

The Sentence

A Khizara Prequel

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Author's Note

This story takes place two years before the events of *Khizara*.
It is best read before beginning the novel.

CHAPTER 1

New Assignment



Linsora heard the officer's grating voice butcher her name. It was almost unrecognizable. "Anselm?"

Carratian was a rough language. Even filtered through Mercantile Standard, it grated.

She rose from her seat in the onboarding area and raised her hand. The officer gestured toward a small table with two chairs facing each other. Linsora sat. He remained standing a moment longer before settling across from her.

"You can call me Linsora," she said.

He grunted and scanned her papers. "You are Khizaran?"

"Yes."

"And an archaeologist?"

"Yes."

He studied her longer than protocol required. "Why?"

Linsora exhaled slowly. "Why what, exactly?"

"Why would you want to work on this ship?"

"You're going into deep space. I've served on a ship in this system for the past two years. It's close to Khizar, and I'm ready to venture farther."

That was the diplomatic answer.

In truth, she searched for something older. Origins.

“Well, we need an archaeologist.”

Linsora recognized the phrasing. They didn't want an archaeologist; Mercantile regulations required one. Every exploration vessel had to certify a planet was free of prior civilization before claiming resources. If an ancient culture had lived there, even if long vanished, it retained legal interest. Ownership had to be cleared, not assumed.

“We will have you work with us.” He handed her a small chip. “Wear this. It grants access to authorized areas.” A tablet followed. “Your lodging assignment and a ship map. We operate on Carratian world schedule. Late afternoon. Dinner in three hours. Morning meal at 0600.”

“Thank you. Whom do I report to for duty rosters and shift assignments?”

“I will bring it to you tomorrow.”

That was dismissal.

Linsora rose and followed the map to her quarters. The door slid open at her approach. The room was small but functional.

“Small,” she murmured. “But comfortable enough.”

She wouldn't spend much time here. Solitude invited memory.

Two years ago.

Khizara.

Her half-brother.

The miscalculation still burned. One moment of pride, one careless second during a challenge. She shut the memory down before it finished forming.

This was neither the time nor the place.

She toured the accessible decks before returning to her room. Sleep, at least, usually granted her silence.

Morning came quickly.

In the mess hall, she filled her plate with meat and thin brown sauce. Khizarans were carnivores by preference if not necessity. Carratians, at least, supplied adequately.

She scanned the room as she ate. Terrans, mixed quadrants, but no other Khizarans.

Her father had been Terran. Robert Anselm. The man who discovered the oldest settlement on Khizara. As a child, she'd stood beside him and first felt it: the faint pull of ancient voices at excavation sites. Not sound. Not quite memory. Something older.

The officer who had onboarded her entered and sat without invitation.

“I want to tell you about your assignment.”

“Good. I'm ready to begin. First, what should I call you?”

He stared at her. “Commander.”

“Yes, Commander.”

He placed several sheets of parchment on the table. “I understand archaeologists prefer using this.”

She smiled faintly. “I prefer whatever records truth most accurately. But this will suffice.”

“How much do you know about Carratians?”

She chose her words carefully. “I've heard they are efficient negotiators.”

A muscle moved in his jaw. “We are traveling to a planet with a rich Benadium core. We intend to mine it. By Mercantile law, an archaeologist must certify that it has no prior occupation.”

He leaned closer.

“Your assignment is to certify the planet is clean.”

“I'll survey the planet for signs of habitation and report my findings.”

“Your assignment,” he repeated slowly, “is to certify the planet is clean.”

There it was.

“We arrive in four days. The Carratian government has designated the planet Bracken. Breathable atmosphere. Longer rotation cycle than Carratia. You will have access to scan arrays. Of course, there will be nothing to find. Your work should be simple.”

“And if I find signs of prior habitation?” she asked.

His gaze hardened. “You will report anomalies. A research team, the Captain, and you will accompany a surface inspection to confirm you were mistaken.”

Confirm you were mistaken.

He stood and left without another word.

If she didn't know better, she'd think they didn't want her to find anything at all.

She slid her dishes into the recycler and turned toward the exit.

A flicker of movement at the opposite doorway caught her attention.

Khizaran.

Or so he appeared.

Dark shoulder-length hair. Pale blue eyes. Tall. The faint curve of clawed nails.

Another Khizaran this far from Khizara was rare, and rarely accidental.

He did not wear command insignia. He wore the uniform of an Engineer.

Their eyes met for a fraction too long, a silent current passing between them.

She moved through the doorway, pulse quickening, refusing to glance back.

She told herself she'd noticed him only because he was Khizaran.

The lie did not convince her.

In the lab, she had trouble concentrating on her work. The scanning systems were familiar. Different interface, same principles. She learned them quickly.

Concentration, however, proved harder.

The Khizaran engineer lingered at the edge of her thoughts.

That night at dinner, she kept watch for him, scanning each new arrival. When the mess hall was nearly empty and she was ready to give up, he finally appeared. He went to the food replicator, chose his meal, and sat in the far corner. Their eyes met, he didn't look away immediately.

Linsora finished the few pieces of food left on her plate, walked over to the recycler, and then walked to the man sitting alone.

"I'm Linsora. I just joined the crew. Do you mind if I sit down?"

Permac paused, a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. She slid into the seat across from him before he could object. "Sure," he said, the word slow and cautious, then took his bite.

"I saw we had a few similarities, and I wanted to introduce myself. I'm the archaeologist on board. Just boarded."

Permac swallowed, put his fork down, and stuck out his hand. "Permac Sudé," he said. Linsora shook his hand and waited. "I'm the lead engineer."

"How long have you been on this ship?" Linsora asked.

"I've been here six months now. I transferred from a Targon transport ship."

"Targon?" Linsora asked. "What were the Targon doing this far out? That's crazy!"

Permac smiled. "They weren't out in this system. They were doing research about halfway between here and Carratia. They stopped at Gennan, a planet in system 724, to change crew. I decided to leave. The next day, coincidentally, this ship stopped looking for

crew. They needed an engineer. I was available. So, here I am! How about you? You mentioned you just joined the crew. Where were you before this? It's a long way from Khizara."

"A very long way," Linsora said. "I'm proud that I served in the Khizaran Navy, but my enlistment was over, and I wanted more. I wanted to get out and conduct some deep space research into the Origin Project."

Permac raised his eyebrows. "The Origin Project? I've heard about that. Isn't it a Mercantile-funded exploration?"

"It is. Only the best archaeologists are invited to join," she said evenly. "I plan to be among them. While my Father was a well-known archaeologist in his own right, I have to prove myself. So, I've been joining ships that need my skills and making a name for myself."

"That's very impressive," Permac said, but his tone didn't warm. "I'm not sure what kind of name you'll make for yourself on this ship. Carratians aren't the most scrupulous of races. They'll probably exploit your talents to suit their needs and then drop you off at the nearest port."

"I should be ok. They want to mine for Benadium on this planet we're headed to. Merc rules say it has to be a clean planet. That's where I came in."

Permac shook his head.

"What?" Linsora asked.

"They only want you here because it's the law. You assume certification changes outcomes," he said. "It doesn't. That's how they are." He glanced over his shoulder, voice dropping. "That's one of the reasons why, when we dock at Carratia, I'm debarking. Being around Carratians is tiring."

Linsora bristled at his comment. Was she truly just a legal necessity to them? A pawn in a larger game? She bit back a sharper reply, deciding to watch and wait for now.

“Tiring?” She tried to keep her tone neutral, but a prickle of suspicion crept in.

“It’s difficult to listen to them complain as much as they do, and live with their constant suspicions.”

“Ah,” Linsora said.

At this point, the conversation lagged. Permac took the last bite of his food.

Linsora was about to ask Permac where he was from on Khizara, but before she could, a woman entered the mess and said, “Oh, there you are. Linsora, I need you in the lab. I know it’s late, but I need you to check some advanced readings we’re getting from the surrounding planets. They might indicate a few things we’ll need to look at once we reach Brachen.”

Linsora turned to Permac and said, “It was nice to meet you. I hope to see you again and continue our conversation.”

“I’d like that,” Permac said. “It’s nice having someone new to talk to who doesn’t complain every third sentence.” Linsora stood from the table. Permac added, lightly, “Be careful what you certify.”

During each meal break the next day, Linsora watched for Permac, telling herself she wasn’t really looking, just, hoping. Instead, her gaze lingered on other crew members as they passed through doors or rounded corners. It unsettled her, how much she noticed his absence. She had no idea Permac felt the same. The following day, with only two days left until Brachen, Linsora was eating alone when a voice startled her from behind.

“I was beginning to think you’d jumped ship!” Permac stood behind her, tray in hand, grinning. “Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” she said, relief flickering across her face before she could hide it.

Permac sat, shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth, chewed quickly, and swallowed. “I’m very interested to hear more about your archeology and about your father,” he said.

Linsora smiled. She loved talking about her work and her father.

“When you say you hear ancient voices,” he asked, “do you mean metaphorically?” Permac watched her, gaze lingering until it made her skin prickle. Was he skeptical, or just curious?

For the next hour, they talked about work, hobbies, travels, and interests. Linsora remembered that she wanted to ask Permac about where on Khizara he came from. “Permac,” she started, “I wanted to ask you...”

Her thought was cut short by a sudden, guttural yell from the mess hall doors. A wild-eyed man burst in, brandishing a long pipe—the jagged end glinting like a blade.

“We’re all going to die!” he screamed, slamming the pipe into a nearby table with a metallic crack. He looked feral, eyes blazing as he swung his gaze to Linsora and Permac.

CHAPTER 2

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Both sprang from the table, chairs clattering to the floor. Linsora dropped into a crouched fighting stance, hidden knives suddenly appearing in her hands. Permac remained upright, calm, his open palms raised between them and the wild man.

“Be calm,” Permac said in a quiet voice, and he walked toward the crazed man.

“No!” the man screamed. “Stay away. You’re a demon!” He brandished the pipe, knuckles white. Linsora tensed, arm cocked to throw a knife, until Permac glanced back and gave the slightest shake of his head. She hesitated, lowering her blade but staying coiled, ready to move.

The man swung the pipe at Permac, the jagged end grazing his arm and tearing fabric.

Permac remained calm. “I’m not a demon. I’m your friend. Don’t you remember, Marek?”

The man, Marek, stared at Permac. He couldn't take his eyes off him. Permac walked closer. "I'm your friend. We've been friends for months. We like each other. Remember?"

Linsora straightened slowly, knives dropping to her sides. She watched, awe mingling with confusion, as Permac calmed the wild man with nothing but words.

Marek's face twitched. He rapidly shook his head, making a few grunting noises. He closed his eyes. Opened them again. Looked at Permac, who was still inching forward.

Permac reached out and placed his hand on the long pipe-like object. "Look at me," he said quietly. "You know me."

Marek looked at Permac and smiled. "I...know you," Marek said slowly. "You're safe."

Permac slowly took the pipe from Marek's hand and placed it on a table behind him. Marek dropped his hands but continued to smile blankly at Permac.

Two uniformed guards ran into the room and grabbed Marek, placing him in restraints. Marek continued to smile.

"He's having confinement anxiety," Permac said to the guards. "Take him to the ship's doctor and let him know. He should be able to be treated and released."

The guards escorted the man out. When Permac turned back toward Linsora, something in his gaze caught her breath. His eyes. Violet, deep and luminous for a heartbeat, then pale blue again. Linsora blinked, heart skipping. A cold, familiar unease twisted in her gut, dredging up memories better left buried.

When Permac returned, Linsora managed a shaky smile. "That was impressive. You calmed him, and did it without knives."

"He was spiraling," Permac said. "I just broke through to him. Friendship helped." Permac winced, rubbing his bicep. "He got me

good with that pipe. I'll have the doctor look at it, and check on Marek too. Their biomenders aren't great, but they'll do."

Linsora looked at Permac's face and eyes.

"What?" Permac asked, rubbing his face. "Do I have something stuck to my face? Something in my teeth?"

Linsora smiled. "No. It's just that when you turned around from dealing with Marek, it looked like..."

"Like what?" Permac asked.

"Nothing," Linsora replied. "Go get your arm looked at. Maybe we can talk again tomorrow. We'll be at the planet the day after."

"That sounds good," Permac said, continuing to rub his sore arm. "Until tomorrow then!"

The next day, Linsora's schedule kept her running. She missed both morning and midday meals, and by evening she was famished. She wished she knew how to reach Permac. She had no access to Engineering, no messages from him. By the end of her meal, she hadn't seen him. She found herself worrying about his arm. As she left for her quarters, she hoped they'd cross paths tomorrow.

On her way to her room, she detoured by the lab to grab a few things for the surface trip. Entering the transport bay, she approached the ramp just as Permac burst through a side door, making her jump.

"Permac! What are you doing?"

"Linsora! I didn't expect to see you here, but I'm not disappointed. I'm getting the transport ready to go for the trip to the surface tomorrow. You?"

"Same. I have supplies that I need to get ready in the cargo hold."

Permac walked in with her and showed her where the cargo hold was located. "This area is where you'll be storing your equipment." He said, pointing to a large open area with cabinets and straps for securing larger items.

“Thanks.” She said and walked over to place the box of items in a cabinet.

“Let me help you with that,” Permac said, reaching for the box. Their hands brushed, warm, electric. For a moment, neither pulled away. Their eyes met, breath catching, before they both turned aside as Permac placed the box in the cabinet.

Linsora asked, “How’s your arm?”

Permac rolled his shoulder. “It’s fine. The doctor said it was only bruised. Good as new now. I can probably help you dig, or survey, or listen, or whatever you need me to do.”

Linsora laughed. “Do they let Engineers work on archaeology digs?”

“They let anyone do manual labor, as long as the Captain doesn’t have to lift a shovel!” Permac grinned. “Need help hauling anything else from your lab?”

“Well...”

“Hello?” A woman’s voice called from the door.

Permac went to the entrance where a young woman stood with a case in one hand and some tools in the other. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I’m helping bring equipment from the archeology lab.”

Linsora poked her head around the side of the door. “Hi, Kelain.”

“Oh! Hi, Linsora. I didn’t know you were here.”

“I just finished eating and thought I’d bring some equipment down.”

“The team is right behind me, and we’re getting it all ready. You’ve had a long day. You can head to bed if you want.”

Linsora looked at Permac. “Walk with me for a minute?”

Permac shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. I have to be here while people bring items on board, and then ensure everything is locked up before I leave. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Linsora said with a small smile. “Just so you know, I’m a tough boss. I expect competence.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, standing at attention.

Linsora smiled, lingering a moment longer than necessary. “See you tomorrow, Permac.”

She lingered in the quiet bay, glancing back at Permac before turning toward the ship’s entrance. A deep breath steadied her as she made her way to her quarters, nerves and anticipation warring inside her.

Permac watched her disappear into the corridor, only letting out a long breath when she was gone. He flexed his fingers, the memory of her touch lingering.

The following day, the landing crew reported to the transport bay, along with the Captain and Commander.

The Captain said, “Verify the readings. Confirm mineral density. Transmit your findings. Then we can report to the Carratian Government that this planet is ready to mine. Waste no time. This world is an asset. Treat it as such.”

With that, the Captain walked out of the transport bay.

The Commander looked at the group of people and said, “You heard the Captain. Get on the transport and let’s go.”

Permac was not only the engineer in charge of ensuring the transport ran at peak efficiency, but also the pilot. Once he knew that everyone was on board, he signaled for the transport bay to open its doors, and he flew out.

Though it wasn’t required, Permac banked the transport in a slow arc, letting himself marvel at the endless oceans and green below. A world untouched, at least for now. He drew out the circuit, reluctant to break the spell of first sight.

He set the craft down at the designated coordinates. When the hatch opened, sunlight spilled inside, bright and sharp. The air

outside was cool, tinged with the unfamiliar scent of wild grass and distant trees. The team began unloading equipment while Permac circled the craft, breathing in the new world's untouched air.

Linsora directed the team where to unload. She found herself glancing at Permac, each time, her heart picked up when she caught him watching her. He'd always glance away, pretending interest elsewhere, but she saw the flicker behind his eyes.

Finally, she walked over to him. "Are you going to join us while we explore?" She asked him.

"I wouldn't miss it. You might have to explain what you're doing and what you're looking for, though," he said. "Other than what you've told me, I really don't know much about archaeology. I've always pictured it as digging until you find some old stuff, clean it up, and place it in a museum."

Linsora just stared. "You really need some lessons on the finer art of finding old artifacts. I expect to see you at the camp in one hour. And don't forget. I don't..."

"Tolerate tardiness?" Permac said, completing her sentence.

"Exactly!" Linsora said, smiling.

Her smile undid him. She was shorter than most Khizarans, her father's Terran blood evident in her build and those impossible green eyes! Eyes that locked with his for a moment too long. No one on Tokorel or Khizara had green eyes like that. "I'll be there. On time," he managed, feeling the ground shift beneath him. "See you in 56 minutes."

Linsora grabbed her pack and called to her team. "This way. I want to check a few places that stood out during our scans. They might have potential." As she led them toward the woods, the Commander grunted behind her.

"Potential for what?" The Commander asked.

“You don’t really want the answer to that,” Linsora said over her shoulder, not waiting for a reply as she strode toward the trees.

The Commander grunted and followed her.

Permac finished inspecting the transport and headed off into the wooded area. When he arrived, he found Linsora. “Three minutes early,” he called.

“You’re lucky,” she said. “I was going to start without you in four.”

She had already assigned areas for the team to explore, telling everyone to pair up for safety. “We don’t know what the wildlife, if any, is like here, so we have to proceed carefully. Keep your radios with you and call if you find anything.”

The teams fanned out in pairs, leaving Permac and Linsora alone. A hush settled over the field, the sounds of the others fading until only the rustle of leaves and distant calls of unseen birds remained.

“Let’s get started,” Linsora said. “This way.”

Linsora set off at a brisk pace, boots brushing through dew-wet grass as she aimed for an overgrown pathway at the field’s edge. The light dimmed as the forest canopy closed in overhead.

“Slow down!” Permac shouted. “What’s the hurry?”

“There’s something this way, and I want to explore it. That’s my job and what I’m here for,” she said, continuing her pace.

“I don’t think that whatever you’re looking for is going to run away. Why, exactly, do you feel there is something this way?”

Linsora glanced back at Permac and slowed. “I can feel it,” she said, voice quieter. “It’s hard to explain. When I’m searching for archaeological sites, it’s like a pull and almost physical. An instinct.”

Permac studied her carefully. She spoke of instinct the way his people spoke of influence. A current beneath the surface, unseen, but shaping everything. He wondered if she realized what she was

admitting. Permac thought for a moment. “Is your instinct always right?”

“It’s rarely wrong. Let’s put it that way. It’s hard to explain. Probably easier to show you. We’ll keep walking this direction, and when I feel it, I’ll tell you and show you. It’s very exciting.”

After several minutes weaving through dense undergrowth, Linsora stopped abruptly. The air here was cooler, thick with the scent of moss and earth. She closed her eyes, a shiver running up her spine as she listened to the quiet hush, like standing in a cathedral of trees.

“What are you looking..”

“Shh.” Linsora quieted him with a gentle gesture. Her eyes snapped open and she pointed. “This way.”

Permac watched, captivated and uneasy, as she broke through tangled vines and dense brush into a sudden clearing bathed in filtered sunlight.

“This is it,” she whispered, stepping toward what looked like a moss-covered stone. For a breathless moment, she hovered there, hand outstretched, anticipation crackling in the air. Then she glanced at Permac, eyes bright. “Get ready.”

CHAPTER 3

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“What is it?” Permac asked.

“Watch.” Linsora’s gloved hands trembled slightly as she parted the tangled vines, revealing a section of stone wall. “This wasn’t wilderness,” she whispered, awe in her voice. “This was home.”

Permac was speechless. Linsora called out on the radio. “I need a team with full excavation kits to come to my location. I’ll send the coordinates.” She turned to Permac. “What do you think?”

He continued looking at the partial structure. “It’s amazing. I thought it was just a shrub of some kind. I would never have guessed there was a structure under there. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” He looked at Linsora. His blue eyes met her green eyes. Her green eyes held him. Something in his chest tightened. He looked away first, forcing himself to look back at the structure. This was dangerous ground, and not because of the excavation. “What happens now?”

“Now, we begin to carefully remove everything that isn’t the structure and begin exploring what this could have been and who could have lived here.”

The Commander, who had decided this activity was too boring to attend, broke through the dense overgrowth where Permac and Linsora had recently emerged from. He walked over to the couple and asked, “Tell me this doesn’t complicate the report. Log the coordinates and let’s move on.”

“This, Commander, is proof that at one time, a community existed here, on this planet. Over the next few days, we will discover if the community lived here or only used this planet as a place to store items.”

“We are not here to rewrite history,” the Commander said, voice flat and icy. “We’re here to confirm extraction viability. If this site delays the operation, it will be noted, and so will those responsible.”

He turned to leave but heard noises coming from the wooded area. “What was that?” The Commander asked, frozen in his tracks.

Both Linsora and Permac turned to listen.

“Sounds like native animals,” Linsora murmured. Growling and rustling grew closer. A tense, animal chorus. Suddenly, a creature the size of a small dog burst from the brush, followed by several more. They crept low, eyes glinting, unafraid and watchful. The Commander’s shout shattered the quiet; the animals vanished in a blur. In their wake, a heavy silence pressed down on the clearing.

Permac shook his head. He had the unsettling impression they weren’t the only ones observing. “Was that necessary?”

The Commander turned. “I don’t like small creatures.” He turned and walked toward the overgrowth and disappeared through the hanging branches.

Linsora watched him disappear into the brush, unimpressed.

Permac found himself smiling. She had not flinched. “You were right,” Permac said quietly.

Linsora didn’t look at him. “I usually am.”

She moved more of the overgrowth from the stone structure and noticed something odd. “Permac, look at these stones. Do you notice anything strange about them?”

Permac looked. “They are geometrically perfect,” he said.

“They have also been dismantled,” she said. “This structure didn’t collapse due to weather; someone intentionally took it apart. We’ll document what we can.”

“And hope no one looks too closely,” Permac replied.

For hours, the team excavated under Linsora’s sharp eye. Permac hefted stones and debris, working twice as hard as most, sweat streaking his brow. Linsora took note, pride and gratitude flickering beneath her focus.

The Commander approached Permac and said, “You need to go back to the transport and ensure the engines are ready for the return flight. Unless she finds something that delays this operation, we’ll be leaving soon.”

Permac nodded and walked over to Linsora. “I need to go,” he said. “I guess they want me to do my job.”

“That’s fine,” she replied. “It looks like this was just a storage area, and not proof of occupation. Whoever used this building could have done so from off-world.” She sighed.

Permac stood close enough to Linsora that she could feel it and said, “You’ll find the truth. Just keep looking.”

Permac turned and left for the transport.

Linsora strode to the far end of the field, the strange sense of unfinished business gnawing at her. Something here called to be uncovered. She waved to a small group of men lingering nearby. “I

need you to dig here,” she called, pointing to a subtle dip in the ground.

“I think we need a break, Linsora. We’ve been digging for several hours now.” The man wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his sleeve.

“You’re right,” she said, “go ahead and find some shade and eat.”

The men smiled and jogged off to sit under the shade of some nearby trees, opening containers of food. They laughed. They talked. They ate. Linsora walked over near them, looking at the ground for more signs of a settlement.

She heard one man say, “...all I can say is never play cards with that Tokie. Especially poker.” The man shook his head. “I don’t care what he says; nobody reads a table as he does. And I’m not saying that he cheats, but he always knows when to fold. Always!”

Linsora walked closer and said, “Excuse me. I understand Carratian fairly well. I’m not familiar with the term ‘Tokie’ though. Can you tell me what that is?”

The men stopped talking. No laughter. They looked at the ground.

“I would really like to know,” she said.

The man who had been talking looked up at her. “I was referring to the Tokorellan and meant no insult to you.”

Linsora managed a brittle laugh, but a tight knot twisted in her gut. “I’m not insulted. I’m not Tokorellan, and wouldn’t have anything to do with one, even if they begged me to save them from a wild animal. But I’m curious: where did you meet a Tokorellan?”

The three men looked at each other and then at Linsora. The one man said, “You aren’t Tokorellan, are you?”

“Absolutely not!” She exclaimed. “I’m Khizaran.” She thumped herself on the chest.

The man's face turned a shade of red. "I apologize. I didn't mean to imply that you were. I only wanted to be sure."

Linsora said, more firmly this time, "Where have you met a Tokorellan before?"

The man hesitated, then said, "That Engineer you associate with. I believe he is a Tokorellan. That was who I was referring to."

Linsora's stomach lurched, a chill running through her limbs. Her heart pounded, anger and disbelief warring inside her. "How do you know he's Tokorellan?" she forced out, voice tight.

The man looked at the ground again, then looked back up. "When we play cards, sometimes I notice his eyes change color. Sometimes, they become purple. He tries to hide it most of the time by looking down or turning away. But, sometimes he doesn't, and I can see the change."

Linsora's mind flashed to Marek's outburst in the mess hall and the split-second when Permac's eyes had glowed violet. She'd dismissed it, convinced she'd imagined it. Now, she wasn't so sure.

"I have to go," Linsora whispered, barely trusting her voice. She turned and walked away, the world spinning, each step heavy as she fled the group and the truth she could no longer ignore.

CHAPTER 4

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“Sude!” Linsora stormed across the open area from her dig to where Permac was working on the transport engines.

Permac didn’t have to reach out with his mind to realize she was angry. It radiated from her like a furnace. She never called him by his surname unless there was something very wrong. As she walked closer, Permac said, “Hey, Linsora. Is everything okay?”

She shoved him with both hands, hard enough that he staggered back, almost losing his footing. Her heart pounded, heat burning in her cheeks. For being a head shorter than Permac, she was pure force, body, and will. Her glare could have melted stone. “No. Everything is not okay,” she hissed, voice low and dangerous.

“What happened?” Permac asked, regaining his balance. “An hour ago, you were happy and excited about what you might find in the clearing.”

“Maybe you should make me happy again with those powers of yours,” Linsora said, folding her arms.

Permac instantly knew Linsora had heard something about him, and that something was not going to bode well for him. “Powers?” he asked. “What happened in the last hour?” He studied her for a second or two, waiting for expression to reveal her feelings.

“An hour ago, I didn’t know I was associating with a liar.”

“What?” Permac asked.

“You’ve been lying to me this whole time. It’s bad enough I’m on a Carratian ship, dealing with Carratians, but then to find out this about you? Someone I thought I could trust. Someone I thought was Khizaran. I let my guard down with you.”

“What did I lie to you about?” Permac asked, confused.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Tokorellan? You should have at least allowed me to choose whether I associate with you or not.”

“First of all, you never asked. Second, I never lied to you about it. I just never told you where I was from. You assumed. I didn’t correct you.” Permac thought about sending her a wave of complacency. He reached out and touched the edge of her emotional consciousness, but stopped.

“What do you think now?” With a single, practiced motion, she unfolded her arms and drew two knives, one in each hand, the blades flashing in the sunlight. Years of training made the movement fluid and fast. For a breathless instant, all he saw was steel and anger.

Permac’s mind scrambled for footing. He hadn’t even seen her move, and now the blades were dangerously close. His heart hammered. Breath shallow. After so many friendly encounters, could she really kill him? He forced a small, nervous smile. “Linsora, we’ve been getting along so well. We’ve laughed together, worked together, even shared ale. Neither of us needs to die today.”

“You mean you don’t want to die today?” she growled. She had trusted this man. But now, things were different. Now, he was one of the people whom her race despised. A descendant of the man who almost destroyed her people.

“No. I don’t want to die today. Look, all I’m saying is that we’ve been getting along so well. What does it matter if I’m Tokorellan and you’re Khizaran?”

“Can’t you just shut up!” Linsora snapped, her voice cracking with fury. In a single sweep, she pressed the cold edge of her knife to Permac’s throat. Firm enough to threaten, not enough to cut. He

froze, chin lifted, breath coming in short, sharp bursts. The cold shell of the transport pressed against his back.

“What can we do to resolve this?” Permac croaked.

Linsora glared up at this man who, just an hour ago, had been her friend. Those words. Her friend. The word tasted bitter. He had been good to her. But he kept secrets. She didn’t like secrets. If this was his surface, what else lay beneath? She valued honesty. And her values had been betrayed by this man. By her friend. She looked at him. Tall. Muscular. He stood his ground without resorting to tricks. “You can stay away from me, as far away as possible. If we’re forced to work together, I’ll be civil, but don’t think for a moment, Tokorellan, that I won’t end your life if you test my patience again. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Permac said quietly, pulse still racing. He could sense her anger ebbing. He knew he could have reached into her mind, sent her calm, erased the edge. But he refused. Not with her. There was something about this woman. Something he wouldn’t risk losing. *Patience, Permac*, he told himself.

Linsora’s knives dropped to her sides, her shoulders slumping with exhaustion and something close to regret. As quickly as they’d appeared, the blades vanished. She glared at Permac, ashamed at how quickly she’d trusted him, furious that she’d cared.

“I need to get back to work,” she said. With that, she turned and walked back to the dig, where a Carratian officer waited for her report on the findings in this area.

Permac exhaled, shaky, only now realizing he’d been holding his breath. He touched his throat where her blade had rested seconds before, staring after her as she walked away. He had survived her blade and her fury. He wasn’t sure he could survive losing her.

CHAPTER 5

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The next day, the team returned to the surface, and Linsora walked through the forested area where she found a small clearing. She knew that her position on the Carratian vessel wasn't necessary, at least in the minds of the Carratians. But the Mercantile, the governing body in this region of space, required all ships to employ an archeologist, especially when exploring new, uninhabited planets for mining operations.

"This is a waste of time!" The Carratian Captain grumbled. "Let's just call the planet clean and be on our way."

Linsora stopped walking. "Captain. I know Carratians aren't necessarily concerned with protocol or proper procedures, but as long as I am the archaeologist on this visit, we will conduct the research necessary, and the time to do so."

The Captain rolled his eyes. "Someday, Linsora, that attitude of yours will put you in a cell. Or worse."

Linsora was about to snap back at the Captain when it hit her. The pull. A tremor ran down her spine, the silent weight of something buried and waiting, ancient voices humming in her bones. She scanned the clearing, breath quickening. "Captain," she said, "get

a few people here to help me dig around these stones. I believe they might be the foundation of a city.”

The Captain made a guttural noise. Linsora wasn't certain if it was a Carratian word she was unfamiliar with or frustration. He turned to the team of people following them. “You!” He shouted. “Permac. Come here and grab a shovel. Bring those three with you!” He said, indicating the men closest to him.

Permac grabbed a shovel and jogged over. He waited for the word to begin and where to do so. Linsora stared through him. “Dig carefully, around those rocks jutting up from the ground,” Linsora started, “and if you see more deeply or running in a line in a certain direction, call me over immediately.”

The small group of men hurried to various spots and stone groupings and began digging.

Within a few minutes, Permac called Linsora. “I think I have something.”

Linsora walked over to Permac. “What have you found?”

Permac knelt and, using his hands, he dug along the outline of a line of stones until it stopped. There was only dirt for roughly 2 meters, and then the stones reappeared, continuing in a straight line. “If I'm not mistaken,” Permac said, “This is the foundation of a home, and this break is a doorway. Don't you think?”

Linsora knelt next to Permac. She was close enough that he could smell her scent. He took a silent, deep breath.

“I think you're right,” she said, pushing herself to her feet. “Damn. The Carratians aren't going to like this. Find the foundation's edges, and let's see how far it goes. We'll clear the brush and dig in layers. Anything, no matter how small, you find, tell me. I want to know it all.”

Permac could sense Linsora's excitement even if she tried not to show it openly.

Over the next three hours, the team carefully excavated the foundation of the small building. Then they cleared away the low overgrowth and started carefully digging. Now and again, someone

would shout out, “Linsora. Over here!” She’d run over, pat them on the back, and take the trinket of someone’s forgotten past, clean it up, number it, record the image, catalogue it, and safely pack it away aboard the transport. By the end of the day, they had located over 100 articles from a distant past belonging to the planet’s inhabitants, not long gone.

As Linsora was carefully placing the last artifact in its crate, the Captain called on the radio.

“Sudé here,” Permac answered.

“Are you ready to return to the ship?” The Captain asked.

Permac turned to Linsora, who nodded.

“We are, sir,” he replied. “We’ll leave after our pre-flight check.”

Permac scanned through the pre-flight checklist and nodded to the pilot. The transport rose, tilted its nose toward the sky, and headed to the main ship. When it docked inside the transport bay, the doors opened, and Linsora stepped out. Permac was still inside, within earshot of the door, revving down the engines.

The Captain stood waiting, and he was not alone.

Three officers in dark brown uniforms she had never seen before stood beside him.

None of them looked curious.

All of them looked prepared. Linsora’s pulse thundered in her ears, a silent warning that nothing would be the same after today.

The Captain stopped her. “Linsora. These officers are from Carratia’s high command. They will be in our debriefing. Please go to the debriefing room immediately.”

CHAPTER 6

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The Captain turned and walked away, followed by the senior officers. Linsora knew there would be no discussion. She sighed and walked off in their direction.

Permac had been listening. He felt something in the Captain. Not irritation. Not frustration. Calculation. He walked over to the artifacts, carefully stored in the Transport cargo hold. “I need to get as much of this safely stored away as possible,” he said out loud, and started moving the crates to another, smaller skiff that would be going to the surface of Carratia for maintenance.

By the time Linsora arrived at the conference room, all of the officers were seated and waiting for her. She walked in and heard the door close, latching and sealing with a metallic click, much too loud, much too deliberate. The sound echoed in her chest. She crossed to the far end of the table and sat, jaw set, pulse racing.

The Captain looked at Linsora. “It’s my understanding that you may have found some artifacts indicating previous occupation of the planet we now call Brachen. Is that correct?”

“It is,” she answered.

“And would it appear that this former occupant was alone?” One of the officers asked. Linsora looked at the officer who asked the question. She was a higher-ranking officer with angular features who looked as if she never smiled. Linsora noted the three silver and one gold stripe on her sleeve cuff, the mark of an officer not to be argued with.

“No,” Linsora said. “In fact, it would appear that this building was the center of a larger town. Investigation also indicates there was a series of roadways which led in and out of this town, possibly to other towns.”

The higher officers leaned in to speak in hushed tones, glancing at Linsora from time to time. The unsmiling woman officer said, “It is our opinion that you are incorrect and that you will not mention this to anyone. This planet is now under the jurisdiction of the Carratian Elite military. We will transfer ownership to the Carratian government, which will begin mining operations within three years. I assume you found artifacts of this old occupation?”

Outrage flared in Linsora. “You can’t start mining!” Her voice rang out, louder than she’d meant. “According to Mercantile rules and the laws of this region—”

“We are well aware of the Mercantile rules regarding the mining of planets,” another officer said, interrupting Linsora and brushing the sleeve of suit dark brown uniform. “We will simply tell the Mercantile that this planet has been certified as never being inhabited. You will certify the planet as uninhabited. You will do so voluntarily. And in return, you will be rewarded generously. The Mercantile auditors will never know.” The officer looked up at Linsora, straight-faced, indicating that this was the only offer that he would extend.

Linsora wondered if any of the officers in the Carratian military smiled. “No. This planet has a rich and forgotten history that begs to be explored. I will not lie about the existence of these people so you can mine benadium and get rich.”

“Are you sure?” The Captain asked in a voice more threatening than questioning.

“There is no doubt in my mind.” Linsora stood, spine straight, daring every officer at the table to contradict her.

An officer tapped twice on the hollow of his right collarbone. The doors opened, and a contingent of guards entered the room. The unsmiling woman officer stood and addressed the guards. “This Khizaran is charged with theft of state resources and interference with military operations. Remove her. Put her in the brig. Round up anyone who was on her excavation team or working with her, and bring them along as well. We will speak with all of them individually. That is all.”

Rough hands seized her arms and dragged her from the room. They threw her in the brig, where a few of the dig team waited, eyes wide with fear. She looked around, voice hoarse: “Where’s Sudé?”

“They haven’t brought him in yet.”

I can’t believe he would sign. I know he wouldn’t. Linsora thought.

One by one, a guard escorted the team out of the cell for questioning, and one by one, they never returned. When it was only Linsora and one other worker, the guard came to the door and demanded that the worker come out, leaving Linsora alone. “Hey!” She yelled to the guard.

“What do you want?” The guard had a heavy Carratian accent and looked like he’d had a hard life to go along with it. His empty eyes looked at Linsora. There was no hope in them, and no spark.

“Where is Sudé?” She asked. “When are they bringing him in?”

The guard thought momentarily. “They have already interviewed him. After asking him questions, they let him go. I heard that everyone in the interview room said they trusted what he said.”

Of course, they trusted him! She thought. “When can I get out of here?”

“You can leave in two days when we reach Carratia.” The guard took the worker he had in his custody and walked away, slamming the door and leaving Linsora alone with her thoughts.

The next two days crawled past. Every jump of the ship hit her like a gut punch, her empty stomach churning. She wondered if they timed the jumps to her meals, just to make her more miserable.

On that day, they had not fed her yet. The ship jumped again. Her empty stomach lurched.

A guard came in carrying shackles. "It's time for you to leave." He said.

"You're letting me go now. Great. I'll gather my things," Linsora said sarcastically.

"We've arrived on Carratia. You'll be going straight to the Determination Center for the Justice to interview you."

Linsora said nothing, dread crawling up her spine. This didn't sound good.

She was shackled and transported to the Determination Center. Two guards flanked her on either side, escorting her into the building. The air was hot and humid. Her skin felt sticky. She looked around to see who was there. No one she knew. No one she cared to know.

The guards escorted her into the building. The large, open entryway echoed her footsteps. The guards took to a bank of several doors on the far side of the room.

"Wait here," one guard said, and went into a room.

Linsora scanned the cavernous hall. Strangers in uniforms, officials bustling from courtrooms. Then she saw him. Permac had just entered, scanning for her. Their eyes locked across the room. For a heartbeat, the world dropped away. Regret, hope, anger all tangled in that gaze. She wondered what he was doing here, if she'd ever see him again. Then the guard seized her arm and pulled her away.

The door closed behind her with a loud and final click. The room was large, but not as large as the entryway. It was darker and colder. Benches were lined up in front of a half-wall. The guards brought her to the front of the room and through a side door.

"Where are you taking me?" She asked the guards.

"You get a private audience with the Justice."

Linsora swallowed. “Private? Good. We can take care of this nonsense, and I can get out of here.”

The side door led to a small room, where a lone figure sat. He looked up as the guards entered. With a slight wave of his hand, he dismissed the guards. They bowed slightly and left the room, closing the door behind them. Linsora stood and waited for the man to speak.

“Linsora Anselm. Khizaran archaeologist. Is that correct?” The man read from a paper on his desk, not looking up.

“I am Linsora,” she replied.

“You are here to be convicted of theft. What have you to say for yourself?” The man looked up, boredom washing over him like a wave.

“What did I steal?” Linsora asked. “More importantly, when will I have a public trial? Isn’t that how Carratians deal with thieves? A public broadcast to shame the accused?”

“Is that what you have to say for yourself? I believe that was my question to you. If you have nothing more to say...”

“You did not answer my questions!” Linsora said.

“You are not in a position to ask questions. Now. I will ask you one last time. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I didn’t steal anything.”

“Guilty. Sentence: two years in Carratian Central Prison. Guards!” The Justice picked up a stamp and slammed it down on a piece of paper on his desk as the guards entered. He picked it up and handed it to the guard. “Here are your transport orders. Take her to CCP and give them these orders. That is all.”

Linsora’s blood ran cold. Lightheaded, she swayed. Two years? For a crime she didn’t commit. Long enough for Brachen to be stripped bare. She barely registered the guards at her sides, hauling her away as the world blurred.

Permac paced in the hallway. A Court Guard approached him. “Do you need help? What are you doing here?”

“I’m waiting for the broadcast of a specific trial. Can you tell me when the hearing from Linsora Anselm will be broadcast?”

The guard took a small, handheld device from his pocket. He spoke in a low voice into the device and waited as a 3D list appeared, floating above the screen. He scrolled through. “There is no one being tried today by that name. Perhaps you’re here on the wrong day. You should leave now.”

Permac softened his expression. He mentally reached out. *Compassion*, he thought.

The guard’s facial expression changed to one of sympathy. “Actually, if you wait one moment, maybe I can find out what happened to this person.” The guard put the device to his ear and spoke to the air as he walked slightly out of earshot. When he returned, the guard said. “Yes. Your friend has already been tried. It was private and before a justice.”

Trust, Permac thought.

The guard glanced around, then leaned in to whisper, “I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but your friend has been convicted of theft and is already on her way to Carratian Central Prison. Not a good place for prisoners. You’ll be lucky to see her again. Sorry.” He turned and melted into the crowd.

Permac thought about the guard’s words. He touched his jacket as he walked to the entrance of the Determination Facility. When he walked outside, he removed a small, gold statuette of a winged figure from his jacket. It glistened in the Carratian sunlight. He walked to a nearby vendor stall, one that was away from the main street. The man running the stall was dirty and rough-looking.

“Do you purchase unusual items?” Permac asked. “Perhaps, items that you cannot buy anywhere else on the planet?”

“What are you thinking, off-worlder?”

Permac opened his hand. “Would this be of interest to you in a round of negotiation?”

“Hmm. I don’t know what I would do with this,” the vendor stated, holding tightly to the golden object.”

Permac felt the man's excitement flare. "Then I'll find someone else," he said and reached for the statuette.

"Not so fast," the vendor said, pulling away. "Let's barter."

"I know you'll give me a good price for this. If it's fair, there's more to be had. Much more! Enough to change your life."

Permac sent a wave of greed to the man.

"Deal!"

Permac did not smile.

Two years.

Enough time to change everything.

Enough time to build leverage.

Thank you for taking the time to read and explore the beginning of the Tokorel universe. I hope you enjoyed this preview and glimpse into what you can expect in the next books. Your time is greatly appreciated. Feel free to email me at any time if you have questions or would just like to comment, or chat about the story, the characters, or the future!

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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.

Continue the Story in

KHIZARA

She was sentenced to two years in Carratian Central Prison.
He had two years to prepare.

Now she must return home.

To her brother.
To Tokorel's origin.
To a prophecy she does not believe in,
but cannot escape.

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