

CHAPTER 1

The Carratian Prison

Linsora



Carratia is the fourth planet from the sun in the Samish system. The nights are too cold. The days from when the sun rises until it sets is too hot. The atmosphere is too thin. And the population of people raised and stuck here are too cranky, dishonest, and overbearing. As with many worlds, this one has prisons.

One particular Carratian prison is much like a medieval Earth dungeon but without the pleasant company of the king's guards, the fine food offered by the dungeon keepers, and the shackles. The complex is damp, with stone floors and stone walls built by the indebted and incarcerated at the hand of the empirical government. It has 267 cells, each with a 10-foot-high ceiling and a small opening at the top of the outside cell wall. For half an hour each day, it allows a sliver of light to taunt each occupant of each cell.

On her first night there, Linsora discovered a hole in the floor connected to an underground river where a monstrous creature lives. It consumes biological waste—and prisoners, should they become desperate enough to attempt an escape. Fortunately, a heavy metal grate separates her cell from the water a short way down the shaft.

It's not the sort of place one would prefer to spend their time.

And to think—Linsora had arrived there approximately one year, seven months, twelve days, and—if her math was correct—seventeen agonizing hours prior. Her cot is hard, but at least it's a raised cot and not directly on the bug-infested floor that many other inmates have to endure. Tonight, she wanted to sleep, but the wails of several distant inmates echoed through the hallways and ricocheted off the walls of her cell. One would think she'd be used to it by now, but no one ever gets used to inhumanity—unless they're born with the IXY gene.

Linsora did not have that gene.

So, instead of sleeping, she *thought*.

If she could survive three more months, then she'd be free. At least, that was the hope. In the meantime, she thought about the man who had put her there—and turned her head to spit on the floor at the very thought of that devil. The floor bugs scurried to consume the liquid expelled from her mouth.

She wanted out, and she wanted revenge.

There was truth to everything she had heard about the devil who had put her there—truth about his race, including his demonic powers of emotional control. She hated him with every fiber of her being. Three more months. She only needed to survive three more months.

Thoughts continued to envelop her until her ears gave a warning, and a surge of adrenaline flooded her body. She heard a noise; it wasn't the wailing or the pounding of fists against the stone walls by her fellow inmates but quiet footsteps and the crunching of dirt. She strained to see in the dark and thought she could see the outline of a figure. No, not one figure, but two silhouettes slightly darker than the shadow of the dank hallway.

She froze, instinctively reaching for a knife—the weapon of choice on her home world, Khizara. Her subconscious mind reminded her she was still in prison, and correctional officers deprived her of the luxury of carrying a knife upon entry. The dark figures loomed ominously at her cell door, unmoving. There was the faintest jangle of keys.

It was unbelievable that a prison this old hadn't been updated to have modern, electronic locks instead of skeleton keys. However, the Carratians were notoriously parsimonious and most likely refused to spend more time or resources on prisons than they had to. Inmates weren't even issued uniforms, remaining in their original clothes from arrival. They had the luxury of washing them once every two weeks if they chose to do so. Most didn't bother.

The distinct click of a key being inserted into a lock echoed across her cell, followed by the squeal of the rusted tumblers as the key turned. Linsora prepared her body to fight. She had heard rumors of prisoners who would mysteriously vanish in the night. Most of them were troublemakers. If she was honest with herself, she knew she wasn't a model inmate—but surely she wasn't rebellious enough to warrant such a violent midnight visit.

The rusty hinges moaned as the door slowly swung open. Almost inaudible whispers floated past Linsora's ears as slight hisses. Curse these unlit hallways! It was hard to tell, but the dark figures appeared to be expanding. Were they growing wings?

In an instant, a cloth enveloped her, and claustrophobia hit, causing the adrenaline to surge through her even more. She gasped for air and screamed, "Let go of me!"

"Calm down," a gruff voice replied. "You want to get out of here, don't you?" The cloth fell from her face. Still, in the dark, she couldn't make out any details of her assailants.

It was often difficult for Linsora to understand Carratian. The language was as harsh as the planet's environment, laced with hard consonants and few vowels. She recognized the voice as one of the day guards. She wasn't sure why he would be here this early but knew it wasn't right. She struggled more as they lifted her from the cot.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Away from here. Stop struggling. It will be much easier if you cooperate."

When her feet hit the floor, she lashed out with wild kicks, hoping to connect with any portion of a body. Her hope became a reality when her foot collided with something solid, and she heard a muffled Carratian curse.

"Secure her!" a voice said in a tone strong enough to be authoritative but quiet enough not to draw attention.

Linsora felt her arms pulled behind her and restraints placed on her wrists. She started to yell Khizaran curses when a guard shoved something soft into her mouth, followed by a cloth bag quickly pulled down over her head. If she were going to die today, it would be with her fighting back. She wanted her ancestors to be proud of her efforts.

A moment later, she was tilted back and picked up by her legs. She continued to thrash about until finally, and not unexpectedly, her legs were bound at the ankles by one of the strong guards. Her mind raced as she was carried away to someplace unknown. She tried to imagine the layout of the prison. She'd walked the hallways daily for over a year, but never at this angle. It seemed they were heading toward the infirmary.

They came to an abrupt halt, waiting as another door opened with a rumbling groan before launching forward again. Moments later, she felt the cool breeze of the night air and smelled the fresh scent of the outside.

Should I be worried or grateful?

Either way, she could tell her captors were getting tired. Their pace slowed, and the sounds of their labored breathing made her believe they were either getting close to the final destination or approaching a transport.

With a whooshing sound another door opened shortly after, and she was thrown into a compartment. The door immediately closed, followed by two other doors opening and closing again. Someone yanked the hood from her head, and she could see her abductors in the dim light. The two officers sat in the front seats of the authority transport. The guard who had pulled off her hood stared down at Linsora and asked, "If I take the silencer out of your mouth, do you think you can be quiet?"

Linsora glared at the guard and nodded. With that, the guard pulled the silencer from her mouth, barely moving his fingers in time to avoid her biting them off. A low growl followed as Linsora breathed out.

After a deep, cleansing breath, she calmly asked, "May I at least ask a few questions quietly?"

The transport started to move, and the guard who had removed her silencer replied, "You can ask whatever questions you want. Quietly and calmly is preferred. What do you want to ask?"

"Where are you taking me?" It was all she could do to keep her volume at a civilized level—and it must've shown in her eyes because the guard's response was prompt and clear.

"We're taking you to your benefactor."

"What do you mean, my benefactor?" She thought they were taking her somewhere to disappear. Perhaps she misunderstood the Carratian accent.

"Your benefactor is the person interested in getting you out of that Carratian prison," the guard replied, and her brows bolted toward her hairline. Was somebody rescuing her? "He wants you brought to him. He has an interest in your well-being. Why anyone would want that is beyond me, but you can ask him about that yourself when we bring you to him. Once we drop you off, he is welcome to you." The guard reached down and rubbed his shin where Linsora had kicked him in her cell.

"And what if I refuse to go to this benefactor? What if I run away when you release me?"

"You'll be shot and reduced to ashes," he answered bluntly, stating the consequences with such level-headed certainty that she knew he wasn't lying. "Your benefactor compensates us to bring you to a certain release point, not harbor an escapee. If you want to live out the rest of your life, I would say your best choice is to be grateful, keep your mouth shut, and accept the sanction that will come with your release to the benefactor."

"Does this benefactor have a name?"

The guard sighed heavily, visibly growing weary of the unending questions, and turned to look back at Linsora. “All I know is I’m taking you somewhere to drop you off. What happens after that is up to you. The two of you can kill each other for all I care. Now be quiet. We’re almost there.”

“I don’t care for your tone of voice,” she replied, and the guard ignored her. She quietly tried to slip out of the wrist restraints, but the bonds adjusted to her movements. Her mind raced. It seemed like they were telling her the truth, but if they were going to kill her, why would they drive all this way?

The transport began to slow and come to a stop.

“We’re here,” announced the guard. “I’m going to get you out, but don’t do something stupid and start a fight.” Linsora had to force her facial expression into one of neutrality. *If you think I won’t fight, you strongly underestimate me, idiot.* “I need to explain where we are and what you should do next.”

Not fighting was the last thing Linsora had on her mind. She wanted to fight, run, and get as far away from this place as possible, but she tried to go completely limp, making it more difficult for the guards to maneuver her out of the vehicle. They laid her on the ground and attempted to sit her up, but she collapsed and remained stretched out, not moving. The guards looked at her and sighed.

“I guess we could leave you here in shackles and hope that the sun comes up before the creatures of the night smell you. Now sit up so that I can remove your restraints!”

Linsora did as she was told, watching as the guard held her ankles to the ground while the other started removing her wrist restraints. She could see a dwelling not too far from where they were—but it was hard to make out the details in the dark of night. It was small, that much she could tell, though it was impossible to know whether it was lavish or drab. She just knew that it was there, and that was enough.

Her restraints fell to the ground. It felt nice to move her legs and arms freely again.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she asked.

The guard behind her reached into his pocket, and Linsora immediately started thrashing about, hitting the guard behind her in the face with a closed fist. He threw his body—much larger than her small frame—on top of her and growled, “Will you just stop? Take this!”

He slowly sat up and gave her a small black box.

“What is this?”

“Go to the front door. You can either knock or use this to defeat the door lock. Just flip the switch.”

Their job complete, the guards backed away rapidly, running to the transport, which rose and hurried away.

Linsora stood in the dark, looking at the structure before her. She quietly approached the front door and listened for any sounds coming from within. It was quiet. She flipped the switch on the small box and held it to the door. There was a slight *click*. As the door opened, she saw a dim light coming from inside and a candle on a wooden table. Opening the door further, she saw two legs stretched out and a figure sleeping in a chair.

She squinted to make out the figure’s details. She knew this man.

Linsora muttered a Khizaran swear word under her breath, shaking her head. “I can’t believe it . . .” As she approached, she noticed a knife lying fortuitously on the table.

And it was as though the knife was waiting just for her.