seized in place as if paralyzed. I frowned, puzzled. Something was wrong with this picture. Droids were very strong; he should have been able to climb out easily. Then I understood why he was not moving. He was missing an arm. His left shirtsleeve lay flat and wet against his torso. Gurgling, bubbling sounds were coming out of him—actually, out of his shoulder.

“Yuck, gross!” I grimaced.

Alerted by my voice, the droid slowly lifted up his pseudo-skin-covered face.

I backed away before he could see me, but still had a good look at him. He was an old humanoid model, probably older than I was. In my opinion, his face was not very humanlike. The pseudo-skin didn't help either; made of flexible polymer, it looked more like rubber than actual skin. The color was too pink for the Caucasian skin tone it tried to imitate. Droids belonging to that series appeared unfinished, with nothing firm about their features: every single one was round, smooth, and curvy like a half-drawn woman's face. Stylized, I believe this look was called.

Stretching, I glanced down at the droid's face and caught a brief glimpse of myself in his oversized mirror eyes: a slightly distorted image of a filthy, round-faced Asian teenager with a small low-bridged nose and dimpled cheeks. I hated those dimples and often wondered if I'd ever outgrow them—probably not, I supposed. In all, it was a face still holding on to its last thread of childhood. My mouth however, generous and lushly pink, had crossed into womanhood. I touched my brow. I had my mother's blue-green eyes. Beautiful on her, they were strangely out of place on me.

Memories flooded me. It had been an identical droid that had delivered my sentence eight months ago. Since the ratification of the First Strike Law by the Dominion—a union of colonized planets ruled by the ten oldest ones, the mother colonies—no judges were needed anymore. Following a strict ascending guide chart, sentencing was now automatic. Once pronounced guilty, which I was, having been caught on tape stealing a watch, I was assigned to a labor camp—the corporation-owned prison-mine of this desert planet called Carmel 5—then shipped away. The last memory of my mother is of her crying as the sentencing droid escorted me out of the judging chamber. Moans escaped my lips, and before I could do anything to stop them, rage engulfed me.

I stared hard into the droid's eyes. They were not the windows to his soul, they were just mirrors. He was just a stupid, thoughtless machine. Scanning the surroundings, I saw only one surveillance monitor. The small black box hung down from the wall by its remaining bits of wires. It was dead.

“Guess this day isn't all bad after all,” I whispered. After a last peek around, I stepped to the edge. “Well, it's just you and me, ugly.”

My first kick landed on the droid's fingers—more immediately followed. The pseudo-skin split and peeled away under the force of my assault, yet the metal and nylon skeleton fingers underneath held on to the rock.

“Stop, inmate 6118,” the droid said in a voice far too human for my taste. “Inmate 6118, you are in violation of code 318-E.”

“Shut up, it's payback time,” I said and kicked harder.

The droid kept on repeating my number, while I kept on kicking. Nothing could stop this vengeful impulse of mine. Although a small helpless part of my mind acknowledged that

it was a similar type of impulse that had brought me here, a similar inability to think things over before doing them. *Something must be wired wrong in my brain*, I'd later think. But for the moment, no clear thought was going through that thick skull of mine; I went on kicking until the droid's fingers broke.

I watched the machine fall with a satisfied smile. *Ain't payback a bitch?*

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I found Jenny under one of the few lights still working ten yards down the exit tunnel. Her entire body was covered with white talac dust; so much so that she seemed carved out of the stone itself. Her brow was deeply furrowed; she looked angry. Then again, I'd never seen her any other way. Thinking of it, with her twenty-year sentence for burglary, Jenny had no real reason to be happy. No one lasted that long here.

"There you are!" she snapped at me. "You know, staying near a cave-in is dangerous. What took you so long? I was worried."

"Nothing," I lied, shaking my head. A cloud of talac fell from my hair like snowflakes in a storm.

"I miss having short hair," Jenny said. She rubbed her thick mane, tossing dust all around. Despite her best effort, her auburn locks remained grayish at their tips. Mine were probably in the same condition, except that my hair was shorter, falling just over my ears in an unflattering black, straight bob.

In her mid-twenties, Jenny had the delicate build of a bird. Her wrists were so fine I could circle them with my thumbs and forefingers and still have space to spare. Her facial features had a surreal daintiness, as though it were crystal under her skin instead of bone. One could say she had an ethereal beauty, just like the heroines of my mother's romance novels. Too bad most people only saw her lazy eye. After Celia's death, Jenny had become my cellmate, helping me survive the crucial first months. Without her guidance I believe I would've died. Jenny taught me to look ahead, not behind, to stop wallowing in the past. I couldn't change it anyway. "Keep your head low and your eyes open, keep them focused and moving," she told me on our first meeting. More advice had since followed. In this prison, petite gals like us tend to watch each others' backs. Another inconvenience to our short stature was that nothing fit us. Our coveralls' crotches hung halfway to our knees, and our rolled-up cuffs gathered a heavy harvest of pebbles and dirt. Today mine felt heavier than usual.

"What happened back there?" I asked. "Half the freaking cave broke down."

"One of the digging crews probably screwed up the amount of explosives to use. It wouldn't be the first time. Them bitches don't even know how to read."

"Neither can you," I said, "like most colonists."

Jenny shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm not playing with explosives. If you ask me, this was no mistake. Diggers are the toughest, nastiest criminals this prison-mine holds. They're lifers, Ching, with no hope of getting out. A lot of them go crazy down there. For all we know this could be another suicide pact."

"Oh, come on!" I exclaimed. "It was just an accident."

"Yeah—maybe." Jenny gave me a look of concern. "Let's hope management don't pick any of us to replace the ones that croaked down below." There was an air of disgust on Jenny's face as she stared at me with her good eye—the other one always stayed fixed on her nose. For a moment, I questioned at whom this sudden disgust was directed: the situation, management, or the diggers? I couldn't tell. "Let's move," Jenny finally said.

We hadn't taken ten steps in the dark tunnel when the emergency lights spread along the walls lit up, bathing everything in their amber glow.

"Droids ahead," Jenny announced.

Three droids were lumbering toward us. Their attention, I noticed, was mostly directed at the metallic mesh. In this tunnel's section the mesh had held, although in certain spots it had stretched and was now pregnant with a litter of medium-sized boulders.

The droids finally reached us. They were the cheap models most common here. No pseudo-skin on these, instead a dull metal exoskeleton covered their entire bodies with the exception of their faces, where dirty skin-toned masks were bolted. Made of hard plastic, all these masks bore identical masculine traits.

Jenny and I backed against the wall so the droids could scan the ID chips imbedded in the skin of our shoulders. These contained our entire biographies, medical charts, and sentence statuses.

The lead droid stepped toward us. His mask was cracked across the forehead and his nose was broken. My eyes glided down his body, stopping at his smooth metal crotch. I let out a giggle, which brought me a dark stare and a disapproving growl from Jenny.

"Go on 5896," the droid told Jenny, once done reading her chip. The white lights that made up his eyes moved to me and stayed on me longer than they should have. I watched the two bright dots roam over my shoulder with growing fear. "Inmate 6118," the droid began, "you have violated code 318-E, and will be put under surveillance until due sentencing."

"Nooo," I breathed. "This can't be. The monitor was dead."

"Yes, 6118," the droid continued, "a recording of the mentioned violation is under study. You will be sentenced in one day, 6118. Move along."

Wasting no time, I joined Jenny who was waiting for me a few steps down the tunnel.

"What was that all about?" she asked. "God, what have you done, Ching?"

"I don't understand," I said with a light tremor in my voice. "I checked the surveillance monitor twice. It was dead. Dead, I tell you. How could they know?"

"Know what? Tell me what happened."

"There was a droid on the edge of the cave-in. He would've fallen anyway. I just helped him... a bit."

"Oh balls!" Jenny shook her head. "Did he read your chip? Did he call your number?"

My eyes suddenly filling with tears, I looked away, silent.

"Answer me," Jenny ordered. She gripped my shoulder and shook me hard, as if she expected the words to fall out of me like fruits off a tree.

"Yeah," I managed to mumble between sobbing breaths, then glided out of her grip.

"Damn! Ching, they're all linked together. What one droid sees, the others see."

"I didn't know that. Tell me, Jenny, how could I know that?"

"The same way I do. Listen when other people speak, listen to what they say."

"I do."

"No, you don't," Jenny said in a wan voice. "For God's sake, girl, you already got a ten-year sentence, and you know damn well that the average life span here is eight. You had a hair of a chance of getting out alive, a hair I don't have. But *nooo*, you had to mess it up! Right now, you might as well be dead." She threw me a sorrowful glance. "Shit! Why couldn't you listen to me! Now there's nothin' I can do for you. Nothin'!" Shaking her head, Jenny walked away.

“Wait, I’ll listen. Don’t go so fast, wait up.” I wanted to talk more with her, but there was no more time—we’d reached the opening of the main tunnel. A low rumble hit us as soon as we turned toward the lift’s chamber.

“Brace yourself, it’s full,” said Jenny.

Seconds later, we entered the long narrow lift’s chamber and faced a sea of dusty gray coveralls, a sea of haggard-eyed women crammed flesh against flesh. Columns of steam rose from that mass of overheated bodies. The place was a chaotic madhouse, with hundreds of women pushing, punching, and shouting at each other for a place closer to the elevator’s doors. The preexisting pecking order established among inmates quickly came into play. The strong and aggressive ones moved to the front.

Jenny and I entered the middle of the boiling mob and were quickly pushed back near the walking wounded. On my right, a girl with a tear-streaked face wailed non-stop. I saw that she was cradling a badly broken hand against her chest. I squeezed to her side and formed a small shield with my body, protecting her from the bumping movements of the other inmates as best I could. Too shocked to realize that I was helping her, the girl stared at me with terror-filled eyes. I gave her a reassuring smile, then peeked at her hand and winced. Her fingers were crushed and twisted at odd angles.

This was a bad injury. In a sense all injuries here were bad because management didn’t provide any medical service—it barely provided food—profit was all it cared about, and its greed most certainly condemned this girl to a slow, painful death. Shielding her with my body was all I could do for her, which did nothing to appease my hatred of management. It also made me think of my sentencing. That droid was expensive...very expensive. Could I get death for that senseless act of stupidity? Then again, I’d got ten years for stealing a watch...Crap!