

Excerpt from *Crack the Stone* by Emily Golus

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CHAPTER 1: VALSHARA

On day three, the coal-black tunnel drove me into a wall of rock—a dead end in total darkness.

Scraping my claws blindly against the unyielding stone, I found a crack in the surface. My fingers traced it to an opening about ten inches tall, and I crammed myself into it.

My claws scratched at the limestone, pulling my emaciated body forward inch by inch. The rough stone bit into my bare scalp, my elbows, and anything else not protected by my ragged prison uniform.

The space was so tight that taking a full breath was impossible. Good—that would help me conserve air.

After an hour of scrabbling in utter darkness, I wondered if this had been a mistake.

My first wrong turn had probably been when I'd left the underground stream for a narrow side tunnel. I should have stayed the course, followed the broad path lit by the faint blue glow of cave moss. But that way had seemed too obvious, too open. Paranoia took over, driving me towards smaller and darker passages.

Should I turn back?

I shuddered. The thought of losing ground and returning to my old trail made me ill. He might be waiting there.

Actually, he could be following me now.

My arms flailed forward, forcing my body into the ever-narrowing crack. I turned my head sideways to avoid scraping my face on the cave floor.

The iron shackle on my wrist hit the limestone with a heart-stopping *clang*.

For a terrible second, my world froze.

Finally, I stretched out my other hand—the unshackled one—and tried to pull myself forward.

Nothing. My head was wedged in too tight. I'd reached the bitter end.

I had three options.

One: retrace my path and risk my pursuer intercepting me. Two: use my light and risk him seeing me.

Three: surrender and die here.

At least in the third scenario I'd remain free. I curled up my small, green body as much as I could in the dark crack. As a final farewell, I whispered my well-practiced litany of curses, calling down misery on the wardens, the Guidelights, and everyone who'd wronged me.

No. Heat rose up inside me. I am Valshara, the black stone born of fire. Break me, and my edges turn into knives.

I will live.

Inhaling, I tasted the stale air. The narrow space smelled of something other than just limestone—I caught a slight whiff of decay.

I clicked my tongue, wincing at the risky disruption in the silence. But it confirmed what I had noticed before—this narrow fissure didn't echo properly.

Shifting my position, I ran my hands against the stone above me. Something soft tickled my skin.

My body tensed. I needed light. If I didn't know what I was dealing with, I wouldn't make it out alive.

Stretching out my clawed fingers, I willed them to glow.

Instead of the natural yellowish-green light that goblins are born with, my fingertips shone blood-red.

When the tattooist had injected the red pigment into my fingers dot by dot, I'd seen it as a mark of savage pride—a triumph for me, the first female to make the ranks. I never dreamed it would make me an easy target.

In the dim red light, tiny white threads hung from the stone. My heart skipped a beat. Not threads—roots.

Roots meant plants. Plants meant the Topside world was just above me. A few feet and I'd be free of the cavern system entirely.

I dug my ragged claws into the crackled limestone ceiling and pulled.

Of course, there was a good chance that doing so would cause a cave-in, killing me instantly. Or worse, trapping me until I suffocated or starved. But that kind of death—any death really—would be better than going back to the Pit.

Pebbles and dust fell into my face and I suppressed the urge to cough. I worked desperately for five, maybe ten minutes, digging upward into powdery soil.

Something flashed through the hole above.

Light.

I clawed my way through with renewed energy. The dot of flickering yellow light grew above me.

A moment later, sunlight—horrible, burning, wonderful sunlight—poured into the shaft. I thrust my body through the opening and into the open air.

The shifting yellow light seared my retinas. I scrambled away from my hole in the earth, half-expecting a hand to grab my ankle then and there.

Fibers wrapped around my arms and legs. I panicked, ripping a set of roots out of the earth.

My vision was nearly useless in this blazing light, but I recognized the silhouette of a leaf. These plants were huge and stringy with broad fronds—nothing like the mosses and lichens native to my world.

They also provided a decent amount of cover. I crouched beneath a patch of leaves, waiting for my vision to adjust so I could make a run for it without hurting myself.

My fingers reached into my tattered uniform and drew out my shiv. I tested the black edge of the weapon with a calloused finger and drew blood.

I'd discovered this shard of *valshara*—black obsidian, my namesake—while crushing ore in the Pit mine. While the wardens weren't watching, I'd chiseled it with a rock, the glassy stone yielding razor-sharp edges.

I had fantasized about killing anything—or better yet, anyone—that got in the way of my escape. Now was the time.

Peering around the green leaf, I squinted at the flickering light on the horizon. Beside it blazed a second light.

I'd only been above ground once during my military training, but I knew that it didn't have two suns.

I turned. Three more yellow lights burned, hovering above stone urns. Above me, stalactites dangled from a solid stone ceiling.

This wasn't the Topside world at all. Somehow I was still underground.

In the grey soil beneath my clawed feet, stems and leaves rose from the ground in neat rows. Only one species favored unnaturally straight lines like this. There was an awful smell, too—not just of soil, but something sour with a bit of spice and—

Thump. Something heavy landed on top of me and tangled around my limbs. Coils of fiber—a net.

Before I could react, the ropes constricted around me.

I thrashed my limbs to no avail. Three gangly creatures wrestled the net closed, cinching it with a heavy cord. Then they backed away, gawking at me with their grotesque faces.

Humans.

They were ugly creatures—nearly twice my height, with eyes comically small for their faces and ears that were stubby and round. Their skin—at least what wasn't covered up by layers of white clothing—was about as dark as my own, but reddish-brown instead of green. Ghastly white strings sprouted from their heads, and one of them actually had the stuff growing out of his face, under his bulbous nose.

But their looks were nothing compared to their *stench*. When humans overheat, they secrete a stinking liquid from their skin. These humans had apparently gotten quite warm wrestling me into the net.

My eyes watered.

If I hadn't been so distracted by the mystery of the lights—which I could now tell were just urns of yellow flame—I'd have smelled them sooner and stabbed them all.

I didn't care if they were only fieldworkers, startled by a goblin digging through their crops. I'd have still killed them without remorse.

The net was too heavy for me to wrestle my way out of, and a scrap of broken metal on my shackle had gotten entangled in the fibers. My shiv might be able to saw through the rope, but it would take some time.

I snarled at the humans. "You mans." I racked my brain for the little bit of Vindorian I'd learned at the military academy. The emphasis had been on eavesdropping on Topside enemies, not on speaking, but a bit of threatening couldn't be too hard.

"You come here me, I shiv you. I crack you like stones. I bash in you toes."

I was fairly sure that last word was the term for “skulls” in Vindorian. Whatever exactly I said, the humans stepped further back.

I drew my shiv and tried to saw the rope as subtly as I could. But I hadn’t gotten far when five more humans appeared, each holding a torch of silver fire. The largest man carried some sort of club.

Guards. My blood went cold.

The big guard chatted with the fieldworkers for a moment, then approached the net, looming over me. I braced myself.

“Well, this is unexpected.” The guard spoke in crystal-clear Goblin.

What?

He continued. “I assume you have escaped from the Masters?”

How could this human speak our language, and know about the Dominion’s ruling political party? Perhaps I was in more danger than I’d estimated. If these humans somehow had dealings with the Masters, or even an agreement with them—

My vision went black around the edges.

“Do you understand?” the big guard asked. “Did you—”

“Please,” I heard myself whimpering. “Don’t take me back.”

The big guard nodded to his companions, and the world lurched as they lifted the net with me inside.

The big guard drew closer, his small brown eyes looking into mine. “There are others here like you. Others who have escaped.”

“What?”

“We will take you to them. But we will leave you bound because the farmers said you threatened them. The goblins of Ipktu can decide your worthiness.”